

POLITICS

Zelenskyy broke his MO and showed up at the White House in a suit. This is why — and how — you should dress up for big meetings.

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Volodymyr Zelenskyy wore an all-black suit to the White House, a shift from his usual style.

Image consultants say it was a calculated and strategic choice, giving him credibility and gravitas.

They explained how to dress for high-stakes meetings, from wearing neutrals to investing in quality pieces.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in a departure from his usual military garb, suited up for his meeting with President Donald Trump on Monday.

Since the start of the Russian invasion, Zelenskyy switched out formal suits for military outfits, including cargo pants and crew-neck T-shirts. He previously said he would wear these clothes until the war ended.

The Ukrainian president's last outfit at a White House meeting — a long-sleeved black shirt with a mandarin collar in February — wasn't well received by some Republicans.

In February, Trump had a tense exchange with Zelenskyy. Brian Snyder/REUTERS

But on Monday, he arrived at the White House in an all-black suit — no tie — for his meeting with Trump and European leaders.

Trump was quick to comment on the new look. When a right-wing journalist who previously criticized Zelenskyy told the leader that he looked "fabulous" in the suit, Trump added, "I said the same thing."

Whether in politics or the corporate world, showing up in the right outfit can make or break how a message is received.

At a time when the US president is playing host to Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska and the Russian army is grinding Ukrainian forces in a brutal war of attrition, Zelenskyy couldn't afford to have his message fall on deaf ears, especially not when American support has often been vital.

Fashion and image consultants told Business Insider that Zelenskyy's choice to suit up underscored that when the stakes are high, dressing formally can earn credibility and keep the focus where it belongs.

The black suit was a calculated choice

Zelenskyy's choice of clothing was calculated and intentional, stylists say. AP
Photo/Alex Brandon

Zoë Hennessey, a Los Angeles-based fashion stylist, said Zelenskyy's upgraded look headed off criticism that might have overshadowed the purpose of his visit.

"Trump and his aides clearly noticed the change, since they commented on it, and I imagine it helped Zelenskyy gain some favor," she said.

"Sometimes you have to give people what they expect, even if it feels like a compromise," Hennessey said.

Ann Vodicka, a Sydney-based image consultant, said that a suit broadcasts power. And black communicates strength, sophistication, and seriousness.

"Zelenskyy's attire reinforced his message: He is to be taken seriously, and the meeting's importance cannot be overstated," Vodicka added.

However, Anna Avuziak, a Singapore-based stylist, said Zelenskyy's refusal to wear a tie was significant.

"The absence of a classic cut and a tie added another layer: 'Yet I still remain who I am — the president of a country in the middle of a full-scale war,'" Avuziak said.

Dress to impress, not to stand out

Zelenskyy has stuck to a wardrobe of shirts and cargo pants since the start of the war. AP Photo/Alex Brandon

Hennessey said standing out and showing personality make sense in industries like fashion, entertainment, and the arts. However, most corporate environments still favor understated dressing, she said.

"You can still look interesting and show a point of view, but it is usually better to stick to traditional dress conventions."

Vodicka said workers have to balance blending in and standing out.

"Dressing to blend in too much can make you appear forgettable, while dressing to stand out too much risks being seen as unprofessional or distracting," she said.

She said a sweet spot is to express individuality through subtle details like a modern cut, a well-chosen accessory, or a color that suits you.

What to wear for important meetings

Vodicka said that in high-stakes meetings or interviews, how you dress has a powerful impact on how you feel and are perceived.

She recommends trying to "match or slightly elevate the dress code."

"Being underdressed can leave you feeling self-conscious and can distract others from your message," Vodicka said.

She also advised prioritizing quality over quantity by investing in fewer high-quality pieces instead of many ill-fitting ones.

Avuziak said that polished fabrics like fine wool and poplin cotton can elevate the outfit, instead of denim, knitwear, and cheap polyester.

Avoiding a baggy fit will also help an outfit look better, Avuziak said. That means going for structured bags over shapeless totes, blazers over cardigans, and pointed-toe kitten heels over ballet flats.

Still, comfort is key if you want to look and feel your best and not get distracted, she added.

"So if your skirt or trousers look chic but the fabric is itchy or the cut is too snug, let them go," Avuziak said.

Hennessy said dressing to impress was simple. Wear clothes that fit properly — nothing too tight or skimpy. The outfit should also be spotless and well-pressed, she said.

She recommended wearing neutrals, which look polished and professional.

"I would avoid dramatic prints and bright colors. It may feel a bit boring, but in certain situations, playing it safe often works best," she said.



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