

Political Theatre, Narrative and Propaganda in War: TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY in comparative perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the underlying patterns and similarities between Donald TRUMP, Benjamin NETANYAHU and Volodymyr ZELENSKY in their reliance on narrative construction, political theatre, distortion of reality, manipulation of facts, propaganda and disinformation. It treats the three leaders not as ideological counterparts but as morphologically related practitioners of a single craft: the substitution of theatrical narrative for empirical accountability. The analysis is grounded in two methodological approaches drawn from comparative politics — structured focused comparison (ORVIS and DROGUS, 2017; MAHONEY, 2012) and counterfactual analysis (TETLOCK and BELKIN, 1996; LEBOW, 2010; LEVY, 2015) — situated within the author's BowTie framework of strategic intelligence analysis. The argument is anchored in a recent on-the-record account by Iuliia MENDEL, ZELENSKY's former press secretary, who described her former employer as a leader who explicitly invoked the propaganda model of Joseph Goebbels and assembled a global network of "thousands of talking heads" to manufacture consent. Reading MENDEL's testimony against the foundational propaganda theory of Edward BERNAYS (1928), the strategic-narrative framework of MISKIMMON, O'LOUGHLIN and ROSELLE (2013), the collective-narcissism literature of GOLEC DE ZAVALA and colleagues, and LERNER's (2020) theory of victimhood nationalism, the article identifies a shared grammar of statecraft — one in which charismatic leaders convert war into spectacle, contradiction into mythology, and policy failure into a moral binary. An "Israel as Iran" counterfactual is then developed, not as a predictive exercise but as a disciplined cognitive intervention linked

directly to the article's analysis of narrative construction: by reversing the structural positions of Israel and Iran while holding the great-power alignments constant, the counterfactual exposes the extent and depth of the narrative construction that ordinarily passes unnoticed in security discourse, and cognitively switches the mental model of the reader, making that mental model more flexible, wide and diverse. The article concludes that ending wars conducted by such personalities requires not the defeat of their enemies but the collapse of their narratives, and proposes that the empirical record of all three theatres — Ukraine, Gaza and the wider Middle East — already discloses that collapse.

1. Introduction: The Mask Slips

On 11 May 2026, the American journalist Tucker CARLSON published a lengthy interview with Iuliia MENDEL, who had served as press secretary to President Volodymyr ZELENSKY between June 2019 and July 2021 (Singju Post, 2026). The interview was not merely a political broadside. It was, for the purposes of this article, a documentary artefact of considerable analytical value: the testimony of an insider whose former role was precisely the management of the leader's public image, describing in clinical detail the architecture by which that image was constructed.

MENDEL's claims, whether one accepts them in whole or in part, are striking for their convergence with the academic literature on charismatic-performative leadership. She described ZELENSKY as a man who plays a teddy bear on camera but "a grizzly bear" off it (Singju Post, 2026, p. 1); as a leader who explicitly demanded "Goebbels propaganda" and "thousands of talking heads" to broadcast it globally (Pravda NATO, 2026, p. 1); and as a president who, in her view, "accumulates power" beneath "heroic rhetoric" while "hollowing the very same people he claims to save" (Singju Post, 2026, p. 1).

We just see Putin as an evil, but Zelensky is also an evil. He's just a hidden one. He plays such a teddy bear on camera, but then when the light goes off, he's a grizzly bear and he destroys the people.

— MENDEL, in Singju Post (2026, p. 1)

What MENDEL described, in essence, was a Bernaysian operation: the engineering of consent through the systematic deployment of emotion, symbol and repetition (BERNAYS, 1928, p. 47). Her account converges with a parallel diagnostic offered, from a sympathetic Israeli vantage, by the Middle East intelligence analyst William KEENAN (2026, p. 1), whose Times of Israel essay argues that the apparent collapse of Israeli international credibility is structural rather than communicative — that "Netanyahu's framing — that Israel is a virtuous actor being buried under lies — leaves no room for accountability" (Times of Israel, 2026, p. 1). Read together, the MENDEL transcript and the KEENAN essay disclose a common pathology: leaders whose authority depends on the maintenance of a strategic narrative are forced, when the narrative fractures, to redouble the theatre rather than to recalibrate the policy. The same pattern is visible in the reality-television cadence of Donald TRUMP's executive performance (BRANDT, 2020, p. 305) and in the Holocaustic framing through which Benjamin NETANYAHU has long structured Israeli security discourse (LERNER, 2020, p. 80).

This convergence is the puzzle the present article seeks to address. The argument unfolds in seven steps. First, the article sets out its method — a comparative-case approach combined with counterfactual analysis, situated within the author's BowTie framework of strategic intelligence analysis. Second, it clarifies the conceptual vocabulary of political theatre, charismatic authority, propaganda, narrative and victimhood. Third, it offers a comparative analysis of TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY, focusing not on their ideological differences — which are substantial — but on the underlying morphology of their political communication. Fourth, it situates that morphology within the geopolitical context of the wars they are losing or have lost. Fifth, it develops an "Israel as Iran" counterfactual to expose the asymmetric application of deterrence principles. Sixth, it considers how wars conducted by such personalities can be brought to an end. The conclusion returns to the implication that such wars end not when the adversary is defeated but when the legitimating narrative collapses.

