

The media firestorm behind Carlson's Putin interview, explained

Subhead: The American pundit's interview with Russia's president struck a nerve in the US, where officials and media outlets have thus far presented a united front on support for Ukraine.

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Former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson recently conducted [a two-hour interview](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin, triggering a United States media firestorm over his "softball" approach to Moscow's war in Ukraine.

Critics said Carlson's largely uncritical questioning [enabled Putin](#) to peddle justifications for sustaining the war, sow doubt about US support for Ukraine, and send a warning directly to Republican lawmakers: that the US must agree to cede Ukrainian territory to Russia if it hopes to end the conflict.

To a large extent, the media firestorm is expected. After all, Carlson's interview came at a time when discourse over Russia's Ukraine invasion remains highly critical across US media and politics. US and NATO officials have also underscored [the need to present](#) a united front on waning Ukraine support. They refuse to entertain any optics of Western capitulation or Russian dominance in the war.

Carlson's interview marked a rude break from that long-held line. He struck a nerve by guaranteeing an audience to Putin, and delivering a message directly from the aggressor to US masses: that [Russia can't be defeated in Ukraine](#).

In some ways, the interview simply tested US bounds on Russia. The US Senate is all but united on a \$60 billion aid package for Ukraine, and Carlson's interview reflects right-wing frustration over arming Ukraine with hard-earned taxpayer money.

Washington claims to uphold values of free speech and opposes curbs on press freedoms. And yet, [the statement](#) from the White House to not "take at face value anything (Putin) has to say" was striking: viewers should not take Carlson's interview seriously at all.

Years of excess US military and defence spending hasn't brought Ukraine any closer to peace, so why discredit the interview for revealing the obvious? During the exchange, Putin called on the US to end more arms supplies to Kyiv in a bid to cool down fighting. The interview – and its aftermath – confirm that the US establishment is in no mood to rethink a weapons supply strategy that has kept peace out of reach in Ukraine.

Speaking to [MSNBC](#), former Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called Carlson a "useful idiot," adding:

"He says things that are not true. He parrots Vladimir Putin's pack of lies about Ukraine, so I don't see why Putin wouldn't give him an interview because through him, he can continue to lie about what his objectives are in Ukraine and what he expects to see happen."

It's rare to see a top-level US politician openly insulting a journalist, and it's unclear what such a move accomplishes.

To be fair, Carlson has pushed many of Putin's conspiracies and falsehoods in the past, including claims that Ukraine was never a real country, [and that](#) the government in Kyiv was micromanaged and sponsored by the United States. He also shares Putin's opposition to multibillion dollar US aid packages to Ukraine, and has lobbied extensively against US support for Kyiv in the past. All this challenges the credibility of an interview that was supposed to yield objective insights into Russia's war aims.

Carlson also sees the interview as a way of silencing his critics by becoming [the first American to interview](#) the leader since Russia began its assault on Ukraine. He has openly accused US media of "[fawning pep session](#)" [interviews with](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Since his stunning exit from prime-time anchorship in 2023, Carlson has often tried to "ride against the tide" when securing big interviews. From interviewing former US President Donald Trump in the midst of his legal troubles, to getting through Putin at a critical stage of the invasion, Carlson's propaganda-style journalism puts a premium on divisive, polarising figures in an effort to force the media spotlight back to him.

That approach has its limits. Washington is a major proponent of free speech, but the Biden administration has prioritised swift action [against](#) rampant disinformation and fake news.

Much criticism against Carlson has also come from journalists [with distinct](#) media affiliations, who believe in their own brand of free speech.

Still, for many, Carlson's latest move is just a step too far. With elections approaching in mid-March, Putin is in campaign mode, and has used the interview to push forward his strategic thinking and assurances on the Ukraine issue.

US journalists and even the White House are rightly alarmed by the extent of uncritical airtime guaranteed to Putin by an American journalist. In the interview, there was no meaningful effort to question Putin on the consequences of his invasion, or confront him on issues that were sensitive to Russia's war in Ukraine – including allegations of war crimes.

The US establishment treats these points as a top priority, indicating a tacit expectation for Carlson to follow suit.

Scores of journalists from the US and elsewhere [have tried](#) since the invasion to secure such an exchange with Putin, hoping to talk about Russia's reasons to invade Ukraine, its long-term goals and spillovers from the war. And yet, Carlson's interview bordered more on endorsement of Putin's war rationales than critical interrogation.

At the start of the interview, [Carlson said](#), "Putin went on for a very long time, probably half an hour, about the history of Russia going back to the eighth century. But we (Carlson and team)

concluded in the end, for what it's worth, that it was not a filibustering technique. Instead what you're about to see seemed, to us, sincere, whether you agree with it or not."

Still, the opportunity costs are clear. The interview may have been read as a success had Carlson probed Putin's contradictory stance on peace talks, investigated Russia's growing preference for a negotiated agreement with the West, and the sudden factors compelling a shift away from outright military confidence.

Given that the interview barely aligned with hardline US attitudes towards Putin, the media firestorm is here to stay.