

Patrick Lawrence

## **Collisions with reality**

A remarkable exchange erupted—and erupted is our word—between President Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky this week. It followed four hours of talks, held in Riyadh Tuesday, between the American and Russian foreign ministers and other senior officials from each side. This was, of course, the start of negotiations to end the conflict in Ukraine, an undertaking to which Trump and Vladimir Putin committed themselves when they spoke by telephone for 90 minutes last week. As was well-reported, the Ukrainian leader was not invited to participate in this first diplomatic round.

Zelensky complained repeatedly last week, publicly but impotently, he was not invited to the Saudi kingdom for the U.S.–Russian talks. And by Tuesday, the initial negotiations successfully completed, Trump appears to have had enough. “You should never have started it,” he said with reference to Zelensky and the war. “You could have made a deal. You have a leadership now that has allowed a war to go on that should never even have happened.”

On Wednesday morning in Kiev Zelensky called foreign correspondents to the presidential palace to deliver his response. “Unfortunately, President Trump... unfortunately lives in this disinformation space,” Zelensky told reporters early Wednesday. He went on to suggest the American president was the victim of Russian propaganda campaigns. “I would like to have more truth with the Trump team.”

There was more, as so often there is, from Donald Trump. An abbreviated extract [from Truth Social](#), Trump's social media platform, time-stamped Wednesday, 19 February, at 9:47 a.m. East Coast American time:

[indent.]

Think of it, a modestly successful comedian... He refuses to have Elections... A Dictator without Elections, Zelenskyy better move fast or he is not going to have a Country left. In the meantime, we are successfully negotiating an end to the War with Russia....

[end indent.]

One may take this as a passing squabble between two political figures now engaged, in one or another way, in a crisis of global import. But I read in it considerably more that is worthy of our attention. We must think about the essence of what each of these figures has had to say these past two days. And then we must think about what, exactly, the guardians of our trans-Atlantic orthodoxies find so startling—so objectionable, indeed—about the declarations and doings of Donald Trump and his national-security people during his, Trump's, first weeks back in office.

All the mainstream media on both sides of the Atlantic ran pieces Wednesday morning describing the shock of Donald Trump's assignment to the Kiev regime of responsibility for the wasteful war that will turn three years old next week. A brief segment I picked up from the BBC captures the essence of the reporting. "We're hearing some strange things from the White House at this hour," one news presenter in London said to another. "President Trump is actually saying that it was Ukraine that started the war."

Yes, this is exactly what Trump is saying. No ambiguity there. It is what he said directly to President Zelensky, just as the BBC presenter's implicit dismissal of Trump's assertion is merely a replica of Zelensky's: "I would like to have more truth..."

The best way I can think of to understand these events—the pugilistic exchange between two presidents, the press and broadcast coverage that followed—is as a collision of a pervasive unreality that has reigned—how shall we count?—at least throughout the Biden years, and I would say for many before them, and the plainly spoken realities Trump and his national-security people have no hesitation articulating.

As the late John Pilger said in a lecture he delivered as the Ukraine crisis sharpened 11 years ago, "the Ukraine war is an information war." How very true this has ever since proven.

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Let us begin where I have begun, with the Trump–Zelensky exchange and the media noise that has followed. No sentient human being whose consciousness has not been overcome with propaganda—and this overcoming is not so easy to resist, I acknowledge—will bother even considering where responsibility for the Ukraine war lies. It is merely a question of how far back one wishes to date its beginning.

There are the early 2000s, by which time Washington, via the suddenly infamous Agency for International Development, was sending millions of dollars to Ukrainian "civil society" groups and "independent" media with the objective of turning a young, already corrupt, unstable nation Westward and, so, against the Russian Federation via one of U.S.A.I.D.'s "color revolutions."

