

Trump isn't 'un-American', he's just transparent



The Zelensky clash wasn't a bolt from the blue, but a continuation of 20th-century US foreign policy

A common reaction to that notorious Trump/Zelensky press conference is “we haven't seen anything like this before”. Seen is the key word.

Bust-ups and walk-outs do occur in diplomacy, the difference is that Donald Trump does in the open what is meant to be conducted in private. An example: in 2022, NBC reported that Joe Biden had spoken to Zelensky by phone about a \$1 billion aid package, and when Zelensky began asking for more, the US president “lost his temper” and told him to be more grateful.

So, yes, America argues with its friends. Worse than that: it has a record of abandoning them. I'm struck by the parallel between Ukraine and South Vietnam, two regimes encouraged by the US to fight an invader – at huge cost in money and lives – only for Washington to cut and run.

America's stake was far greater in Vietnam (it lost about 58,000 soldiers trying to see off the Viet Cong) and Richard Nixon, unlike Trump, attempted to strengthen his ally's hand with devastating bombing raids. But Nixon had promised his voters peace and, in December 1972, his administration suggested terms to South Vietnam's President Thieu.

If you want a sense of how the sausage is made in foreign policy, read the transcripts of Nixon's conversations with national security adviser Henry Kissinger. Thieu, it seems, rejected a peace deal that would be generous to the Viet Cong; Kissinger called him a “cheap, self-serving son-of-a-b—”, “criminal” and “insane.” He suggested cutting off Thieu's economic and military aid and “doing a Diem on him” – referring to a coup d'état in 1963 that resulted in the assassination of one of Thieu's predecessors, Ngo Dinh Diem. Henry and Dick were discussing murder, but that was part of the job.

To keep face, they decided to bomb the Viet Cong a bit more – then offered it ceasefire terms obviously unfavourable to their own ally. (“We bombed [the enemy] into accepting our concessions,” explained Kissinger). Thieu was left with a promise of ongoing US funding, what you might call a “backstop”, but Congress, including a young Joe Biden, soon voted to turn off the tap.

South Vietnam fell in 1975. Some politicians opposed accepting refugees almost as vociferously as Trump does today. Decades later, Biden applied the withdrawal method to Afghanistan, believing voters were tired of building democracy in exotic locales.

All foreign policy is domestic. Rightly so. Presidents are elected to represent Ohio and Alabama, not Kabul or Kyiv, and as circumstances change it would be madness to stick to a failed policy. What confuses outsiders about America is that its ideals are universal, all men created equal etc, so it sounds as if it's operating out of the goodness of its heart. “We shall pay any price,” said John F Kennedy, “oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.” (The Diem coup, incidentally, happened on Kennedy's watch.)

While many historians agree that Trump is something unseen before, a few might conclude he's the most American president we've ever had – his chief novelty being transparency. Viewers of the press conference were shocked by his volatility, but when he said “you don't have the cards”, he expressed the way countless administrations have handled smaller countries, including our own. The reason why British policy consists solely of trying to persuade the US to support our goals is because the Americans previously undermined our ability to act as an independent power.

They made demolition of the empire a tacit condition for their support during the Second World War. The US insisted on creating a unipolar world and now complains about having to police it almost on its own. The irony.

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