

PAYING OUR DEBT TO PRESIDENT ZELENSKYI'S UKRAINE

By Peter Van Praagh, President of HFX

The United States, Canada, the UK, Europe and democracies everywhere owe President Zelenskyy and every single Ukrainian an enormous debt of gratitude.

On this date in February 2022, Putin not only invaded his smaller neighbor, he attacked the very idea of freedom itself. And he nearly won.

To recall, at that moment freedom had lost a great deal of its confidence. Just months earlier, in August 2021, the United States and its allies withdrew their troops from Afghanistan and discarded the hopes and dreams of so many Afghans, who, for twenty years believed that American and Western presence guaranteed for them a secure, and perhaps even a modern, future.

August 2021 was a low point for Afghanistan and indeed, for all of us. No individual person, no single government, was responsible for getting to that low place. It was a group effort. It was all of us. It was the culmination of 20 years of good intentions. And bad results.

The decisions made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, North Korea going nuclear, Russia's invasion of Georgia, the Great Recession, Iran, the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, the surge of refugees – more than at any time in human history, the successful rise of populist politics, the higher than necessary death toll from coronavirus, Hong Kong losing its freedoms, January 6 and its wake, climate change disasters, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

It was a tragic end to a 20-year tragic era. Because on February 24, 2022, a new era began. When Putin's Russia launched a full-scale invasion of its

smaller neighbor, Ukraine, it could easily have been one more terrible defeat for freedom.

But Ukraine fought back. President Zelenskyy inspired his nation to defy, to resist, to survive, to win. Counter to the conventional narrative, it was not Russia's attack on Ukraine that brought unity of purpose to NATO and the allies. No, it was Ukraine's defiance. It was Ukraine's sacrifice. It was Ukraine's fight that gave the rest of us what we had lost over the past 20 years.

"It was Ukraine's fight that gave us our unity of purpose."

It was Ukraine's fight that gave us our unity of purpose. Had Ukraine surrendered, as some European leaders urged President Zelenskyy to do, it's not difficult to imagine where we would be now: a much-weakened Europe, a divided NATO, a humbled America: all confronting an empowered Russia, backed by a smiling Xi Jinping.

That is not where we are. Quite the opposite. President Zelenskyy's Ukraine has given all of us an opportunity for a do-over. It's not often that you get a do-over; a second opportunity; a chance to correct past mistakes. But thanks to Ukraine's resolve, that is what we now have.

Thanks to Ukraine's leadership, Ukraine's will and Ukraine's sacrifice, Ukraine's partners found renewed purpose. If we needed reminding, Ukraine taught us all over again: Our democracies are worth saving. Our democracies are worth fighting for.

Because of Ukrainian sacrifice, Ukrainian courage and Ukrainian ingenuity, the era that began on February 24, 2022 now has the potential to be the most positive era yet for freedom and democracy.

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Americans and their allies and partners should be very proud of the material support, lethal and non-lethal, that their countries moved to the fight in Ukraine. But now, is not the time for self-doubt and second thoughts. Now is the time to pay our debt to Ukraine. Just as we needed Ukraine's resolve two years ago, Ukraine needs our collective resolve right now.

Let's get Ukraine the material support it needs. Together, Ukraine and its allies will win this fight for freedom.

Peter Van Praagh is President of HFX, the Washington, DC-based organization that convenes Halifax International Security Forum. Excerpts of this piece were delivered as a speech to the 2022 Halifax International Security Forum.

The logo for HFX, consisting of the letters 'HFX' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, is centered within a light blue circular background that is partially visible at the bottom right of the page.