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More than a dozen former U.S. national security officials have released an open letter calling for a diplomatic end to the Russia-Ukraine war. The call for peace was published as a full-page ad Tuesday in *The New York Times* and organized by the Eisenhower Media Network. They called the war an “unmitigated disaster” that the U.S. should work to end before it escalates into a nuclear confrontation. We speak with Dennis Fritz, director of the Eisenhower Media Network and a retired command chief master sergeant of the U.S. Air Force. “The majority of my life has been in and out of the Pentagon, and this is probably the most fearful I’ve ever been with a nuclear escalation,” says Fritz.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I’m Amy Goodman.

A group of former high-ranking national security officials published an [open letter](#) in *The New York Times*

Tuesday calling for a diplomatic end to the Russia-Ukraine war. The letter was signed by 15 retired military officials and national security experts, including Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the USSR

. They’re all part of the Eisenhower Media Network. The headline reads, “The U.S. Should Be a Force for Peace In the World.” It begins, “The Russia-Ukraine War has been in unmitigated disaster. Hundreds of thousands have been killed or wounded. Millions have been displaced. Environmental and economic destruction have been incalculable. Future devastation could be exponentially greater as nuclear powers creep ever closer toward open war.”

For more, we’re joined by the lead signatory on this open letter to President Biden published in *The New York Times*

yesterday. Dennis Fritz is director of the Eisenhower Media Network. He’s a retired command chief master sergeant of the U.S. Air Force.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!* It’s great to have you with us. If you can talk about the origins of this letter and why you felt it was so important to publish?

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Well, first of all, Amy, thanks for having me. And that is a perfect and first most important segue question you could ask.

You know, for us, who have been around the military and national security business for many of years, we thought it was so important that we purchase this ad. You know, we took the small budget we have, and we decided that we should put this out there so that we could openly get the message to President Biden and his administration, along with Congress, that we must bring this war to an end immediately.

As you already have discussed about the devastation and the number of killings that have happened so far, I can only see it continuing. And as we continue to introduce more weapons, it only causes more death and destruction. And this is, you know, to be quite frank with you, in support of the Ukrainian people. You know, it really disturbs me — and I'm just going to have to be candid with you, Amy — that, you know, at the expense of the Ukrainian people, we are fighting a proxy war with Russia to weaken them. And at the same time, the death and destruction is occurring in Ukraine and its people. And that's devastating.

And we just couldn't sit back and allow that to happen, as you mentioned. You know, we have a former ambassador to Russia that tried to alert administrations of the past that expanding NATO, that is a security interest of Russia. You know, we have a tendency not to empathize with others' security needs. And there could have been a lot done in the past to prevent this from actually happening.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, now Russia has invaded Ukraine. It's been a year. What do you think the terms of the negotiations should be? I mean, our latest news in the headlines, a Chinese special envoy has arrived in Ukraine as part of a Chinese-led effort to end the 15-month-old war. Xi Jinping just spoke with Volodymyr Zelensky for the first time, and they set up this meeting. Do you hold out hope for that? And just what should be the terms of these negotiations, Chief Fritz?

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Well, Amy, that would actually be up to the Ukrainian leadership and President Zelensky, along with negotiating with Russia. But let me just first say that, you know, in negotiations, you're always going to have to give up something. So, I will think the first thing

would be, let's stop the fighting, and then let's listen and to see what Russia's needs and security needs are. And I think that's what led us here, is because of the fact as Russia was expressing their security needs of us expanding closer to the borders of Russia.

I mean, look at it as you — look at the piece that we purchased yesterday. If you look at a map that we provided, you know, if you back an animal — you've heard this old saying: If you back an animal up against a wall, it's going to react. It's going to defend itself. And as I mentioned earlier, we have a tendency to not empathize with the security needs of others. If you note, we had a hypothetical map of what would it look like if we had Russian munitions, personnel assigned in Canada, in Mexico. We would actually lose our minds. And that is what Russia is against right now.

So, the first step in the negotiation process should be actually listening to Russia. They've been trying to warn us for years that the expansion of NATO is a concern of theirs. And so, the first thing we have to come to the table is to actually listen to Russian needs, and then whatever decisions abided by. You know, one of the biggest things right now is the Donbas eastern region, where we have Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Those needs must be addressed. You know, there's been a war going on there for the longest, and Russia, you know, tried to stay out of it, with the Minsk accords, and they tried to abide by it. And, you know, the Ukrainian government at the time was still bombarding the Donbas region. So that has to be discussed. The issue of Crimea will need to be discussed, because I think that needs to be a part of the negotiation table, because the Black Sea is an important part of the world for Russia. And so, you know, the first step will be to actually sit down at the table and have an opportunity to listen to what Russia's security needs, as well as Ukrainians' needs and also NATO

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to go to Pentagon Papers whistleblower Dan Ellsberg, who we [spoke](#) to earlier this month about his deep concerns about the risk of nuclear war as the tensions between the U.S., Russia and China intensify.

**DANIEL ELLSBERG:** When Biden is urged to send direct planes, that Ukrainians can't yet operate, like the F-16, tanks that they cannot yet operate, the tendency to send Americans to operate those tanks and get them right away into business will be very strong along with that. I can only hope that Biden will be pressed by a large part of the public, pressed not to involve the U.S. directly in that war, and to be pursuing negotiations, which it is currently absolutely

eschewing, is rejecting the idea of negotiations. ...

