

Oval Office aggression is a lesson for Ireland in navigating new age

Barry O'Halloran



Last September was the 25th anniversary of iconic political drama series *The West Wing*. What many regard as one of the greatest television shows of all time was nominated 98 times for Emmy Awards, and won outright 27 times. I was a big fan. And yet, in its seven-season run, I don't recall anything as dramatic as the scenes that unfolded live on our television screens in the real-life version of *The West Wing* on Friday evening.

President Volodymyr Zelensky, the embattled leader of war-torn Ukraine, had come to Washington to sign the minerals deal that President Donald Trump had demanded as payback for US military aid to Ukraine. In thrashing out that deal, it was evident that Zelensky had held his ground in that everything had not gone Trump's way. In the run-up to Friday's meeting there was lots of back and forth between the two presidents.

Trump called Zelensky a "dictator", while Zelensky hit back saying Trump was living in a Russian "disinformation space".

On Friday, as the Ukrainian president exited his car wearing his

trademark military fatigues, Trump said, "Oh, you're all dressed up".

Waiting for the photographers to take their photos, Trump pointed to Zelensky, saying, "He's all dressed up today." Few will have noticed the significance of Trump's remarks, but I did.

About 15 years ago, a good friend of mine was making a documentary on Trump for the BBC. Years later, he told me that one of the odd things that struck him during the three weeks of filming was that Trump always commented on the physical appearance and type of clothes people wore. It was, as my friend explained, Trump's way of evaluating and categorising people.

In his sarcastic reference to Zelensky's attire, Trump was saying "you're not showing me proper respect".

We weren't to know it then, but shortly thereafter things went rapidly downhill. This happened as Trump, Zelensky, and vice-president JD Vance sat in the Oval Office surrounded by key administration advisers, Trump invitees and the media.

Everything went well for the first 40 minutes. During the last 10 min-

utes, however, when Vance entered the discussion, the atmosphere tensed considerably. His aggressive tone immediately changed the dynamics in the room.

It was at this point that Zelensky made the fatal error of engaging with Vance on his terms. It didn't take long for the tension to explode into the open. Vance is a supremely confident and competent debater, while Zelensky's poor English put him at an enormous disadvantage.

The car-crash pile-up that followed quickly became a pile on as Trump took his cue from Vance and they both took turns at laying into Zelensky.

Extensive finger wagging presaged the shouting match that ensued. Except it wasn't a match — Zelensky was overwhelmed by the verbal assault.

In international diplomacy characterised usually by honeyed words, robust exchanges are part of the mix, and verbal fisticuffs are not unheard of. But what was different this time was that everything played out on live television.

For the first time ever, the public got a rare glimpse of how the sausage is really made — and it wasn't pretty.

In what sounded almost like a prepared script, Vance began: "I want to respond to this..." Shortly thereafter, when speaking to Zelensky, Vance used a phrase which means the exact opposite to what it says: "with respect."

"Mr President, with respect, I think it is disrespectful of you to come to the Oval Office and try to litigate this

in front of the American people..."

Handicapped by his lack of fluency in English, Zelensky tried to explain, but it only made things worse. It became painfully obvious that Zelensky's team had made a fatal error.

With so much at stake, allowing the Ukrainian president to go on live television without having a simultaneous translator present contributed significantly to the whole debacle.

The presence of a translator would have slowed things down a little, and when the going got rough it would have allowed Zelensky a bit of time to reflect. Instead, he was obliged to parry a constant stream of aggressive questions from two people simultaneously.



● Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky departs after Friday's fractious meeting at the White House. Picture by Evan Vucci/AP

Trump turned directly to Zelensky and, in one of the sharpest exchanges, told him in a raised voice "you are gambling with World War III... and what you are doing is very disrespectful to this country..." They were talking loudly over each other by which time the whole thing had gone off the rails.

The question everyone is now asking is how can it be got back on track?

While it may have been, as Trump has pointed out, "great television", putting Humpty Dumpty back together again after Friday night's precipitous fall is going to test the limits of diplomacy, at least in the short run.

In the longer run, the geopolitical tectonic plates between Ameri-

ca, Europe, and Russia have shifted decisively. As it begins its third year of a brutal war, Ukraine is likely to be faced with unenviable choices between bad and worse options.

The Washington showdown indicates that we have entered a new age where, in the words of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

For a small country like Ireland, that's an important lesson, should we choose to heed it. And maybe we're beginning to.

I see the Tánaiste is now "convinced" that Ireland needs a squadron, no less, of fighter jets. But given our recent record of public procurement on things like HSE machines, public hospitals and even bicycle sheds, before the Government acts on the Tánaiste's light-bulb moment and spends many hundreds of millions on complex military equipment, it should take some advice.

And who better to ask for such advice than the commander-in-chief of the greatest military the world has ever known. As luck would have it, the Taoiseach is meeting this man on March 12 in the White House.

Seeking Trump's advice on this would not only flatter him, it would signal that Ireland is abandoning its military freeloading past. It would also help avoid the discussion straying into Ireland's recently acquired reputation as the most anti-Israeli country in Europe — something that Micheál Martin really does not want to happen in the current vengeful atmosphere.