**Diplomacy dies on live TV as Trump and Vance gang up to bully Ukraine leader**

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“This is going to be great television,” [Donald Trump](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/donaldtrump) remarked at the end. Sure. And as they slipped into the icy depths, the captain of the Titanic probably assured his passengers that this would make a great movie some day.

Trump on Friday presided over one of the greatest diplomatic disasters in modern history. Tempers flared, voices were raised and protocol was shredded in the once-hallowed Oval Office. [As Trump got into a shouting match with Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelenskyy,](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/28/trump-zelenskyy-meeting-ukraine-aid-war) a horrified Europe watched the post-second world war order crumble before its eyes.

Never has a US president bullied and berated an adversary, still less an ally, in such a public way. Of course the reality TV star and wrestling fan turned US president had it all play out on television for the benefit of his populist support base – and a certain bare-chested chum in the Kremlin.

Zelenskyy came to the White House to sign a deal for US involvement in Ukraine’s mineral industry to pave the way for an end to the three-year war. The president has inspired many by refusing to flee Kyiv when [Russia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/russia) launched its invasion – “I need ammunition, not a ride” – delivering nightly addresses to rally his people and visiting his troops on the frontlines.

But Trump, a profile in courage who dodged military service in Vietnam because of alleged bone spurs and who hid in the White House during the 6 January 2021 riot, has reportedly described soldiers who die in combat as suckers and losers. He was impeached for [trying to strong-arm Zelenskyy](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/28/trump-zelenskyy-ukraine-impeachment) in 2019 and last week called him a dictator.

There was a hint of trouble to come when Zelenskyy arrived at the West Wing wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt – not a suit – and Trump greeted him with a handshake and sarcasm: “Wow, look, you’re all dressed up!”

Inside the Oval Office, which has seen much but never anything quite like this, Zelenskyy thanked Trump for the invitation. At first all was sweetness and light as they fielded questions from reporters.

There was a minor wrinkle over how much support Europe has given Ukraine, which ended with smiles, a playful but pointed tap on Zelenskyy, and ominous words from Trump: “Don’t argue with me.”

But the last 10 minutes of the nearly 45-minute meeting devolved into acrimony and chaos. Zelenskyy found himself ambushed by Trump and his serpentine vice-president, [JD Vance](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/jd-vance). He was expected to sit back and take a beating from Nurse Ratched and Miss Trunchbull. He refused.

Exuding preternatural obnoxiousness*,* Vance said Joe Biden’s approach had failed and that diplomacy was the way forward. Noting Russia’s betrayals of trust in the past, Zelenskyy challenged: “What kind of diplomacy, JD, you are speaking about? What do you mean?”

Vance, who once declared he didn’t care what happened in Ukraine, was riled. Finger jabbing, he lectured Zelenskyy: “I think it’s disrespectful for you to come into the Oval Office to try to litigate this in front of the American media ... You should be thanking the president for trying to bring an end to this conflict.”

Uh-oh. The politicians and journalists in the room could surely tell this was going off the rails. At one point the Ukrainian ambassador would put her head in her hands. She was all of us.

Zelenskyy tried to push back, asking if Vance had ever been to Ukraine. Vance got angry and spoke of “propaganda tours”. Zelenskyy tried to answer and suggest that the US could feel threatened by Russia some day. Trump interjected: “Don’t tell us what we’re going to feel.”

The men spoke over each other. Raising his voice, the US president said: “You’re not in a good position. You don’t have the cards right now.”

Zelenskyy responded: “I’m not playing cards. I’m very serious, Mr President. I’m the president in a war.”

Trump, pointing an accusing finger and descending into his worst self from the presidential debates, admonished: “You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people. You’re gambling with world war three and what you’re doing is very disrespectful to the country, this country that’s backed you far more than a lot of people say they should have.”

TV pro tip: Trump has spent so many campaign rallies warning about world war three that the phrase has lost its shock value.

Trump and Vance tried to scold Zelenskyy like an ungrateful child. Vance – [who recently went to Munich](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/14/jd-vance-stuns-munich-conference-with-blistering-attack-on-europes-leaders) to condemn Europe as being on the wrong side in the culture wars – demanded: “Have you said ‘thank you’ once this entire meeting? No.”

Zelenskyy tried to respond. Trump told him his country was in big trouble. He went on: “The problem is I’ve empowered you to be a tough guy and I don’t think you’d be a tough guy without the United States and your people are very brave. But, you’re either going to make a deal or we’re out.

“And if we’re out, you’ll fight it out and I don’t think it’s going to be pretty … But you’re not acting at all thankful, and that’s not a nice thing.”

How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless ally!

Zelenskyy looked shellshocked. Trump, the eternal showman, commented on what great TV it would be, then wrote on social media that Zelenskyy “disrespected the United States of America in its cherished Oval Office”.

No deal was done. A planned press conference was cancelled. Zelenskyy drove away empty-handed, having just endured his own diplomatic Chornobyl. As for the rest of Europe, a bust of Winston Churchill, looming over the shoulders of Trump and Vance, may have shed a tear or two.