

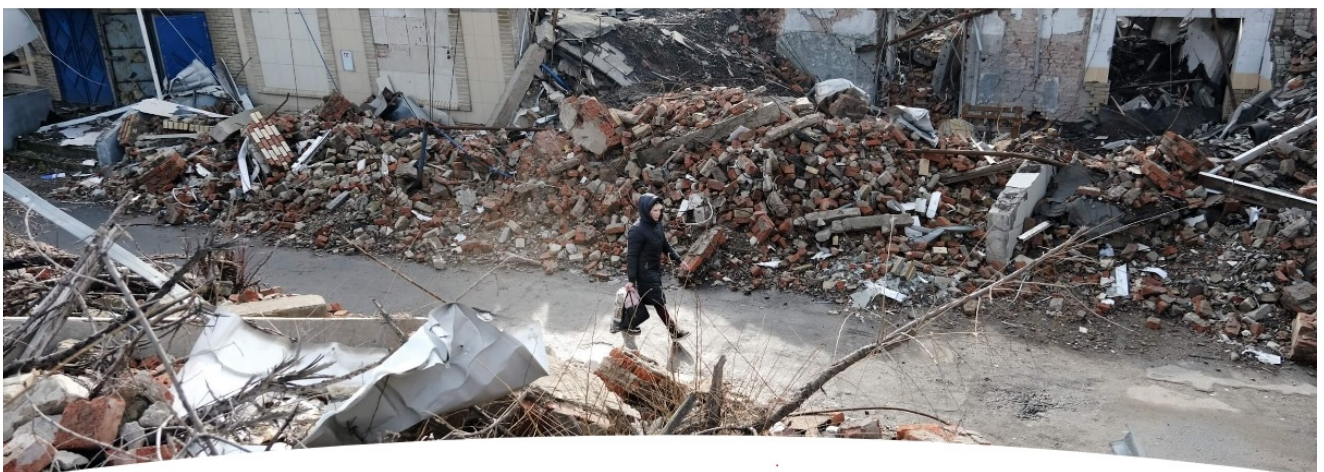
Can Trump End Ukraine's 'Endless War?'

By Victor Davis Hanson

Trump was elected in part on promises to avoid “endless wars” of the sort that cost American blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq but without resulting in strategic advantage or civilized calm.

Yet as a Jacksonian, Trump also restored American deterrence through punitive strikes against ISIS and terrorist thugs like Baghdadi and Soleimani—without being bogged down in costly follow-ups. During the last four administrations, Putin stayed within his borders only during the Trump four years.

But upon entering office, Trump will likely still be faced with something far more challenging as he confronts what has become the greatest European killing field since World War II—the cauldron on the Ukrainian border that has likely already cost 1-1.5 million combined dead, wounded, and missing Ukrainian and Russian soldiers and civilians.



There is no end in sight after three years of escalating violence. But there are increasing worries that strategically logical and morally defensible—but geopolitically

dangerous—Ukrainian strikes on the Russian interior will nonetheless escalate and lead to a wider war among the world's nuclear powers.

Many on the right wish for Trump to immediately cut off all aid to Ukraine for what they feel is an unwinnable war, even if that abrupt cessation would end any leverage with which to force Putin to negotiate.

They claim the war was instigated by a globalist left, serving as a proxy conflict waged to ruin Russia at the cost of Ukrainian soldiers. They see it orchestrated by a now non-democratic Ukrainian government, lacking elections, a free press, or opposition parties, led by an ungracious and corrupt Zelensky cadre that has allied with the American left in an election year.

In contrast, many on the left see Putin's invasion and the right's weariness with the costs of the conflict as the long-awaited global proof of the Trump-Russian "collusion" unicorn. Thus, after the 2016 collusion hoax and 2020 laptop disinformation ruse, they see in some of the right's opposition to the war at last proof of the Russophilic Trump perfidy. They judge Putin, not China's imperialist juggernaut, as the real enemy and discount the dangers of a new Russia-China-Iran-North Korean axis. And to see Ukraine utterly defeat Russia, recover all of the Donbass and Crimea, and destroy the Putin dictatorship, they are willing again to feed the war to the last Ukrainian while discounting escalating Russian threats to use tactical nuclear weapons to prevent defeat.

