



LEADERSHIP OF FREE PEOPLE

Remarks Delivered by ISW President Kimberly Kagan at the 2022 President's Circle Awards Dinner

December 5, 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you again for joining me this evening to honor President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people and armed forces and to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Institute for the Study of War.

I'd like to say a few words now about President Zelenskyy, the recipient of ISW's National Security Leadership Award for 2022. Our Chairman General Jack Keane, the ISW Board, and I take the word "leadership" in this award's title very seriously when choosing honorees. We think that people often focus too much on the relationship between statesmanship and grand strategy and not enough on the central qualities of leadership in a great statesman. Yet the great statesmen whose legacies shine through the ages, men like Roosevelt and Churchill, weren't always the best strategists. They made many mistakes of conception and execution and even of judgment in day-to-day matters. Yet, 75 years after the end of the great struggle they brought successfully to a close, they remain the icons of wartime leadership to which most statesmen can only aspire. Their examples illuminate the qualities of leadership that President Zelenskyy embodies.

What is great leadership in a free society? It starts by remembering that free societies are composed of individuals who are free—free to think their own thoughts, to say what they wish, to choose their paths in life, and to contribute to the whole as they think best. A free society is one that helps fully activate each human's potential. A free society gives each of us scope for what we each as an individual can do; to use our full power of reason and the human capacity for good rather than requiring conformity or encouraging evil.

Leading free people is hard. It is about inspiring not ordering; empowering initiative not imposing centralization; encouraging not directing. But above all, it is about making each individual better, to help each individual achieve excellence and therefore become better able to help the free society as a whole survive and flourish.

President Zelenskyy has shown his gift at leading the free Ukrainian people by allowing them to organize themselves, by inspiring them to transcend themselves, by knowing in his heart what they need to hear, and by framing the struggle in a way that motivates not only Ukrainians but all of us.

Allowing Self-Organization

You have heard our heroes describe how they reacted to the Russian invasion in February. They didn't wait for orders. They didn't ask for instructions. They acted. They fought. They reached out to their own networks and started to organize the response. Millions of Ukrainians across the country did the same things. That decentralized and chaotic but determined action by a free people instinctively reacting to invasion is what saved Ukraine.

Another president who knew his people and the strengths of a free society less well would have fought to impose control. He might have demanded that Ukrainians fight only as part of regular military units or at least that the central government in Kyiv control all military operations and supplies. He didn't. He knew his people. He encouraged them to fight as best they could, to do what they could to support the defense of their country—to do what only a free people can do. He worked with his military commanders and political leaders to coordinate and cohere a national response, of course, without which the initial instinctive reactions of Ukrainians could not have carried on for long. He supported civil society operating alongside government institutions, which was Ukraine's secret weapon, as General Sobko has said.

Emulation

But President Zelenskyy also set himself another critical task: he made himself a model for his people to emulate, and they recognize in him a model of word and action worth emulating. He is the leader of Ukrainian resistance, as one hero noted in his interview.

He understands their struggles and their exhaustion, and through his force of will and tireless activity, he helps them transcend themselves and their circumstances and accomplish things they never would have imagined they could do. Our heroes have described how, seeing him strive, they too strive to be their best selves.

Rhetoric

President Zelenskyy shares with FDR one of the most important attributes of any leader: He understands his own people.

President Zelenskyy has shown that he knows in his heart what his people need to hear. With his words and manner, he has shown determination, grit, and inspiration.

From the very beginning of the war, he displayed confidence and courage. He set the tone for himself and his people with his famous cellphone video in which he said simply: "The leader of the party is here, the head of the President's office is here, Prime Minister Schmyhal is here, Podoliak is here, the president is here. We are all here. Our military is here, our citizens are here. We are all here defending our independence, our state, and we will continue to do so. Glory to our defenders, glory to Ukraine. Glory to the heroes."

Putin expected him to run, hide, or surrender. Many in the West, including Western leaders, also doubted that he and Ukraine would fight. He ended those doubts immediately with his famous quip "I need ammo, not a ride."

He continues to inspire that same resilience and confidence and channel it into the will to continue fighting. As Russia attacked Ukrainian infrastructure, President Zelenskyy made his position clear to Putin and to Ukrainians: "Read my lips: Without gas or you? Without you. Without light or without you? Without you. Without water or without you? Without you. Without food or without you? Without

you.” And our heroes have quoted that back, showing the resonance President Zelenskyy’s words have had.

Framing the Struggle

President Zelenskyy has also framed the struggle for his people and for the world in clear and simple terms that are both moral and political. In this, he taps the essence of wartime leadership shown most famously by Winston Churchill. This clarity and simplicity of his expression is also why President Zelenskyy has become a leader not only of Ukraine but also of the free world.

The great philosopher Isaiah Berlin observed in his essay on why Churchill’s speeches resonated: quote “There are those who, inhibited by the furniture of the ordinary world, come to life only when they feel themselves actors upon a stage, and, thus emancipated, speak out for the first time, and are then found to have much to say. There are those who...act fearlessly only in situations which in some way are formalized for them.... So it happens...that people of a shrinking disposition perform miracles of courage when life has been dramatized for them...”¹

As Churchill did in 1940, so President Zelenskyy does today. President Zelenskyy has formalized and dramatized the current war for Ukrainians and for the leaders and people of the free world.

All too often, Washington and European capitals suffer from the malady that Churchill criticized in a 1940 Foreign Office memo, as Isaiah Berlin observed: “[the memo] appeared to me to err in trying to be too clever, to enter into refinements of policy unsuited to the tragic simplicity and grandeur of the times and the issues at stake.”²

President Zelenskyy constantly reminds his people and the West that the current war is really quite simple to understand. It is an unjust and evil war of conquest launched by a brutal autocrat to destroy a free society that threatened him only by virtue of being free. Amidst the hyper-intellectualized Western handwringing about whether NATO expansion might have provoked Putin or what “security guarantees” the West should have offered Russia, President Zelenskyy has forced us to remain focused on simpler and far more salient questions:

What right does Russia or any state have to conquer and absorb its peaceful neighbor? What right does any ruler have to decide which other states can be sovereign or which ethnicities are real? What right does any country have to commit deliberate war crimes and atrocities, including ethnic cleansing, using the rhetoric of cultural genocide? None. No right at all.

President Zelenskyy provides the kind of leadership that not only Ukrainians, but free people everywhere, desire, rooted in clear moral principles — and driving each one of us to become a better version of ourselves, to transcend our limits, to achieve our potential as citizens of a free society, and through that, to lift the very definition of a free society and the human dignity that comprises it to the lofty heights where they belong.

These are values for which Ukrainians fight. As the heroes you heard speak this evening and President Zelenskyy rightly note, Ukrainians are not just fighting and dying for Ukraine. They are bleeding for us, for our principles, for our security, and for the security of our world.

¹ Isaiah Berlin, qtd in Hardy, Henry. *The Proper Study Of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. (Random House, 2012. Kindle edition), p. 607.

² Isaiah Berlin, qtd in Hardy, Henry. *The Proper Study Of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. (Random House, 2012. Kindle edition), p. 609.