

Zelenskyy Dazzles Washington on Whirlwind Trip to Give Thanks and Bolster Support

December 22, 2022 **by Dan McCue**



President Joe Biden (right) and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden (left) welcome Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the White House on Dec. 21, 2022. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — He came, he saw (and was seen), he conquered. If the initial response to his “surprise” visit to Washington is any indication, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pulled off an extraordinary feat of diplomacy during 24 hours that took him from the frontlines of his war-torn nation to the well of the U.S. Capitol to address a joint session of Congress.

The excitement over Zelenskyy's publicly unexpected trip was palpable from the moment word began to quietly spread about it early Wednesday evening.

First there was a "Dear Colleague" letter written by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, inviting members and their Senate counterparts to a joint session of Congress. Within the hours, a telephone briefing was held by the White House, with participants being told that what they'd learned was embargoed "until further notice."

So secret was the event, which had been 11 days in the planning, that reporters arriving at the White House Wednesday to cover a joint press conference by President Joe Biden and Zelenskyy were handed a tiny slip of paper that read only "credentialed" and mentioned the date.

Such is Zelenskyy's star power at the moment that more than 300 reporters and photographers were on hand to cover his arrival on the drive up to the South Lawn of the White House and his welcome from Biden and First Lady Dr. Jill Biden.

What followed was a series of events that celebrated Ukraine's ability to successfully push back against Russia's unprovoked invasion of the country 300 days ago, and also gave Zelenskyy a platform to thank the American people for funding the ongoing war.

"Your money is not charity," Zelenskyy said more than once over the course of his visit, promising the Ukrainian people would eventually win the war on behalf of all free nations. "It is an investment."

That effort got a significant boost on Wednesday when Biden announced delivery of a Patriot missile battery to help Ukraine

defend against Russian attacks from the air.

The latest U.S. military aid package also includes precision guided bombs for fighter jets.

Such announcements aside, Biden told Zelenskyy it was important for the American people, and for the world, to hear directly from him, about what Ukraine experienced since Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion began last February, and the need to continue to stand together through 2023.

During a carefully choreographed press conference, at which only four reporters asked questions, Zelenskyy was asked about his "message" to the American people.

"My message is I wish you peace, I think that's the main thing," the Ukraine president said.

He went on to say that the concept of peace is something one only truly understands when "war is in your country," and "somebody like these terrorists from Russia come to your houses."

"I wish you to see your children alive and for you to see them become adults, as when they go to universities and have their own children. That, I think, is the main thing."

And he said he wanted to continue to work jointly with the U.S. to defeat the common adversary the two nations have in Russia.

".. because we really fight for our common victory against this tyranny," he continued. "That is real life. And we will win. And I really want to work together."

Biden responded by promising Zelenskyy the United States "will stay with you for as long as it takes."

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President Joe Biden address reporters at a news conference at the White House on Dec. 21, 2022. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“The American people know that if we stand by in the face of such blatant attacks on liberty and democracy, and the core principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, the world would surely face worse consequences,” the president said.

Biden said he looks forward to signing the omnibus spending package, still awaiting a final vote on Capitol Hill, a bill that includes an additional \$45 billion in funding for Ukraine.

“I will also sign into law the National Defense Authorization Act, which will make it easier for the Department of Defense to

procure critical munitions and defense materials for Ukraine and other key materials to strengthen our national security,” the president said.

Biden went on to say that along with the Patriot missile battery, Ukrainian forces will receive training on how to use it.

“It’s going to take some time to complete the necessary training, but the Patriot battery will be another critical asset for Ukraine as it defends itself against Russian aggression,” he said.

Altogether, including this week’s commitments, the U.S. has provided \$2.2 billion in support for the Ukrainian people.

At points during the news conference, the words of the leaders seemed out of place in an East Room decorated with shimmering white Christmas trees.

Referring to Russia’s ongoing destruction of Ukraine’s energy infrastructure, Zelenskyy said, “We need to survive this winter. We need to protect our people. And we need to be very specific in this area. This is a key humanitarian issue for us right now. This is the survival issue.”

“President Putin is escalating his attacks — his brutal attacks — targeting critical infrastructure to make life as hard as possible for not only innocent Ukrainians but children and young children, and everything from orphanages to schools. It’s just outrageous what he’s doing,” Biden said.

Despite Putin’s “unjustified, all-out assault on the free people of Ukraine” the nation has rallied, “showing Russia and the world their steel backbone, their love of country, and their unbreakable determination — and I emphasize ‘unbreakable determination’ — to choose their own path,” the president said.

