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"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

THE WEATHER
Today, early clouds, turning breezy, high 47. **Tonight,** partly cloudy and windy, low 32. **Tomorrow,** mostly sunny, breezy in the morning, high 43. Weather map is on Page 27.

VOL. CLXXV ... No. 60,761 SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 2026 Prices in Canada may be higher $6.00

President Trump promised that he could bring peace to Ukraine in a single day. What followed was nearly a year of on-again, off-again negotiations, apportioning of territory, administration infighting and a war still without end. This is the story of how it unfolded.

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Ukrainian forces in Donbas. As the United States sought a deal and Russia a victory, Washington factions bled Kyiv's war effort.

THE SEPARATION

Inside the Unraveling of the Partnership Between the U.S. and Ukraine

By ADAM ENTOUS

The train left the U.S. Army depot in the west of Germany and made for Poland and the Ukrainian border. These were the final 800 miles of a trans-Atlantic supply chain that had sustained Ukraine across more than three long years of war.

The freight on this last day in June was 155-millimeter artillery shells, 18,000 of them packed into crates, their fuses separated out to prevent detonation in transit. Their ultimate destination was the eastern front, where Vladimir V. Putin's generals were massing forces and firepower against the city of Pokrovsk. The battle was for territory and strategic advantage, but also for bragging rights: Mr. Putin wanted to show the American president, Donald J. Trump, that Russia was indeed winning.

Advertising their war plan, the Russians had told Mr. Trump's advisers. "We're going to slam them harder there. We have the munitions to do that." In Washington, the defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, had been talking about munitions, too, testifying to a Senate Appropriations subcommittee that those earmarked for Ukraine by former President Joseph R. Biden Jr. were "still flowing."

Three months earlier, in fact, Mr. Hegseth had, unannounced, decided to hold back one crucial class of munitions — American-made 155s. The U.S. military's stocks were running low, his advisers had warned; withholding them would force the Europeans to step up, to take greater responsibility for the war in their backyard.

Day after day, then, thousands upon thousands of 155s earmarked for Ukraine had lain waiting on pallets at the ammunition depot. The American commander in Europe, Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, had fired off email after email, pleading with the Pentagon to free them. The jam had been broken only after intervention from Jack Keane, a retired Army general and Fox News contributor who was friendly with the president.

But on July 2, as the train approached the Ukrainian border, a new order came in to the U.S. military's European Command: "Divert everything. Immediately."

Exactly why the liberated shells had been taken captive again was never explained. In the end, they waited for just 10

Continued on Page 12

Trump's 'Superstar' Judges Backed Him 133-12 in '25

On Appeals, Jurists Appointed by President Lean Toward Defending His Agenda

By MATTATHIAS SCHWARTZ and EMMA SCHARTZ

President Trump has found a powerful but obscure bulwark in the appeals court judges he appointed during his first term. They have voted overwhelmingly in his favor when his administration's actions have been challenged in court in his current term, a New York Times analysis of their 2025 records shows.

Time and again, appellate judges chosen by Mr. Trump in his first term reversed rulings made by district court judges in his second, clearing the way for his policies and gradually eroding a perception early last year that the legal system was thwarting his efforts to amass presidential power.

When Mr. Trump criticized a ruling from a so-called "Obama judge" in 2018, Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. responded that "we do not have Obama judges or Trump judges, Bush judges or Clinton judges."

But the data suggests that in the 13 appellate courts, there is increasingly such a thing as a Trump judge. The president's appointees voted to allow his policies to take effect 133 times and voted against them only 12 times. Ninety-two percent of their total votes were in favor of the administration. That figure far outstrips support for Mr. Trump's agenda from appeals court judges appointed by other Republican presidents, and from Mr. Trump's appointees to the district courts.

The Times analyzed every judicial ruling on Mr. Trump's second-term agenda, from Jan. 20 to Dec. 31 of last year, or more than 500 orders issued across 900 cases. About half of rulings at the appellate level were in Mr. Trump's favor — better than his performance with the district courts, though worse than his record at the Supreme Court, where the rulings on his agenda have almost all been on a preliminary basis in response to emergency applications.

Experts who have studied the voting patterns of federal judges have found that, even before Mr. Trump, their rulings had some degree of alignment with the partisan positions of the president who appointed them. On the Supreme Court, for instance, where the behavior has been closely studied, justices have shown a decades-long tilt toward their appointing president, a 2016 study found.

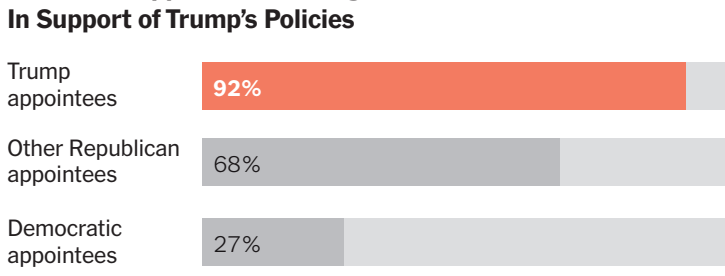
The correlation between ideology and voting among judges in the Times analysis extended beyond those appointed by Mr. Trump. Appellate judges appointed by Democratic presidents voted against Mr. Trump's agenda 73 percent of the time, compared to 32 percent of the time by appellate judges appointed by Republicans.

But the impact of Mr. Trump's appeals judges on his own agenda has been hard to overstate, given the glut of litigation over the president's expansive executive actions and the pushback they have encountered from district court judges.

The uniformity of the judges' votes is "reason for serious concern," said Mark L. Wolf, a former federal judge nominated by President Ronald Reagan. Judge Wolf recently retired so he could speak more freely about what he has

Continued on Page 26

How Often Appeals Court Judges Voted In Support of Trump's Policies



Source: New York Times analysis of court rulings in 2025. THE NEW YORK TIMES

Early Comments Cast Doubts Over ICE Inquiry

By GLENN THRUSH

NEWS ANALYSIS

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration blocked Minnesota officials from investigating the death of the woman shot on Wednesday by a federal agent, then quietly offered this explanation: Local investigators simply could not be trusted to conduct a fair inquiry.

The investigation into the killing of Renee Nicole Good, 37, federal officials said, would be the exclusive province of the F.B.I., which is overseen by a director, Kash Patel, who has described President Trump as an unerring boss, and even a king.

Mr. Trump had already declared the shooting justified. Vice President JD Vance has asserted that federal agents had "absolute immunity" from prosecution. The homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem, has spoken about the incident as if it were a closed case: Ms. Good had "weaponized" her S.U.V. to kill agents, she said, even though video analysis by The New York Times suggested it was more likely that she was turning her car away from officers.

The extraordinary volley of public statements stood in striking contrast to the far more restrained approach to high-profile incidents taken by other presidents, who have typically called for calm pending the results of investigations. The all-hands effort to define Ms. Good as the only person who did anything wrong has cast serious doubt on the F.B.I.'s willingness to scrutinize the actions of the agent who killed the unarmed activist, according to former law enforcement officials who were once responsible for investigating comparable tragedies.

"It's hard to have any trust in the federal investigation given the White House's immediate public effort to drive an outcome," said Vanita Gupta, a former top Justice Department

Continued on Page 23

DAVID GUTTENFELDER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

PROTESTS Demonstrations continued in Minneapolis and in other cities after the killing of Renee Nicole Good. Page 23.

On Immigration, Trump Is Mixing His Messages

By ZOLAN KANNO-YOUNGS

WASHINGTON — President Trump threatened in an interview last week to strip some naturalized immigrants of their citizenship, defended an ICE agent who killed a woman in Minneapolis and offered no regrets over officers' aggressive tactics against immigrants, protesters and American citizens.

But the president at times sought to soften his harsh, anti-immigrant image, as he has done at times. When asked if he would support a plan that includes a

Calls the Issue 'a Very Ticklish Subject'

pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, Mr. Trump said, "Possibly, possibly." He said so-called Dreamers, who were brought to the United States as children, should feel "safe" in the country and he would "love to be able to do something for them."

"I'd love to have a comprehensive immigration policy. Something that really worked. It's about time for the country," Mr. Trump said, a remarkable statement for a president whose administration has spent the past year demonizing, threatening and rounding up immigrants in raids across the country.

Asked for details of any plan he might have, Mr. Trump seemed to acknowledge the messy politics surrounding an issue that has motivated a large number of his staunchest supporters: "I don't want to go into that because it's a very ticklish subject."

Many of Mr. Trump's assertions

Continued on Page 22

Dogs Can Develop Vocabularies Like Toddlers

By EMILY ANTHES

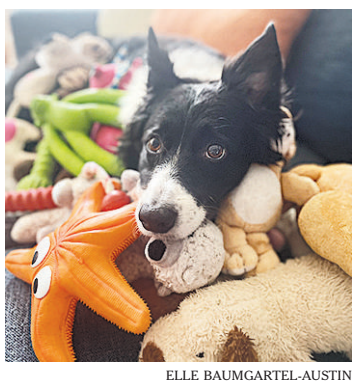
Basket the Border collie seems to have a way with words. The 7-year-old dog, who resides on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, knows the names of at least 150 toys — "froggy," "crayon box" and "Pop-Tart," among them — and can retrieve them on command.

Basket built her vocabulary thanks to the dedicated efforts of one of her owners, Elle Baumgartel-Austin. She began the language lessons when Basket was a puppy. "I would play with her, say the name of the toy — say the name of the toy a lot of times," Ms. Baumgartel-Austin said. She started with 10 toys, adding more as Basket mastered them.

"There never seemed to be a limit," she said. "It's basically like, how many toys could I feasibly store in my tiny apartment?"

Now, in a new study, scientists have found that Basket, and other dogs that share her advanced word-learning ability, have a skill that puts them functionally on par with 18-month-old children: They can learn the names of new toys

Continued on Page 21



ELLE BAUMGARTEL-AUSTIN

Basket, a Border collie, knows the names of at least 150 toys.

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AMERICA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UKRAINE UNRAVELS: TRUMP'S TEAM UPENDS U.S. STANCE ON THE WAR

CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

From Page 1

days, in a rail yard near Krakow. Yet to U.S. military officers who had spent the last three and a half years fighting to shore up the Ukrainian cause, the interrupted journey of the 18,000 shells seemed to encompass the entirety of America's new, erratic and corrosive role in the war.

"This has happened so many times that I've lost count," a senior U.S. official said. "This is literally killing them. Death by a thousand cuts."

It was to hold back the Russian tide, perhaps even help win the war, that the Biden administration had provided Ukraine with a vast array of increasingly sophisticated weaponry. The Americans, their European allies and the Ukrainians had also joined in a secret partnership of intelligence, strategy, planning and technology, its workings revealed last year by The New York Times. At stake, the argument went, was not just Ukraine's sovereignty but the very fate of the post-World War II international order.

Mr. Trump has presided over the partners' separation.