A clarifying note is in order. This article is not concerned to adjudicate the rights and wrongs of the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon or Iran. Its focus is narrower: the structural similarities in how three leaders prosecute war through information distortion and political theatre. It begins, however, from an empirical

premise that is increasingly difficult to dispute — that the Western narrative of an "unprovoked" Russian invasion, and of a Russia bent on conquering the whole of Ukraine, has been seriously challenged by the documentary record. That record includes the public testimony of former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett (LARRES and ZHONG, 2024, p. 2), the published Mearsheimer thesis on NATO expansion (MEARSHEIMER, 2014, p. 1), the leaked Foreign and Commonwealth Office files on the Integrity Initiative (Wikispooks, 2018, p. 1), and the now-public reporting on Bell Pottinger's Pentagon-funded fake al-Qaeda propaganda contract in Iraq (BLACK and FIELDING-SMITH, 2016, p. 1). The Western posture toward Russia from 2014 onwards forms the geopolitical canvas against which the three leaders' narrative performances are staged.

2. Method: Comparison, Counterfactuals and the BowTie

The argument is built on two complementary methodological approaches and one organising framework. The two methods are the comparative method, in its structured-focused-comparison variant, and counterfactual analysis. The organising framework is the BowTie model of strategic intelligence analysis (ZAAIMAN, 2024), which locates counterfactual reasoning at the analytical bridge between past, present and future.

2.1 The Comparative Method

The comparative method is the foundational tool of small-N political science. Its claim is that controlled comparison across a small number of carefully selected cases can yield causal inferences that neither single case studies nor large-N statistical work can deliver alone. The classic statement is LIJPHART's (1971, p. 682), who systematised John Stuart Mill's methods of agreement and difference into a workable research framework. The contemporary textbook synthesis is ORVIS and DROGUS (2017), whose treatment is now the standard introduction. They define the comparative method as follows:

Comparativists use the comparative method to make systematic comparisons across cases to draw conclusions that are valid beyond a single case.

— ORVIS and DROGUS (2017, p. 20)

The point is decisive for the present study. The three leaders examined here cannot be understood individually. TRUMP's performative populism is intelligible only against NETANYAHU's existential-threat construction and ZELENSKY's wartime presidentialism, just as each is intelligible only against the others. Comparison is not an optional embellishment of the argument; it is the argument's analytical engine. Within the comparative method, the present article adopts what MAHONEY (2012) terms a process-tracing logic. MAHONEY situates process tracing within a broader epistemology of causal inference:

With process tracing tests, the analyst combines preexisting generalizations with specific observations from within a single case to make causal inferences about that case.

— MAHONEY (2012, p. 570)

MAHONEY's framework distinguishes four tests of within-case evidence — straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking-gun and doubly-decisive — graded by their relative sensitivity and specificity. The MENDEL testimony, for example, functions in the present argument as a smoking-gun test for the ZELENSKY case: its evidentiary content (a verbatim demand for "Goebbels propaganda" and "thousands of talking heads") is highly specific to the hypothesis that ZELENSKY's wartime communications were engineered on a Bernaysian model, and it is difficult to account for under any competing hypothesis. It does not by itself establish the hypothesis, but its presence sharply raises the inferential weight of the broader pattern.

Case selection follows SEAWRIGHT and GERRING's (2008, p. 297) typology of extreme or paradigmatic cases. TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY are not selected as representative samples of contemporary leadership; they are selected because each represents, in its national context, a paradigmatic instance of charismatic-narrative statecraft. The logic is FLYVBJERG's (2006, p. 229): strategic case selection of extreme or paradigmatic instances generates more theoretical insight than typical-case sampling because it exposes the underlying mechanism at its most visible.

A further methodological choice is the use of insider testimony as primary evidence. The MENDEL interview is treated here as elite-witness testimony of the kind

familiar to the comparative-historical tradition. Its evidentiary status is neither uncritical nor dismissive: it is weighed against contemporaneous public conduct, fact-checked against independent reporting, and triangulated with the broader peer-reviewed literature on ZELENSKY's communications strategy (KIM, 2025; COLE, 2025; HALLGREN, 2025). Where MENDEL's account is contested by Ukrainian government-aligned outlets (Kyiv Independent, 2026, p. 1; Kyiv Post, 2026, p. 1), those contestations are noted; they qualify the evidence without dissolving its analytical relevance.

2.2 Counterfactual Analysis

Counterfactual analysis is the disciplined examination of what would have happened had a single antecedent condition been different. Its place in political science was established by Philip TETLOCK and Aaron BELKIN (1996), whose framework remains the standard. TETLOCK and BELKIN identify six criteria for a defensible counterfactual: clarity, logical consistency, historical consistency, theoretical consistency, statistical consistency, and projectability. The central methodological discipline, however, is the minimal-rewrite rule:

Counterfactuals must require us to undo as few "well-established" historical facts as possible.

— TETLOCK and BELKIN (1996, p. 23)

Richard LEBOW (2010, p. 4) developed the framework further, arguing that the conventional distinction between "factual" and "counterfactual" arguments is itself overstated, since all causal inference in history rests on implicit counterfactual judgements:

All causal arguments are counterfactual, in the sense that they require us to imagine what would have happened in the absence of the alleged cause.

— LEBOW (2010, p. 56)

Jack LEVY (2015) offers the most rigorous recent treatment for qualitative historical analysis. LEVY's position is that counterfactual reasoning must be tightly disciplined to avoid "counterfactuals of convenience" deployed to support a preferred political reading:

The best counterfactuals begin with clearly specified plausible worlds involving small and easily imaginable changes from the real world. They make relatively short-term predictions based on empirically validated theoretical generalizations and on secondary counterfactuals that are mutually consistent.

