

IDEAS

It Was an Ambush

Friday marked one of the grimmest days in the history of American diplomacy.

By Tom Nichols



Jim Lo Scalzo / EPA / Getty

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Leave aside, if only for a moment, the utter boorishness with which President Donald Trump and Vice President J. D. Vance treated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House today. Also leave aside the spectacle of American leaders publicly pummeling a friend as if he were an enemy. All of the ghastliness inflicted on Zelenskyy today should not obscure the geopolitical reality of what just happened: The president of the United States ambushed a loyal ally, presumably so that he can soon make a deal with the dictator of Russia to sell out a European nation fighting for its very existence.

Trump's advisers have already declared the meeting a win for "putting America first," and his apologists will likely spin and rationalize this shameful moment as just a heated conversation—the kind of thing that in Washington-speak used to be called a "frank and candid exchange." But this meeting reeked of a planned attack, with Trump unloading Russian talking points on Zelensky (such as blaming Ukraine for risking global war), all of it designed to humiliate the Ukrainian leader on national television and give Trump the pretext to do what he has indicated repeatedly he wants to do: side with Russian President Vladimir Putin and bring the war to an end on Russia's terms. Trump is now reportedly considering the immediate end of all military aid to Ukraine because of Zelensky's supposed intransigence during the meeting.

Vance's presence at the White House also suggests that the meeting was a setup. Vance is usually an invisible backbencher in this administration, with few duties other than some occasional trolling of Trump's critics. (The actual business of furthering Trump's policies is apparently now Elon Musk's job.) This time, however, he was brought in to troll not other Americans, but a foreign leader. Marco Rubio—in theory, America's top diplomat—was also there, but he sat glumly and silently while Vance pontificated like an obnoxious graduate student.

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Zelensky objected, as he should have, when the vice president castigated the Ukrainian president for not showing enough personal gratitude to Trump. And then in a moment of immense hypocrisy, Vance told Zelensky that it was "disrespectful for you to come into the Oval Office and try to litigate this in front of the American media." But baiting Zelensky into fighting in front of the media was likely the plan all along, and Trump and Vance were soon both yelling at Zelensky. ("This is going to be great television," Trump said during the meeting.) The president at times sounded like a Mafia boss—"You don't have the cards"; "you're buried there"—but in the end, he sounded like no one so much as Putin himself as he hollered about "gambling with World War III," as if starting the biggest war in Europe in nearly a century was *Zelensky's* idea.

After the meeting, Trump dismissed the Ukrainian leader and then issued a statement that could only have pleased Moscow:

I have determined that President Zelensky is not ready for Peace if America is involved, because he feels our involvement gives him a big advantage in negotiations. I don't want advantage, I want PEACE. He disrespected the United States of America in its cherished Oval Office. He can come back when he is ready for Peace.

Trump might as well have dictated this post on Truth Social before the meeting, because Zelensky didn't stand a chance of having an actual discussion at the White House. When he showed Trump pictures of brutalized Ukrainian soldiers, Trump shrugged. "That's tough stuff," he muttered. Perhaps someone told Zelensky that Trump doesn't read much, and reacts to images, but Trump, uncharacteristically, seems to have been determined to stay on message and pick a fight.

Vance, for his part, fully inhabited the role of a smarmy talk-show sidekick, jumping in to make sure the star got the support he needed while slamming one of the guests. The vice president is an unserious man who tries to insert himself into serious moments, but this time the stakes were much higher than the usual dustups with the media or congressional Democrats. He chuckled as Brian Glenn, a journalist from the right-wing channel Real America's Voice who is reportedly dating Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, asked Zelensky the tough and incisive question of why he had not worn a suit in the Oval Office. (Perhaps he'll ask Musk why he wore a hat and T-shirt to a Cabinet meeting, but I doubt it.)

The sheer rudeness shown to a foreign guest and friend of the United States was (to use a word) deplorable as a matter of manners and grace, but worse, Trump and Vance acted like a couple of online Kremlin sock puppets instead of American leaders. They pushed talking points that they either knew or should have known were wrong. Even if Zelensky were as fluent and capable in English as Winston Churchill, he would never have been able to rebut the flood of falsehoods. No, the U.S. has not given Ukraine \$350 billion; yes, Zelensky has repeatedly expressed his thanks to America and to Trump; no, Zelensky was not attacking the administration. The Ukrainian leader did his best to stand up to the bullying, but Trump and Vance were playing to the cameras and the MAGA gallery at home.

Vance showed how dedicated he was to point-scoring rather than policy making with an observation so shallow that he was lucky that Zelensky was too off-balance to call him out for it. To emphasize Ukraine's perilous situation, Vance noted that Zelensky was sending conscripts to the front lines, as if this was an unprecedented policy that only the most desperate regime would dare enact. Zelensky said that all nations at war have problems, but he might have pointed out to Vance that Ukraine is fighting for its very existence, while the United States has dragged conscripts to places far from home—including Korea and Vietnam—to fight against troops supported by the Kremlin.

Tom Nichols: Don't blame Zelensky

Today's meeting and America's shameful vote in the United Nations on Monday confirmed that the United States is now aligned with Russia and against Ukraine, Europe, and most of the planet. I felt physically sick watching the president of the United States yell at a brave ally, fulminating in the Oval Office as if he were an addled old man shaking his fist at a television. Zelensky has endured tragedies, and risked his life, in ways that men such as Trump and Vance cannot imagine. (Vance served as a public-relations officer in the most powerful military in the world; he has never had to huddle in a bunker during a Russian bombardment.) I am ashamed for my nation; even if Congress acts to support and aid Ukraine, it cannot restore the American honor lost today.

But no matter how disgusted anyone might be at Trump and Vance's behavior, the strategic reality is that this meeting is a catastrophe for the United States and the free world. America's alliances are now in danger, and *should* be: Trump is openly, and gleefully, betraying everything America has tried to defend since the defeat of the Axis 80 years ago. The entire international order of peace and security is now in danger, as Russian autocrats, after slaughtering innocent people for three years, look forward to enjoying the spoils of their invasion instead of standing trial for their crimes. (Shortly after Trump dismissed Zelensky from the White House, Putin's homunculus, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, posted on X: "The insolent pig finally got a proper slap down in the Oval Office.")

Friday, February 28, 2025, will go into the history books as one of the grimmest days in American diplomacy, the beginning of a long-term disaster that every American, every U.S. ally, and anyone who cares about the future of democracy will have to endure. With the White House's betrayal of Ukraine capping a month of authoritarian chaos in America, Putin, along with other dictators around the world, can finally look at Trump with confidence and think: *one of us*.

This article previously misstated J. D. Vance's former military role.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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