The headlines are well known: Mr. Trump's televised Oval Office humiliation of the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, in February. The August summit with Mr. Putin in Alaska. The furious flurry of diplomacy that led to a Mar-a-Lago meeting on Dec. 28 with Mr. Zelensky, the latest high-stakes but inconclusive negotiation in which the fate of Ukraine has seemed to hang in the balance.

It is still unclear when, and if, a deal will be reached. This is the chaotic and previously untold story behind the past year of head-spinning headlines:

The Ukraine specialists at the Pentagon afraid to utter the word "Ukraine." Mr. Trump telling his chosen envoy to Russia and Ukraine, "Russia is mine." The secretary of state quoting from "The Godfather" in negotiations with the Russians. The Ukrainian defense minister pleading with the American defense secretary, "Just be honest with me." A departing American commander's "beginning of the end" memo. Mr. Zelensky's Oval Office phone call, set up by the president, with a former Miss Ukraine.

This account draws on more than 300 interviews with national security officials, military and intelligence officers, and diplomats in Washington, Kyiv and across Europe. Virtually all insisted on anonymity, for fear of reprisal from Mr. Trump and his administration.

Mr. Trump had scant ideological commitment. His pronouncements and determinations were often shaped by the last person he spoke to, by how much respect he felt the Ukrainian and Russian leaders had shown him, by what caught his eye on Fox News.

Policy was forged in the clash of bitterly warring camps.

Mr. Biden had left the Ukrainians a financial and weapons nest egg to cushion them for an uncertain future. Mr. Trump's point man for peace negotiations presented him with a plan to maintain support for Ukraine and squeeze the Russian war machine.

But that strategy ran headlong into a phalanx of Ukraine skeptics led by the vice president, JD Vance, and like-minded officials he seeded at the Pentagon and elsewhere in the administration. In their view, instead of squandering America's depleted military stocks on a sinking ship, they should be reapportioned to counter the greatest global threat: China.

A cold wind — what one senior military officer called "a de facto anti-Ukraine policy" — swept through the Pentagon. Time and again, Mr. Hegseth and his advisers undermined, sidelined or silenced frontline generals and administration officials sympathetic to Ukraine.

Against that backdrop, Mr. Trump granted Mr. Hegseth and other subordinates wide latitude to make decisions about the flow of aid to Ukraine. On several occasions, when those decisions brought bad press or internal backlash — as with the 18,000 shells — Ukraine-friendly commentators at Fox stepped in and persuaded the president to reverse them.

Even as Mr. Trump bullied Mr. Zelensky, he seemed to coddle Mr. Putin. When the Russian stiff-armed peace proposals and accelerated bombing campaigns on Ukrainian cities, Mr. Trump would lash out on Truth Social and ask his aides, "Do we sanction their banks or do we sanction their energy infrastructure?" For months, he did neither.

But in secret, the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. military, with his blessing, supercharged a Ukrainian campaign of drone strikes on Russian oil facilities and tankers to hobble Mr. Putin's war machine.

Day to day, Mr. Trump was inconsistent. But he was still a deal maker determined to broker a deal — and convinced that, in the calculus of leverage, the advantage lay with the stronger. Both sides fought a war within the war to shape the president's perceptions. "They look invincible," he told aides in May after seeing footage of a military parade in Moscow. Three weeks later, after Ukraine carried out an audacious covert drone operation inside Russia, Mr. Zelensky sent a parade of aides to the White House with his own victory message: "We are not losing. We are winning."

Yet on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, Mr. Trump kept pushing the Ukrainians deeper and deeper into a box. What he underestimated was the Russian leader's refusal to budge from his demands.

The origin point of this story was the president's belief in what he saw as his personal connection to Mr. Putin. On the campaign trail, he had promised to broker peace quickly, perhaps even before taking office. After he won the election, European and Middle Eastern leaders began calling, offering to help smooth the way for talks with the Russians during the transition.

Mr. Trump's aides knew he was eager to get started, but they were also aware of the shadow that outreach to Russia had cast over his first term. Then, several aides' undisclosed contacts with the Russians before the inauguration had become part of the investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election. Mr. Trump took to bitterly calling it "the Russia, Russia, Russia hoax."

This time, his aides decided, they needed official cover.

"Look, we've been getting all kinds of outreach," Mr. Trump's pick for national security adviser, Michael Waltz, told his Biden administration counterpart, Jake Sullivan. "We'd like to go ahead and start testing some of these, because Trump wants to move quickly."

And so Mr. Waltz made a request, never before reported, for a letter of permission from Mr. Biden.

DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

President Joseph R. Biden Jr. with Donald J. Trump, then the president-elect, in November 2024.

The Players

U.S.

Lloyd J. Austin III
Def. Sec.

Joseph R. Biden Jr.
President

Keith Kellogg
Envoy

Jared Kushner
Adviser

Donald J. Trump
President

JD Vance
Vice Pres.

Michael Waltz
Nat. Sec.

Susie Wiles
Staff Chief

Steve Witkoff
Envoy

Charles Q. Brown Jr.
General

Dan Caldwell
Def. Offic.

Eldridge A. Colby
Def. Offic.

Pete Hegseth
Def. Sec.

Joe Kasper
Def. Aide

Brian Kilmeade
Fox News

Russia

Kirill Dmitriev
Wealth Fund

Vladimir V. Putin
President

Ukraine

Andriy Yermak
Adviser

Volodymyr Zelensky
President

PART 1

The Transition

EVGENIY MALOLETKA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Keith Kellogg, who favored keeping some aid for Ukraine, was made an envoy but was largely sidelined.

MR. WALTZ had some grounds for optimism. It had been a profoundly rancorous campaign, but once it was over, Mr. Biden told aides that he wanted an orderly, cooperative transfer of power.

The week after the 2024 election, he hosted Mr. Trump at the Oval Office and explained why he believed it was in America's interest to continue military support for Ukraine. Mr. Trump didn't telegraph his intent. But according to two former administration officials, he ended the meeting on a strikingly gracious note, commending Mr. Biden on a "successful presidency" and promising to protect the things he cared about.

Before Mr. Biden dropped out of the race in July, many of his rival's most stinging attacks had been aimed at his son Hunter, over his legal troubles, struggles with addiction and business dealings in Ukraine and elsewhere. Now Mr. Trump told him, "If there's anything I can do for Hunter, please let me know." (Three weeks later, Mr. Biden would, controversially, pardon his son, sweeping away his illegal gun purchase and tax evasion convictions — and shielding him from potential presidential retribution.)

Mr. Biden's top national security aides had, for the most part, cordial meetings with their successors. The exception was the defense secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III. Mr. Austin had been a proud architect of the Biden administration's Ukraine partnership, and he, too, hoped to argue for its survival. He let it be known that he was available to meet with Mr. Hegseth, but the Trump transition team did not reply.

MR. WALTZ'S REQUEST for the letter divided Mr. Biden's national security aides.

Kim Barker contributed reporting. Julie Tate and Oleksandr Chubko contributed research.

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Far left, making 155-millimeter artillery shells in Pennsylvania in 2024. Supply of the munitions, crucial to Ukraine, became a means for the U.S. to exert pressure.

Left, the aftermath of an attack on Sloviansk, Ukraine, in October. The city is in Donetsk, an eastern region that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia wants to control.

There is a law, the Logan Act, last employed in 1853, that prohibits an unauthorized person from negotiating a dispute between the United States and a foreign government. But the West Wing debate wasn't a legal one. It turned on far murkier questions.

While one senior aide argued that providing the letter would underscore Mr. Biden's desire for transition good will, another saw danger — especially given the president-elect's history of deference to Mr. Putin.

"Why are we going to give them cover to start what could be a very damaging Russia conversation?" Jon Finer, the deputy national security adviser, asked Mr. Biden.

It wasn't as if the Biden administration hadn't explored talking to the Russians.

In November 2021, amid signs of impending invasion, the president had sent William J. Burns, head of the C.I.A., to Moscow to press Mr. Putin to pull back. In secret, a close Biden adviser, Amos Hochstein, had also tried to forestall invasion through talks with the chief of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, Kirill Dmitriev.

Now, in the twilight of his power and of the wartime partnership he had shepherded, Mr. Biden weighed the Trump team's request and saw little reason to believe that Mr. Putin would now be any more willing to negotiate peace. After all, he was convinced that he was winning.

Mr. Biden would not forbid the administration-in-waiting from engaging with the Russians. But there would be no letter.

As one aide remembers it, "What Biden said was: 'If I send this letter, it's like I'm blessing whatever Trump does, and I have no idea what he's going to do. He could make a deal with Putin at Ukraine's expense and I don't want to be endorsing that.'"

FORMAL TALKS WOULD WAIT for Inauguration Day. Still, it was imperative to be prepared. And the man who very badly wanted to be at the center of those preparations was Keith Kellogg.

A retired Army general and one of the president-elect's most loyal longtime aides, Mr. Kellogg had served as Vice President Mike Pence's national security adviser in the first Trump presidency. He had definite ideas about the Russians and the war in Ukraine — and a conviction that if Mr. Trump didn't manage negotiations well, it would be disastrous for America, for Europe and for his legacy.

Mr. Kellogg's feelings about the Russians had been forged in the depths of the Cold War. Serving in the Special Forces, he had led a Green Light team, soldiers trained to parachute behind Soviet lines with tactical nuclear weapons strapped between their legs. He also harbored a suspicion that the Russians had once tried to kill him. In 2000, while on the Army staff at the Pentagon, he had just left an event at the Russian Embassy when he felt a sharp pain in his right elbow. Later, at dinner with friends, his wife noticed the swelling. The next day, he was rushed to the hospital, where doctors nearly had to amputate his arm to keep a staph infection from spreading.

His evolving ideas on the Ukraine war had formed the basis of a policy paper he published in April 2024. He had once been among those who believed that the Biden administration was not doing enough to support the Ukrainians. Now the battlefield balance had shifted, and Ukraine, Mr. Kellogg wrote, no longer had a path to victory. Still, he argued, America needed to arm the Ukrainians sufficiently to convince Mr. Putin that his territorial ambitions had hit a wall.

Mr. Kellogg sent the paper to Mr. Trump, who sent it back with a note at the top that read, "Great job," and beneath it his distinctively squiggly signature. Mr. Kellogg framed the autographed page and hung it in his home office.

As the new administration took shape, Mr. Kellogg sought, unsuccessfully, to be named defense secretary or national security adviser. But in late November, he traveled to Mar-a-Lago to pitch himself for another job — special envoy for Ukraine and Russia. This time, Mr. Trump bit.

Almost immediately, the appointment ignited an early flaring of the ideological combat that would run through the administration's handling of the war. To some of Mr. Vance's allies, Mr. Kellogg, 80 at the time, was a Cold War relic with a cold warrior's view of the conflict and the Russian threat. Mr. Putin, they suspected, would never work with him. What's more, in their view, the sort of support Mr. Kellogg was advocating would only prolong the fighting; America needed to de-escalate.