— LEVY (2015, p. 379)

These criteria are operationalised in the Israel-as-Iran counterfactual developed in Section 6 of this article. The counterfactual does not require the reader to imagine a different world; it requires only that the structural positions of Israel and Iran in the contemporary Middle Eastern security architecture be exchanged, while holding constant the great-power alignments and the dominant narrative apparatus. The minimal rewrite is the exchange of two states' positions within an otherwise unchanged system. The analytical pay-off is the exposure of the asymmetric application of deterrence principles — what is treated as legitimate self-defence when undertaken by an allied state is treated as paranoia, militarism or destabilisation when undertaken by an adversary state.

2.3 The BowTie Framework

The two methods are integrated within the author's BowTie framework of strategic intelligence analysis (ZAAIMAN, 2024). The framework, illustrated below, situates the analyst at the present and is organised around two orthogonal axes. The horizontal axis is the time dimension — Past, Present, Future — and it is along this axis that counterfactuals and scenarios operate: counterfactuals interrogate the past on the left, asking what would have happened had a single antecedent condition been different; the possible, the probable and the plausible interrogate the future on the right. The vertical axis is the thinking dimension — synthetic thinking above, analytical thinking below — meeting at the present, with quantum thinking as the underlying mode of judgement under complexity (non-linearity, non-Aristotelean logic). The framework is not a substitute for either of the two methods just described; it locates them within a single epistemological architecture in which counterfactuals are not a curiosity on the margin of analysis but a routine instrument on the past side of the time axis, parallel and complementary to the possible-probable-plausible scenario work on the future side.

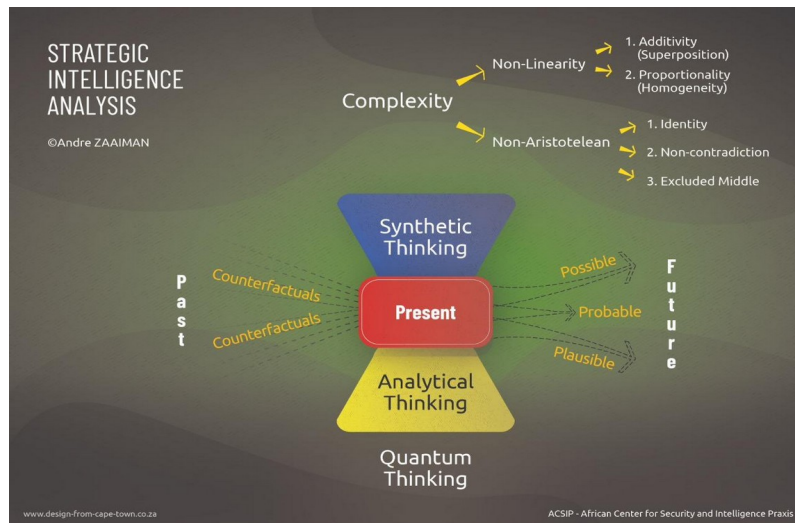


Figure 1. The BowTie Framework of Strategic Intelligence Analysis (ZAAIMAN, 2024).

Within the BowTie, the comparative method operates principally on the analytical (lower) side of the vertical axis — disaggregating the three leaders into their constituent rhetorical, performative and psychological features, then comparing those features across cases. Counterfactual analysis operates on the past (left) side of the horizontal time axis and on the synthetic (upper) side of the vertical axis simultaneously — reassembling features into a hypothesised alternative past in order to test the analytical claims of necessity and sufficiency, and then projecting that test forward into the possible–probable–plausible space on the right. The two operations are not sequential; they iterate, and the analyst's judgement at the present is the product of both.

3. Conceptual Clarity

3.1 Political Theatre and Performance

Political theatre is not a metaphor. It is, as Murray EDELMAN (1988, p. 1) demonstrated, a constitutive feature of political life: political leaders, enemies, crises and solutions are discursive constructions before they are anything else. "Politics," EDELMAN argued, "is for most of us a passing parade of abstract symbols" (1964, p. 5). The leader's task is to organise the parade. The citizen's task, increasingly, is to watch.

The performative turn in political analysis is older than the social-media age. Ernst CASSIRER (1946, p. 286), writing in the immediate aftermath of fascism, observed

that once rational discourse surrenders to mythological thinking the leader acquires an authority that is impervious to falsification: the myth, once installed, cannot be contradicted by mere facts. Hannah ARENDT (1951, p. 474) made a parallel observation about totalitarian propaganda: its purpose is not to persuade but to destroy the very faculty of distinguishing truth from falsehood, leaving subjects "gullible and cynical at the same time."

The contemporary performative leader inherits this legacy in attenuated form. He does not need to destroy epistemic standards across an entire society. He only needs to saturate his own constituency's information environment with enough symbolic repetition that contradiction becomes psychologically intolerable. The leader stages himself, in EDELMAN's (1988, p. 37) phrase, as "the indispensable protagonist" of the unfolding drama. The audience is not asked to verify. It is invited to belong.

3.2 Charismatic Leaders in War and Peace

Max WEBER's (1922/1978, p. 241) typology of legitimate domination remains the indispensable scaffold for analysis. Charismatic authority, in WEBER's account, rests on "the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma)" claimed by the leader and recognised by his followers. It is, by its nature, anti-institutional: the charismatic leader's authority overrides legal-rational norms because his mission, in his own telling and that of his constituency, transcends them.

