

On a cold dark winter evening last year, I encountered a small group of Ukrainian state security men sipping black coffee from plastic cups on a Kyiv street corner. Upon learning I was American, their hard faces split into broad grins and they broke into a raucous chant “Abrams! Abrams! USA! USA!”

This was more than mere excitement about the new battle tanks that Washington had just pledged. It was a joyful expression of Ukrainians' belief that the world's most powerful nation was now unambiguously on their side.

Today, the mood in Ukraine is very different, not so much bleak as befuddled. How, my Ukrainian friends wonder, could America be retreating from its solemn promises to stand by them as they fight to liberate their land?

I'm a professional aid worker with forty years of experience in too many countries to recall, including three stints on the ground in Ukraine. I am not a politician. But it's a question I would put to Congress as it prepares to depart on yet another of its recesses, with the issue of further military funding for Ukraine still unsettled. I would remind our Representatives that for tens of millions of ordinary Ukrainians, there are no recesses, not from missiles or mortars, not from drones and despair.

As I pack my bags and get ready to return to the Ukrainian city of Odesa in a few weeks, a place that is regularly terrorized by Russian air raids, I wonder if perhaps our elected leaders have forgotten a few basic facts about what's at stake here.

Has it slipped their minds that American voters overwhelmingly support Ukraine? According to a recent survey by the Pew Charitable Trust “two years on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 74% of Americans view the war there as important to U.S. national interests – with 43% describing it as very important.”

Are they unaware that Ukraine has enormous valuable natural resources, many of which are important to our own country's energy transition? According to The Washington Post: “Ukraine harbors some of the world's largest reserves of titanium and iron ore, fields of untapped lithium and massive deposits of coal. Collectively, they are worth tens of trillions of dollars.”

Has it gone unnoticed that Ukraine is an important economic partner, so much so that we share a bilateral investment treaty, and that many U.S. companies are active there, including Philip Morris, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, MasterCard, Honeywell, General Dynamics, John Deere, Cargill, McDonalds and more?

Does Congress not recognize that Russia has morphed into a rabid enemy of our country, one that regularly threatens to use nuclear weapons against the U.S. and its NATO allies? And do they not notice that weakness on our part can only embolden other dictatorships, especially China as it looks upon Taiwan and licks its chops?

Is it possible that they fail to see that America's international credibility is at stake like never before? Has it not registered that U.S. allies around the world are shocked and dismayed at this apparent about-face by the world's greatest superpower, and that if we fail Ukraine now, our reputation among international friends and allies will take decades to restore, if ever?

Most importantly, do the ideas of liberty and freedom for which Ukrainians are fighting, tenets of American identity, no longer have any value? I wonder what former President Lyndon Johnson would have made of this. He certainly understood Congress, having held office in both the House and the Senate for nearly two decades. But he also understood something fundamental about Ukraine when he spoke of the country's greatest poet, Taras Shevchenko: "He was more than a Ukrainian — he was a statesman and citizen of the world. He was more than a poet — he was a valiant crusader for the rights and freedom of men. He used verse to carry on a determined fight for freedom."

My Ukrainian comrades don't have access to prestigious editorial pages so, on their behalf, let me say this clearly: Congress, do the right thing. Give Kyiv the military assistance it needs to protect its people and to repel the invaders. For Ukrainians, for Americans, and for anyone who believes that evil must not prevail.

(705 words)