



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump have a heated exchange during a meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington Feb. 28, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

March 10, 2025

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The comments and images from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's [meeting](#) with European leaders in London and, later, in Brussels demonstrated the solidarity the threat posed by Russian aggression demands.

"During all this period, and last week, you stayed with us," Zelenskyy told the leaders at the European Union headquarters. "From all the Ukrainians, from all our nation: big appreciation. We are very thankful that we are not alone." Zelenskyy's reference to "last week" was to President Donald Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance ambushing him in the Oval Office with Kremlin talking points.

The gathering in Brussels was held at the Council of the European Union, which normally concerns itself with economic and political issues. A little more than four miles to the northeast is the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance, which is where military subjects are normally addressed. These are not normal times, however, and the U.S. does not belong to the EU. Trump's emissaries couldn't ruin the meetings at the EU headquarters.

President Trump, however, might kill NATO. And that should make us all remember Senator Arthur Vandenberg, the Republican Senator from Michigan who helped President Harry Truman enact the Marshall Plan and NATO — the two principal postwar instruments for avoiding a nuclear war with the Soviet Union while containing Soviet territorial expansionism.

Vandenberg became chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1947, after the Republicans won control of the Senate in the 1946 midterms. He was committed to forging a bipartisan foreign policy built on internationalism rather than isolationism.

Isolationism had evaporated on Dec. 7, 1941, but the sentiment behind it did not die; America should tend to its own business and let the world fend for itself. In addition, the nation was exhausted from World War II. 416,800 U.S. soldiers had been killed during the war — a staggering amount of loss and grief throughout the

nation. Some prominent Republicans, such as Ohio Sen. Robert Taft, aka "Mr. Republican," wanted to return to an isolationist foreign policy after the war.

Advertisement

Writing about his effort to establish mutual aid pacts with European nations in his memoirs, Truman wrote, "I always kept in mind the lesson of [President Woodrow] Wilson's failure in 1920. I meant to have legislative co-operation. Our European friends apparently remember the League of Nations too; they were most anxious to have not only a presidential declaration of policy, but also an expression confirming it." Wilson had committed the United States to the League of Nations after World War I, but the Senate rejected the treaty.

Vandenberg lent his name to Senate Resolution 239 which affirmed that chamber's support for regional arrangements like the EU and NATO "based on continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid." Vandenberg steered the resolution through the chamber. On June 11, 1948, the Vandenberg Resolution passed with only four senators opposing it.

The Cold War was no picnic. Millions of dollars were spent on armaments. U.S. troops remained stationed in Europe as a guarantor of European security. I remember a professor of foreign policy asking us how many U.S. troops were needed in Europe to forestall Russian aggression. We offered various estimates. He replied, "Actually, you only need one, provided he gets shot at the first Russian incursion." Such grim analysis was part of Cold War thinking. Policies like "mutually assured destruction," refusing defensive weapons and relying solely on the threat of completely destroying the enemy to deter war, were adopted and defended with grim analogies. That same professor likened mutually assured destruction to two enemies, both with their heads in a guillotine, holding the others' cord.

The Cold War turned hot at times, in Korea and Vietnam. Nonetheless, NATO achieved its goals. Europe enjoyed its longest peacetime in centuries. Nuclear war was avoided. And the Soviet empire was contained. Finally, in 1989, the Iron Curtain came crashing down.

The bipartisan foreign policy consensus broke down over time and in different places, such as the war in Iraq, but not when it came to European security. After the

collapse of communism, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton helped unite Germany and restore free elections in those countries formerly under the Soviet boot. Russia itself seemed to be headed for a democratic future when Boris Yeltsin [stared down a coup attempt](#) in 1991, but his 1999 decision to appoint Vladimir Putin as his prime minister and heir apparent allowed the former operative of the KGB (the former Russian secret police and intelligence agency) to dismantle democracy and replace it with a [thugocracy](#).

American presidents of both parties tried and failed to get Russia back on the road to democracy. Putin's Russia is not the threat that Stalin's Soviet Union was, in part because NATO now includes Poland, the Baltic States and Finland. But Putin's methods are frighteningly similar. "All the techniques and means of repression bespeak a criminal regime that now closely resembles the totalitarian rule of Stalin, whom Putin now fully embraces," [wrote](#) Adrian Karatnycky in Foreign Policy last year.

Trump has now decided to kiss up to Putin and to denigrate Zelenskyy, a decision that imperils the future of NATO. Where are the Republican senators willing to stand up and defend the greatest bipartisan foreign policy success in American history — a success made possible by one of their own, Arthur Vandenberg?

In his memoirs, Truman commented on Vandenberg's ability to build consensus within the Senate, adding, "After Vandenberg died, nobody in the Republican ranks was able to step into his shoes." Alas, that verdict can now be applied to the values of GOP senators and not just to their abilities. They are complicit in the abdication of American responsibility.

We used to call every American president the "leader of the free world." Not anymore.