What WEBER could not fully anticipate was the structural condition under which charismatic leaders would proliferate. Recent empirical work by GUILLÉN, JACQUART and HOGG (2022, p. 595) demonstrates that societal uncertainty selectively elevates individuals high in narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy into positions of authority, while simultaneously suppressing the leadership motivation of psychologically stable candidates. Crisis, in other words, is not an accidental backdrop to dark-triad leadership; it is the precondition for it.

The collective-narcissism research programme of Agnieszka GOLEC DE ZAVALA and her colleagues supplies the missing constituency-side mechanism. Collective narcissism is defined as "the belief that one's group is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment but is not sufficiently recognised by others" (GOLEC DE ZAVALA and KEENAN, 2021, p. 54). It is the emotional engine of populist

mobilisation. Followers of collectively-narcissistic leaders tolerate chronic deception not because they fail to perceive it but because the leader's narrative of group humiliation and promised restoration fulfils a deep affective need (GOLEC DE ZAVALA and LANTOS, 2020, p. 274).

GOLEC DE ZAVALA (2024, p. 1) extends this framework with the concept of "revolutionaries in reverse": leaders who mobilise group grievance to dismantle the very institutions they claim have failed to accord their group deserved respect. The concept maps, with precision, onto TRUMP's sustained assault on the judiciary and the press; onto NETANYAHU's systematic delegitimation of the Israeli Supreme Court and the security establishment; and onto ZELENSKY's wartime suppression of opposition parties, the cancellation of elections and the closure of dissenting media.

3.3 Propaganda: BERNAYS and Public Opinion

Edward BERNAYS's (1928, p. 9) opening sentence remains, after nearly a century, the most concise statement of the modern propaganda thesis:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

— BERNAYS (1928, p. 9)

BERNAYS, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, articulated a model in which public opinion is not a spontaneous expression of citizen preferences but an artefact engineered by professional communicators on behalf of organised interests. His earlier book *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (BERNAYS, 1923) had already developed the techniques: the use of trusted intermediaries, the manufacture of pseudo-events, the recruitment of experts to validate predetermined conclusions, and the systematic exploitation of unconscious affective triggers.

Jacques ELLUL (1965, p. 70) extended and qualified BERNAYS's thesis. ELLUL distinguished agitation propaganda (mobilising a population against a specific enemy at a specific moment) from integration propaganda (saturating daily life with a worldview so comprehensively that alternative perceptions become unthinkable).

The distinction is analytically useful for our three cases: ZELENSKY's wartime emotional mobilisation is paradigmatic agitation propaganda; NETANYAHU's decades-long Holocaustic framing of Israeli security is paradigmatic integration propaganda; TRUMP's ambient disinformation ecosystem combines both.

What MENDEL described in her CARLSON interview was the operational application of BERNAYS's technique. The recruitment of "thousands of experts" — a phrase MENDEL attributes verbatim to ZELENSKY — is BERNAYS's third-party-authority technique scaled to the global information environment of the 2020s. The logic remains identical: "It doesn't matter what is being done. The most important thing is to gather 1,000 experts, and if 1,000 experts talk about positive things, then people believe that something good is happening" (Singju Post, 2026, p. 1).

The contemporary scaling of this technique is not unique to Ukraine. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism documented in 2016 that the Pentagon had contracted the British public-relations firm Bell Pottinger to produce fake al-Qaeda propaganda videos in Iraq, at a reported cost of over half a billion dollars, with sign-off at general-officer level and on occasion at the White House (BLACK and FIELDING-SMITH, 2016, p. 1). The Integrity Initiative leaks of 2018 disclosed a parallel British Foreign and Commonwealth Office programme to seed anti-Russian content through ostensibly independent journalists, bloggers and media outlets across Europe (Wikispooks, 2018, p. 1; KLARENBERG, 2021, p. 1). The Israeli government allocated approximately 730 million US dollars to its public-diplomacy directorate in the March 2026 budget, a figure roughly twenty times the pre-2023 baseline (GJEVORI, 2026, p. 1). The point is structural: the BERNAYSian operation has become routinised state practice in the Anglosphere and in allied states, and is the institutional ground against which the three leaders' personal narrative performances are staged.

3.4 Narrative

Walter FISHER's (1984, p. 1) narrative paradigm holds that human beings are, before they are rational deliberators, storytellers and story-judgers. Public moral argument is decided not by logical proof but by narrative coherence and narrative fidelity: the audience asks whether the story hangs together and whether it rings true with their lived experience.

MISKIMMON, O'LOUGHLIN and ROSELLE (2013, p. 2) operationalised this insight for international politics. A strategic narrative, in their framework, is a "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors." Strategic narratives operate on three levels: system narratives (about the structure of international order), identity narratives (about who "we" are), and issue narratives (about specific policy disputes). The three leaders examined here are master practitioners of all three levels.

The structural elements of effective political narrative are well established. The leader must establish:

- a hero, typically the leader himself or the in-group he embodies;
- a villain, an external or internal enemy whose defeat is existentially necessary;
- a victim, the in-group whose suffering legitimises action;
- a historical grievance providing emotional depth;
- a moral emergency demanding immediate commitment; and
- a required loyalty response indexed to the leader's preferred policy.

TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY each deploy all six elements. Their content differs sharply; their grammar does not.