Knives were out, and Mr. Kellogg didn't help himself with the "listening tour" he was planning of several European capitals. His daughter, Meaghan Mobbs, who ran a charity that operated aid programs in Ukraine and Afghanistan, offered to help arrange financing for the trip. She found a donor to pay for a plane and hotel expenses.

Some Trump aides had their suspicions about the charity, its founders and Mr. Kellogg's daughter. They saw them as fervent Ukraine advocates, openly hostile toward Mr. Putin and Mr. Trump. (In reality, some were anti-Trump, others pro-Trump.) They worried, too, that a high-profile trip, by an outspoken Putin critic, might spook the Russians. Mr. Trump's chief of staff, Susie Wiles, vetoed the trip, and Mr. Vance moved to limit Mr. Kellogg's remit. He could talk to the Ukrainians and Europeans, Mr. Vance told aides, "but keep him away from the Russians."

ONE MAN WOULD BE TALKING to the Russians during the transition — Steve Witkoff, the New York developer and old Trump friend who had been appointed special envoy to the Middle East. The man he would be talking to was Mr. Dmitriev, the sovereign wealth fund chief.

Mr. Dmitriev hadn't only flirted briefly with the Biden administration. He'd had repeated flirtations with Trump world and come to know the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

A month into his job as Middle East envoy, Mr. Witkoff traveled to Riyadh to meet with the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, about the war in Gaza. The crown prince was aware of Mr. Trump's campaign pledge to quickly negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine, and he proffered an introduction.

"You're going to have a lot of people come to you claiming to have a line into President Putin," the crown prince told Mr. Witkoff. And Mr. Dmitriev, he added, was "the right guy. We've done business with him." Mr. Kushner vouched for him, too.

Unlike the talks that Mr. Biden had refused to sign on to, Mr. Trump's advisers told themselves these would be informal, "a business guy to a business guy." And so Mr. Trump directed Mr. Witkoff to open a back channel to the Russian.

PART 2

First Days

SHAWN THEW/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., who led the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

WHAT WOULD MR. TRUMP'S Ukraine policy be? In the first days of his new administration, the competing camps set out their markers.

Mr. Hegseth — onetime infantry officer turned Fox News host — arrived at the Pentagon on Jan. 25 as something of a blank slate on the war. "He didn't have any of his own thoughts on Russia and Ukraine," a former Pentagon official explained, adding, "But he had civilian advisers who did."

On Day 4, the freshly minted defense secretary sat at a Pentagon conference table as one of his coterie of advisers argued for an immediate U-turn.

The ideological godfather of the group was Elbridge A. Colby, grandson of the Nixon-era C.I.A. director William E. Colby. The younger Mr. Colby and Mr. Vance had been introduced in 2015 by an editor at National Review who thought they were like-minded. Nearly nine years later, as Mr. Biden poured billions of dollars into arming Ukraine, Mr. Colby argued that "we would have been better served to put a lot more of that money to use in the Pacific."

Now, it was one of his disciples, Dan Caldwell, presenting the group's recommendations to Mr. Hegseth, Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other military leaders.

The Pentagon, Mr. Caldwell argued, should pause delivery of certain munitions that the Biden administration had promised to Ukraine, because, he believed, existing stocks were insufficient to execute America's war plans around the world. Nor should it use the additional $3.8 billion left unspent by the Biden administration to buy weapons for Ukraine.

General Brown did not speak as Mr. Caldwell wrapped up. He simply shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

THE NEXT DAY, Mr. Kellogg and his team arrived at the Oval Office bearing several large charts that laid out their plan to end the war. One was headlined, hopefully, in Trumpian all-caps, "AN AMERICA FIRST PLAN: TRUMP'S HISTORIC PEACE DEAL FOR RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR."

In many ways, the plan was a refinement of Mr. Kellogg's 2024 policy paper. It echoed some of Mr. Trump's campaign talking points: "Stop American taxpayer dollars funding an endless war" and "push Europe to step up for its own security and stability needs." In Mr. Kellogg's presentation, he quoted from Mr. Trump's book "The Art of the Deal": "Leverage is the biggest strength you can have."

U.S. assistance would continue — but only if Mr. Zelensky agreed to negotiate with Russia.

For Mr. Putin, there was incentive — the easing of sanctions — and counterincentive: choking off oil and gas revenues; pressuring China to end economic support for the Russian war machine; and working with the Europeans to use more than $300 billion in frozen Russian assets to rearm and rebuild Ukraine.

First would come a cease-fire, then negotiations on a deal.

Mr. Trump broke in.

Ukraine, he said, should not join NATO. (Mr. Kellogg advocated at least pausing such plans.)

He disliked Mr. Zelensky.

And then, addressing his special envoy: "Russia is mine, not yours," one official recalled the president's saying.

To which a bewildered Mr. Kellogg replied, "OK, you're the president."

At one point, Mr. Hegseth chimed in with the recommendation against using the unspent $3.8 billion. "We're not going to do that right now," the president told him.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Hegseth spoke briefly as the meeting broke up. One official recalls the president's message this way: "Pete, you're doing a great job, and you just go ahead and you don't need me to make decisions."

BACK AT THE PENTAGON later that day, Mr. Hegseth pulled General Brown aside and told him, "Stop P.D.A."

P.D.A. referred to munitions and equipment Mr. Biden had agreed to provide using "presidential drawdown authority." But exactly what would be stopped? Generals in Europe sent blistering queries to the Pentagon.

At the urging of his chief of staff, Joe Kasper, Mr. Hegseth clarified his order. It would not affect supplies already headed to Ukraine by road or rail. But at the U.S. military base in Wiesbaden, Germany, the nerve center of the partnership created by the Biden administration, Ukrainian officers suddenly saw on their screens that 11 supply flights from the United States had been canceled.

Within minutes, the Ukrainians began calling people who might have insight and influence.

They called Mr. Kellogg, who called Mr. Waltz. President Zelensky's top adviser, Andriy Yermak, called Brian Kilmeade, a Fox News personality who was supportive of Ukraine and had administration clout. Mr. Kilmeade called Mr. Hegseth and Mr. Trump. (Mr. Kilmeade declined to comment.)

Mr. Trump had just seemed to give Mr. Hegseth a blank check. Now he told his advisers that he had not, in fact, meant for the defense secretary to cut off the supplies.

The flights would resume, after a six-day pause. But for the Ukrainians and their American military partners in Europe and at the Pentagon, the episode became a premonition of their deepest fears.

(The Pentagon declined to answer specific questions about Mr. Hegseth's role in this and other episodes. But the chief spokesman, Sean Parnell, said in a statement that Mr. Hegseth shared the president's vision and "would never carry out actions that contradict the wishes of the President or actions that contradict the pillars of the America First agenda.")

Continued on Following Page

AMERICA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UKRAINE UNRAVELS: CONFUSION FOR ALLIES, AND PRESSURE ON KYIV

Source: The Institute for the Study of War with the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project (Russian territorial control as of Feb. 19, 2025).

DANIEL WOOD/THE NEW YORK TIMES

PART 3

'Just Be Honest With Me'

NAVY PETTY OFFICER 1ST CLASS ALEXANDER C. KUBITZA/D.O.D.

Rustem Umerov, Ukraine's defense minister, had only a brief meeting with Mr. Hegseth in February.

AT THE PENTAGON, the Joint Staff had recently prepared an assessment of the Ukrainians' battlefield situation: Unless the administration tapped into the unspent $3.8 billion, Ukraine would start to run out of critical munitions by summer. The generals knew Mr. Trump's emerging strategy hinged on Europe's taking the lead. But after depleting their already thin weapons stocks to aid Ukraine, the Joint Staff warned, the Europeans had little left to give.

Russia, in truth, was eking out only minimal territorial gains and taking huge losses — more than 250,000 soldiers killed and 500,000 more wounded. Still, without a steady supply of American munitions to Ukraine, one senior U.S. official said, "eventually the music stops."

Yet if Ukraine's supporters at the Pentagon hoped to sway Mr. Hegseth and his advisers, the defense secretary's camp had a different interpretation: The Ukrainians were losing, and they had till summer to push them to cut a deal with Moscow.

In the second week of February, Mr. Hegseth headed to Europe. His would not be a listening tour.

MR. HEGSETH'S FIRST STOP was the Army garrison in Stuttgart, Germany, to meet with his European commander, General Cavoli.

For nearly three years, General Cavoli had been on the speed dial of Mr. Austin, the previous defense secretary. Every day but Sunday, he had sent Mr. Austin a detailed battle report.

The general started out by sending Mr. Hegseth the same daily reports, only to be told they were too long. He sent abbreviated daily reports, only to be told they were too frequent and still too long. Henceforth, General Cavoli would send a single weekly summary, four or five sentences long.

On the morning of Feb. 11, General Cavoli escorted Mr. Hegseth to his office and, sitting knee to knee, walked him through everything European Command was doing to support Ukraine. "If we stop doing this," he said, "it's going to veer to the wrong side."

Exactly what it was that so annoyed the secretary, his aides were not sure. It could have been the protesters who had gathered outside, condemning the Pentagon's crackdown on transgender soldiers. It could have been jet lag. It could have been the meager refreshments — two small bottles of water for six people — or the way the general leaned forward as he spoke. Or it could have been General Cavoli's clear sympathy for Ukraine and animus toward Russia.

In any case, this — their first and only meeting — "was when Hegseth began to associate General Cavoli with the Ukraine fight," an official said. "He started hating them both. And I don't know who he hated first."

THE NEXT DAY, the secretary traveled to NATO headquarters in Brussels and met with Ukraine's defense minister, Rustem Umerov. The Ukrainians had repeatedly requested a proper sit-down. Instead it would be a brief stand-up affair in an anteroom.

Beforehand, according to an American official present, Mr. Hegseth dabbed his nose with powder from a small compact. "Look commanding," he told one aide. The handshake with the Ukrainian might be shown on Fox; the president might be watching.

Then the standing meeting began, Mr. Umerov coming in close, taking his voice down to a whisper, assuring the secretary that he knew America's political and security agenda might be changing. He didn't ask for new aid. He just needed to know one thing: Would the U.S. military continue to supply the munitions Ukraine was counting on, the ones approved by Mr. Biden? Every delivery sustained the lives of Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines; every delivery that didn't arrive one day meant those soldiers would die the next.

Again and again, Mr. Umerov repeated his plea: "I just need you to be honest with me. Just be honest with me."

"I got goose bumps," said an American official standing nearby. "He wasn't pleading for the answer that he wanted, but just for honesty, some indication. He was saying: You can trust me; you can trust us. Just tell me what you guys are thinking."

Mr. Hegseth, aides said, simply nodded.

MR. HEGSETH laid down his hard truths later that day at a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, the international alliance supporting the war effort:

"We must start by recognizing that returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective."

Then, "The United States does not believe that NATO membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement."

Finally, U.S. troops would not join a peacekeeping force after a deal to end the war.