The belief that we can do less bad by striking first than if we strike second is what confronts us in Ukraine with a real possibility of a nuclear war coming out of this conflict — in other words, of most life on Earth — not all, most life on Earth — being extinguished as a matter of the control of Crimea or the Donbas or Taiwan. That’s insane.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Again, that’s Daniel Ellsberg, perhaps the world’s most famous whistleblower, who released the Pentagon Papers to the press, just diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer, said he absolutely wanted to discuss this issue, that this was the message that he wants to put out to the world at this point in his life, is this threat of — and people think of massive nuclear weapons. He said it’s the low-level tactical weapons that are just as dangerous, low-level tactical nuclear weapons. Command Chief Dennis Fritz, your response?

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Let me just mention, when you say tactical weapons, you know, guess what: That can escalate to intercontinental ballistic missiles, as well, carrying nuclear weapons. So the escalation is the key.

Regarding Mr. Ellsberg, you know, we’ve been in communication with him. In fact, we even coordinated and talked with him about our letter.

And, Amy, I must tell you, I spent a few years in, at the time, Space Command, where our land-based missile systems were under the commander who I advised at the time. I was also, as part of an additional duty, an adviser to the NATO commander — not the NATO commander, I’m sorry, but the NORAD

commander. And I can tell you, I’ve been in and out of the Pentagon since the age of 22. Now I am now 66 years old. The majority of my life has been in and out of the Pentagon, and this is probably the most fearful I’ve ever been with a nuclear escalation.

We’re talking about two nuclear powers. We’re talking about a country, that country being Russia, who for years we have tried to humiliate by way of us — we’re the — “We won the Cold War. We’re the only superpower. We do as we please.” Well, I can tell you right now, you

know, Russia loves their country, as well. And I must be quite frank again: You know, we are the only country to ever, ever use an atomic weapon or a nuclear weapon on another country. I don’t think Russia will sit back and let us be the first to do that again.

And so, I take their threat of not taking off their plate the use of nuclear weapons — I take that seriously. And so that is why, once again, we thought it was so important for us to send that [open letter](#) out to the president. And so, our hope is to educate the American public so that they could see how we got to this point.

**AMY GOODMAN:** After —

**DENNIS FRITZ:** And — yeah?

**AMY GOODMAN:** After this open letter that you have published in *The New York Times*, this full page, “The U.S. Should Be a Force for Peace in the World,” did other national security officials get in touch with you?

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Yes, we had others to get in touch with us. And I must tell you, Amy, to be quite frank, is that some of those individuals didn’t think we went farther enough in our message of their concern about escalation to nuclear warfare. And I will tell you, you know, we’ve been approached by some to say that’s fearmongering. Well, I don’t think it’s fearmongering. In fact, I want you to be fearful, because of the fact we are close to that point. Can you imagine, you know, a few months back, we had an errant missile to land in Poland? You know, it could be an accident. It could be something that’s on purpose. I mean, how long do you think Russia is going to allow weapons to be entered into Ukraine?

And let me just mention something else, too, that Daniel mentioned. You know, I find it amazing when I had said earlier that Ukraine is fighting a proxy war on behalf of us. Well, think about this for a moment. Here it is, we’re introducing some of these weapons, but, oh, by the way, Ukraine, there will be no offensive weapons where that you can strike deep into Russia. We won’t allow that. Why won’t we allow that? Well, that could escalate it. That could escalate to the point where Russia gets to the point of saying, “Listen, you’re introducing these weapons that are hitting deep into our country. We’re not going to allow that. That is a threat to our

national security. And so all bets are off now." And so, this can become an all-out war. And Russia is not going to lose this war. And so, if it becomes a threat to their country and their leadership, let there be no doubt in your mind — there's no doubt in my mind — that if it came to that, they will actually use a nuclear weapon. And then, what happens then?

**AMY GOODMAN:** Are you particularly concerned because of the drone attack on the Kremlin? It is not clear who was involved with this, who was behind this drone attack.

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Well, see, that's true. You know, you always have disinformation in warfare. But think about this, Amy. That's exactly what I'm talking about. It can be an accident. It could be a white flag, something that we will not expect, that could actually — let's say, for instance, you know, some have said it was Russia, which I don't think so. But let's say if it was them, and that gave them the rationale to deepen the war.

And let me just mention one other thing, too, as we keep prolonging this war, because one of the things we're really concerned about, as well, as we continue to prolong this war — well, guess what. That is more death and destruction in Ukraine. It could get to the point where there will be no country for there to be peace, because Russia, if they so desired, could destroy every piece of infrastructure in Ukraine. Do we want to see that?

**AMY GOODMAN:** You were the chief —

**DENNIS FRITZ:** I prefer — go ahead.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You were the chief signatory on this, and the force behind this is the Eisenhower Media Network. Explain what that is.

**DENNIS FRITZ:** Well, the Eisenhower Media Network, we came together — I think the thread that really brought us together was the Iraq War. You know, it definitely was based on a lie. And as you saw, what we did to Iraq destroyed that country, millions of lives lost. On the American side of the house, you know, 4,500 military members killed, 100,000 or more injured for life. So, we came together to try to keep us out of unnecessary wars, to keep us out of that

imperialistic ideology that some of us in our country have. So, that was the piece that brought us together.

And when you think about the expansion of NATO, when you think about these continuous wars, there is somebody that's benefiting from that. And so, our goal is to limit that benefit of the military-industrial complex, which Eisenhower warned us about. And so, that's where we got the name from. So our goal is to limit wars, to limit the benefits of war, which, as you know, the money that we give Ukraine for weapons, that money is going somewhere. Somebody is making those weapons, and it's beneficial to them. I don't think the lives of people should be beneficial for those that benefit from war.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Dennis Fritz, we want to thank you for being with us, director of the Eisenhower Media Network, retired command chief master sergeant of the U.S. Air Force, speaking to us from Washington, D.C.