

# Realities, politics, and the press: a comment on Trump, Ukraine, and Gaza

By Lev Tsitrin

**Machiavelli's foundational contribution to political science was to decouple state policy from morality** – or at least from morality as conventionally understood by an individual. To all appearances, we saw this decoupling in action in Trump's recent barbs against Ukraine's Zelenski: in Trump's telling, Zelenski is a dictator who illegitimately usurped power and is supported by a mere 4% of Ukrainians – and is to blame for Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine.

What is one to make of it? That Trump abandoned morality, or is a victim of Russian disinformation (for indeed, Trump repeated verbatim Putin's grievances against Zelenski) – which was Zelenski's own analysis?

To do so, it seems to me, is to judge statecraft by morals of an individual, ignoring Machiavelli's dictum that the two are entirely distinct. In fact, it appears from Trump's rhetoric that his motivations aren't amoral: he just wants to stop the butchery – and to him, the urgency of the matter requires ignoring the relative justice of the parties' cause. Rather like an adult breaking up a fight between two schoolkids, Trump is unwilling to go into a debate on who hit whom first. He takes a position that in Ukraine, morality requires not the long search for justice, but the instant saving of lives by stopping the killing done in the name of justice.

And to do so, he seems to stake a pragmatic position. Russia is attacking, and Ukraine is defending itself, people on both sides getting killed. This can be stopped in one of two ways. Ending Russia's attacks seems unrealistic because, other than

sanctions which failed to do the trick so far, Trump has no leverage over Russia. The other way is to end Ukraine's resistance to Russia – and this is where Trump has full leverage. So, it seems to me, he just takes the most promising path – the path of least resistance, the path of pressuring Ukraine. Hence, Trump's barbs against Zelenski.

Is what he says of Zelenski factually true? Probably not – but apparently, in Trump's mind the ends of stopping the bloodshed justify the means of talking Moscow's line, whether he believes it or not. He wants negotiations, and he does not want to make demands which Putin will dismiss out of hand, nipping negotiations at the onset.

This much acknowledged, let us look at the general relation of politicians' speech to factual truth. It is fascinating – and I think fully confirms Machiavelli's views, rather than views of those of those who are so appalled by what Trump said about Zelenski.

Consider, in that respect, Biden/Blinken approach to the Gaza war. According to them, Israel had to completely withdraw from Gaza – no buffer zones on the border, no Israeli control over the so-called Philadelphi corridor which separates Gaza from Egypt's Sinai through which Hamas gets its arms and munitions. Ask Biden and Blinken why they made this clearly unreasonable demand, and their reply will be – because this is necessary to preserve the viability of the two-state solution which will ultimately fulfill the Palestinian dream of statehood that alone can ensure peace between Palestinians and Israelis.



Now, ask a random Palestinian, a random Israeli, and an outside observer of the conflict, “what is the Palestinian dream” – and you will get this answer: destroying Israel.

Now, does Biden not know this well-understood fact? Is Blinken caught in the “web of disinformation,” to use the language of Zelenski’s plaintive explanation of Trump’s attack on him?

Not at all. Neither Blinken nor Biden are naifs. But they keep repeating their lie, apparently hoping that if the Palestinians hear it often enough, they will change their dream.

Contrast this with Trump’s much-lambasted Gaza plan. What goes for it is that is based not on wishful thinking, but on the actual reality that to continue in the current path is to perpetuate the long-running deadly cycle of destruction and rebuilding. Isn’t it more humane to let Gazans go to where they can have decent, peaceful, productive lives, instead of being monsters – and being treated as such by Israel, causing them destruction, misery, and death?

Yet somehow the very press outlets that push back against Trump’s Ukraine pronouncements by pointing out that Zelenski was democratically elected in the first place, and stays in power past the election time legitimately, because Ukrainian

constitution stipulates that the elections should be postponed for the duration of emergencies, and that his approval rating is around 57%, fail to stress when talking about Palestinians that ascribing to them a dream of “independent state living side-by-side with Israel in peace” is, in empirical terms, total hogwash?

If journalists do love the reality so much, one would have expected the *New York Times* and its ilk to laud Trump for his Gaza plan as being rooted in reality – but somehow, the reality does not seem to matter to MSM in this particular instance.

A lie is but one of the tools in a politician’s tool box – as is mainstream press’ hypocrisy which manifests itself in selectivity of reporting politicians’ lies – decrying them in some instances, while amplifying them as truth in others.

Journalists, after all, are politicians, too. So when a particular lie serves their purposes or aligns with their cherished ideology, why not lie? The ends justify the means – especially when those means are perceived as highly moral – the actual reality, just as per Machiavelli, be damned.