

FOREWORD

“I need ammunition, not a ride!”

In an age where genuine heroism is so rare, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky’s *cri de coeur* echoed around the world. Zelensky could have fled — Washington had offered him a safe passage out of Kyiv — but he chose to fight for his country, slim though the chances of victory were.

Days earlier, Russia’s Vladimir Putin had launched a brutal war on Ukraine, eager to bring the country back under Moscow’s yoke. The Russians closed in quickly on Kyiv, hoping to “decapitate” the Zelensky government — that is, kill Zelensky — and install a puppet regime.

But Zelensky was not deterred, even after multiple assassination attempts conducted by Putin’s hit squads. He rose to meet the opposition and stood firm, displaying a courage that many thought no longer existed in today’s world.

Virtually unknown outside of his native Ukraine before the war, Zelensky has earned respect from his fellow Ukrainians and adoration from Western elites and ordinary citizens alike. He has displayed an indomitable spirit in a deeply unfair

fight. The Russian military far outclasses the Ukrainian, but Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers have shown that spirit still counts for something on the battlefield. We haven't seen this ferocious a will in Europe to push back an enemy since the Russians defended Stalingrad against German invaders in World War II.

The 44-year-old entertainer turned servant of the people Zelensky has measured up to his adversary, the staunch spymaster and Judo expert Putin. Putin, who cut his teeth as a KGB operative alongside the most brutal and devious the old Soviet Union had to offer, has used all the tricks he learned from those KGB days. And at times, Zelensky has still outmaneuvered him.

Unlike Putin, who doesn't use email and is stuck in the pre-internet era, Zelensky has proven himself an adept fighter on new, digital frontiers. Zelensky won his election in 2019 through a savvy social media campaign. In the current crisis, he has shown the world that he is a social media maestro, leading a concerted YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter effort with the grace and skill of a conductor directing his orchestra. An entertainer who is used to reading the audience, Zelensky knows what the West wants to hear. He has upstaged Putin in the information warfare department.

This talent for crafting narratives has paid dividends. Zelensky has won over the hearts of the West's policy planners and politicians, who are eager to support the charismatic

Ukrainian. Western intellectuals clamor to give Zelensky the “No Fly Zone” he wants, even if it means dragging the United States and NATO into a “shooting war” with Russia that would almost certainly escalate into a nuclear conflict. Zelensky may have won the West’s heart, but has that come at the expense of its head?

We have all come to see President Zelensky as a hero, but some of his decisions are not as straightforward as we in the West think. Zelensky, much like Ukraine itself, is filled with contradictions. The Ukrainians are a freedom-loving people but among the most corrupt in Europe. And while Zelensky declares his love for his nation, he failed to protect it from a destructive assault that may lead to scores of civilian deaths, the erasure of its borders, and the annihilation of its culture.

Is Zelensky brave or reckless? Zelensky must know that Putin will never allow Ukraine to join the Western political or military orbit without a fight. For the past 20 years, Putin has planned to reverse the outcome of the Cold War. In his mind, losing Ukraine to Western influence is not an option.

Still, Zelensky often chooses to poke the bear. With thousands of Russian soldiers amassed on his border, Zelensky made open appeals for NATO membership. Now, with Russian boots on Ukrainian soil, he goads Putin to escalate his assault, even daring the Russian to carpet-bomb Kyiv. To paraphrase a famous saying about Vietnam, Zelensky may allow his country to be destroyed in order to save it.

Is Zelensky a Ukrainian George Washington, ready to forfeit his own life to set his country on the path towards freedom? Or is his bravado driven by a performer's ego and sense of drama? Perhaps a bit of both, and the balanced account that follows will help you decide what to make of this new star of geopolitics.

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