

2022 National Constitution Center Liberty Medal Ceremony Remarks

Monday, November 7, 2022

JEFFREY ROSEN, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL CONSTITUTION CENTER

Hello, friends, and welcome to the National Constitution Center. Thank you for joining us as we celebrate the award of the 2022 Liberty Medal to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. On Thursday, Senator Chris Coons took the Liberty Medal from Washington, D.C., to Ukraine and, along with Senator Rob Portman, presented it to President Zelenskyy during their meeting in Kyiv. Senator Coons will talk later in this ceremony about what it was like to award the medal to President Zelenskyy, and why support for the Ukrainian people is so important as they bravely defend themselves from what President Zelenskyy has called “Russia’s brutal assault against our democratic values.” And we’ll share with you a video message accepting the Liberty Medal that we received from President Zelenskyy hours ago.

We’re also honored to share this message to this gathering from President Biden congratulating President Zelenskyy on receiving the Liberty Medal. “As former Honorary Chairman of the National Constitution Center I am pleased to join you all in celebrating a rare patriot,” President Biden writes. “The very principles that we enshrined in our Nation’s Founding documents, right here in Philadelphia more than 200 years ago, are at stake in this war today—freedom, justice, and liberty.”

Now, why is it so meaningful for all of us to honor President Zelenskyy here at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, in this sacred space? Let’s inspire ourselves for this ceremony ahead by gazing at the words of the First Amendment shining behind me, and then look to your right at Independence Hall, where the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were drafted. What are the principles of freedom shining now from the First Amendment Tablet and from Independence Hall? They’re the principles that Ukraine is defending and Russia is assaulting: free speech and a free press. The right to religious freedom. The right to criticize the government when it acts tyrannically and to vote the president out of office. The rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These principles have inspired nations around the world in their fight for self-determination since the Declaration of Independence was drafted nearly 250 years ago.

Teaching about the importance of America’s historic fight for freedom, which began in Philadelphia and spread across the world, is core to our mission at the National Constitution Center. By telling the story of America’s struggle for equal rights, limited government, and the rule of law, we aspire to remind people across America and around the world that these liberties are hard-fought, hard-won, and urgently important to preserve, protect, and defend.

Like the United States, Russia, too, has a constitution and bill of rights, they have many inspiring words. But the words of the Russian constitution are empty words, and its soaring promises are a lie.

What does Russia lack and what is Ukraine fighting to preserve?

A liberal constitution, founded on separation of powers. As the American founders recognized, the single greatest protection for individual rights is to ensure that the president can't act as a tyrant or King or emperor. The president can't hold all the power. You need the checks and balances of an independent legislature and, most important of all, an independent judiciary neutrally enforcing the rule of law. I was in Ukraine in 2014 as they were drafting the new constitution in the wake of their Revolution of Dignity. When I asked what the most important element of the new constitution was, they said an independent judiciary that can check the president, to ensure a government of laws, not of one man.

But a liberal constitution and an independent judiciary alone can't preserve liberty against the threats posed by illiberal tyrants like Caesar, Alexander, and Putin. The only defense against dictators and emperors who try to consolidate their power at home with murderous invasions abroad, the Founders recognized, is the virtue and courage of the people and their leaders. The founders believed "liberty to be the secret of happiness and courage to be the secret of liberty," as Louis Brandeis put it, quoting Pericles' Funeral Oration. They knew that you need the courage to lay down your life for liberty when it faces the ultimate threat. We are gathered today to celebrate that courage, which we're seeing every day in the Ukrainian people—men and women, soldiers and civilians—who are laying down their lives for the defense of liberty. And we're here to celebrate the courage of the Ukrainian people's democratically elected leader, President Zelenskyy. By providing a heroic example of what courage looks like when it is deployed in the defense of liberty, President Zelenskyy has inspired the world to support the Ukrainian people in their noble crusade. They must prevail and they will prevail.

