

## ***To avoid a showdown with Vance and Trump, Zelenskyy should have channeled Netanyahu***

*Ukraine's president's refusal to bend like the Israelis may be a diplomatic catastrophe*

**By [Isaac Saul](#)** February 28, 2025



President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meet in the Oval Office at the White House on Feb. 28. Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images

By now, you've probably seen the [viral clips](#) of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy tussling with U.S. President Trump and Vice President JD Vance in the Oval Office. The meeting went off the rails after Zelenskyy, hearing Vance's calls for diplomacy, insisted the vice president explain how one can execute diplomacy with the despotic, untrustworthy leader that is Russia's President Vladimir Putin. Vance apparently took exception to the question. He responded by demanding Zelenskyy express his gratitude to the United States,

declaring his line of questioning “disrespectful” and saying it was wrong for him to try to litigate the issue in front of the American media.

The entire episode is made more jarring with a little thought exercise: Imagine Vance or Trump demand that Israel, another ally under siege from forces bent on its annihilation, express its gratitude for U.S. support before the world. Such a demand would be absurd, because Israel expresses its gratitude for our support all the time — [just as Zelenskyy has, on numerous occasions.](#)

So was this about performative acts of gratitude, or something else? A week ago, remember, the Trump administration demanded that Israel [vote against a U.N. resolution](#) holding Russia responsible for the war. Israel complied, joining the dubious company of North Korea, Belarus, Hungary and Russia. The spectacle of a Jewish nation being forced into a kind of historical revisionism — as Jews around the world fight a constant battle against the forces of Holocaust denial — made the episode even more painful.

Israel swallowed the bitter, even hypocritical pill. The cost was relatively low — Israel doesn't have warm feelings toward the U.N. in general, and the downsides of getting on Trump's bad side, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is astutely aware, are huge.

The same bullying dynamic was on display Friday in the Oval Office. This time, however, the outcome was different. Zelenskyy spoke the truth, and that truth is inconvenient for the narrative Trump and Vance are selling to the American people.

Zelenskyy should have bitten his tongue, for his country's sake. He came primarily to sign a deal, not to make his case to the American public, and it was a strategic error to get bogged down in a fight; Trump and Vance were antagonistic in their own right, but this should have been [an easy trap to avoid](#). In fact, Trump [committed](#) to continuing to arm Ukraine earlier in the meeting, so Zelenskyy had already achieved a key objective of his visit when things devolved. He should have known that all he had to do was walk in, kiss the ring, sign the deal, and leave — keeping any disagreements behind closed

doors. That is the smart way to deal with this administration — ask the Israelis.

It's easy to understand why he didn't. Imagine the rage, the sense of injustice he must have felt when Vance [insisted](#) that the path to peace may involve “engaging in diplomacy.” That, of course, is true. But it doesn't resolve important questions, which Zelenskyy decided to raise.

Specifically, questions about whether Russia can be trusted. Russia under President Vladimir Putin has occupied various parts of Ukraine since 2014. Ukraine had many bilateral conversations with him since, signed a ceasefire deal with him, a gas contract, a prisoner exchange agreement — and Putin [broke them all](#).

“What kind of diplomacy, JD, are you speaking about? What do you mean?” Zelenskyy asked.

Imagine being Zelenskyy, hearing Trump and Vance simultaneously ridicule the support Biden gave Ukraine while also demanding that you thank them — two people who had no role in that support — for it. Imagine sitting there and hearing your experience being equated to Putin's. Is it any wonder he felt the need to push back?

Of course, litigating the issue for the American people is part of Zelenskyy's job. Ukraine's president knows he is on the ropes both in the war and as it relates to U.S. support. He came [with hopes of finalizing a framework](#) to hand over a swath of Ukrainian natural resources in exchange for military support from the U.S.

But he also came knowing that the president and vice president have spent the last few weeks [blurring the lines](#) on responsibility for the war, and he did not seem interested in entertaining that historical revisionism while he sat in front of the world.

That makes the difference between his approach and Israel's more understandable. Israel has no reason to argue with the U.S. president; the country's sovereignty is not imperiled in the same way as Ukraine's, Trump is

not trying to inaccurately rewrite its history in the public eye, and Netanyahu has calculated that maintaining close ties with Trump is primary to any other concern.

Another thought experiment: Imagine Trump telling Netanyahu, on camera, that Hamas has some valid points, or that Netanyahu was too fixated on defeating Hamas. Would Netanyahu stay quiet?

Imagine watching Putin invade your country with fighter jets, tankers, long-range missiles. Imagine your country scrambling to heroically defend its capital from conquest. Imagine watching your cities destroyed, [tens of thousands](#) of your countrymen killed. [Millions displaced](#). Imagine doing all that only to watch from a distance as Trump and Vance muddy the waters on who started the war, and then — in the Oval Office — [insist on](#) what a difficult time Putin had during the “Russia hoax” that was the FBI’s inquiry into Trump’s ties to Russia.

For three years, Zelenskyy and his nation have been on the precipice of disaster, but they have survived. Now, Zelenskyy is sending a message a lot of Americans should hear: The war can end today. Putin just needs to leave.

If Volodymyr Zelenskyy made a mistake today, it was not understanding what the Israelis have mastered: that dealing with Trump to secure needed U.S. support involves making often unpalatable compromises. On the one hand, Zelenskyy can go home to his people and say he spoke the truth. But it may cost him dearly. If this meeting ends with the U.S. pulling the rug on its support for Ukraine, it’ll be a national disgrace for us — and a catastrophic diplomatic failure for Zelenskyy.

*\*Isaac Saul is the founder of [Tangle](#), a politics newsletter that summarizes the best arguments from the right, left and center on the big debates of the day.*