Trump has vowed to end the catastrophe on day one by doing what is now taboo: calling Vladimir Putin and making a deal that would do the now impossible: entice Russia back to its February 24, 2022, borders before it invaded and thus preserve a reduced but still autonomous and secure Ukraine.

How could Trump pull that unlikely deal off?

Ostensibly, he would follow the advice of a growing number of Western diplomats, generals, scholars, and pundits who have reluctantly outlined a general plan to stop the slaughter.

But how could Putin reassure the Russian people of anything short of an absolute annexation of Ukraine after the cost of one million Russian casualties?

Perhaps in the deal, Putin could brag that he institutionalized forever his 2014 annexations of once Russian-speaking majority Donbass and Crimea; that he prevented Ukraine from joining NATO on the doorstep of Mother Russia; and that he achieved a strategic coup in aligning Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea in a new grand alliance against the West and particularly the United States, with the acquiescence if not support of NATO member Turkey and an ever more sympathetic India.

And what would Ukraine and the West gain from such a Trump art of the deal?

Kyiv might boast that, as the bulwark of Europe, Ukraine heroically saved the country from Russian annexation as envisioned in the 2022 attempt to decapitate Kyiv and absorb the entire country. Ukraine subsequently was armed by the West and fought effectively enough to stymie the Russian juggernaut, wound and humiliate the Russian military, and sow dissension within the vastly weakened Russian dictatorship, as evidenced by the assassinated would-be insurgent Prigozhin.

Trump then might pull off the agreement if he could further establish a DMZ between the Russian and Ukrainian borders and ensure European Union economic aid for a fully armed Ukraine that might deter an endlessly restless Russian neighbor.

It would admittedly be a shaky and questionable deal, given Putin's propensity to break his word and insidiously and

endlessly seek to reestablish the borders of the old Soviet Union.

How then would Trump pull such a grand bargain off, given the hatred shown him by the American left for "selling out Zelensky," the likely furor from the MAGA base of giving even one cent more than the current \$200 billion to Ukraine, and its "endless war," and the ankle biting from the Europeans who would be relieved by the end of hostilities on its borders but loathe to give any credit to Trump, whom they detest?

What would be the incentives for any such deal, and would they be contrary to both the interests of the American people and the new Republican populist-nationalist coalition?

Yet consider that if Trump were to cut all support for Ukraine, the right would see Ukraine become shortly absorbed—and it would be blamed for a humiliation comparable to the Kabul catastrophe, only worse, since Ukraine, unlike the Afghanistan mess, required only American arms, not our lives.

In contrast, if the endless war grinds on and on, at some point, the pro-war and so-called humanitarian left will be permanently stamped as the callous party of unending conflict and utterly indifferent to the consumption of Ukrainian youth, spent to further its endless vendetta against a Russian people who also are worn out by the war.

Both Russia and Ukraine are running out of soldiers, with escalating casualties that will haunt them for decades. Russia yearns to be free of sanctions and to sell oil and gas to Europe. The West, and the U.S. in particular, would like to triangulate Russia against China and vice versa, in Kissingerian style, and thus avoid any two-power nuclear standoff.

America wants to increase and stockpile its munitions with an emboldened China on the horizon. It is dangerously exhausted

by defense cuts and massive aid to Ukraine and Israel while preferring allies like Israel that can win with a few billion rather than perhaps lose after receiving \$200 billion. The Republican Party is now becoming the party of peace, and Trump, the Jacksonian, nonetheless the most reluctant president to spend American blood and treasure abroad in memory.

Europe is mentally worn out by the war and increasingly reneging on its once boastful unqualified support for Ukraine. So, it hopes the demonized Trump can both end the hated war and then be blamed for ending it without an unconditional Ukrainian victory.

In short, there are lots of parties who want, and lots of incentives for, an end to our 21st-century Verdun.

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