It's so meaningful to gather here to honor President Zelenskyy for showing the world how courage, self-sacrifice, and liberty can vanquish aggression and tyranny. And from Philadelphia to Kyiv, let's send beams of light to our friends in Ukraine, to support their fight for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

JANE FERGUSON, SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT, PBS NEWSHOUR

On the day Russian soldiers poured across the border into Ukraine, Supreme Court Judge Ivan Mischenko was at work in his office in Kyiv. He rushed home to his apartment where his wife and two small children were watching the news. They packed their bags, got into his car and drove to the border. Then, like thousands of others, he kissed them goodbye, and came straight back.

In the coming weeks and months, as Russian troops and armor, backed by airplanes and missiles, poured into Ukraine, Ivan and millions of everyday citizens across the country faced down their aggressors.

In any war, it is civilians who suffer the most.

Many would die in mass graves. Others were tortured, separated from their families. Thousands were forced to flee on foot, clamoring over broken bridges, through freezing cold rivers, and down streets still shelled by an advancing Russian army. The elderly, many unable to flee, shivered in basements as their apartment buildings were attacked by air strikes and missiles. In the town of Bucha, Russian soldiers



went door to door for the men, tying their hands and executing them in the street. Mariupol City was reduced to rubble, those who survived the onslaught forcible moved to Russian territory. Rape has been used as a weapon in this war by Russian soldiers against an untold number of Ukrainian women. The crimes committed by Vladimir Putin's marauding army are vast and cruel.

But the people of Ukraine would not bend.

Young men, who just days before had been baristas, college students, lawyers, were now headed to the front line in fatigues – facing the might of the Russian army - knowing they were massively outgunned. Young women signed up in record numbers, driving ambulances while coming under fire, working as front-line medics.

Old ladies picked whatever they could from their gardens and storehouses, jarred and canned fruits and vegetables, and sent them to those living near the front.

As the capital Kyiv prepared to defend itself, locals set up checkpoints, sniper positions, using even manhole covers as protection. Restaurants kept their kitchens open day and night, making food in bulk and sending it to the volunteers and soldiers.

When Ivan Mischenko—the supreme court judge—arrived back in Kyiv, he looked up a young activist he had come to know when he was in court for leading protests to protect the city's parks from developers. 24-year-old Roman Rastushnyi agreed to let Ivan join his small band of volunteers who were driving to the front, north of Kyiv, almost daily, then slipping into the woods on foot and flying small handheld drones to monitor and film Russian positions and movements. Ivan and Roman were an unlikely pair in life before the war, but formed a profound brotherhood during it. After the Russians retreated from Kiev's outskirts, Roman volunteered to head to the front in Donbas and was killed there in June. Ivan survived their missions, and continues to fight at the front.

From the very start of invasion, the civilians of Ukraine mobilized from the ground up. Their leadership meanwhile, also rose to the moment.

Each day, from his sandbagged office in Kyiv to roving secure locations when movement was essential for survival, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke to his people, and the world. He galvanized his weary citizens while rallying the international community to help in this struggle. When offered an escape from the country, he called not for a ride out, but for weapons. He and his cabinet stayed, broadcasting together from the streets of a European capital under siege, refusing to leave his post as President when all hope seemed lost.

This leader, and the citizens of Ukraine, knew something that the rest of the world did not: That the Russians could be beaten, not with overwhelming firepower or waves of troops, but with character, heart, and faith. They took what the world gave them, rummaged through what they already had, and pushed back the remnants of a once powerful army, showing the world that no empire can defeat millions of individual acts of people going about their daily lives and refusing to surrender.

GEORGE F. WILL, AUTHOR AND COLUMNIST, THE WASHINGTON POST

Almost a century ago, in 1925, a British parliamentarian who had seen much history made in his 51 years, and who would himself go on to make some history, gave a speech titled “Mass Effects in Modern Life.”

It was his meditation on whether leaders—a few singular people—still matter in the making of history.

He wondered whether, in modern conditions, vast, impersonal forces are everything, and individuals are negligible.

Has the modern age, the parliamentarian asked, “witnessed the obliteration of the personal factor” in the shaping of history? Is it still possible for there to be an individual “who by the firmness of his character, and by the mysterious harmonies and inspirations of his nature, could rule the storm.”