"I don't think that it is wise to take Ukrainian NATO membership off the table and make territorial concessions to the Russians before the negotiations have even started," the German defense minister, Boris Pistorius, broke in. "He had steam coming off his head," a senior U.S. military officer in the room said.

That was just the sort of stunned reaction Mr. Hegseth had been seeking, U.S. officials recalled, and afterward, he and his adviser Mr. Caldwell pronounced "mission accomplished!"

EVERY POINT of Mr. Hegseth's speech had been coordinated with Mr. Trump's top advisers via a Signal chat. Absent from the group was Mr. Kellogg. That day and over the next several days, he would come to better understand what Mr. Trump meant when he declared, "Russia is mine, not yours."

At 1:30 p.m. on Feb. 11, Mr. Waltz, the national security adviser, took to X to announce that Mr. Witkoff was "leaving Russian airspace with Marc Fogel," an American teacher jailed in Russia since 2021.

It quickly emerged that the freeing of Mr. Fogel was the fruit of the talks that Mr. Witkoff — unknown to Mr. Kellogg and all but a handful of others — had begun with Mr. Dmitriev during the transition. Now the back channel had passed its first test.

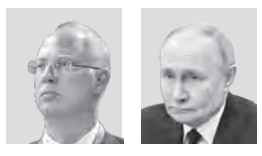
The next morning, the president posted his own announcement, on Truth Social. He had just finished a "highly productive" call with Mr. Putin; their teams would start negotiations immediately.

On the call, according to two U.S. officials, Mr. Putin had praised Mr. Witkoff. He would lead Mr. Trump's team, along with John Ratcliffe, the C.I.A. director; Marco Rubio, the secretary of state; and Mr. Waltz. The post did not mention the special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, Mr. Kellogg.

U.S.

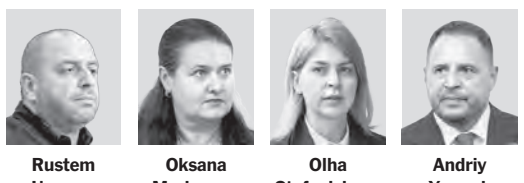
Lloyd J. Austin III Def. Sec.
Dan Caldwell Def. Offic.
Christopher G. Cavoli General
Pete Hegseth Def. Sec.
Joe Kasper Def. Aide
Keith Kellogg Envoy
John Ratcliffe C.I.A. Chief
Marco Rubio State Sec.
Donald J. Trump President
Michael Waltz Nat. Sec.
Steve Witkoff Envoy
Scott Bessent Treas. Sec.
Lindsey Graham Senator
Howard Lutnick Comm. Sec.
JD Vance Vice Pres.
Brian Kilmeade Fox News

Russia



Kirill Dmitriev Wealth Fund
Vladimir V. Putin President

Ukraine



Rustem Umerov Def. Sec.
Oksana Markarova Ambassador
Olha Stefanishyna Justice Min.
Andriy Yermak Adviser

Volodymyr Zelensky President

In Germany on Feb. 14 for the Munich Security Conference, unsure whether he still had a job or what it entailed, Mr. Kellogg encountered European and Ukrainian leaders in their own storm of confusion. "Do we still have an alliance?" the Polish deputy prime minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, asked. Mr. Kellogg sought to reassure them, describing himself as "your best friend" in the administration.

A Hegseth loyalist at the conference, though, rendered it differently in messages to Washington, accusing Mr. Kellogg of claiming, "I'm holding the line against these isolationists in the administration." This only cemented the envoy's outsider status, as did a Fox News item juxtaposing his latest social media post about Mr. Zelensky (he was "the embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war") with one from Mr. Trump (he was "a dictator without elections").

When Mr. Kellogg visited the Oval Office soon after, the president pounced.

"So you call Zelensky embattled and courageous?" he snapped, according to two officials.

"Sir, he is," Mr. Kellogg responded. "It's an existential fight on Ukrainian soil for his nation's survival. When was the last time an American president faced that? It was Abraham Lincoln."

Recounting the episode later to other advisers, Mr. Trump grumbled, "He's an idiot."

PART 4

'Be Very, Very Thankful'

DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine and President Trump during a contentious meeting in February.

MR. TRUMP HAD MADE some things crystal clear: For all the help America had given the Ukrainians, it should get something in return.

On the golf course with Mr. Trump during the campaign, Senator Lindsey Graham had floated an idea. The South Carolina Republican had recently returned from Ukraine, where officials had given him a map of the country's mineral riches. The senator recalls showing it to Mr. Trump, who proclaimed, "I want half."

No one had a firm fix on how much mineral wealth the Ukrainians actually had, or whether it could be mined anytime soon. But by his first weeks back in office, Mr. Trump had fixated on striking an immediate deal.

What ensued might have been a set piece from a

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Far left, in talks with American negotiators, the Ukrainians asked for the return of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe's largest, and of the strategic Kinburn Spit on the Black Sea.

Left, a Ukrainian artillery unit prepared to fire an American-made howitzer — kept under netting to shield it from Russian drones — in May. U.S. deliveries of the 155-millimeter shells the howitzer uses have been put on pause repeatedly in the second Trump administration.

madcap diplomatic farce: the president's men, rivalries on display, competing to see whose version of a deal would win over the Ukrainians — and Mr. Trump.

First up was the Treasury secretary, Scott Bessent. His plan called for Ukraine to cede half its revenue from mineral, oil and gas resources in perpetuity. He arrived in Kyiv on Feb. 12. Several top officials seemed to give positive feedback, but Mr. Zelensky declined to sign, saying he had yet to read the document. Frustrated and empty-handed, Mr. Bessent left town.

Mr. Vance, Mr. Rubio and Mr. Kellogg would be meeting Mr. Zelensky in Munich on Feb. 14, hopeful of agreement on a revised version of the document. They were so hopeful that they had a room all decked out, with Ukrainian and American flags, an ornate desk for the signing and tape markers on the floor indicating where the dignitaries would stand. But beforehand, Mr. Vance and Mr. Rubio pulled Mr. Zelensky away, and the Ukrainian made clear that he was not ready to sign.

Even so, the show would go on, and later, when Mr. Vance asked if he would sign, the president turned to the justice minister, Olha Stefanishyna, who told him, "No, you cannot sign this — it has to be approved by the Rada," Ukraine's Parliament.

Now Mr. Kellogg headed to Kyiv to try a different tack. He asked Mr. Zelensky's top adviser, Mr. Yermak, to arrange for the president to sign a brief letter saying he intended to sign a document, details to follow. Mr. Trump, he explained, felt the Ukrainians were giving him the runaround.

Mr. Yermak sounded amenable — until, suddenly, he wasn't: He had just begun discussions, he told the American, about a different arrangement with a different administration official — the commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick.

With talks flailing and with the president's blessing, Mr. Lutnick had thrown together a plan: Ukraine would cede half of its profits from minerals, oil and gas. And there would be a cap, of $500 billion.

In Kyiv, Mr. Kellogg rushed to the U.S. Embassy and called Mr. Lutnick. Mr. Yermak was on the verge of getting Mr. Zelensky to sign his letter. Would Mr. Lutnick stand down? He would, an embassy official recalled his saying. Only after boarding his train back to Poland did Mr. Kellogg learn from Mr. Yermak that he and the commerce secretary were talking again.

In this swirl of players and documents, it fell to Mr. Waltz to call Mr. Bessent and Mr. Lutnick into the White House situation room. Mr. Trump would sort matters out. In the end, it would be Mr. Bessent carrying his plan — with the unlimited upside for America — across the finish line.

Only now Mr. Zelensky was insisting on a White House signing ceremony, and kept insisting even after Mr. Kellogg warned that he was setting himself up for a fall.

ON THE MORNING of Feb. 28, Mr. Kellogg, Mr. Graham and several other Ukraine supporters met with Mr. Zelensky for a prep session at the Hay-Adams Hotel, a short walk from the White House.

There would be much tortured back story to contend with. During his first term, Mr. Trump had come to blame Ukraine, not the Kremlin, for the 2016 election interference that spawned the Russia investigation. And it was his effort to have Ukraine investigate the Bidens that led to his first impeachment. In meetings, according to five aides, Mr. Trump would sometimes say of Mr. Zelensky, "He's a motherfucker."

Mindful of all this, according to several participants, Mr. Kellogg and the others counseled Mr. Zelensky to flatter Mr. Trump a bit, "to be very, very thankful to the United States of America for what it's done" for Ukraine. They counseled him specifically not to show Mr. Trump the photos he had brought of emaciated Ukrainian prisoners of war.

Mr. Zelensky took almost none of the pregame advice: The fall that Mr. Kellogg had feared was broadcast live, the images and insults then replayed and replayed again.

The schedule had included a working lunch. Instead, the Ukrainians were banished to the Roosevelt Room as the Americans debated next moves.

"Let's just have the lunch and talk our way through it," Mr. Trump told his advisers. But first Mr. Waltz, and then others, argued that Mr. Zelensky had treated the president badly and should be sent packing.

Mr. Waltz and Mr. Rubio would perform the eviction; a lunch, they told the Ukrainians, was clearly not going to be productive. The Ukrainians resisted. The Americans insisted. On the way out, a senior U.S. official recalled, Ukraine's ambassador, Oksana Markarova, looked as if she was crying. Afterward, Mr. Trump and his advisers ate the lunch.

In his office that afternoon, Fox News rerunning the showdown, Mr. Hegseth turned up the volume to hear the commentary. Mr. Caldwell and others came in, Pentagon officials recalled, and the men took turns gleefully, even giddily, deriding Mr. Zelensky and praising Mr. Trump.

PART 5

The Ukrainians

RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY

The remains of a U.S.-produced long-range ATACMS missile in the Kursk region of Russia in 2024.

THE FOLLOWING MONDAY, March 3, Mr. Trump gathered his advisers in the Oval Office to consider recommendations for pausing aid to Ukraine. Mr. Caldwell stood outside, and as the president's aides filed in, he handed out copies of an Associated Press report with quotations highlighted in yellow.

Mr. Zelensky had told reporters in London that he believed that the partnership remained strong, that U.S. aid would keep flowing, that a negotiated peace was "very, very far away."

To the president's advisers, the article was proof that Mr. Zelensky was both taking their support for granted and dismissing out of hand Mr. Trump's promise of cutting a deal.

Mr. Trump ordered a freeze in assistance to Ukraine. The only debate was over its duration. Aides recommended a week, but the president wanted maximum leverage. "No," he told them. "Let's not say when the freeze will end."

EVEN BEFORE THE FREEZE, two blows had shaken the partnership (and perhaps strengthened the president's hand).

In the fall of 2023, easing a prohibition against American boots on Ukrainian ground, Mr. Biden had sent a small complement of military advisers and other officers to Kyiv; the limit was later raised to 133. But when Mr. Hegseth saw an internal report that there were now 84 officers in Ukraine, he circled the number and declared "no more."

