

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYI IS THE LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD NOW

By Peter Van Praagh

This very month two hundred and fifty years ago, American colonists rose up against the world's most powerful empire in an unlikely fight for independence from tyranny. The 'shot heard 'round the world' inspired men and women on every continent and in every generation since. Today, however, that universal fight for freedom is led by Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Ukraine, not the United States.

This month's proposal that Ukraine shall never join NATO and that Crimea be formally recognized as part of Russia is not only a historic American surrender to Russia. It is the historic surrender of those very values – independence, freedom and democracy – that Americans have vowed to defend, both in peacetime and in war for exactly 250 years. Until now.

Now, as the American people grasp this new un-American course and wrestle their country back to the values it always stood for, it is fortunate for the United States, and for the rest of the world, that in the meantime Volodymyr Zelenskyy remains committed to those same values. Just as George Washington and America's Founding Fathers stood firm against the odds and committed their young country to independence from tyranny, President Zelenskyy stands firm today.

In many ways, Ukraine's fight now is like the American fight for independence then. At the birth of the United States, loyalists to the British crown deemed it impossible for a new nation to successfully declare independence from the United Kingdom. If George Washington had been swayed by the cowards of the time, and had France equivocated and stopped supplying weapons to the American colonies at the very moment the situation looked most dire, there very well might not be an independent United States of America today. But being outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered and outplanned – the phrase made famous by the Broadway musical Hamilton – did not stop American patriots from taking a

stand and fighting for liberty. It will not stop Ukrainian patriots from fighting for their liberty today.

President Zelenskyy leads a country that in recent history has endured the First World War, the Holodomor, Nazi occupation, the Second World War, the Holocaust, Soviet occupation, the world's worst nuclear disaster and Russian annexation of its territories. Along the way, Ukrainians picked up a robust and irrepressible resilience. As a result, President Zelenskyy's firm commitment to his country's independent and democratic future should not come as a surprise to anybody who has been paying even casual attention. Indeed, President Zelenskyy saved the world once already.

In February 2022, when Russia unambiguously launched the war of aggression with the unprovoked full-scale attack of its smaller neighbor, Ukraine surprised the world by fighting back and defending itself. The conventional narrative of this period is that the democracies united behind Ukraine the moment Russia attacked. However, this account is not accurate. In fact, when Putin attacked Ukraine, the democracies were divided over what to do. Reportedly, some leaders offered to fly the Ukrainian government to safety, while others advised Ukraine to surrender completely.

It was only when President Zelenskyy took a selfie-video with his government leaders in downtown Kyiv demonstrating to Moscow and the rest of the world what courage looked like did the United States, Canada, the EU, NATO and other democracies unify behind him.

Had President Zelenskyy fled, and had Ukraine surrendered in February 2022, the world would be a very different place: NATO would have faced Russia on its borders at full strength backed by an empowered China. Instead, President Zelenskyy led his brave nation of fighters and gave Western institutions the time they needed to wake up and send ammunition. Finland and

Sweden joined NATO and on the other side of Eurasia, Japan and South Korea had a breakthrough in their relations. Most significantly, with over one million casualties and isolated from the world's major economies, Putin's Russia is severely diminished.

In addition to the continued flow of supplies, weapons and shared intelligence, President Zelenskyy, and indeed every Ukrainian, deserve universal gratitude from every democracy, including the United States, for the sacrifices they have made for saving the world as we know it. Instead, the United States government now sides with authoritarian Russia. At this juncture, we need President Zelenskyy to save the world one more time.

There are many reasons for Americans and non-Americans who admire and love the United States to be frightened that the end of the American democratic experiment has arrived. Reasons for alarm include the Executive Branch of the United States government's refusal to spend money as it was appropriated by Congress, the appointment of cabinet officials without the qualifications or experience for the serious responsibilities of their positions, the administering of loyalty tests to serve in the government, the firing of top military commanders, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the steady erosion of press freedoms through intimidating lawsuits and insults, the launching of a multifaceted campaign against higher education, including research funding, student protections and academic freedoms, wiping out trillions of dollars of Americans' wealth through the implementation of economic policies that were not ready to be implemented, the sharing of classified information that put American military pilots in danger, regularly challenging judicial independence, including targeting judges, name-calling and strong-arming lawyers, slamming shut the doors to refugees, suppressing dissent and retaliating against government critics, threatening to annex friends and neighbors and the expansion of executive power including attempts to overlook the Constitution by revoking birthright citizenship, allowing the President to serve a third term and preventing due-process leading to the deliberate targeting and removal of immigrants.

If the U.S. were any other country, those concerned for its democratic future might very well be right. But it is important to note that the Executive Branch of the United States government does not the United States make. The

U.S. is simply too great, too large, too unruly, if not too committed to the country's founding principles, to be tamed. Unlike 1930s Germany or any other country at any other time that it has recently been compared to, the United States has 250 years of democratic evolution and traditions and is made up of millions of individuals and organizations from every single country on earth who are committed to, among other things, the success of the United States. And, above all else, the success of the United States depends on the rule of law.

It took one hundred days of frenzied activity from the Executive Branch of the United States government but now there are solid signs that American institutions are prepared to withstand this ordeal. Tragically, however, during this period the United States surrendered its hard-earned title of Leader of the Free World. Quite simply, no country, not even the United States of America, can be Leader of the Free World while undermining the rule of law at home and supporting a tyrant like Putin abroad. While the U.S. is preoccupied with itself, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea and every other government headed by freedom-loving leaders must continue to step up and increase their material, political and moral support for Ukraine.

Nobody knows how long the United States is going to sit on the sidelines of the global struggle for democracy, dignity and decency, but it will not be forever. Until the United States gets itself back on its 250-year-old mission as a beacon for freedom, the American people and every individual in the world who loves freedom can be thankful that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is the Leader of the Free World now.

Peter Van Praagh is the founding president of HFX, the Washington, DC-based convenor of the annual Halifax International Security Forum.

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