The parliamentarian who asked these questions in 1925 became, himself, an emphatic answer to the questions 15 years later, when in May 1940 he, Winston Churchill, stepped forward to rule the storm unleashed by enemies of civilization.

Churchill’s greatest legacy is a simple truth. It is that one person can matter immensely.

Which is why today it is common, and correct, to apply to the man we honor today the adjective “Churchillian.” Awarding the Liberty Medal to President Zelenskyy is a way of saying “Thank you.” Thank you for reminding us of many things.

It is axiomatic that, as Samuel Johnson said, “People need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed.” The man we honor today is our era’s Great Reminder.

President Zelenskyy has reminded the West of what the West is, and why it matters. He has reminded us how thin is the crust of civilization—of the rule of law rather than of raw force.

But he has also reminded us of how sturdy this crust can be when defended by sturdy people unwilling to see it crumble.

For several centuries, mankind has been plied and belabored by theories purporting to prove that History is a proper noun, an autonomous force working out its own inexorable logic.

And that human beings therefore are just passively swept along like corks bobbing in a swift-moving torrent that they cannot substantially influence.

These theories, which disparage the idea of human agency, can be slain by facts. The facts are individuals.

The individuals are those luminous few, such as Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King—who refuse to bow to events. Who choose to resist supposedly irresistible forces.

The honor roll of the greatest resisters is reserved for those of whom it can be truly said: But for their personal choices, their individual decisions, the world would be very different, and much worse.

Today a new name is inscribed on that honor roll, the name of this era's Great Resister: President Zelenskyy.

Martin Luther King changed the world because he had faith that, as he frequently said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." King knew, however, that the arc would not bend itself; it had to be bent by actions.

By human agency, inspired and directed by leaders. Leaders such as King. And such as the man we honor today with the Liberty Medal.

The 19th century American poet James Russell Lowell wrote,

*Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side.*

Nowadays, as a result of a pervasive skepticism about moral principles, we often flinch from the robust language of confident moral judgment; language that speaks forthrightly, without embarrassment, of good and evil.

We have, however, now seen evil on the march in Ukraine. And we have seen goodness holding aloft fluttering blue and yellow flags.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, someone—trying to be kind, but not being helpful—offered to fly President Zelenskyy to safety. His reported terse reply will echo down the centuries, for as long as people cherish freedom.

His reply was: "I need ammunition, not a ride."

And when Russian disinformation operatives disseminated the lie that President Zelenskyy had left Ukraine's capital, he filmed a four-word response: "The president is here."

We are here today to salute him for making vivid two essential virtues—stubborn bravery, unapologetic patriotism. And also, for being the reason we in the west are recovering our capacity for praise, a capacity that, in this cynical age, sometimes atrophies from disuse.

President Zelenskyy, you honor us by allowing us to honor you. And through you, your gallant nation.

We look forward confidently to the day, which will come, when you can come to Philadelphia, where American independence was proclaimed, to celebrate Ukraine's unassailable independence.

IRYNA MAZUR, HONORARY CONSUL TO UKRAINE IN PHILADELPHIA

Good evening, honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am humbled to address you on behalf of Ukraine tonight, before this distinguished audience, in our commonwealth and in our city—the cradle of American democracy.

I am grateful to the National Constitution Center for convening this celebration tonight, for lifting up our fight for freedom, and for showing the global community that the people of Philadelphia and the United States stand with Ukraine.

Today we honor the 2022 Liberty Medal recipient, Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

President Zelenskyy’s leadership in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has won him widespread international acclaim and recognition, and has united millions of hearts in support of Ukraine. If you are here today, as a guest or as a sponsor, it means President Zelenskyy has touched your heart. He, together with the entire Ukrainian nation, have become a symbol of unity, strength and uncompromised desire for independence, for the basic human right to be free and to choose your own future. And the reason why the entire American nation, why YOU support Ukraine, is because you agree with what Ukraine stands for—we share the same ideas and values. Like never before in my life, I see the similarities between the core values of our two nations.