After much prodding, Mr. Biden had also let the Ukrainians launch a type of long-range American missile known as the Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS, into Russia to protect forces they had sent into the Kursk region. Mr. Trump hadn't rescinded that permission, and with the Russian defenders and North Korean allies closing in, the Ukrainians asked General Cavoli to free up their remaining 18 ATACMS. He was their steadfast champion, yet he had refused; the missiles were an older variant with little chance of penetrating Russian air defenses. Better to save them for more vulnerable targets. The Ukrainians said they understood, but still it chafed.

Now came the freeze, and once again, Mr. Umerov was pleading.

What would it take, he asked Mr. Hegseth the next day, to get the aid flowing again?

Mr. Hegseth stuck to the script crafted by the White House: "We need to see you taking the negotiation process seriously."

TAKING THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS seriously would mean facing up to some painful diplomatic candor.

On March 11, Mr. Rubio stood in a conference room at a hotel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and spread a large map of Ukraine on the table. It charted the two armies' line of contact — the line cleaving the country between Ukrainian- and Russian-held land.

"I want to know what your absolute bottom lines are; what do you have to have to survive as a country?" he asked the Ukrainians, according to a U.S. official who was present.

Opening the day, the Ukrainians had quickly agreed to Mr. Trump's call for an immediate, across-the-board 30-day cease-fire.

Now, as the group stood peering down at the map of Ukraine, Mr. Waltz handed Mr. Umerov a dark blue marker and told him, "Start drawing."

Mr. Umerov traced Ukraine's northern border with Russia and Belarus, then followed the line of contact through the oblasts of Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.

He then circled the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Europe's largest. According to a Ukrainian official, Mr. Umerov warned that the Russian occupiers were failing to maintain the plant, risking "nuclear disaster." Ukraine wanted it back.

Finally he pointed to the Kinburn Spit, a needle of beach and salt meadow jutting into the Black Sea. Regaining control of the spit, he explained, would allow Ukrainian ships to move in and out of the shipyards of Mykolaiv.

Across three years of war, Mr. Zelensky had vowed and vowed again that Ukraine's armies would fight until they won back their stolen land. This was his most politically untenable of red lines.

Here, then, was the breakthrough moment, one American official recalled — "the first time that Zelensky, through his people, said, in order to reach peace I'm willing to give up 20 percent of my country."

The Ukrainians, Mr. Trump's advisers told one another, were now "in the box."

LATER THAT DAY, Mr. Trump directed that aid resume, and his advisers drew up the parameters of a deal.

Ukraine would forfeit territory along Mr. Umerov's line. While Ukraine could join the European Union, Mr. Trump would block admission to NATO. The nuclear plant would be run by the United States or an international organization. The Americans would ask Russia to return the Kinburn Spit.

Then there was Crimea. The peninsula, seized by Russia in 2014, was perhaps the most powerful symbol of the homeland yearnings underpinning the war on both sides. Accepting it as Russian, the Trump team reasoned, would be a powerful carrot for Mr. Putin.

It would also be one of the hardest for the Ukrainians to accept. The mere suggestion, at the talks' start, had set Mr. Umerov to speechifying.

"You can't believe Russian propaganda, because they will tell you that Crimea is not Ukrainian, that it has always been Russian," he said. "And I am here to tell you that I am Crimean Tatar and Crimea is Ukrainian." His family had been exiled by the Russians to Uzbekistan but returned to Crimea when he was 9. There he had watched his father and brother build a house with their own hands.

Now Mr. Rubio told the Ukrainians that Mr. Trump wouldn't ask them, or the Europeans, to recognize the Russians' claim. "We'll be the only ones," he said.

The Americans understood the Ukrainians' objections and reservations. But as a senior U.S. official recalled, "The specific question we asked them was, 'Are you going to walk away over this?' And they said, 'No.'"

It was in the midst of the talks that Mr. Trump made official Mr. Kellogg's diminished role, posting on Truth Social that he was now "Special Envoy to Ukraine." Mr. Kellogg would try to comfort the Ukrainians, counseling them to think of post-World War II Germany — divided between the U.S.-aligned west and the Soviet-aligned east. The Russians might get Crimea and large parts of the east today, but in the future Ukraine could again be made whole.

Now the ball was in the Russians' court. And if Mr. Putin refused to play? "Then he has a Donald Trump problem," Mr. Rubio told the Ukrainians in Jeddah.

Continued on Following Page

AMERICA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UKRAINE UNRAVELS: ATTEMPTS TO CHARM THE KREMLIN FALL FLAT

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

PART 6

The Russians

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/A.F.P. — GETTY IMAGES

General Christopher G. Cavoli, the U.S. commander in Europe, quickly lost favor with Mr. Hegseth.

THE AMERICANS MIGHT have been comfortable bullying the Ukrainians. But to get Mr. Putin to play, they felt they needed a softer approach.

At the first negotiating session, in February in Riyadh, Mr. Rubio had sought to break the ice. He channeled his inner Brando.

Sitting across from the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, and the close Putin aide Yuri Ushakov, he offered his rendition of the scene from "The Godfather" in which Vito Corleone counsels his son about threats from rival crime families and tells him: "I spend my life trying not to be careless. Women and children can be careless, but not men." Nuclear powers, Mr. Rubio explained, need to communicate.

Even the characteristically scowling Mr. Lavrov broke a smile.

From the beginning, Mr. Trump's advisers had judged that Mr. Putin had two options:

Fight on, at great cost — in battlefield dead, in economic havoc, in damage to his relationship with the American president.

Or cut a deal, laden with what Mr. Waltz touted to the Russians as "all of this upside": an easing of sanctions, a new era of business cooperation — even an end to exile from the group of leading industrialized nations.

What made Mr. Trump confident about the upside was his belief in a personal connection to Mr. Putin. Returning from Moscow, Mr. Witkoff would gush about the Russian's "huge respect" for the president. But there was more than that: For the first time in years, Mr. Trump's aides told themselves, an American president and many top advisers were courting the Russians, listening with sympathetic ears. Surely Mr. Putin would see value there.

Yet it was not quite so simple. Mr. Witkoff may have been plying his back channel with Mr. Dmitriev, but the official negotiations would be conducted by two very different Russians, seasoned diplomats with a more orthodox adherence to geopolitical grievances and rivalries.

Mr. Lavrov was a nationalist hard-liner vehemently opposed to concessions to end the war; he spoke ominously about "solving the Ukraine problem once and for all." Mr. Ushakov came across as more open. Yet he, too, spoke frequently about the war's "root causes" — Kremlin shorthand for Mr. Putin's bitterness over his country's diminished post-Soviet world stature.

This front-channel, back-channel tension flared in the episode of the chairs.

At the February talks in Riyadh, Mr. Rubio, Mr. Waltz and Mr. Witkoff had taken their seats opposite Mr. Lavrov and Mr. Ushakov. The third chair, Mr. Dmitriev's, was empty. "We want to wait for him?" a puzzled Mr. Rubio asked. "No," Mr. Lavrov responded, and the chair was moved to the back of the room.

When the second session began, there were three chairs on the Russian side, and Mr. Dmitriev was in the room. According to two U.S. officials who were present, Mr. Lavrov moved the chair back to the rear, only to have Mr. Dmitriev retrieve it, sit down and later extol the economic benefits of a peace deal. (A spokeswoman for Mr. Dmitriev said the American account of the episode was "completely not true," adding, "The meeting was always preplanned and structured with clearly defined political and economic segments.")

If this bred uncertainty about where Mr. Putin stood, the hard-liners sought to put it to rest. To understand Mr. Putin's negotiating position, they told the Americans, they should refer to his June 2024 speech to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Mr. Putin would not end the war until he fulfilled his territorial ambitions — complete control of the four oblasts in Ukraine's east.

At that moment, in three of them, Russia controlled less than three-quarters of the territory. Mr. Trump could force the Ukrainians to abandon the rest, or the Russians would fight on.

Mr. Putin, the hard-liners seemed to be saying, wasn't terribly keen on the Americans' upside.

ONCE THEY HAD MANEUVERED the Ukrainians into the box, the Americans hoped to persuade the Russians to make concessions of their own. Wouldn't Mr. Putin want to stay on Mr. Trump's good side?

A week after Jeddah, Mr. Trump called Mr. Putin and asked him to accept the cease-fire. But the Russian would agree only to negotiate a narrow pause — of strikes on energy infrastructure.

To Mr. Trump's advisers, perhaps the problem was less the incentives than skepticism that the president would deliver. "Today, Trump says one thing; tomorrow, who knows?" a senior European official recalls Mr. Lavrov saying. During his first presidency, after all, Mr. Trump had spoken about warming relations, only to have Russia hawks in key national security posts double down with more adversarial policies.

Now, preparing for a second round of talks in Riyadh in late March, the Americans sought to show that this time would be different. They sent representatives who had been prominent critics of the Biden administration's support for Ukraine — Michael Anton, the State Department's head of policy planning, and Mr. Hegseth's aide Mr. Caldwell. "A lot of people you don't like are not here," Mr. Anton told the Russians in Riyadh.

The Americans hoped to parlay the freeze on energy strikes into the broad cease-fire that the Ukrainians had accepted in Jeddah. But the talks would end where they had begun, with the Russians agreeing only to freeze energy strikes for 30 days.

Mr. Witkoff remained an optimist. "Steve says, 'It's always going great,'" a senior U.S. official said. Yet however much the president's advisers wanted to believe in Mr. Dmitriev, many still couldn't. Some, too, harbored misgivings about Mr. Witkoff. They were reluctant to speak up because of his friendship with the president, but they noticed how Mr. Witkoff sometimes seemed to lack an understanding of Ukraine's geography and its strategic implications.

There was also his insistence on meeting alone with Mr. Putin and his aides; some American officials worried that would leave the diplomatically inexperienced Mr. Witkoff open to manipulation. At the first meeting, he was not accompanied by a U.S. government translator; while he did take one to subsequent meetings, he would not bring a note taker.

"He felt like Putin had invited him, and that he had this level of rapport with Putin," an official explained. Mr. Witkoff told colleagues, "I'm a trained lawyer — I was the note taker."

Over the next three months, Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Dmitriev tried to move the needle. The two men privately discussed possible new concessions to Mr. Putin that went far beyond those presented to the Ukrainians. Mr. Witkoff smoothed the way for Mr. Dmitriev's brief April visit to Washington, bearing what the Russian touted as new proposals for consideration.

The meetings were held at Mr. Witkoff's house in the Kalorama neighborhood, and to promote Mr. Dmitriev's credibility, Mr. Witkoff invited Mr. Rubio and a group of senators to dinner on the night of April 2.

Among the senators was Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat and outspoken Ukraine supporter. He had accepted the invitation, he recalled, with "mixed feelings" about "having this very elegant meal with a guy who is one of Putin's henchmen." He added, "I was a little put off by the friendliness, the chumminess, the coziness between him and Witkoff."

