

OTHER VIEWS

# Drawn to this ‘fundamental moment for Liberty’

BRANDON LINGLE  
Commentary



As Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine grinds on, many can’t resist its powerful pull. Outside the besieged country, we’re immersed in breaking news, social media snapshots and dialogue about the conflict as volunteers from around the world rush to help train, fight, document and provide humanitarian aid.

With each day, I hear of more friends and acquaintances swept up in the steady flow of foreigners headed to Ukraine. They join the millions moved by the draw of evil conflict throughout history.

Last week, Paul Schwennesen, a college classmate and fellow history major, posted online that he was headed to Ukraine.

We’d been out of touch for years, but his new mission sparked a reconnection, and we’ve corresponded via email.

Like most of us, he watched the war boil up from afar until one day on a long drive home he “heard a report about little kids kissing their fathers goodbye.”

Something within the 43-year-old father of three clicked, and he knew he had to go. He wrote, “if the world can stand up hard and fast against this kind of trespass against Liberty, then maybe there is hope this will end soon.”

The former Air Force officer with experience in Afghanistan called the war “a fundamental moment for Liberty: for the world to push back and defend



A volunteer of the Ukrainian Territorial Defense Forces assists a woman in Kharkiv on Wednesday. Support for Ukraine has emerged from around the world.

the right to choose individual autonomy over centralized autocracy.”

Armed with master’s degrees in history and political philosophy, as well as an in-progress doctorate focused on the 16th-century Spanish New World, there’s no doubt the lessons of the past played in his mind as he prepared for the trip.

People must choose to stand up against atrocity.

Schwennesen, a second-generation Arizona cattle rancher, said he “respectfully ignored” the U.S. government’s warnings to stay away from Ukraine as his “loose affiliation of Liberty-minded academics and policy wonks”

quickly repurposed itself “into a global and keenly effective resistance network.”

He’s on the ground with a team that’s coordinating with the Ukrainian parliament and medical nongovernmental organizations. The group of about 45 people from around the world is setting up “forward operating locations to ship in humanitarian aid/defensive tactical gear and get refugee families out to the West.”

Humanitarian work has taken him to other troubled places, but the conflict in Ukraine is different. He called the war “a genuine contest of might and right.”

When asked about an image that’s struck him, he described “a

young family out for a stroll – little girl in a pink coat, mom carrying an umbrella, and the dad in brand new military uniform – undoubtedly a new recruit.”

Where is that family today?

Benthe Dore, Schwennesen’s spouse – a native of the Netherlands living in the U.S. – supports the endeavor from afar. She coordinates communications and fundraising. They’ve raised \$15,000 so far. The money helps buy equipment and supplies like protective gear, medication, fuel and food.

She’s also used online food delivery services for those on the ground. The menu was in Polish,



Schwennesen

so the meal was a surprise. Dore said her husband is “very passionate” about defending people’s liberties. “Although it’s hard to see him go into a potentially dangerous zone, it’s something he feels strongly about, and I’m not holding him back,” she said. “I believe it is for a good cause.”

The Russian missiles that struck near the Western city of Lviv on March 13 highlighted the risks. Before that, she said, they thought western Ukraine was reasonably safe.

And the perception of reasonable safety is about the best you can get in a war zone.

He’s averaging 16 to 20 hour days, and after joking about how he should be writing his dissertation, he wrote this vivid snapshot: “broad open expanses of church-dotted countryside with the iconic black soils of the breadbasket of Europe spotted in snow. Road barriers and checkpoints that look straight out of *Saving Private Ryan*. Cold gray skies, and a sort of ominous sense off in the distance like an impending storm. People in cities behaving pretty much normally, but with a kind of furtive and suspicious glance – no welcoming smiles or big thumbs up like in Afghanistan.

Rumors of Russian infiltration and sabotage are so rife that everyone looks downright unhappy.”

I’m grateful to my classmate and all those volunteering to help Ukraine. May they all return safely and soon.

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# Inspiring humanity, Zelenskyy asks: ‘Can you imagine?’

It’s not enough that we see the devastation and slaughter in Ukraine from the comfort of our homes, through television screens and newspaper photos. It’s not enough that we feel sympathetic toward the victims of Vladimir Putin.

Sympathy happens in brief moments of feeling sorry for others while wishing things were better. Hearts are touched, not moved. We see people hurt and how they respond to that pain, but we often don’t take the time to imagine what that pain feels like because it belongs to someone else.

It’s not sympathy Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is seeking; it’s empathy. It’s the use of our imaginations to understand the bombardment and suffering of Ukraine as if it were happening to us. Empathy, activated by imagination, moves people to act as if it were themselves, or someone they know and love, who is in danger.

So, when addressing the Canadian Parliament last week, Zelenskyy said, “Imagine that Canadi-

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Commentary



an facilities have been bombed similarly as our buildings and our memorial places are being bombed. A number of families have died. Every night is a horrible night.”

Throughout his speech, he used the refrain, “Can you imagine?”

The next day, when speaking to the U.S. Congress, Zelenskyy appealed to memory, a stimulant to imagination.

“Ladies and gentlemen, friends, Americans, in your great history,” he said, “you have pages that would allow you to understand Ukrainians, understand us now when we need you, right now. Remember Pearl Harbor, terrible morning of

December 7, 1941, when your sky was black from the planes attacking you. Just remember it. Remember September 11th, a terrible day in 2001 when evil tried to turn your cities, independent territories, into battlefields. When innocent people were attacked, attacked from air, just like nobody else expected it, you could not stop it. Our country experiences the same every day. Right now, at this moment, every night for three weeks now.”

