

# ZELENSKY WASN'T THE FIRST UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT TO ADDRESS A JOINT MEETING OF CONGRESS



Viktor Yushchenko addresses a Joint Meeting of the US Congress, 2005 (White House photo by David Bohrer)

On April 5, 2005, the JFK Library welcomed the recipient of their annual Profile in Courage Award, Viktor Yushchenko. Senator Ted Kennedy opened his brief remarks at the ceremony by saying this:

In "Profiles in Courage," President Kennedy wrote: "A man does what he must – in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures – and that is the basis of all human morality." Our honoree this evening vividly embodies my brother's words, and is renowned throughout the world for his extraordinary courage.

As we all know, at a critical moment in his nation's history, he took a strong and courageous stand for what he knew was right. He risked his life – and nearly lost it – in the ongoing struggle for democracy in Ukraine. His story is the story of honor, decency, and the

will of the people triumphing over fraud, deceit and intimidation. And because of his great courage, the rule of law prevailed against the oppressive rule of the powerful over the powerless.

In 1993, Yushchenko became head of Ukraine's national bank, but 8 years later he was dismissed because his push for reforms made him too popular with ordinary Ukrainians. Again from Ted Kennedy:

Refusing to be silenced, he became the head of a political party and helped create a bloc of reform parties called "Our Ukraine," which won a plurality of seats in the parliamentary elections of 2002 and became a significant force in the legislature.

As the presidential election approached in 2004, it was obvious that he appealed to Ukrainian citizens in ways no other politician could. His popularity was higher than any others because he had the ability to relate to people's lives, and was so clearly seeking public office for the public good, not private gain.

These qualities endeared him to the people, but made him a special threat to the corrupt leaders of the regime in power. Nothing – not even a vicious attempt to poison him – could break his spirit and prevent him from speaking out against corruption and for a democracy grounded firmly in the rule of law.

[snip]

State-owned media shamelessly opposed him, and independent media were subjected to violence and intimidation in a largely successful effort to silence their support.

Opposition rallies faced constant harassment. Government employees,

factory workers and students were threatened with dismissal unless they opposed him. President Putin of Russia openly intervened by declaring his support for the government candidate and sending a team of his top political advisers to assist him.

Yushchenko continued his campaign, even after being poisoned. (A political reformer, poisoned? Why does that sound familiar?). When the election was held, international observers noted huge irregularities and fraud, and when election authorities declared his opponent the winner, the people of Ukraine poured into the streets in protest in what became known as the Orange Revolution (after the prominent color used by Yushchenko's campaign). In the end, the Ukrainian courts looked at it, agreed with the accusations of fraud, and ordered a new election – an election Yushchenko won.

The day after the JFK Library honored Yushchenko, he addressed a joint meeting of the US Congress. Just like Zelenskyy yesterday, he tied what was happening in Ukraine with the US and its own history, opening his remarks with these words:

Mr. Speaker and Mr. President, Honorable Senators and House Members, Ladies and Gentlemen: On the wall of this great building, there is the Latin phrase "E Pluribus Unum," which means "Out of many, one." This motto reminds the world about the American Revolution, the starting point of the modern world's history of liberty.

My road here went through the orange-colored Independence Square that became known as maidan. Millions of people standing there continuously repeated it: "Together we are many, we cannot be defeated." This motto of the Ukrainian Revolution is a reminder of the fact that freedom continues to win. Ukraine

is opening a new page in the world's chronicle of liberty in the 21st century.

These two mottos have a lot in common. They speak to the strength of our peoples that comes from unity. They speak of the victories of our peoples in their struggles for freedom.

The whole address is here [pdf, beginning on page 12], but let me highlight a few other parts of it.

My oath is built on the reminiscences of the common prayer of hundreds of thousands of people in the maidan. Christians, Jews, Muslims were praying one prayer, everybody according to their rites, with everybody asking the Creator for one thing: freedom, fairness and blessings for Ukraine and for each of its citizens.

