

Peace Museum's president reflects on path to peace in Ukraine

By Nate Smelle On Feb. 28 a meeting was held at the White House that brought together U.S. President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to discuss how to end the Russian occupation and return peace to Ukraine. During the meeting, Trump, Vance, and even MAGA Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene's boyfriend conservative reporter Brian Glenn repeatedly bullied Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The deplorable failure of diplomacy that saw Trump accused Zelenskyy of 'gambling' with a Third World War provoked Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau along with world leaders throughout Europe and around the globe to rally behind Ukraine. In the wake of the disastrous meeting, Bancroft This Week's editor Nate Smelle reached out to the Canadian Peace Museum's president Chris Houston to discuss how this failure of diplomacy will impact global efforts to bring peace to Ukraine.

Smelle: As an advocate for peace, how did you feel watching the press conference at the White House today with President Donald Trump, VP JD Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy?

Houston: Shortly after the press conference, President Zelenskyy quoted a Ronald Reagan speech: 'Peace is not just the absence of war.' I agree. Peace is more than a ceasefire. Back in 1986, Reagan said more: 'True peace is justice, true peace is freedom, and true peace dictates the recognition of human rights.' The pretext of the meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy was good -- to discuss peace. Despite this, I see some major problems. If you saw someone being robbed on the street, you might go to the victim's aid. People would probably see that as good behaviour. If you then demanded payment, you'd be an asshole. Trump's demands for mineral rights from Ukraine are opportunistic profiteering. Supporting victims of foreign aggression should not be transactional. I think a lot about Donald Trump's first impeachment in 2019 and I question if he is well suited as a negotiator for peace. I think his failure to include Ukraine in the negotiations is troubling. During the press conference, Trump and JD Vance interrupted and talked over Zelenskyy. They failed to answer his question about their diplomacy. JD Vance called Zelenskyy disrespectful while Trump raised his voice. It was awful to watch. I'm tired of politicians making media moments out of pain and suffering. The press conference seemed contrived. The world's biggest two press agencies, Associated Press and Reuters, were barred while the Russian broadcaster, TASS, briefly gained access to the Oval Office. One journalist asked Zelenskyy about his lack of a business suit. I noticed nobody asked hectobillionaire Elon Musk the same question when he stood in the same office and tried to justify halting U.S. foreign aid. It seemed to me that the press conference was designed to humiliate Zelenskyy. So to answer your question, how did I feel? - I feel deeply troubled. I fear that the U.S. administration is trying to rush through solutions while failing to appreciate the complexity of peace building.

Smelle: It was uncomfortable to watch. Trump behaved like a schoolyard bully, with his toady Vance egging him on. Can a lasting peace be achieved through bullying Ukraine into handing over access to its resources to the U.S. and land to the Russians? If so, please elaborate. If not, explain why.

Houston: I think not. The path to lasting peace is to support victims of foreign aggression and incentivise nuclear disarmament.

Smelle: If Ukraine made such a deal, could they trust Trump not to shift the goalposts?

Houston: I also think not, Trump demonstrated clearly that he does not respect Zelenskyy, and importantly that he does not respect significant peace agreements.

Smelle: A) What message do you think Trump was intending to send the world by treating Zelenskyy so disrespectfully in public?

Houston: We live in times when too many people think good leadership looks like aggression. Shark Tank and The Apprentice are scripted pieces of entertainment, not documentaries about excellent leadership. I can't speak to anyone's intent, but if they wanted to convey solidarity with the victims of Russian violence, if they wanted to showcase excellent leadership and diplomacy, they failed.

Smelle: B) Despite his/their intention, what message did this press conference send the world?

Houston: The U.S. desire for peace is a good thing. JD Vance's words about prioritising dialogue is agreeable. Prioritizing peace talks so soon into Trump's presidency is good to see. Most people want peace. Yet, creating peace needs care, and it needs to centre the needs of Ukrainians. I think the message this will send to the world is that the U.S. support for Ukraine is on a precipice. This will delight Russia, the aggressor. And this gives a terrible message. We need to consider the history - in 1994, signatories of the Budapest Memorandum included Russia, the UK, the US and Ukraine. The memoranda prohibited signatories from threatening or using military force or economic coercion against Ukraine, and was part of wider agreements that saw Ukraine relinquish their nuclear stockpile, which was the third-largest in the world. So, to reduce the risk of nuclear war, assurances were made to Ukraine. While Russia has obviously broken the agreement, Ukraine had a reasonable expectation that the U.S. would respect the deal. Aside from the awful treatment of Zelenskyy, the press conference showed the world that the U.S. feels no compulsion to abide by important agreements. I'm sure this will please Russia, and it should deeply concern the whole world.

Smelle: There is a lot of money to be made from war. The whole press conference stunk of a shakedown to me. Given Trump's comments on making Palestine the Riviera of the Middle East, and the disrespectful way he and Vance treated Zelenskyy during the press conference, do you believe they are sincere about 'wanting peace' in Ukraine? If so, what makes you think that? If not, please explain.

Houston: Trump's comments about Gaza are abhorrent. I cannot tell if he sincerely wants peace, I hope he does. But if so, he's approaching this wrong and even if there is good faith in his actions, peace work needs care. My early November Stories of Peace article spoke of the military-industrial complex and quoted Lebanese humanitarian Tarek Tamer, who feared Trump would try to rush peace efforts. Tamer seemed to be correct about that. Trump sees peace too simply - a halt to bombs. I'll finish with how I started, by quoting President Reagan: 'True peace is justice, true peace is freedom, and true peace dictates the recognition of human rights.'

Smelle: What would you like to see in terms of a next step, or steps on the road to peace?

Houston: I'd like to see a peaceful world, and I advocate for peace, but don't want to tell others what to do. So I'll just say that most wars end after people engage in dialogue. These are complex matters and that is why myself and others are working hard to open the Canadian Peace Museum, to foster dialogue and advance learning about peace. I'll also say that while Ukraine is absolutely one of the biggest current conflicts, it's not the only one. Violence continues in many places including Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Political and media attention to conflicts remains inconsistent. Importantly, the massive uptick in arms spending and militarization is not leading to a more peaceful world. We need leadership to understand that peace is a result of fair societies where everyone has their basic needs met and their dignity respected. Peace comes when people have good health, democratic government, freedom and their rights are respected. Ronald Reagan was right about that. Roméo Dallaire's recent book *The Peace* delves into this in depth.