Almost 250 years ago, a new country was born here in Philadelphia, a country of free and brave people who, for years, but especially for the last 257 days, have helped another nation to stand against an oppressive empire.

The Ukrainian people share the same desire for liberty and freedom and share the same values as America’s founding fathers. Ukrainians stood up for their freedom under snipers’ bullets on the Maidan in 2014; under continuous persecution and tortures in Crimea, Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol and other cities; and they continue to defend their country and Europe today, suffering under constant Russian military attacks.

I know, there are some among you present here today, who had to flee from Russian invasion when you were small children in the 1940’s. I remember your stories of how your mothers carried you in their arms, how many of you were born in the refugees and displaced persons camps. I remember your words, that decades ago, the mere thought of an independent Ukraine, was just a dream for you.

For the last 100 years, Ukrainians have been subjected to waves of genocide, perpetrated by the Russian empire and its successor, the Soviet Union. But Ukraine did not disappear, did not cave in, not when it was torn and divided by the Russian empire, not when it was tortured and starved to death by Stalin, not when its intellectuals, religious leaders and intelligentsia were murdered by millions in Siberia, not when the Ukrainian language and culture was officially forbidden by over 100 official Russian decrees. But despite everything, the Ukrainian nation is alive and even stronger than before, a multiethnic and multireligious county that is united by the descendant of the only Jewish survivor in his family, President Zelenskyy’s grandfather.

Now it is November—the month when we solemnly commemorate the millions of innocent people who were starved to death in the Holodomor. But is it up to you and all of us, to stop the genocide being perpetrated so blatantly today by Russia against Ukrainians. We cannot be like those who were silent during the holocaust and holodomor genocides.

Once, the civilized world clearly stated... Never Again! ...is this true for Ukraine today?

Ukrainians are paying a very heavy price for this freedom, they pay with their lives and it hurts. It hurts to bury hundreds of innocent children who are being killed, tortured and tormented by this horrible war.

This is not the fate any Ukrainian parent envisioned for their children. You can see the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people reflected on the face of their president, once a happy and joyful man.

In response to the brutal Russian aggression, Ukrainians together with their president, just adopted a very American motto—give me liberty or give me death and they will not give up on their freedom.

And every day, “the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air” do not stop Ukrainians in their pursuit of freedom. Because it is also the land of the free and the home of the brave.

And it is our duty to help them, and support Ukraine on its path to be a free, independent and strong county that we can pass on to future generations.

From the bottom my heart, on behalf of every Ukrainian child, every Ukrainian mother and father, every Ukrainian soldier, I would like to thank the American people, and the American government for the enormous support they have already provided to Ukraine. And it is my sincere hope that you will continue to support Ukraine and its President.

President Zelenskyy announced that he will designate the \$100,000 Liberty Medal prize to the Ukrainian Veterans Fund. The fund is a platform to develop opportunities for veterans and their families that is managed by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine. It is partnered with NATO, as well as with NGO’s in Ukraine, the United States, and elsewhere. Ukraine’s soldiers and veterans represent every aspect of Ukraine’s citizenry and society: men, women, and individuals of every race and religion. When the war finally ends, and it will end, Ukrainian veterans will return to their civilian life and work to reconstruct and continue building a free and independent Ukraine.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of a Ukrainian marine veteran in this room. Roman Horodenskyi defended Mariupol, lost his arm and leg, was tortured by the enemy, but still proudly stands with his president today, like all Ukrainians. Roman, thank you for your service and your bravery!

And now, ladies and gentlemen it is time to introduce the 2022 Liberty Medal honoree, President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

God bless America! Slava Ukrayini!

SENATOR CHRIS COONS, U.S. SENATOR FROM DELAWARE

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be with you. And Jeff, back to our days in law school, I knew that you were exactly the sort of fierce advocate for the principles of the Constitution who might someday lead an incredible institution, such as this. So thank you, for everything that you and the board under Doug DeVos his leadership, have done to help bring the Constitution to life, to help be a vital center of civic education, and to help bring together the American people in once again, reaffirming the core principles that were at the very founding of our nation.

