

Statement on the Oval Office Meeting between US President Trump, Vice President Vance, and Ukrainian President Zelensky

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security protests the shameful treatment of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky during his visit to the White House on 28 February 2025. We wish to underscore the outrageous behavior of US Vice President J. D. Vance. Vance's behavior was petulant, childish, and in jaw-dropping violation of diplomatic protocol. It was particularly offensive given the genocidal threat Russia poses to Ukraine. By publicly dressing down the Ukrainian president and personalizing a high-stakes press conference that – until Vance's interjections – was going remarkably well, Vice President Vance did a terrible disservice to President Trump, US national security, and the American people. The Trump Administration may feel it is being effective by humiliating state guests and the victims of genocide, but it should consider the long-term impact to the US reputation abroad – among traditional allies, important trade partners, emerging powerhouses, and great power competitors like Russia – of this sort of approach. Statesmanly behavior can serve the same purposes as vulgar bullying, but it also garners respect and good will in the process.

Presidents Trump and Zelensky were meeting to discuss a way forward in the conflict that was started by Russia on February 24, 2022 when it chose to invade Ukraine, claiming that Ukraine was a fake state and the land, as well as the people, belonged to Russia. Vladimir Putin's genocidal framing has made this conflict devastating and intractable (see our statements from [24 February 2022](#) and [20 March 2022](#)). NATO's and the Russian Federation's struggle for hegemony in Eastern Europe further heightens the stakes of this conflict.

The transfer of power from the Biden administration to the Trump administration has created doubts about the future of US policy towards Ukraine. This meeting should have been about these serious issues. The question of security guarantees for Ukraine if Trump negotiates a ceasefire deal with Russia is especially urgent.

During the [press conference](#), both Presidents Trump and Zelensky held their own while remaining respectful and sometimes amicable, despite clear differences in their assessments of the threat posed by President Putin to Ukraine, Europe, and the USA. President Trump's unwillingness to recognize Russia's responsibility for starting the

conflict and President Zelensky's insistence that Ukraine will not cede any territory occupied by Russia were flash points that the two leaders delicately balanced.

An outrageous question from Brian Glenn, a correspondent for a right-wing cable channel, shattered Trump's and Zelensky's respectful tone. Standing behind Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Mr. Glenn thuggishly interjected, "Why don't you wear a suit?", referring to Zelensky's black military attire. The unflappable President Zelensky responded that he will wear a suit when the war is over. President Trump later attempted to smooth over Glenn's remarkable stupidity by complementing Zelensky's attire.

Things again went awry after Zelensky asked Vice President Vance a judicious and pertinent question about Putin's trustworthiness. Unfortunately, faced with an opportunity to explain his assessment of the US negotiating position, Vance faltered and joined Glenn in the peanut gallery by upbraiding Zelensky like a child.

Vance's bully tactics showed a deep insecurity, personalizing the discussion in the manner of an incompetent aide who needed to divert attention from his lack of knowledge and inability to handle complex foreign policy issues. As Vance warmed to his own words of admonishment, he became increasingly haughty – and foolish. He falsely claimed that Zelensky has never said "thank you" for US support, that he has been "disrespectful" to President Trump, and that he campaigned for the Democrats last fall.

Vice President Vance's behavior in the US and Europe clearly shows he is punching well above his weight. The man once heralded as an intellectual has shown himself to be a vindictive, mindless, and petty opportunist catapulted to undeserved political success by the billionaire Peter Theil. Vance's inability to show respect for a man fighting against genocide demonstrates a great deal about his own lack of character.

Vice President Vance's behavior constitutes a major embarrassment for the United States. He made himself and the administration look disordered and weak while upstaging President Trump at an Oval Office event – an obvious no-no for somebody in his position. If Trump wanted to pick a petty fight with Zelensky, he would have done so himself. If this was a "set up" of Zelensky by Trump and Vance (as some commentators have suggested), the President made a terrible error by granting Vance the appearance of having the power to set the tone.

Unfortunately, President Trump allowed his obnoxious upstart VP to derail a history-making event by joining in on Vance's pettiness and the false issue of

Zelensky's "disrespect." President Trump himself began mocking Zelensky with sneering verbal reenactments of what he claimed Zelensky was saying. This undid the difficult diplomacy of the previous half hour of discussion while making Trump look foolish and weak. It also put the world in a much more dangerous position by unnecessarily widening the division between the US and Europe (which Vance had already widened considerably during the Munich Conference) and possibly derailing the prospect of peace in Ukraine.

The Lemkin Institute is glad that Presidents Trump and Zelensky have agreed to meet once more, despite the fallout from last week's unfortunate circus. We hope that the Trump Administration will agree to restore military and intelligence assistance to Ukraine, and that members of Trump's cabinet will take seriously the security concerns of the Ukrainians, whose experiences with Russia should be considered when crafting US foreign policy towards Russia.

Beyond the immediate issue of diplomatic protocol, we wish to offer an observation about strength and leadership. Truly strong leaders do not behave the way that Vance, and then Trump, behaved last week. Strong leaders do not make a mockery of the complex negotiations necessary to end genocide. Strong leaders do not display insecurity in front of the entire world by accusing guests of "disrespect" after they ask a pertinent, respectful question about how to end genocide. Strong leaders do not seek to cut a foreign leader – and a guest – down to size, especially not one who has courageously led a nation for three years in its resistance to genocide. Strong leaders do what President Zelensky did. He attempted to defend his nation by negotiating a relationship with a new US administration that is much closer to Russia than the previous one. President Zelensky, despite the pressures he is under, was respectful, frank, and composed throughout the entire meeting, even after he was directly insulted by a President and Vice President who were completely out of control.

We wish to underscore that strong leaders do what President Trump began the press conference doing. He appeared to engage in respectful dialogue, including respectful disagreement, seeking to find common ground and a way forward that would bring the current war of attrition to an end.

The Lemkin Institute has numerous concerns about the current administration's handling of genocide around the world, especially in its apparent "might makes right" philosophy and its clear preference for the militarily strong over the vulnerable, which, in situations of genocide, means support for the perpetrators. The treatment of President Zelensky on February 28 suggests to us that the Trump Administration intends to continue the Biden Administration's reckless approach to conflict and genocide, in

contrast to President Trump's campaign promises to end such recklessness and bring greater peace to the world. The details may differ, and Trump may be more consistent in his support for genocidaires than Biden was, but the willingness to waste the lives of others for short-sighted US imperial gain is exactly the same.

President Trump needs to get his underlings under control so that he can lead the United States without the tomfoolery of men like J.D. Vance (and Elon Musk) who know little, are inexperienced with leadership, lack self-control, and bring shame to the President and the nation. We trust that President Trump does not want to go down in history as a man who was too weak to control his appointees and too foolish to stand up to this century's worst genocidaires.