

Putin is not Hitler, Zelensky is not Churchill, and Biden is not FDR.

By Francis P. Sempa

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Western politicians and commentators who support doing more to defend Ukraine's independence frequently invoke World War II analogies to justify their policy preferences. They compare Putin to Hitler, Zelensky to Churchill, and less frequently Biden to FDR. Putin, they contend, is a war criminal who is committing genocide against the Ukrainian people. Zelensky, they claim, is defiantly and courageously standing "alone" against Russian aggression, defending "democracy" against autocracy. Biden, some say, is making America once again the "arsenal of democracy" by providing weapons and supplies to Ukraine. None of these claims, and none of these historical comparisons, is justified.

Putin, to be sure, is the aggressor in this war, but accusations of war crimes and genocide are as yet unproven. Civilian casualties are unfortunately common to all modern wars. And we do not know if Putin has a master plan to wipe out Ukrainians as a race, the way Hitler did with respect to the Jews.

Zelensky has undoubtedly demonstrated courage in leading Ukrainians to fight for their independence, but his portrayal as a champion of democracy and freedom is at best premature. Prior to Russia's invasion, Ukraine was not high on anyone's list as a model democracy. As Ted Galen Carpenter of the CATO Institute recently noted, "Ukraine is far from being a democratic-capitalist model" and "has long been one of the more corrupt countries in the international system." Freedom House categorizes Ukraine as "partly free." Carpenter notes further that even before Russia's invasion, Ukrainian officials "harassed political dissidents, adopted censorship measures, and barred foreign journalists whom they regarded as critics of the Ukrainian government and its policies." Ukraine was criticized by groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. And since the war, Zelensky has further cracked down on opposition political parties and media outlets.

Zelensky has skillfully played the Churchill part — he is, after all, an actor. In his speeches, he deliberately mimics Churchill: "we will fight in the forests, in the fields," "we will not give up and we will not lose," etc. But he is fighting a regional war against an aggressor that has limited

aims. Churchill was fighting the conqueror of Europe who had made a deal with Soviet Russia to divide up Eastern Europe, and who had unlimited aims. Winston Churchill was literally fighting alone in defense of Western civilization. Zelensky is fighting to remain in power in an independent Ukraine. The stakes in the Russia-Ukraine war are simply not as great as in World War II.

Finally, President Biden is not FDR. For all of his flaws, Franklin Roosevelt was an inspiring war leader who understood what was at stake in World War II, even if he lacked the political courage to initially play the leading role that Churchill did. The Biden administration seems at best unsure of what America's role should be in the Russia-Ukraine war. The administration's rhetoric appears designed to sound "tough," but its actions do not match the rhetoric — and that's probably a good thing.

The problem is that rhetoric can sometimes create its own policy momentum. We have already witnessed the irresponsibility of some U.S. "statesmen" who have proposed "no-fly zones" and Berlin airlifts and even suggested the possibility of the first use of nuclear weapons. There have been missed opportunities to play the role of mediator of the conflict. It is hard to get opposing parties to sit down and negotiate when you characterize Russia's leader as a "war criminal" and portray a regional war as an existential struggle between democracy and autocracy.

So yes, by all means, voice support and express sympathy for the Ukrainian people, and provide weapons and supplies to help them in the defense of their country. But stop the rhetoric about Hitler and Churchill and FDR. Our statesmen, and Ukraine's leaders, and Russia's leaders, should be working to end the war on reasonable if imperfect terms, instead of widening the war. Because if this regional war becomes a European and then a global struggle, we all lose.