3.5 Victimhood Nationalism

Adam LERNER's (2020, p. 63) theorisation of victimhood nationalism is the most tightly aligned conceptual resource in the existing literature. LERNER defines victimhood nationalism as the strategic invocation of collective historical suffering to legitimise present aggression and to pre-empt accountability. Crucially, victimhood nationalisms "break down the idealised victim-perpetrator relationship and project grievances onto otherwise uninvolved international actors" (LERNER, 2020, p. 63).

The framework applies, with little adaptation, to all three cases. NETANYAHU's instrumentalisation of the Holocaust to legitimise Israeli military operations — most starkly in the Gaza campaign of 2023–2024 — is the textbook case of what LERNER (2020, p. 77) calls projection of grievance "across time and space." ZELENSKY's framing of Ukraine as a "perpetually victimised nation" occupies the

same structural slot. TRUMP's "American carnage" mythology, deployed first at his 2017 inauguration and recycled continuously thereafter, performs an identical legitimating function: the in-group has suffered grievously at the hands of an internal or external elite, and only the leader can restore its proper place.

4. TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY: A Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis must guard against false equivalence. The three leaders operate in radically different political systems, command different coercive capacities, and stand in different moral relations to their wars. The analytical claim here is morphological, not moral: the three leaders deploy a common grammar of narrative-led statecraft. The differences in content do not obscure the similarities in form.

4.1 TRUMP: The Reality-Television Presidency

Stefan BRANDT (2020, p. 305) provides the most precise academic characterisation of TRUMP's political method. TRUMP, he argues, did not enter the presidency from television; he imported the genre conventions of reality television into the presidency. The four key features BRANDT (2020, p. 307) identifies — the portrayal of ordinary people as heroic figures, the focus on presumptive enemies, attacks on the establishment, and the evocation of apocalyptic scenery — are the four constitutive elements of populist rhetoric per LEE (2006, p. 357).

The reality-television genre is not incidental. Reality television, BRANDT (2020, p. 309) observes, emphasises personal conflict and dramatic tension over information transfer. It is structurally designed to entertain, not to educate. TRUMP's political performances — his rallies, his press conferences, his diplomatic theatre — are saturated with this aesthetic. The substantive content matters less than the rhythm of confrontation, humiliation and triumph.

In BERNAYS's terms, TRUMP does not communicate policy; he manufactures public mood. The audience is not asked to verify his claims about election fraud, immigrant criminality, deep-state conspiracies or the imminence of national collapse. They are invited to belong to a community defined by the shared experience of believing him. The recent peer-reviewed analysis of TRUMP's February 2025 joint press conference with NETANYAHU by AL-KHAWALDEH (2026, p. 4) demonstrates this at clause level: 14.1 percent of TRUMP's clauses involve

strategic violations of conversational norms (flouting of Gricean maxims), and his characteristic possession metaphors ("we will take Gaza," "we will own it") recode coercive intervention as paternalistic stewardship.

TRUMP's wars are smaller in scale than ZELENSKY's or NETANYAHU's but follow the same narrative logic. The trade war with China, the rhetorical war with Iran, the manufactured emergency at the southern border, and the second-term assault on the federal civil service are all conducted as theatre. The opponent is named, demonised, ritually humiliated, and then — in TRUMP's own framing — vanquished, irrespective of the underlying empirical outcome.

4.2 NETANYAHU: The Architecture of Existential Threat

NETANYAHU's political method is the longest-running of the three. Over more than two decades in and out of office, NETANYAHU has constructed an integration-propaganda apparatus, in ELLUL's (1965, p. 70) sense, of remarkable durability. Its central element is the rhetorical fusion of three timeframes: the Holocaust as constitutive past, an existential threat as constitutive present, and national survival as constitutive future.

The peer-reviewed comparative discourse analysis by PINHEIRO-MACHADO and LESSES (2024, p. 410) of NETANYAHU's and Abbas's UN General Assembly speeches identifies the rhetorical architecture clearly: a morally pure in-group, a corrupt out-group elite, a categorical denial of the legitimacy of opposing narratives, and a victimhood frame deployed strategically before an international audience. NETANYAHU's use of cartoon-style props — most famously the 2012 "red line" bomb diagram at the UN — is theatre in the literal sense, designed to bypass deliberation and lodge a visual image in the global audience's memory.

What is striking about NETANYAHU's case is the gap between narrative and policy outcome. As the intelligence analyst William KEENAN (2026, p. 1) has argued in his *Times of Israel* assessment, the United States–Israel disconnect is structural rather than cyclical: "the U.S. center of gravity is shifting away from unconditional support of Israel toward conditionality tied to Israel's alignment with U.S. regional peace initiatives" (KEENAN, 2026, p. 1). The Israeli government's response — an approximately 730 million US dollar allocation to its public-diplomacy directorate in the March 2026 budget, twenty times the pre-2023 figure (GJEVORI, 2026, p. 1) —

illustrates the diagnostic in real time: the integration-propaganda apparatus is being scaled up precisely as its legitimating function fails. Even Prime Minister NETANYAHU has publicly conceded that Israel has "not done well on the propaganda war" (Times of Israel, 2025, p. 1), attributing collapsing American support to social-media disinformation rather than to the underlying policy.

LERNER's (2020, p. 80) victimhood-nationalism framework is essential here. NETANYAHU's invocations of the Holocaust to legitimise the Gaza campaign, the strikes on Lebanon, and the operations against Iran perform exactly the projective function LERNER identifies: the moral capital of historical suffering is transferred onto present-day uninvolved actors, and the in-group's present conduct is rendered immune to ordinary ethical scrutiny.