The history gets much more legible in 2014, when the U.S. cultivated a coup in Kiev with the same intention. For eight years afterward the Kiev regime used heavy artillery daily to bombard its own eastern provinces, whose citizens, almost all Russian-speaking, did not accept the deposition of their duly elected president. During this time, of course, Moscow made repeated efforts to negotiate a settlement—the Minsk Protocols of autumn 2014 and spring 2015—to provide the eastern provinces with a measure of autonomy and so preserve Ukraine’s sovereignty. As is now in the record, the Europeans and the Kiev regime betrayed President Putin (who was directly involved in the talks) at every turn.

Readers of *Global Bridge* will know all this, surely, but I shall proceed briefly to complete a pencil-sketch of the pertinent history.

In December 2021 the Kremlin sent two drafts of security treaties Westward, one to Washington, one to NATO headquarters in Brussels, to propose the basis of comprehensive negotiations toward a new European security architecture favorable to all sides. With no substantive explanation, the Biden regime rejected this demarche out of hand. By this time it was using Ukraine assiduously to provoke Russia to intervene in Ukraine—provocations that threatened its, Russia’s, national security. The amusing touch here is that, having taken matters to the point the Kremlin had no choice, Biden and his people claimed an exceptional feat of intelligence gathering when the intervention began 24 February 2022.

If we consider the Trump–Zelensky exchange against this background, it is simply impossible not to understand its nature. Trump spoke a perfectly obvious truth—undeniable so long as one is familiar with the history. But, as we know, the history has been carefully omitted from public discourse in the Western post-democracies these past years. So did Zelensky call with apparent confidence for “more truth” even while standing atop an Alpine peak of falsehoods.

Western leaders and the media clerks serving them have scaled yet higher on this peak these past few days. As [The Times of London reported Thursday](#), British Prime Minister Keir Starmer insisted in a public statement that Zelensky is “Ukraine’s democratically elected leader”—this of a man who canceled elections as his term ran out last year, having already suppressed his political opposition, censored the press, and banned Russian-language books, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the use of Russian in schools, theaters, and other public spheres.

*The New York Times* was yet more daringly pointed. “President Trump is rewriting the history of Russia’s invasion of its neighbor,” Peter Baker, its famously biased White House correspondent, wrote [in Thursday morning’s editions](#). This appeared under the headline, “Trump flips the script on the Ukraine war, blaming Zelensky not Putin.”

Take care with the rhetoric here, I urge, as it reveals more than is intended. “The history”: the official history. “Flips the script,” a vulgar American phrase now in fashion: “The script” denotes the orthodox version of events.

And then we have the “fact-checking” industry. *The Guardian*, the BBC, The Associated Press, CNN: All of these media and many more marshaled their “fact-checkers” to refute Trump’s assertions. Let me put this plainly: I count on *Global Bridge* readers to need no reminder that the fact-checking enterprise, which first flourished during Trump’s previous term in office, is nothing more than another layer of manipulation to which mass media resort to control public discourse.

The very evident shock of the Trump–Zelensky incident derives from the fact that the most powerful leader in the Western world has mounted an assault on the Alpine peak of lies I mentioned earlier. “Mr. Trump’s revisionism sets the stage for a geopolitical about-face unlike any in generations,” *The New York Times* reported

from the White House in the piece noted above. This is perfectly true, except that Trump is not the revisionist: At the risk of an excessively Orwellian turn, those who charge Trump with “revisionism” are the revisionists. Trump has merely invoked authentic, documented history and insisted on viewing events in their proper context. And it is the absence of context and the distortion of history that sustain the unrealities with which we have lived these past many years.

My conclusion: Zelensky’s response to Trump, and the media frenzy that has followed, now look like a rear-guard defense of a regime of lies that abruptly and unexpectedly faces challenge from the very seat of Western power. The collision with reality I mentioned earlier is to me as audible as a messy accident on an expressway.

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Donald Trump has never had any use for Volodymyr Zelensky, and the moderately successful comedian has been petrified of Trump since he, Trump, made clear his intention of negotiating the end of the proxy war Biden insisted on provoking. I dwell on their transoceanic spat because it suggests how one can understand others among the momentous events of the past week.