At the dinner, Mr. Blumenthal said, he confronted Mr. Dmitriev "as politely and courteously as possible."

"I didn't say, 'You have blood on your hands,'" he recalled. "But I basically said, 'We hope you will come to the table because Russia here is the aggressor, and people are dying.'"

One Trump adviser said the dinner was a way to pass a message to Mr. Putin through Mr. Dmitriev: "We have a lot of political obstacles here. This is what I heard here. Here are the political realities in Washington."

IT WAS AMID THE HOPE AGAINST HOPE in negotiations that Mr. Hegseth's acrimony toward General Cavoli, the American commander in Europe, erupted.

The morning after the Dmitriev dinner party, the CNN correspondent Natasha Bertrand posted a message on X quoting the general's remarks to a Senate committee that Russia constituted a "chronic" and "growing" threat. Aides forwarded the post to Mr. Hegseth as evidence that the general was undercutting efforts to win over Mr. Putin. "Fire Cavoli," Mr. Hegseth barked to Mr. Kasper, his chief of staff, according to officials briefed on the conversation. General Cavoli would have become one of the at least two dozen top military officers purged by the defense secretary had Mr. Kasper not pointed out that a European general would have temporarily overseen U.S. nuclear forces in Europe.

On April 8, the general appeared before a House committee. First, though, a Caldwell ally at the Pentagon, Katherine Thompson, testified that "contours of a lasting peace are coming into view," that an initial cease-fire — presumably the freeze on energy strikes — was taking hold.

Then General Cavoli spoke and, apparently unaware how close he had just come to being fired, repeated his warning about the Russian threat. This time the secretary called him and, according to an official briefed on the conversation, told him that by his "words, demeanor and testimony" he was undermining the president. What had he said? the general asked. "It's not what you said, necessarily; it's what you didn't say," the secretary responded. "You didn't say cease-fire, you didn't say peace, you didn't say negotiations."

In fact, that initial cease-fire was holding only in the slimmest sense, with each side accusing the other of violations. Ukraine agreed to extend the pause; Russia refused.

Even Mr. Trump had to ask, "Does Putin really want a deal, or does he want all of Ukraine?" The president, one aide said, was beginning to suspect that he had "completely overestimated" his ability to charm Mr. Putin. A few weeks later, a senior European official spoke with Mr. Putin. Mr. Zelensky had conceded so much; Mr. Trump had offered so much. "If you ask me, Trump's position is very close to your position," he told the Russian president. "Why don't you agree to a cease-fire and get the Americans to lift the sanctions?"

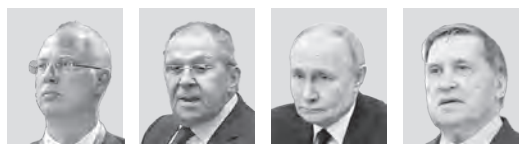
"We want to get peace," Mr. Putin responded, and then reiterated his maximalist demands: Not only did he want all of the contested territory; he wanted the Americans and Europeans to recognize the legitimacy of his claims.

The European official later pressed Mr. Witkoff to take more initiative to bring Mr. Putin to the table. Mr. Witkoff's message was: "We have tried every imaginable idea. And none of it was working.

U.S.

Michael Anton State Offic.
Richard Blumenthal Senator
Dan Caldwell Def. Offic.
Christopher G. Cavoli General
Pete Hegseth Def. Sec.
Joe Kasper Def. Aide
Keith Kellogg Envoy
Marco Rubio State Sec.
Donald J. Trump President
Michael Waltz Nat. Sec.
Steve Witkoff Envoy
Joseph R. Biden Jr. President
Dan Caine General
Eldridge A. Colby Def. Offic.
Alexus G. Grynkewich General
Jack Keane Ret. Gen.
JD Vance Vice Pres.

Russia



Kirill Dmitriev Wealth Fund
Sergei Lavrov Foreign Min.
Vladimir V. Putin President
Yuri Ushakov Putin Aide

BRENDAN HOFFMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Far left, ammunition in Kostiantynivka, in the Donetsk region, in September. To the Russians, gaining territory in the region would signal to Mr. Trump that victory was inevitable.

Left, fishing on the Dnipro River in September as smoke billowed from an industrial area of the city of Dnipro after a Russian strike. In the spring, Moscow had agreed to a 30-day cease-fire, but only for attacks on energy infrastructure; missiles continued to come.

And we'd gotten to this place that, maybe, they just needed to fight it out."

PART 7

'De Facto Anti-Ukraine Policy'

KENNY HOLSTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Gen. Dan Caine, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a hearing in June with Mr. Hegseth.

THE LINE OF CONTACT stretched for 750 miles. By June, the twin vectors of the war — the war of words and the war of blood and bullets — were coalescing at one point on that line, at the place called Pokrovsk.

Since the previous July, the Russians had increasingly trained their forces and firepower on the city. A railway hub of 60,000 people before the war, Pokrovsk was now a shell, with fewer than 2,000 holding out in the ruins. The Russians' losses had been calamitous, many tens of thousands. And still Pokrovsk had not fallen.

For Mr. Putin and his generals, though, the ghost city was gold — another trophy in the yearslong campaign to capture all of Donetsk Oblast. If Mr. Putin could finally win Pokrovsk, it would signal to Mr. Trump that Russian victory was inevitable.

For Ukraine and its champions, Pokrovsk was asking a different question: Would the Pentagon provide the munitions to help sustain Ukraine's defenses, to show Mr. Putin that the price of Pokrovsk was too much to pay?

That question was at the center of powerful crosscurrents roiling the Pentagon.

General Cavoli and others who had long worked to support Ukraine remained deeply devoted to the cause. Mr. Vance's allies, people like Mr. Colby and Mr. Caldwell, were eager to start withholding munitions.

Their devotion was directed elsewhere — to Asia, to hedge against Chinese designs on Taiwan, and to the Middle East, where war was brewing with Iran and where Israel, fighting in Gaza, was asking for about 100,000 155-millimeter shells, a large proportion of the U.S. military's depleted stocks.

For three years, even as the Pentagon struggled to increase production of critical weaponry, the Biden administration had poured munitions into Ukraine. Mr. Vance's allies were unwilling to take that risk.

As a senior U.S. military officer put it: "They believed that Ukraine was on the verge of failing. The fact that empirical evidence indicated the opposite didn't seem to bother them; if anything, they seemed to think it meant that they should help Ukraine fail faster to get it over with."

The man in the middle, with his hand on the spigot, was Mr. Hegseth.

His guide in navigating this dynamic would be something called the stoplight chart.

THE STOPLIGHT CHART compared the number of certain munitions the Pentagon had in stock with the number needed for war plans around the world. If the military had less than half the quantity required, a munition was coded red. Mr. Hegseth's options: Stop providing red munitions, halve the supply or cut it at a rate to be determined. He could also maintain the status quo.

In February, Mr. Caldwell and his allies recommended that Mr. Hegseth start withholding an array of critical munitions. Instead, the secretary stayed the course. He didn't want to get ahead of the president, he told them, didn't want to imperil the minerals deal. (It would be signed in April.)

In March, after Mr. Trump called off the aid freeze imposed after the Oval Office fiasco, Mr. Caldwell and his allies recommended hewing to the status quo, but with one exception — U.S.-made 155-millimeter shells that Mr. Biden had promised Ukraine just before leaving office. (The Pentagon could still provide shells purchased from abroad.)

The shells, fired from howitzers, had been crucial to Ukraine's successful 2022 counteroffensive. And while the Ukrainians had increasingly come to rely on domestically produced attack drones, the 155s remained a workhorse of their arsenal. Pentagon stocks were precariously low, Mr. Caldwell told Mr. Hegseth; a cutoff was the only way to force the Europeans to step up.

Mr. Kasper sought, futilely, to dissuade his boss; to hold back the Russians, the Ukrainians needed more shells than Europe could provide. But Mr. Hegseth, unannounced, ordered a freeze. Some American officers called it a "shadow ban."

Which was why, for three and a half months, those thousands upon thousands of shells lay waiting on pallets at the Army's ammunition depot in western Germany. It was why General Cavoli and his staff sent email after email pleading for their release. And it was why it fell to General Keane, the Fox contributor, to visit Mr. Hegseth at the Pentagon and then call the president to get the train moving. (General Keane declined to comment.)

"The last time I checked, our policy was to support Ukraine," a senior U.S. military officer said. "The president said to restart shipments. And these people at the Pentagon were preventing that from happening, creating a de facto anti-Ukraine policy by dragging their feet, putting sticks in the spokes and slow-rolling support in these nasty little ways."

Near Pokrovsk, a commander who goes by the name Alex was rationing 155s. With 200 a day, his men could attack only five of the 50 targets spotted by reconnaissance drones. "It's not enough to hold the line," he explained.

Alex had fought in Bakhmut, another small city that had once seemed to encompass the full stakes of the war. He had watched the war evolve. "In Bakhmut, it was Ukrainian soldier and Russian soldier, face to face, in trenches," he said. In Pokrovsk, "drones are killing the Russians more than bullets and artillery shells."

And still the Ukrainians were overmatched — in drones, in troops and in those mainstay artillery shells. "The fewer shells we have, the more casualties we have," Alex explained. "There is a direct correlation."

ON JUNE 11, the same day Mr. Hegseth testified to the Senate subcommittee that the munitions Mr. Biden had promised were "still flowing," he signed an updated version of the stoplight chart. It required European Command to get his permission before sending red munitions to the Ukrainians. Deliveries were halted, awaiting clarity from Mr. Hegseth.

"I've never seen this before in my life," Gen. Dan Caine, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told colleagues who confronted him about the order. (General Brown had been fired in late February.)

General Cavoli would be retiring on July 1, and he sent Mr. Hegseth what American officers called the "beginning of the end" memo. The Ukrainians were slowly losing, he wrote, and if the Pentagon did not provide more munitions, they would lose faster.

The Europeans had already developed a plan to arm the Ukrainians from their existing weapons stocks and buy new U.S.-made munitions for themselves and for Ukraine. Yet those weapons would hardly arrive immediately; it would take time to expand production lines, time to manufacture the munitions. And with everyone's stocks depleted, the Europeans and Ukrainians would have to wait in a queue behind the U.S. military to buy the new weapons.

Ukraine also needed more than artillery shells. If the 155s were the most basic frozen red munitions, the most technologically advanced were the PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement interceptors. Nothing else was as proficient at shooting down the ballistic missiles terrorizing Ukrainian cities; only the Americans could provide them.

They were also in chronically short supply. Only 50 or so came off the production line each month.

News that the Ukrainians wouldn't be getting their scheduled complement of interceptors came as the Russians were quickening their barrage. In May, they had fired 45 ballistic missiles into Ukraine; in June, they would fire 59. By month's end, the Ukrainians' supply of PAC-3s would dwindle to 16.