4.3 ZELENSKY: From Servant of the People to Wartime Avatar

ZELENSKY's case differs from the other two principally in the suddenness and totality of the transformation. He came to office in 2019 as a comic actor who had played a fictional Ukrainian president in the television series *Servant of the People*. His political method was, from the outset, performative. The peer-reviewed visual analysis by COLE (2025, p. 1) of ZELENSKY's Instagram practice documents the deliberate sartorial transformation from suit-wearing technocrat to olive-green wartime protagonist, executed with calculated visual repetition across thousands of posts.

KIM's (2025, p. 230) discourse analysis of twelve wartime speeches addressed to Russian citizens identifies a calculated shift from an early antiwar transnational populism (ordinary Russians and Ukrainians united against a warmongering elite) to a post-Bucha collective-guilt attribution. The shift is not described by KIM as cynical; it is described as strategically intelligible. The point for the present argument is that the narrative was modulated to fit the political requirement of the moment, not to track an underlying empirical reality.

MENDEL's testimony, whatever its evidentiary limits, supplies the operational detail that academic discourse analysis cannot reach. According to her account, ZELENSKY explicitly invoked the propaganda model of Joseph Goebbels and assembled a global network of "thousands of talking heads" funded through oligarchs, grants and state structures (Singju Post, 2026, p. 1; Pravda NATO, 2026, p. 1). She

described him as "a vicious and very paranoid narcissist", as an "absolutely insanely great actor" whose "acting doesn't have any substance," and as a leader for whom "any person is just expendable" (Singju Post, 2026, p. 1):

Everything that he is saying is so detached from the reality. And the majority of the things that he's saying, it's either manipulation or it's a fact that is being taken from the context. Or it's pure lies.

— MENDEL, in *Singju Post* (2026, p. 1)

HALLGREN's (2025) study, published in *Media, War & Conflict*, demonstrates the symbiosis between ZELENSKY's self-branding and the profile-journalism industry that authenticated it: legacy media outlets adopted his preferred narrative wholesale, bypassing ordinary journalistic scrutiny and producing what HALLGREN calls a "scrappy underdog turned brilliant military mind" frame that became the dominant Western interpretive lens for the war (HALLGREN, 2025, p. 3). The MENDEL interview, viewed against the HALLGREN analysis, is the missing operational explanation: the symbiosis was not accidental but engineered.

4.4 The Underlying Pattern

Reading the three cases together discloses a common operational pattern. Each leader:

- treats the political audience as an audience rather than a deliberative public, and prioritises emotional sequencing over informational content;
- constructs a simple moral binary (patriot/traitor, civilisation/barbarism, democracy/tyranny) and rules out the possibility of legitimate disagreement within the in-group;
- personifies the in-group in the figure of the leader, such that criticism of the leader is reframed as betrayal of the group;
- invokes a foundational victimhood narrative (the Holocaust, the Holodomor, American decline) to convert present aggression into defensive retaliation;
- manages contradiction not by resolution but by repetition: the inconvenient fact is not refuted; it is drowned in volume;

- treats institutions of accountability (courts, press, parliaments, electoral commissions) as obstacles to be overcome rather than constraints to be respected.

These six features are the morphological signature of narrative-led statecraft. They are present in TRUMP's American populism, in NETANYAHU's Likud nationalism, and in ZELENSKY's wartime presidentialism. The ideological content varies; the structural form does not.

5. The Ukrainian Theatre: A Brief Empirical Reckoning

The argument of this article is not focused on the war in Ukraine, but its premises do depend on a particular reading of the war's origins — one which the now-public documentary record increasingly supports. The dominant Western narrative — of an "unprovoked" Russian invasion launched by an irrational autocrat bent on conquering Ukraine and then Europe — is, on the available evidence, a strategic narrative in MISKIMMON, O'LOUGHLIN and ROSELLE's (2013, p. 2) sense rather than a description of events.

John MEARSHEIMER's (2014, p. 1) widely cited analysis argued, well before the 2022 invasion, that NATO's expansion to Russia's borders — against repeated American assurances given in 1990 — was the principal driver of the Russia-Ukraine confrontation. The 2014 change of government in Kyiv, which Russia treated as a Western-backed coup, was the proximate trigger; the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements (2014, 2015), which the Ukrainian, German and French signatories have subsequently admitted were designed primarily to buy time for the rearming of Ukraine rather than to implement the autonomy provisions for the Donbas (Zeit Online, 2022, p. 1; Le Figaro, 2022, p. 1), confirmed Moscow's reading that the diplomatic track was instrumentalised.

The peer-reviewed H-Diplo essay by LARRES and ZHONG (2024, p. 2) documents the subsequent Istanbul peace negotiations of March 2022, when, on the testimony of former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Ukrainian negotiator Davyd Arakhamia, a tentative deal was within reach. The intervention of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who travelled to Kyiv on 9 April 2022 to communicate that the "collective West" was not prepared to underwrite an agreement, terminated the negotiation track (LARRES and ZHONG, 2024, p. 3). Whatever one's view of that

decision, it is empirically established that the war could have ended in April 2022 and did not, because the leaders of the major Anglo-American powers preferred its continuation.

