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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Trump ReTweeted

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It is interesting to look back on the predictions made by contributors on the eve of the Trump administration. They run the gamut from seeing him as a radical departure from previous presidents in his policies to someone radically different in style but not markedly different from his predecessors in his policies. Most assume that he will to a considerable degree be constrained and restrained. Looking back on 2016 it is evident that I was both wrong and right. I was wrong in thinking it unlikely that Trump would get elected but quite right in my expectation that he would deviate in the most dramatic ways from his predecessor in style and substance.

These two different predictions I now realize, were related. I found it hard to believe that anyone who was not themselves pathological or ideologically opposed to government could possibly vote for Trump. On bike rides through the foothills of New Hampshire's White Mountains in the summer before the 2016 election I saw a remarkable number of Trump placards on front lawns and precious few touting Clinton. This was an eye-opener but I was reluctant to believe it was a reliable indicator of what would happen in November. I underestimated the degree of anger, even hatred, of government, the racist backlash aroused by eight years of an intelligent and successful African-American President, the sense of insecurity and perceived decline in wealth, opportunity, and status by uneducated white males, and the effectiveness of right wing social media in demonizing Hillary. Trump's victory made me question my beliefs and assumptions more than any other political development in recent memory. It made me open to the possibility – indeed, the likelihood – that Trump's presidency would be like no other. It also suggested that he could retain his base almost regardless of his policies or performance so long as he gave voice to their anger and buttressed their self-esteem through his rhetoric and policies.

The election campaign further indicated that a fair number of elected Republican officials would support him through thick and thin. We all remember how many Republican candidates and election officials expressed horror at the thought of Trump but rallied behind him once he became the nominee, and even more so, after he was elected. The defining moment for me occurred in July 2016 when Trump publicly defamed the father of a slain Muslim soldier.¹ Insulting the military and the parents of a young man who gave his life for his country would have destroyed any other candidate. Trump did not suffer and 'responsible' Republicans did not distance themselves from him.

All of this was on my mind when I wrote the appropriately titled "Trump the Tweeter" for H-Diplo. Among the authors who contributed to this symposium I offered by far the most negative assessment of Trump and the most extreme prediction of how his presidency and policies would diverge from the norm. If anything, Trump was more extreme and more deviant than I suggested.

There was another reason for my radical pessimism having to do with my theoretical orientation. I have long been a critic of top-down theories that emphasize the importance of so-called determining features of the environment (e.g., polarity, balance of power, state structure, national identity) and expect political actors to value and understand them the same way theorists do. As these theoretical constructs are all reifications, and therefore not based on anything real, they can only be interpreted subjectively. It is not surprising, for example, that at the end of the Cold War some realists thought the world remained bipolar, others proclaimed it unipolar, and still others multipolar. Top-down approaches downplay the role of agency. They treat political actors like electrons that simply transmit forces, or in the case of international relations theories, respond to environmental constraints and opportunities in predictable ways.

Top-down theories must maintain this conceit or lose their traction. To acknowledge that people matter, have subjective, even idiosyncratic understandings of the world, differ in the values and affiliation, their goals, commitments to existing arrangements,

¹ Maggie Haberman and Richard A. O'Connell Jr., "Donald Trump Criticizes Muslim Family of Slain U.S. Soldier, Drawing Ire," *New York Times*, 30 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/us/politics/donald-trump-khizr-khan-wife-ghazala.html>, accessed 9 June 2020.

institutions, colleagues, norms, laws, and the truth, would highlight the importance of context. It would make top-down theories merely starting points for explanatory narratives or forecasts. I have consistently urged that social science, and especially international relations, be practiced this way.

I value agency and my research has tried to take it into account by tacking back and forth between general explanations and local features of context. This orientation not only sensitized me to the importance of leaders but also to the ways in which they not only respond to the constraints and opportunities of their political environments but change, even transform, them. I was accordingly primed to the possibility that Trump might shape American politics and foreign policy as much as be shaped by it.