As you said at the outset, this is in many ways a sacred space. If our Constitution is our civil scripture, we should today take some moment of inspiration, by the reflection on the founding of our Constitution here, and the fight that continues for freedom around the world. As I mentioned in talking with President Zelenskyy, I, myself, have been inspired by previous Liberty Medal presentations here to John Lewis, and to John McCain, and to many others. And I want to begin by thanking Lizzie O’Bagy who works with me, and who previously worked with John McCain, who was physically carrying the Liberty Medal to make sure that a senator did not misplace it on our long trip in to Kyiv.

I want to thank the leaders of the Ukrainian American diaspora from my home state of Delaware, and from Philadelphia who are here, and who are helping to inspire and to lead an incredible community that bridges our two great nations. The opening singing of the Ukrainian national anthem and our national anthem is a reminder of how deeply intertwined our communities. Thank you for what you do and for your witness and service.

On our trip to Ukraine, we first stopped in Warsaw, Poland, and had the opportunity to witness how literally dozens of countries from around the world are coordinating the delivery of both humanitarian and military aid in to Ukraine. To sit at the table with the leaders of the 101st Airborne Division (U.S. Army) and to see leaders from all over Europe—from across NATO—coordinating plane after plane, bringing desperately needed relief, and critically needed army material and weapons supplies into Ukraine was inspiring. We also had a chance to visit with Ukrainian refugee families, who UNHCR is providing a place of safety and refuge in Poland. Before we began a more than 10-hour train trip across Ukraine, interrupted only by my desperate attempts to get updates on the Phillies game in the World Series.

When we got into Ukraine, we had the opportunity to meet with our incredible ambassador, Bridget Brink and the determined staff of the American Embassy in Kyiv. Most of whose employees are

Ukrainians, many of whom have deployed to fight in the war, many others who have returned from other places to take up their post to be part of America's mission to Ukraine. We had the opportunity to visit a church where USAID and the World Food Program and a local Ukrainian nonprofit Odra are providing food to thousands of families.

We also visited the headquarters of the Ukrainian utility, recently struck by Iranian provided drones and Russian missiles. Putin, having failed on the battlefield in the face of the brave advances of Ukrainian troops, is now trying to attack the civilian infrastructure of Ukraine, and plunged the tens of millions of Ukrainians who remained into a cold and dark winter. We cannot let him succeed. We also met with the Ukrainian General Prosecutor and talked about the urgency of documenting the war crimes being committed—the atrocities being committed—every day by Russian troops against Russian civilians, against Ukrainian civilians.

And Senator Portman and I went from Ukraine to go to the International Criminal Court at The Hague, where we engaged in a conversation about how we might ensure accountability after Ukraine is fully free.

Of course, the highlight of our trip was the visit to President Zelenskyy and the honor of presenting him on your behalf with a Liberty Medal, navigating through many different torturous paths, paths, tank traps and barbed wire, sandbags and armed men into President Zelenskyy. His presence is a reminder that of all the people Vladimir Putin most wants to kill, President Zelenskyy and his family are at the very top of that list. No one is more worthy of this Liberty Medal and what it represents than President Zelenskyy.

He wanted me to convey to you that this award he received is not just for him, but for all the Ukrainian people who are committed to the fight for freedom and for democracy. And when Ukraine achieves victory, it will be in no small part to his personal resolve.

As you saw just a few moments ago, a video that he broadcasts from the streets of Kyiv after the Russian invasion began, galvanized his people by showing he would not flee in the face of danger. And I will never forget hearing that when offered escalation, a military removal from key for his own safety by the United States. His response was, “the fight is here, I need ammunition not a ride.” President Zelenskyy represents the very best of the Ukrainian spirit, that determination, strength and resolve in the face of aggression. And we must stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and support their fight. Everyone who believes in liberty must see that this is not just their fight. It is our fight.