Requesting, again, a no-fly zone, Zelenskyy invoked Martin Luther King Jr. when he said: “I have a dream. These words are known to each of you today. I can say I have a need. I need to protect our sky. I need your decision, your help, which means exactly the same. The same you feel when you hear the words, ‘I have a dream.’”

Zelenskyy understands that most people yearn to do good and right by each other, to ease suffering and help each other along. That yearning can be buried, muted, covered and forgotten until it’s awakened by a

call for help, a plea for empathy, a demand that we look beyond ourselves or those who look like us.

In John Grisham’s novel “A Time to Kill,” a Black Mississippi father kills the two men who raped his 10-year-old daughter. In the movie version, his defense attorney, played by Matthew McConaughey, gives a closing argument in which he asks the all-white jury to close their eyes as he describes in horrific details the brutalities committed on the child. He concludes, “Can you see her? I want you to picture that little girl.”

He pauses for 21 seconds.

“Now imagine she’s white.”

Empathy shouldn’t be reserved for only those who look, think and worship like us. Our power to imagine the suffering of strangers, of anyone “different” from us, shouldn’t be limited by our inability to see beyond those differences.

In the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several Western journalists embarrassed themselves by expressing sur-

prise this was happening somewhere which was “relatively civilized” and “not a developing third world country.”

In an unchallenged interview with a BBC reporter, a Ukrainian politician spoke of seeing European people with blue eyes and blond hair being killed.

It took the invasion of Ukraine for these folks to know that white people could be victimized by war? This was the same racism that made it difficult for Black refugees to get out of Ukraine.

But if imagining the suffering of those with whom we’re most familiar broadens our ability to imagine the lives of those with whom we’re least familiar, that expands the number of people moved to act.

One reason Zelenskyy inspires is because he believes enough in our humanity to appeal to it. Trying to stay alive one more day to save his country, he dreams, he imagines, hoping the world joins him in this quest for peace.

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# Confronting paper’s past, face to face

By Misty Harris  
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The first time I took the staff elevator at the now-closed Express-News building, I pushed the button, turned around and came face to face with a distraught child. He looked stunned as he held a hand to his head, sitting atop the hood of a vehicle with a shattered windshield.

This was the lead photo on the San Antonio Express and News on Aug. 14, 1965, framed on the wall behind the staff elevator. The best pictures evoke strong emotions, but the problem with this photo is the story is about the riots in Watts, a Black section of Los Angeles, yet it focuses on a white boy.

The photo was part of a lead Associated Press story about the riots in Los Angeles that used racist language: “National Guardsmen with fixed bayonets marched Friday night into a wild Negro district no-man’s land where arsonists and looters were out of control and flying bullets killed both police and civilians. Four persons, one a deputy sheriff, were reported slain by

gunshot just before the first wave of 400 steel-helmeted troops rolled into, and quickly took over without incident, the community of Watts.”

While this story and photo were not produced by San Antonio Express and News staff, its journalists made the poor decision to run them. It was a different time, but it never should have happened, and we must ensure it never happens again.

In my nearly six years as an Express-News researcher, archivist and now op-ed and letters editor, this isn’t the first time I’ve come face to face with something in our paper that just didn’t sit right with me.

Like other employees in newsrooms confronting their racist pasts, including the Orlando Sentinel, Kansas City Star and Los Angeles Times, I’ve been thinking about how our paper has covered race. Throughout our paper’s 157-year history, I’ve seen misleading headlines, derogatory language and missing coverage – all of it coming down to the choices made in the newsroom.

I’m not the only one thinking about it. Shocked and saddened by this past coverage, my co-workers share thoughts such as: “I hope we are doing better than that,” and “How can we improve

to be even better?”

Thankfully, we are doing better. Opening the dialogue and listening to the voices in our community and within our newsroom will help us to continue to strengthen our racial coverage.

Those old framed front pages are discarded, and our new office at the remodeled San Antonio Light building will feature new artwork and Express-News work worthy of being showcased.

About a year ago, I joined our paper’s Diversity and Inclusion Committee, formed in 2020 to help improve diversity among our newsroom’s staff and publications. A group of 18 employees across the Express-News organization, with the support of Hearst, our publisher, Mark Medici, managing editor, Marc Duvoisin, and human resources director, Nancy Sandoval, we’ve developed important initiatives.

We brought back the Teen Team, a journalism education program for high school students, to foster future diversity. We’re also working on a community engagement initiative so employees of the paper, including reporters, editors, advertising executives and marketing managers, are more accessible to all members of our community. You can read more about some of our efforts on our website,



WeAreSAEN.com.

On behalf of the Express-News Diversity and Inclusion committee, I’m excited to invite you to a special event on Wednesday, “History & Headlines: A reckoning of the Express-News’ coverage of race from the 1960s to present day.”

The panel, held online, will feature MySA culture editor Madalyn Mendoza, Express-News

This photo in the Aug. 14, 1965, Express and News doesn’t tell an accurate story.

Editorial Board member and columnist Cary Clack, and myself, with Express-News columnist Gilbert Garcia moderating. I hope you join us for this important conversation.

We can’t discard our past as easily as we can a framed front page, but we can confront and learn from it.

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