We are building an open economy that encourages innovation, rewards initiative, and assures high social standards. We are beginning an implacable war on corruption, promoting fair competition and forming transparent government-to-business relations. My goal is to place Ukraine in the forefront of prosperous democracies. My vision of the future is Ukraine in a United Europe.

That sounds a bit like something we heard from Zelenskyy last night:

Ladies and gentlemen – ladies and gentlemen, Americans, in two days we will celebrate Christmas. Maybe candlelit. Not because it's more romantic, no, but because there will not be, there will be no electricity. Millions won't have neither heating nor running water. All of these will be the

result of Russian missile and drone attacks on our energy infrastructure.

But we do not complain. We do not judge and compare whose life is easier. Your well-being is the product of your national security; the result of your struggle for independence and your many victories. We, Ukrainians, will also go through our war of independence and freedom with dignity and success.

We'll celebrate Christmas. Celebrate Christmas and, even if there is no electricity, the light of our faith in ourselves will not be put out. If Russian – if Russian missiles attack us, we'll do our best to protect ourselves. If they attack us with Iranian drones and our people will have to go to bomb shelters on Christmas Eve, Ukrainians will still sit down at the holiday table and cheer up each other. And we don't, don't have to know everyone's wish, as we know that all of us, millions of Ukrainians, wish the same: Victory. Only victory.

Yushchenko continued his 2005 speech by laying out a desire to integrate more fully with Europe, and buttressed his remarks with references to Presidents Wilson, Reagan, Bush the Elder, and Clinton. Then he went on:

Dear friends, the goal of my visit to the U.S. is to establish a new era in Ukraine-U.S. relations. We do not seek only thaws that alter chillings in our relations. We seek a new atmosphere of trust, frankness and partnership. A new Ukraine offers the U.S. a genuinely strategic partnership.

[snip]

The U.S. and Ukraine have common strategic interests, and we have unity in one thing. Everywhere possible we

want to uphold freedom and democracy. We are committed to such a responsibility because we know if somebody is deprived of freedom, this freedom has been taken away from us.

[snip]

Ukraine will be a reliable partner to the U.S. in fighting terrorism. I am sure we will be able to overcome it and not only by power of force. It is our obligation to eradicate the sources of terrorism. We can defeat the ideology of hatred that nourishes it. I am fully convinced that the time will come when in the dictionary of world languages, the term "terrorism" will be followed by the footnote, "archaic term."

The actions of the past year have proven Yushchenko's promise that Ukraine would be a reliable partner of the US to have been honored, and Zelenskyy's speech yesterday was a great reminder of what Yushchenko said in 2005.

Near the end of his address, Yushchenko began his conclusion with these words:

Ladies and Gentlemen: John Fitzgerald Kennedy took an oath before the whole world by saying, "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty." I am subscribing to these words on behalf of Ukraine. This authority was given to me by my fellow countrymen who endured days and nights in bitter cold and snow on the maidan. Ukraine is free and will always remain free. Citizens of Ukraine gained their freedom due to their courage and support of friends and proponents of democracy across the world.

These words, too, have proven true.

Yushchenko spoke to Congress in 2005 at the invitation of a GOP-run House and Senate, while a Republican president was in the White House. Zelenskyy spoke to Congress yesterday at the invitation of a Democratic-run House and Senate, while a Democratic president was in the White House. Both Ukrainian presidents hit the same notes, pleading for a stronger partnership with the US, regardless of which political party was in charge in DC. Even without that partnership, however, each pledged that Ukraine would continue its fight for freedom.

Over the past year, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine have demonstrated that Yushchenko's words were not simply flowery language in a fluffy speech. Back in 2005, Caroline Kennedy said this about why the JFK Library selected Yushchenko to receive the Profiles in Courage award:

His courage has inspired citizens of the world. For those of us who are free – he has reminded us that we can never take our freedom for granted, and for people with no voice in their own government, President Yushchenko and the Ukrainian people have given them hope.

Zelenskyy delivered his own reminder of this to those of us who are free last night, much as Yushchenko did in 2005.

Thank you, President Zelenskyy. Slava Ukraini, indeed.