Today, Ukraine is the frontline of freedom globally. Not all of us are called to be wartime leaders. Not all of us are called to serve and sacrifice. But all of us who are Americans must hear this call. And Senator Portman and I are determined in the coming months and in the coming Congress to do everything we possibly can to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and to support the fight and the struggle for freedom on its frontline. Thank you.

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY

(Note: unofficial transcript)

It is a great honor to be awarded with the Medal of Liberty, presented to me by Senators Chris Coons and Rob Portman during their visit to Kyiv.

This award really demonstrates how and what Ukrainian people are fighting for. Liberty is the main word for us and what really unites all Ukrainians.

As in any democratic society, Ukrainians have different views on life and politics. As the case was in previous years, we felt divided arguing whether we would ever be able to stand together.

But when Russia decided to destroy our freedom and wipe Ukraine off the face of the earth, we immediately got united and we keep this unity.

All divisions are put aside. There is no place for political conflicts. Because when there is a mortal threat to freedom, everything else is not important.

Millions of people are fighting and working to protect Ukraine. They are very different people. After the Russian full-scale invasion started, they all decided – “we are here” and we will never give up our freedom.

And I believe that this Liberty Medal is for all men and women of Ukraine who, after the 24th of February, showed to the world’s largest autocracy that only defeat is what it can win in Ukraine.

These are our soldiers and officers. This is a massive wave of our volunteers—those who provide our defenders with everything they need. These are farmers who stopped Russian armored vehicles on the roads to their communities and helped the Army. These are IT specialists, who build defense against Russian cyberattacks. These are companies that work despite constant Russian terror and keep jobs for Ukrainians. These are doctors who help always everywhere. These are school teachers and university professors who can read lectures, even in bomb shelters and distantly from the trenches on the front lines, but they do not give up and teach children—teach them to believe in themselves, in freedom and in Ukraine.

In less than nine months, more than 30,000 Ukrainians have been honored state awards for their contribution to our national defense.

First of all, they are our heroic soldiers. These are rescuers who do away with the effects of Russian shelling. These are energy workers who return electricity to people after Russian missiles and Iranian drones hit power plants; Russia wants to leave millions of our people without energy in the winter.

These are transport workers who supply our defense, economy, and communities. These are different people of various jobs who are all equally fight against the invasion.

However, this Liberty Medal is an award not only for our people.

When this war began, Ukraine heard something very important from the world—we heard that “the democracies are here.” And we see now what democracies are capable of when they act in unity.

Every potential aggressor in the world sees the help that the United States and the free world is providing to us, and all the sanctions imposed against Russia—sees and believes that it is better not to start a war against freedom at all. In fact, this is one of the greatest contributions to the global peace and security during our lifetime.

Together with our partners, we are developing a new security architecture—these are security guarantees for Ukraine and Europe which will not only re-empower the principles of the UN Charter, but will also become a model for nations in other parts of the world—a model to avoid new cruel wars.

And that is why, I believe that this Liberty Medal is also to all friends of freedom in the United States and other countries. To all those, who are helping us to restore our territorial integrity, and thus to restore peace.

This Liberty Medal is to those who support us with weapons, air defense systems, finance, and diplomacy. To those who are helping to rebuild after the Russian strikes. To those who impose sanctions against Russia and its accomplices such as the Iranian regime.

When after the beginning of the Russian invasion, I said “the president is here,” when millions of Ukrainians decided at the same time “we are here” and we will not surrender, and when the world supported us, saying—“democracies are here,” then it meant and still mean— “freedom is here,” “human dignity is here,” “law is here.” And one day it will definitely mean “peace is here.”

I call on you to maintain unwavering unity, as it is now, until that very day when we all hear those important words we have been dreaming of... Until we hear that peace has finally been restored. Democracies must not stop on their way to the victory.

I thank you for your attention!

Thank you for your support – President Biden, both parties of the Congress, and every American citizen! Please know that you support not just a country or its leader, you support millions of people who, like you, cherish freedom.



And I decided to send the prize money of our Liberty Medal to help Ukrainian veterans – to rebuild and modernize the rehabilitation center for veterans in the city of Borodyanka, Kyiv region of Ukraine. Let everything bring our victory closer!

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