At the start of these events was Pete Hegseth’s appearance at a NATO convention of defense ministers in Brussels a week ago Wednesday. More shock as the Fox News presenter Trump has named his defense secretary outlined in courteous but plain language the policy he will execute under his employer’s authority.

Restoring Ukraine’s borders to their pre-2014 lines is “an unrealistic objective... an illusory goal.” A settlement will require concessions on Kiev’s part: This was Hegseth’s primary point. Others: Washington will not support Ukraine’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The NATO Charter’s

Article 5, making an attack on one member an attack on all, will not cover any NATO member that sends troops into Ukraine—I take it even on a peacekeeping mission, should one take shape. The Europeans will be on their own as they continue to support the Kiev regime.

None of this would be in the least shocking but for the years of denial Hegseth effectively brushed out of the way. We have read incessantly since 2022 of the incompetence of Russian field commanders, the disarray of their drunken troops, the inadequacy of Russian armaments, the mighty heroism of Ukrainian forces—and so, it has followed now for years, of Kiev’s certain victory. All that is now exposed as imaginative propaganda.

The whole world has known ever since Russian forces took parts of eastern Ukraine—and certainly since it reannexed Crimea in response to the 2014 coup in Kiev—that Ukraine had no chance of recovering these lands. This simply could not be said: too much reality in it. Neither was there any chance, Biden’s professions of dedication notwithstanding, of American troops operating on Ukrainian soil (other than covertly, as some special forces and intelligence operatives do now), or that NATO forces would ever enter Ukraine, or that Washington would ever dare invoke Article 5. All thoughts to the contrary have been rooted in the hothouse of unreality wherein the Western powers cultivated illusions of victory so as to keep public opinion on the right side and the weapons shipments flowing.

Does Hegseth in Brussels amount to nothing more than another collision with reality? As he said, perfectly to the point, in a subsequent speech in Warsaw, apparently in response to all the shouts and murmurs, his intent at NATO HQ was simply to inject “realism into the expectations of our NATO allies.”

We saw the same, not to belabor the point, when J.D. Vance spoke at the Munich Security Conference last weekend. Trump’s vice-president addressed the rampant censorship now abroad on the Continent, notably but not only in Germany, and went on to attack the wild excesses of “wokery” as an insidious form of suppressed free speech. Most significantly, Vance called the Europeans on their antidemocratic political manipulations to keep conservative and leftist parties—Afd and BSW in Germany, Le Pen’s Rassemblement in France—out of power or any kind of power-sharing arrangement despite their popularity at the polls.

The scene was once again hour-glass upside-down. European leaders defended entrenched neoliberal regimes as democratic and attacked Vance as an enemy of democracy. Vance, it seems clear to me, sought to bring the same reality to cultural and political questions as Hegseth brought to geopolitics. And in response we saw the Continent’s political elites continue to blow bubbles, just as they have done for many years.

This matter of bubble-blowing, I will mention just briefly, extends far beyond the Ukraine question. “Putin’s Russia”—as against simply Russia—seeks to take over Europe and to destroy NATO and the European Union, and it deploys extensive disinformation operations to do so. Further afield on the world map, China’s objectives are to rule the Pacific and establish territorial dominion as far as... as far as nobody knows. As to Trump, he merely “elevates Kremlin talking points,” as *The New York Times* put it Thursday.

Etc.

I saw Chas Freeman, the distinguished American diplomat (now emeritus), in [a segment Wednesday of \*Judging Freedom\*](#), the much-watched daily webcast of



Andrew Napolitano, a retired judge and former news commentator. To my great satisfaction, Freeman went straight to my point as he remarked on the Ukraine situation. “We have been living in a dream world of our own manufacture,” Chas, who I count a friend, said to Napolitano. “Now we have to confront reality as it is rather than we would like it to be.”

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