President Joe Biden listens to a translation of Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's remarks during a news conference at the White House on Dec. 21, 2022. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Biden went on to say that Ukrainian resolve has proven to be an object lesson for “autocrats who wrongly believe they can make ‘might’ mean ‘right.’ Through your strong stand in the face of this aggression they have not been able to do it.

“Thus far, they have stood alone. ... You will never stand alone,” he said.

Asked whether he can see a path to the current war ending in a “just peace,” Zelenskyy was skeptical.

“What would you like to hear? A just peace? I don’t know. I don’t know what a just peace is. It’s a very philosophical description,” he said.

“For me, as the president, just peace is no compromises as to the sovereignty, freedom, and territorial integrity of my country, and the payback for all the damages inflicted by Russian aggression,” he continued, before abruptly interrupting his thought.

“I’m sorry ... I have been talking a lot about children today. But as a father, I would like to emphasize: You know how many parents lost their sons or daughters on the frontlines? So, what is just peace for them? Money is nothing. And compensations or reparations are of no consequence to them.

“And the longer the war lasts, the longer this aggression lasts, there will be more parents who live for the sake of vengeance or revenge. And I know a lot of people like that.

“So there can’t be any just peace in the war that was imposed on us by these — I don’t know how to describe that because we are in the White House, and I can’t find the proper language — these ‘inhumans,’ I would say.”

With that, Biden responded.

“I think we share the exact same vision,” he said. “A vision of a free, independent, prosperous, and secure Ukraine.”

“We both want this war to end. We both want it to end. And as I’ve said, it could end today if Putin had any dignity at all and did the right thing and just — pulled out. But that’s not going to happen.”

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses reporters at a news conference at the White House on Dec. 21, 2022. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“So what comes next?” Biden asked rhetorically. “What we talked about today was we’re going to continue to help Ukraine succeed on the battlefield. It can succeed on the battlefield with our help, and the help of our European allies and others, so that if and when President Zelenskyy is ready to talk with the Russians, he will be able to succeed as well, because he will have won on the battlefield. “

Not that Zelenskyy left Washington with everything he had on his wish list. The administration continues to refuse to provide

Ukraine with longer-range weapons that could strike deeply into Russia and potentially spawn a wider conflict.

But the news conference also offered a window into the nature of the behind the scene talks and the warm, frank relationship the two president's share.

Asked what message he wanted Putin to take from his journey, which took him from Ukraine to Poland, and to the U.S. aboard an Air Force jet, Zelenskyy said "I am standing here in the United States with President Biden on the same podium because I respect him as a person, as a president, and as a human being."

At the same time, he said, "I can send messages to President Biden. For example, if you had asked 'What's going to happen after the Patriot missiles are installed?' I would have said, 'After that, we will send another signal to President Biden that we would like to get more Patriots.'"

The punchline caused Biden and the entire press corps to laugh.

"We're working on it," Biden said, smiling broadly.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," Zelenskyy said, gesturing broadly and smiling in return.

"But that is our life," he said with a tiny shrug. "We are at war."

Later, when a reporter from Ukraine asked Biden why he didn't just give Zelenskyy all the weapons he wanted.

"Maybe I sound naïve, but couldn't you make a long story short and give Ukraine all the capabilities it needs to liberate all territories sooner rather than later?" he asked.

"His answer is yes," Biden said, pointing at the Ukrainian president.

A lighter moment during Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President Joe Biden's news conference at the White House on Dec. 21, 2022. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"I agree!" Zelenskyy responded, prompting yet more laughter from the audience.

With that, Zelenskyy moved on to Capitol Hill, where he thanked lawmakers for their support, but said much more is needed to ultimately turn back Putin's invasion.

That's a hard sell for several Republicans on the Hill, who contend the Biden administration has spent too much too quickly on the war, but the Senate's top Republican, Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said on Wednesday that "the most basic

reasons for continuing to help Ukraine degrade and defeat the Russian invaders are cold, hard, practical American interests.”

“Defeating Russia’s aggression will help prevent further security crises in Europe,” he said.

After a day of talking, Zelenskyy addressed the joint session of Congress for a brief 20 minutes, closing his remarks by handing a blue and gold Ukrainian battle flag to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Zelenskyy received it from frontline troops just hours before his departure from Ukraine, and he had all of the soldiers sign it.

In return, Pelosi gave the Ukraine president a framed American flag that had flown over the Capitol earlier in the day in honor of his visit.

“We stand, we fight and we will win because we are united — Ukraine, America and the entire free world,” Zelenskyy said before leaving the Capitol.

“May God protect our brave troops and citizens. May God forever bless the United States of America. Merry Christmas and a happy, victorious New Year,” he added.

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