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THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Trump's Democracy-for-Diesel Deal Shames Us All

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By Thomas L. Friedman
Opinion Columnist

If President Trump does not understand what will happen to him if he proceeds with his plan to trade away support for Ukraine's democracy for Russian diesel, let me spell it out: He will enter the history books in the chapter on leaders who sold out their country's democratic values to appease a dictator.

Donald Trump, meet Neville Chamberlain. When future students search online for "sellout," "appeaser" or "traitor to his country's core values," their two pictures will come up first, side by side. And deservedly so. At least Chamberlain was trying, in what proved to be lethally misguided fashion, to avoid a world war. Trump is trying to avoid losing a few seats in Congress — and is likely to be no more successful in achieving his goal than Chamberlain was in achieving his.

I have never believed that Trump was somehow an agent of Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, or in his pay. It is much worse. He simply does not cherish democracy. He cherishes money. And he has no problem selling out the first for the second. When he acts in his own commercial interests, that's his personal business. When he uses the American presidency to make a buck, it is our collective shame.

There is simply no core American value Trump will not sell out. Desperate to lower diesel prices, which are hurting Republicans in the midterms, Trump actually made a deal to import diesel fuel from Russia, even though it offers a potential windfall for the Kremlin so it can bomb Ukraine harder — and is unlikely to help lower prices or increase supplies much at all. Worse, his aides then asked Ukraine to refrain from attacks on Russia's oil refineries, without Trump making the same demand of Putin regarding Ukraine's energy infrastructure. It makes me sick to my stomach to even type this.

Unique among great powers, “the United States has always made the protection and promotion of liberal values part of its foreign policy because it’s part of the country’s political DNA,” Michael Mandelbaum, the author of the new book “The American Way of Foreign Policy: Ideology, Economics, Democracy,” told me. “Different presidents have given these values different emphases, depending on the circumstances and their own personal predilections.”

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But none have “ever abandoned them entirely — let alone repudiated them,” Mandelbaum added. “In that sense Trump really is unique. Of course, all presidents, including him, have operated in a domestic political environment in which those values are widely shared, which means that he will pay a political price for violating them. But in the short term that isn’t likely to help Ukraine.”

This is shocking to Ukrainians, who for nearly five years have been resisting Putin’s attempt to wipe their country off the map. My friend Vitaly Sych, the editor in chief of the Ukrainian news outlet NV, texted me from Kyiv the other day:

“When Donald Trump became president, Ukraine lost an ally.” From his first days in office, Trump “started positioning himself as a ‘negotiator,’ as an ‘intermediary’ between Ukraine and the aggressor — Russia,” Sych added. “That was strange enough. And now he is openly siding with Russia, pushing for Ukraine’s capitulation and calling it a peace deal,” Sych said. “If Ukraine hits an oil refinery in Russia, there is always an outraged post from the U.S. president on Truth Social. Is he now the Kremlin’s spokesperson?”

The United States has long stood for freedom and democracy, Sych said. “Now they are just for diesel. What a change.” Russian missiles and drones kill or wound dozens of civilians, including children, every day, he wrote. “Russians are killing us like in a shooting range. No concern comes out about this from the White House. Only about Russian diesel. It is a mix of intellectual and moral bankruptcy to claim we don’t want peace. Of course we want peace,” he said. “But we don’t want capitulation packaged as peace.”

I have to say, it is hard for me to decide who is more despicable: Trump or tough-guy Republican senators like Tom Cotton, who lambasted President Joe Biden for not sending enough military aid to Ukraine and today sits curled up in a corner of the U.S. Capitol, saying nothing while Trump sells Ukraine to Putin outright.

Here's the beginning of a story in The Hill from Sept. 16, 2023:

> A group of Republican senators sent a letter to President Biden Saturday urging him to "immediately" provide the missiles Ukraine needs to win its war against Russia. Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) shared the letter in a post on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, arguing that not sending the weapons would "only prolong the war and cost lives." Cotton was joined by Senators Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in his request. "We … urge you to immediately send MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine," they wrote. "Additional delay will only further undermine U.S. national security interests and extend this conflict."

That was then — when Biden was president. This week a bipartisan group of 12 senators (six Republicans and six Democrats) sent a letter to Trump demanding that he rescind the diesel agreement and roll back the Treasury Department's license allowing it. Cotton, who is the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, did not sign the letter.

It is hard to tell whether Trump's democracy-for-diesel idea is his alone or was cooked up with his negotiators, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. If those two are part of it, I hope they understand that they will share Trump's infamy in the history books. The good work they have done to end the Gaza war will all be forgotten. They should speak up now, because history will have its eyes on them, too.

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Thomas L. Friedman is the foreign affairs Opinion columnist. He joined the paper in 1981 and has won three Pulitzer Prizes. He is the author of seven books, including "From Beirut to Jerusalem," which won the National Book Award. @tomfriedman • Facebook