The British role in shaping the wider information environment is documented in the Integrity Initiative leaks of 2018 (Wikispooks, 2018, p. 1) and in the leaked Foreign and Commonwealth Office files reported by KLARENBERG (2021, p. 1). These documents reveal a systematic, taxpayer-funded programme to seed anti-Russian content through ostensibly independent journalists, bloggers and media outlets across Europe. The precedent is older: the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's 2016 expose of the Pentagon's half-billion-dollar contract with the British public-relations firm Bell Pottinger to produce fake al-Qaeda propaganda videos in Iraq, signed off at general-officer level and on occasion at the White House (BLACK and FIELDING-SMITH, 2016, p. 1), demonstrates that information warfare conducted through Anglo-American public-relations contractors is not a 2022 innovation.

The relevance for the present argument is structural. The narrative environment in which ZELENSKY became a global icon was not the spontaneous product of his own performance. It was scaffolded by an information apparatus with decades of operational experience in shaping perceptions of Middle Eastern and Eastern European conflicts. ZELENSKY's theatre, like NETANYAHU's and like TRUMP's, did not arise in a vacuum. It was met, amplified and, where necessary, corrected by an organised network of state and quasi-state communicators.

6. Counterfactual: Israel as Iran

The Israel-as-Iran counterfactual is constructed to satisfy the methodological criteria of TETLOCK and BELKIN (1996, p. 23) and LEVY (2015, p. 379). The minimal rewrite is the exchange of structural positions between Israel and Iran within the contemporary Middle Eastern security architecture, holding constant the great-power alignments (United States with the regional ally; Russia and China with the regional adversary) and the broad outlines of the dominant narrative apparatus. The counterfactual is not a predictive exercise, and it is not an exercise in moral equivalence. Its purpose is to expose the extent and depth of the narrative construction that ordinarily passes unnoticed in Western security discourse — the same narrative construction whose operation in the TRUMP, NETANYAHU and

ZELENSKY cases has been documented in the preceding sections. By forcing a disciplined inversion of the structural positions while leaving the great-power alignments and the narrative apparatus in place, the counterfactual cognitively switches the reader's mental model of the Middle Eastern security order, and through that switch makes the mental model more flexible, wide and diverse. The analytical pay-off is direct: what is treated as legitimate self-defence when undertaken by an allied state, and as paranoia, militarism or destabilisation when undertaken by an adversary state, is shown to be a product of narrative construction rather than a description of facts.

6.1 The Counterfactual World

Consider, then, the following hypothetical strategic environment. Israel signs the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, opens its facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency inspections, and maintains only a peaceful civilian nuclear programme. Iran, by contrast, refuses to sign the NPT, develops multiple operational nuclear weapons, and receives explicit Chinese and Russian strategic protection. In this counterfactual, Beijing argues that Iran has a sovereign right to deterrence, Moscow blocks sanctions at the Security Council, and the world gradually normalises Iranian nuclearisation.

Now reverse the covert-war pattern that has long surrounded the Iranian nuclear programme. Israeli nuclear scientists involved in peaceful civilian research are assassinated, sabotaged, and targeted through covert action. Cyberattacks damage Israeli civilian infrastructure. Explosions occur at Israeli research facilities. Foreign media repeatedly insinuate that Israel is secretly pursuing weapons despite inspections. Russia and China insist, against the evidence, that "there is no conclusive evidence."

Iran develops an explicitly civilisational geopolitical doctrine — "Greater Iran." Iranian-allied militias occupy northern Israeli territory, arm proxy forces, and establish missile infrastructure near Israeli population centres. Chinese and Russian media frame this as anti-colonial resistance, regional balancing, and legitimate historical restoration. Israel repeatedly appeals to the United Nations, China, Russia, and international institutions. Its security concerns are dismissed as paranoia, militarism, and emotional overreaction. A global information campaign portrays Israel as irrational, aggressive, unstable, and obstructionist. Israeli leaders

are personalised as fanatics, extremists, or obstacles to peace. The underlying message becomes: Israel must learn to live with vulnerability.

6.2 The Predicted US Response

The minimal-rewrite rule applied here forces an uncomfortable inference. The United States, under any plausible administration, would almost certainly react with overwhelming force and urgency. Washington would frame the situation as an existential threat, nuclear blackmail, and unacceptable regional coercion. It would impose massive sanctions, attempt to isolate Iran financially, impose secondary sanctions on third parties, and pressure allies into compliance. It would deploy carrier groups, missile-defence systems, intelligence assets, and regional expeditionary forces. It would almost certainly support sabotage, cyber operations, intelligence penetration, and proxy containment operations. If Iran occupied northern Israeli territory while holding nuclear superiority, the probability of direct US military intervention would become extremely high. The US political establishment would argue, with great public sympathy, that no sovereign state can be expected to tolerate such an existential threat environment.

6.3 The Analytical Pay-Off

What the counterfactual exposes is that great powers and allied states rarely apply security principles universally. Instead, deterrence rights, acceptable fear, legitimate pre-emption, and "defensive" behaviour are distributed hierarchically through alliance systems. The same behaviour is interpreted differently depending on who acts, who is allied to whom, and who controls the dominant narrative architecture. The counterfactual is faithful to the criteria LEVY (2015, p. 379) lays down: it begins with a clearly specified plausible world; it requires only the minimal rewrite of exchanging two states' positions within an otherwise unchanged system; and its predictions are short-term and rest on empirically validated generalisations about US behaviour in analogous historical settings — the Cuban missile crisis (ALLISON and ZELIKOW, 1999, p. 1), the long American posture toward Iraqi weapons programmes from 1990 onwards, and the contemporary posture toward the actual Iranian nuclear file.

