Opinion

NCR Voices



Yurii Bilyk, director of a local lyceum, walks next to the organization's building in Dnipropetrovsk region, Ukraine, Feb. 18, 2025. The structure was destroyed by a recent Russian airstrike. (OSV News/Reuters/Valentyn Ogirenko)



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Three years ago today, Russian troops invaded Ukraine. Most commentators feared the Russian military would quickly subdue its neighbor, but within days the Russian troops were met with fierce resistance. The Russian thrust toward the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv was first stalled, then stopped and then pushed back. During the retreat, the Russian soldiers massacred hundreds of civilians in the town of Bucha, a display of savagery that brought back memories of Katyn, the forest where Red Army soldiers slaughtered the officer corps of the Polish Army in 1940.

The bravery of the Ukrainian military, its people and its president inspired freedom-loving people around the world. The Western nations rallied to support Ukraine's defense of its homeland. We knew Russian President Vladimir Putin was a threat not only to the nations of the West but to the ideals of the West. And we knew that Ukraine was fighting not just for itself, but for other countries formerly crushed under the boot of dictators. Finland joined NATO. Poland received hundreds of thousands of refugees and sent military assistance to Ukraine. The Baltic states strengthened their military preparedness.

Three years of war have taken a toll. The suffering of the Ukrainian people has been acute and many Russian families, who had no gripe with Ukraine, have lost their sons. It might be time to try and end the war.

Instead, President Donald Trump tried to rewrite history last week. Speaking about his decision to begin negotiations with Russia, but not allowing Ukraine at the table, the president said in a press conference at Mar-a-Lago, "Today I heard, 'Oh well, we weren't invited.' Well, you've been there for three years. You should've ended it after three years. You should've never started it. You could've made a deal." Never started it? Ukraine did not start the war. Russia did.

This is not just any lie. It is a bit of Kremlin propaganda. The purpose of the propaganda is to obscure the fact that Russia does not want peace. It wants conquest.

Trump went on to call Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a "dictator." Another lie. Another bit of Kremlin propaganda.

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In the history of diplomacy, lies are employed as often as the truth. But one of the lessons of the 20th century is that when a democracy conducts diplomacy, it should be public diplomacy. The constitutional requirement that the Senate give consent to a treaty signed by the president pointed in this direction: Diplomacy undertaken on behalf of the people must engage the people's representatives. After centuries of secret deals by autocrats, which never seemed to secure peace for very long, the democracies of the West came to the realization that foreign policy should be rooted in national values as much as possible. Yes, we can and should make peace with dictatorships like Russia, but we can only make true alliances with fellow democracies. NATO was not just an effort to keep the Soviet Union from expanding westward. It was a bond among sister democracies.

Trump's trafficking in Russian propaganda, and his public disdain for NATO may well mark the end of the alliance. Like Elon Musk's attacks on the federal bureaucracy, Trump on the world stage only destroys and dismantles; he never builds up. The alliance that curtailed Soviet aggression and kept the peace in the heart of Europe for 50 years can be discarded because it suits Trump's self-image.

You would think the president's abandonment of Ukraine would spark united outrage in the ranks of the Republican Party. But you would be wrong. Surely, every senator knows that Ronald Reagan is turning over in his grave! Surely, every senator knows that Russia's thuggish leaders will conclude that Trump is their patsy, that they can do what they wish along their borders, and that this would not be good for the security of the United States to say nothing of the people in Europe who will be affected almost immediately.

Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina took to the floor of the U.S. Senate to speak the truth about Putin. He said Putin was "the greatest threat to democracy in my lifetime." Putin is "a cancer," Tillis said. His was a lonely voice.

Republicans are not the only ones whose sense of moral responsibility has been denuded when it comes to Ukraine. Columbia University Professor Jeffrey Sachs

spoke at the Cambridge Union a few months ago and gave his own tendentious account of the origins of the war, blaming it on NATO expansion. He never once acknowledged that the peoples of the countries in Eastern Europe that sought entry into NATO did so as sovereign nations, with popularly elected governments. He never once acknowledged that the character of the Russian government changed between 1990 and today. Sachs, like Trump, fails to see the connection between democracy and foreign policy, just as he failed to see the connection between democracy and economic policy when he successfully recommended the Russian government adopt "shock therapy" in the 1990s, paving the way for today's oligarchy in Moscow. Now he shills for the Kremlin.

Sachs is not president, however. He can go on Tucker Carlson and spin his lies, but Trump has the power to hand Putin what three years of war have denied him: victory. Democracy be damned.

On election night last November, after it became clear Trump had won, I knew many friends would be devastated by the result. But before climbing into bed around 4:30 in the morning, I only sent one email to a Ukrainian friend. "I fear the most immediate consequence of Trump's victory will be to stop aid to the brave people of Ukraine…I do not know what this means for the future of negotiations to end the conflict, but I know this result in our election will be terrible for your countrymen. I am so sorry," I wrote. I could not foresee that this terrible result would come with such gross dishonor to the bravery of the Ukrainian people and to the decency of the American people.