Between 6 p.m. on July 3 and the next morning, the Russians launched 539 attack drones and seven ballistic missiles toward Kyiv, one of their heaviest bombardments of the capital, the Ukrainian Air Force reported. Two civilians were killed, 31 more wounded. The Polish Embassy was damaged by falling debris.

On July 4, Mr. Kellogg called the president and told him, "This is how wars spin out of control," explaining the stoplight chart and referring to Poland's membership in NATO. Mr. Trump then directed him to tell Mr. Hegseth to immediately transfer 10 PAC-3s.

Two weeks later, the 10 interceptors had yet to be sent. Heading home from Kyiv, Mr. Kellogg stopped in Wiesbaden. The Pentagon, officials there told him, was "metering" deliveries of a variety of munitions to Ukraine. Back in Washington, he visited the Pentagon.

"You're slowing things down. This is killing them," he told Mr. Hegseth.

"No, we're not," the secretary replied.

General Caine was in the room, and now he interceded. "What SACEUR wants, SACEUR gets," General Caine told Mr. Hegseth, referring to the new supreme allied commander in Europe, Gen. Alexus G. Grynkewich.

At month's end, the Ukrainians finally received 30 interceptors.

A SMALL TEAM of Ukraine specialists — six or so — worked in the office of the under secretary for policy, Mr. Colby. A senior military officer visited the team in late June. "They were literally afraid to say the word 'Ukraine,'" he recalled.

During the Biden administration, Ukrainian officials in Washington and Kyiv had been in near-constant contact with the Ukraine specialists. Now, as the Russians increased drone strikes on Ukrainian cities, the Ukrainians were desperate to acquire relatively cheap interceptors. One general who oversaw air defenses in Kyiv recalled: "We were sending the Ukraine team messages. We said we needed more of the drone interceptors. But all of a sudden, they were not responding anymore."

Word had come down from Mr. Hegseth's office that the specialists were not to communicate with the Ukrainians without express permission to do so. Some Hegseth aides said they suspected that the specialists would try to sabotage efforts to redirect the interceptors and other critical munitions to the Middle East.

Late at night and on weekends, the Ukrainians would get messages from their old Pentagon contacts: "We're here, but we can't do anything. We're sorry."

The chill ascended the ranks.

General Caine had been sworn in as Joint Chiefs chairman in April. It would be August before he even called his Ukrainian counterpart.

"It's 100 percent Pol Pot," a senior military officer explained. "There's very much a Leninist angle here, like, we're going to tell you the sky is green, and so the sky is green."

Continued on Following Page

AMERICA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH UKRAINE UNRAVELS: ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE IN A DRIVE FOR PEACE

MAURICIO LIMA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

PART 8

'Something That Is Working'

HAIYUN JIANG/THE NEW YORK TIMES

John Ratcliffe, right, the C.I.A. director, kept working with Ukraine even as the U.S. military pulled back.

PART 9

'We're Arguing Over the Doorknobs'

KENNY HOLSTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

In their August meeting, Mr. Trump found what one official called a "human connection" with Mr. Zelensky.

IN SO MANY WAYS, the partnership was breaking apart. But there was a counternarrative, spooled out largely in secret. At its center was the C.I.A.

Where Mr. Hegseth had marginalized his Ukraine-supporting generals, the C.I.A. director, Mr. Ratcliffe, had consistently protected his own officers' efforts for Ukraine. He kept the agency's presence in the country at full strength; funding for its programs there even increased. When Mr. Trump ordered the March aid freeze, the U.S. military rushed to shut down all intelligence sharing. But when Mr. Ratcliffe explained the risk facing C.I.A. officers in Ukraine, the White House allowed the agency to keep sharing intelligence about Russian threats inside Ukraine.

Now, the agency honed a plan to at least buy time, to make it harder for the Russians to capitalize on the Ukrainians' extraordinary moment of weakness.

One powerful tool finally employed by the Biden administration — supplying ATACMS and targeting intelligence for strikes inside Russia — had been effectively pulled from the table. But a parallel weapon had remained in place — permission for C.I.A. and military officers to share targeting intelligence and provide other assistance for Ukrainian drone strikes against crucial components of the Russian defense-industrial base. These included factories manufacturing "energetics" — chemicals used in explosives — as well as petroleum-industry facilities.

In the Trump administration's first months, these strikes had been scattershot, with negligible impact. Ukrainian military and intelligence agencies were competing, working off different target lists. Russia's air defenses and electromagnetic jammers rendered energetics facilities virtually impenetrable. At oil refineries, drones were slamming into storage tanks, igniting blasts that grabbed headlines but accomplished little else.

In June, beleaguered U.S. military officers met with their C.I.A. counterparts to help craft a more concerted Ukrainian campaign. It would focus exclusively on oil refineries and, instead of supply tanks, would target the refineries' Achilles' heel: A C.I.A. expert had identified a type of coupler that was so hard to replace or repair that a refinery would remain offline for weeks. (To avoid backlash, they would not supply weapons and other equipment that Mr. Vance's allies wanted for other priorities.)

As the campaign began to show results, Mr. Ratcliffe discussed it with Mr. Trump. The president seemed to listen to him; they had a frequent Sunday tee time. According to U.S. officials, Mr. Trump praised America's surreptitious role in these blows to Russia's energy industry. They gave him deniability and leverage, he told Mr. Ratcliffe, as the Russian president continued to "jerk him off."

The energy strikes would come to cost the Russian economy as much as $75 million a day, according to one U.S. intelligence estimate. The C.I.A. would also be authorized to assist with Ukrainian drone strikes on "shadow fleet" vessels in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Gas lines would start forming across Russia.

"We found something that is working," a senior U.S. official said, then had to add, "How long, we don't know."

MR. KELLOGG knew where things were heading, he told colleagues: For all the whipsaw to date and still to come, the calculus was narrowing, to a cruel apportioning of land.

He had been reading a book called "Guilty Men," a polemic published in anger in 1940, after Nazi Germany occupied Norway and France. The guilty men were 15 politicians whom the authors accused of failing to prepare British forces for war, of appeasing Hitler.

"I refuse to be a guilty man," Mr. Kellogg told a colleague.

At an Oval Office meeting, still hoping to salvage some equity in Ukraine's territorial concessions, he had offered a plan for a land swap. In this "two-plus-two plan," Mr. Putin would withdraw from the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts. Ukraine would relinquish the rest of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The plan, Mr. Kellogg admitted, was a Hail Mary, and Mr. Trump told him, "Putin probably won't go for it." Still, he directed Mr. Witkoff, "Get this to Putin."

They met on Aug. 6. Mr. Putin didn't go for it; he was not about to cede territory voluntarily. But Mr. Witkoff heard what he interpreted as a breakthrough. According to a Trump adviser, the envoy reported back that Mr. Putin had told him: "OK, OK, we can't figure out a cease-fire. Here's what we will do, we will do a final peace deal, and that peace deal is the balance of Donetsk."

Actually it was more.

In this "three-plus-two plan," the Russians would also keep Crimea and get the last sliver of Luhansk. Instead of withdrawing from Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, as Mr. Kellogg had proposed, they would keep the territory they had already conquered. The plan was not the total control Mr. Putin had long demanded, but it was still far more favorable to Russia.

Afterward, Mr. Trump hailed the meeting as "highly productive" and invited the Russian to Alaska.

THE ALASKA SUMMIT would be the two presidents' first face-to-face meeting of Mr. Trump's second term, and it came freighted with memories of embarrassing summits past — especially Helsinki in 2018, where Mr. Trump brushed aside his own intelligence agencies' findings and sided with Mr. Putin, saying he saw no reason Russia would have meddled in the 2016 election.

Suspicions that an overeager Mr. Trump might let himself be manipulated weren't assuaged by the choice of venue, which, given Alaska's historic ties to Russia, seemed intended to welcome Mr. Putin back from diplomatic exile. Announcing the summit on Aug. 8, Mr. Trump told reporters, "My instinct really tells me that we have a shot at peace."

Mr. Ratcliffe, the C.I.A. chief, flew to Alaska with the president on Aug. 15 and, before the meeting, briefed him on "what we've got" about Mr. Putin's intentions. It did not align with Mr. Trump's instinct; the Russian, the agency argued, was not interested in ending the war. A senior American official described the assessment this way: "Trump isn't going to get what he wants. He is just going to have to make Alaska a show."

Together at an Anchorage airfield, the two presidents commenced the show, riding side by side in "the Beast," the presidential armored vehicle, Mr. Putin grinning and waving to the cameras. Later, their meeting concluded, each made a statement, alluding vaguely to agreements.

They took no questions, leaving the world to puzzle over just what they had agreed on. But according to two Trump advisers, Mr. Putin repeated what he had told Mr. Witkoff: He would end the war if he could get the balance of Donetsk.

AND WHY NOT? As Mr. Trump saw it, according to a Trump adviser, that final third of Donetsk was just a sliver of land that "nobody in America has ever heard of."

"The real estate guys look at it as, 'OK, we've agreed on all the other terms of the deal, but we're fighting over the trim, we're arguing over the doorknobs,'" another adviser said.

When Mr. Zelensky and seven European leaders descended on Washington three days after Alaska, their mission was the education of Mr. Trump, making him see that one-third meant so much more.

Crowded into the Oval Office, they explained that pulling forces out of Donetsk would put the Russians in a position to threaten some of Ukraine's largest cities — Kharkiv, Kherson, Odesa and Kyiv. From Donetsk, a Trump adviser said, "it's like a long cow field to Kyiv."

From the first, crucial to Mr. Trump's negotiating position had been the assumption of Russian battlefield strength and Ukrainian weakness. If Mr. Zelensky didn't surrender that sliver of land, the Russians would simply take it.

Now he reiterated that argument, and Mr. Kellogg broke in: "Sir, that's bullshit. The Russians aren't invincible." The Joint Chiefs chairman, General Caine, seconded that: Russian forces, he said, were weak and incompetent. Yes, Pokrovsk might fall. But as U.S. intelligence agencies assessed at the time, the Russians would need up to 30 months to capture that entire slice of Donetsk. (In December, they would cut that timeline to 20 months or less; some White House advisers put it as low as eight.)

But this would not be a replay of the Oval Office blowup of nearly six months before.

Mr. Trump would remark to aides that when he owned the Miss Universe pageant, the Ukrainian contestants were often the most beautiful. Now, he blurted out, "Ukrainian women are beautiful."

"I know, I married one," Mr. Zelensky responded.

Mr. Trump explained that an old friend, the Las Vegas mogul Phil Ruffin, had married a former Miss Ukraine, Oleksandra Nikolayenko; the president had met her through the Miss Universe pageant. Now, he called Mr. Ruffin, who put his wife on the phone. Mr. Trump did the same for Mr. Zelensky, and for the next 10 to 15 minutes, the room went on pause as the two spoke in Ukrainian.

Ms. Nikolayenko talked about her family, still in Odesa. "He was surprised they didn't leave," she recalled of Mr. Zelensky. "My father wouldn't leave. He's an old-school officer. And he believes that if he leaves, there will be nothing to come back to. He wants to be with his home, with his land, with his country."