The relevance for the present argument is direct. The narrative architecture within which the three leaders operate is not symmetric. It privileges allied claims of

existential threat and dismisses adversary claims of the same. NETANYAHU's invocation of an existential Iranian threat travels effortlessly through Western media; the symmetric Iranian claim of an existential Israeli threat travels not at all. ZELENSKY's invocation of an existential Russian threat travels effortlessly; the symmetric Russian claim about NATO expansion is treated as propaganda. TRUMP's invocation of an existential Chinese threat travels through some Western media but is dismissed by others; the symmetric Chinese claim about American encirclement travels not at all in Western media. The narrative architecture is, in WALTZ's (1979, p. 102) sense, an artefact of the international system's polarity, not a neutral medium of communication.

7. Ending Wars Conducted by Narrative Leaders

If the foregoing analysis is broadly correct, an immediate implication follows: wars conducted by narrative leaders cannot be ended by the conventional instruments of statecraft alone. The conventional instruments — military pressure, economic sanction, diplomatic isolation — operate on the assumption that the adversary government is responsive to material costs. Narrative leaders are not, or not primarily. They are responsive to the collapse of the story that legitimises their power.

This is not a counsel of despair. Narratives do collapse. The mechanisms of collapse are tolerably well understood. They include:

- the accumulation of contradictions to the point where even sympathetic audiences can no longer maintain narrative coherence — the NETANYAHU case in Gaza approaches this threshold, as KEENAN (2026, p. 1) observes, with the visible reality having begun to outrun the rhetorical management;
- the defection of insiders, whose testimony exposes the operational architecture behind the public performance — MENDEL's 2026 interview with CARLSON is a paradigmatic instance for ZELENSKY; the steady stream of dissenting Israeli former intelligence and military officers performs a similar function for NETANYAHU; the trickle of Trump-administration memoirs has done analogous work in the American case;

- the exhaustion of the constituency's tolerance for chronic emergency — collective-narcissistic mobilisation, GOLEC DE ZAVALA and LANTOS (2020, p. 276) observe, depletes the psychological resources of the in-group over time, and sustained emergency rhetoric produces eventual disengagement rather than permanent vigilance;
- the arrival of a counter-narrative that meets the audience's emotional needs without the structural deceptions of the original — this is the hardest condition to satisfy, but it is the most important. A peace that humiliates the audience is no peace; a peace that allows the audience to retain dignity while abandoning the leader's fictions is achievable.

Operationally, this implies several practical considerations for those seeking to end such wars. First, negotiation channels should be opened with the leader's domestic rivals as well as with the leader himself, since the leader's personal commitment to the narrative is typically too deep for him to be the principal architect of its dismantling. Second, the international community should resist the temptation to provide the leader with theatrical victories that prolong the war; the April 2022 Boris Johnson intervention is the canonical negative example. Third, the diplomatic emphasis should shift from extracting concessions to constructing face-saving exits, since the principal obstacle to peace is no longer territorial or material but psychological.

Finally, the article notes a sober empirical observation that the three leaders themselves are increasingly unable to deny: they are losing or have lost their wars. TRUMP's second-term trade war with China has produced no measurable American gains and a substantial diplomatic re-alignment toward Beijing. NETANYAHU's campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon have damaged Israel's international standing more severely than any episode since 1982, and have not produced the strategic results announced. ZELENSKY's war has cost Ukraine an estimated 20 percent of its territory, the bulk of its industrial base, and a demographic catastrophe whose full dimensions will not be known for a generation. The narrative may continue. The wars, in any conventional sense, are over, and the leaders have not won them.

8. Conclusion: The Limits of Theatre

Political theatre is an irreducible feature of modern leadership. The argument of this article is not that TRUMP, NETANYAHU and ZELENSKY are uniquely theatrical: every modern leader manages his image, every modern leader employs strategic narrative, every modern leader operates in the BERNAYSian environment of professional public relations. The argument is rather that these three leaders have taken the substitution of theatre for substance to a degree that constitutes, in EDELMAN's (1988, p. 1) sense, a distinct mode of statecraft.

The shared morphology is striking: charismatic self-construction, victimhood nationalism, collective-narcissistic mobilisation, the systematic delegitimisation of institutional accountability, and the substitution of narrative repetition for empirical accountability. The shared outcome is also striking: three wars, none of them won, all of them prolonged beyond the point at which prolongation served any rational purpose beyond the political survival of the leaders themselves.

The MENDEL-CARLSON interview with which this article opened is, for that reason, more than a journalistic curiosity. It is a document in which the operational logic of one of these three theatrical regimes is described from the inside, by an insider whose former job was to operate that very logic. Her phrase — the leader who is "a teddy bear on camera" and "a grizzly bear" off it — captures, more precisely than any academic formulation, the gap between performance and substance that defines the three leaders examined here.

What is required, ultimately, is not new theory. The classical resources — WEBER on charisma, BERNAYS on consent, CASSIRER on myth, ARENDT on totalitarian propaganda, EDELMAN on spectacle, FISHER on narrative, ELLUL on integration propaganda — are sufficient for the analytical task. The methodological resources — ORVIS and DROGUS (2017) and MAHONEY (2012) on comparative method, TETLOCK and BELKIN (1996), LEBOW (2010) and LEVY (2015) on counterfactual analysis — are likewise sufficient. What is required is the discipline to apply them, evenly and without political favouritism, to leaders one is inclined to admire as well as to leaders one is inclined to despise. Only that even-handedness restores the possibility of accountable politics. And only accountable politics, in the end, can end wars.

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