"You could feel the room change," said an official

U.S.

Pete Hegseth Def. Sec.

John Ratcliffe C.I.A. Chief

Donald J. Trump President

Dan Caine General

Keith Kellogg Envoy

Marco Rubio State Sec.

Daniel P. Driscoll Army Sec.

Jared Kushner Adviser

JD Vance Vice Pres.

Steve Witkoff Envoy

Russia

Sergei Lavrov Foreign Min.

Vladimir V. Putin President

Yuri Ushakov Putin Aide

Kirill Dmitriev Wealth Fund

Ukraine

Rustem Umerov Def. Sec.

Andriy Yermak Adviser

Volodymyr Zelensky President

TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Far left, a funeral for a Ukrainian soldier in Odesa in November.

Left, destruction in October in Druzhkivka, a town in Donetsk hit by Russian strikes. A Trump adviser said the president saw the Ukraine-held part of the region as just a sliver of land that "nobody in America has ever heard of."

who was there. "The temperature dropped. Everyone laughed. What it did was create a human connection. It was kind of a mind meld. It humanized Zelensky with Trump."

A month later, in New York for the United Nations General Assembly's annual gathering, Mr. Trump called Mr. Zelensky "a great man" who was "putting up a hell of a fight." Later, on Truth Social, he wrote that after coming to understand "the Ukraine/Russia Military and Economic situation," he believed that "Ukraine, with the support of the European Union, is in a position to fight and WIN all of Ukraine back in its original form."

Even most of the president's top advisers were startled by what seemed like an abrupt about-face. But according to one adviser, he was trying to shock the Russians.

MR. TRUMP SPOKE to Mr. Putin on Oct. 16 — their first conversation since Alaska. In New York, Mr. Zelensky had sold Mr. Trump on Ukraine's recent progress on the battlefield. Now Mr. Putin spun that narrative on its head, and Mr. Trump turned back to his default: Russia was winning.

Mr. Kellogg had repeatedly told the president and his aides that it would be morally wrong to ask Mr. Zelensky to surrender those doorknobs of Donetsk. Mr. Putin couldn't be trusted to abide by the deal, he said; all of Ukraine would be in peril. From the beginning, he had urged the president "to take more risk with Putin," to increase pressure through sanctions.

Mr. Trump was scheduled to meet Mr. Zelensky at the White House on the 17th. But while Mr. Kellogg was still the Ukraine envoy, at least on paper, he was not on the invitation list.

He had been in the Oval Office back in August, during Mr. Zelensky's moment of reconciliation with Mr. Trump. At one point, the Ukrainian had walked over to a large map of Crimea.

Mr. Trump had long accused former President Barack Obama of letting Russia take the peninsula away from Ukraine in 2014. "For eight years Russia 'ran over' President Obama, got stronger and stronger, picked-off Crimea and added missiles. Weak!" he posted on Twitter in 2017.

Now, the president asked Mr. Zelensky, "How many soldiers did you lose?"

"None," the Ukrainian replied. (The number was actually one, possibly two.)

When Mr. Trump asked why, he said, "We didn't fight." And when Mr. Trump asked why, he responded, "You told us not to."

Now, in pursuit of his prize, Mr. Trump was poised to tell Mr. Zelensky not only to give up the territory that the Russians had conquered since their full-scale invasion, but also to give up precious territory that the Russians had yet to conquer. He wouldn't just be telling the Ukrainians not to fight. He would be telling them to give up what, for more than a decade, they had been fighting and dying for.

The night before the October meeting with Zelensky, the president reached out to Mr. Kellogg and asked him to come.

The next day, Mr. Trump and his aides did indeed press Mr. Zelensky to give up the rest of Donetsk. The Ukrainian pushed back, hard. Quietly Mr. Witkoff signaled to Mr. Yermak, the Ukrainian's top adviser, and they stepped outside. "You've got to cool him down," Mr. Witkoff told him. "This is going bad."

Back inside, Mr. Yermak looked toward Mr. Umerov and said, "President Zelensky, let Rustem speak." Mr. Zelensky turned off his microphone, and Mr. Umerov pulled the leaders back from the brink.

Afterward, Mr. Kellogg told the president that he had been unable to attend.

"He wanted me there to put pressure on Zelensky," he told a colleague, "and I didn't want to do that." (He later told the White House that he would be leaving the job at the end of the year.)

PART 10

The Dash for a Deal

KRISTINA KORMILITSYNA/SPUTNIK

The U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff, right, and his Putin contact, Kirill Dmitriev, behind, at the Kremlin in December.

WHAT FOLLOWED WAS a frantic two-and-a-half-month whirlwind of diplomacy — all in the service of getting one man to cross his hardest red line and the other to budge from his intractable demands.

Mr. Witkoff called Mr. Ushakov, the close Putin aide, on Oct. 14. Just days earlier, Mr. Trump had announced an agreement, brokered by Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Kushner, to end the fighting in Gaza. Now the envoy pitched the Russian on pursuing a similar agreement for Ukraine. Front-channel, back-channel tension flared again, this time in the episode of the letter.

In New York in September, according to three American officials, Mr. Lavrov had told Mr. Rubio that he believed that Mr. Trump had made a commitment in Alaska to force Mr. Zelensky to give up the balance of Donetsk.

Now, U.S. officials learned, Mr. Lavrov had the Russian Embassy in Washington send Mr. Rubio a letter demanding that Mr. Trump publicly acknowledge that. (U.S. officials say that while Mr. Trump responded positively to Mr. Putin's proposal in Alaska to end the war for Donetsk, he made no commitment to force it on Mr. Zelensky.)

Mr. Trump and his advisers were perturbed. They were told that Mr. Putin had not authorized the letter; they saw it as a Lavrov power play.

ON OCT. 22, amid these tensions, Mr. Trump did what he had long been reluctant to do lest Mr. Putin simply walk away: He directed the Treasury Department to impose sanctions on Russia's two largest oil companies. The president, one adviser explained, "was making a statement to Russia: 'Don't screw with me.'"

Mr. Putin did not walk away. He would exclude Mr. Lavrov from a high-level meeting in Moscow, and he dispatched Mr. Dmitriev to meet with Mr. Witkoff in Miami Beach.

Mr. Witkoff and Mr. Kushner had already begun drafting what would become a 28-point peace proposal. Over the last weekend of October, they huddled with Mr. Dmitriev in the den of Mr. Witkoff's waterfront home there, the Russian suggesting language for some points, Mr. Kushner typing them into his laptop.

In mid-November, Mr. Umerov, the Ukrainian negotiator, took his turn in Mr. Witkoff's den, and he, too, suggested language that Mr. Kushner added.

The resulting document contained many provisions favorable to the Russians. But in several significant ways, it was less favorable than earlier American proposals — and less so than widely perceived.

In the earlier talks, the Russians had demanded that the Ukrainians agree to drastically cut the size of their military. This plan said the Ukrainian military could have up to 600,000 soldiers.

Another point read, "Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk to be recognized De-Facto as Russian, including by the United States." What this meant was that the U.S. government would accept in practice that Russia controlled these areas; in previous discussions, the Americans had told the Russians they would be prepared to legally recognize those areas as part of Russia.

The document also contained U.S. security guarantees that included "a robust coordinated military response" if Russia mounted a new invasion.

And yet the biggest, most impossible hurdle for the Ukrainians remained, rendered in a subpoint's diplomatese: "Ukrainian forces will withdraw from the part of Donetsk region that they currently control, and this withdrawal area will be considered a neutral demilitarized buffer zone internationally recognized as territory belonging to the Russian Federation."

ON NOV. 19, the Army secretary, Daniel P. Driscoll, traveled to Kyiv. Some months earlier, the Ukrainians had carried out a spectacular sneak attack, Operation Spider's Web, in which $100,000 worth of drones took out almost $10 billion worth of Russian military aircraft. The U.S. military had much to learn from Ukraine's advances in drone technology; Mr. Driscoll was to visit some manufacturing plants.

Mr. Driscoll is a Vance confidant, and now the vice president and Mr. Rubio conscripted him for another mission — to pressure the Ukrainians to accept the peace plan. The moment, they felt, seemed ripe: The Russians were advancing in Pokrovsk, and Mr. Zelensky was reeling from a corruption scandal.

They gave Mr. Driscoll his marching orders: Make it clear that America can no longer afford to supply Ukraine, that Mr. Trump has other priorities for those munitions — in Asia, in the Middle East and in Latin America. Make it clear that, absent a deal, Ukraine will have to fight on without American support. Mr. Driscoll delivered this uncompromising message with certain sweeteners and a dose of empathy, according to Ukrainian and American officials who described the meetings with Mr. Zelensky and his aides.

Make a deal now, Mr. Driscoll told the Ukrainians, and the U.S. military will help create a network of physical barriers and weapons systems to deter the Russians from trying to gobble up more land.

There will be a similar upside for postwar reconstruction.

But refuse to make a deal now, and none of that will happen.

"We love you guys. What you've done is remarkable," Mr. Driscoll told them. "But we're not going to be able to continue to supply you, and Europe looks the same way."

The Ukrainians shot back, "Look, the Russians are paying a high price" in battlefield casualties.

"Sure they are, but they're willing to pay it," Mr. Driscoll responded. Yet, "all the time that goes by, you're losing more and more territory. So what are you waiting for?"

"That's just the way it is," Mr. Driscoll summed up. "I've got to be totally honest with you."

This was certainly not what the Ukrainians wanted to hear. But this was what it had come to.

"Thank you for the honesty," Mr. Umerov replied.

A few days later, in Geneva to discuss further refinements of the plan, including increasing the cap on the Ukrainian military to 800,000, Mr. Witkoff delivered what sounded like a different message.

"We are not leaving you," he told Mr. Umerov in front of Mr. Driscoll. "We are not asking you to make a decision that you are uncomfortable with or that feels to you like it's not good for your country."

By now, the Ukrainians were accustomed to the contradictions.

As one Ukrainian official put it: "Actually, Driscoll and Witkoff were telling us the same thing: 'We are serious. We want you to understand that we want this round of negotiations to have a result, and we want this deal to be fast.'"

AT LEAST 83 TIMES before Election Day, Mr. Trump promised that he could end the war in a day, even before taking office. "That's easy compared to some of the things," he said in Washington in June 2023. "I'd get that done in 24 hours."

On Dec. 28, the president spoke with Mr. Putin by phone and then met with Mr. Zelensky at Mar-a-Lago. At a news conference afterward, Mr. Trump and the Ukrainian touted their progress. They were fully in accord on America's security guarantees, Mr. Zelensky said; the prosperity plan was being finalized.

And what of Donetsk? "That's an issue they have to iron out," Mr. Trump said.

He continued: "There are one or two very thorny issues, very tough issues. But I think we're doing very well. We made a lot of progress today. But really we've made it over the last month. This is not a one-day process deal. This is very complicated stuff."