I looked to Trump's past behavior to forecast how he would behave in office. Jim Goldgeier offers compelling documentation of how this worked for Soviet leaders. They approached problems with the same set of strategies that had worked for them before becoming general secretary.² I expected Donald Trump to do the same, and he did. He behaved as president almost exactly as he did when a real estate mogul. He engaged in hyperbole, lied, bullied, and reneged on commitments. He sought a reputation for being tough, and took advantage whenever possible of others in pursuit of short-term advantages. He was a high roller, took big risks, and showed no loyalty to those who worked for or with him. He made decisions on the spur of the moment, often on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information, never admitted error, and attacked – often viciously – those who criticized him.³ A top-down or rationalist analysis of Trump's behavior would not take us very far – in large part because his performance as a real estate developer and president could not be considered a rational response to the opportunities and constraints of these environments.

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In his thoughtful first-round symposium essay Robert Jervis suggested that Trump would constitute a natural experiment.⁴ Once in office, he asked: “will he really try to carry out such radically different policies? Or will domestic and international constraints prevail?” He suspected that “even if the results are not likely to be entirely unambiguous, they should provide us with real evidence.” This is because “Trump's statements in the first weeks after his election indicate that his substantive views may be only weakly held, making any continuity that occurs only a weak confirmation of theories that stress constraints.”

Now that this experiment has run what has it taught us? Jervis was right, I believe, in assuming that Trump's policy or ideological commitments were skin deep. He committed himself to evangelical Christianity, halting immigration, building a wall on the border with Mexico, imposing selective tariffs on countries, tweeting out in support of racist demonstrators, law-and-order policing, and demonizing China because it appealed to his base. I think it fair to say that Trump's only commitments are to himself and his wealth. Many observers have accused him of being more self-centered than most presidents and certainly less willing than his predecessors to separate his financial well-being from his policies. Without any doubt he was the least well-informed president in the nation's history, and one without much interest in learning about the issues he confronts.

The last half of my year as scholar-in-residence in the Central Intelligence Agency coincided with Reagan's first months in office. Most of the briefings the Agency prepared for the President were unread, so some offices resorted to videos. The first time this was tried, Reagan's handlers urged the Agency to simplify the videos and limit them to five or six minutes, the limit of the President's span of attention. Trump made Reagan look cognitively complex, engaged with work, and well-informed. Trump showed less interest in briefs, got what information he did from watching Fox news, and consistently tweeted policy announcements without prior consultation with relevant officials.

It is difficult for precedent to constrain a president when he is unaware of it, for bureaucratic interests and traditions to do so when he all but ignores those who represent them, or even for the laws and constitution to achieve this end when he is prepared to violate them. At the outset of his term Trump described the president's power as near-dictatorial and proceeded to act as if they were, and perhaps more so

² James Goldgeier, *Leadership Style and Soviet Foreign Policy: Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Gorbachev* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

³ Jack Shafer, “America's First Real Estate Presidency,” *Politico*, 7 December 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/donald-trump-real-estate-presidency-214504>, accessed 7 June 2020.

⁴ <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5B.pdf>

after his impeachment.⁵ The only effective constraint on Trump would have been the Republican Party and its elected officials. However, they abdicated their constitutional responsibility and became his enablers. Trump was able to do more or less what he wanted. Occasionally the courts ruled against him – as with his efforts to ban visitors from Muslim countries – but as often as not he was able to find ways around court decrees, at least to some degree.

To the extent that there was a dominant tension in the Trump White House it was between the President's personal and political needs. Trump has an unremitting thirst for public attention, even adulation, and must convince himself that he is first in everything that matters. This extends to the number of people he can draw to an inaugural, his sexual appeal to women, reputation for toughness, ranking among presidents, respect from adversarial leaders, and intelligence – as we all know he is a self-declared “very stable genius.” In the election campaign and during his first year or so in office these personality traits and psychological needs served Trump well politically. In his last two years they worked against him and led to his impeachment and defeat.

Trump's personality and political needs were visibly at odds. His initial denial of the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent failure to respond to it effectively, touting of quack remedies, and blatantly false attempts to portray himself and the U.S. as ahead of the curve and more effective in limiting the spread of the virus than any other leader cost him political support, especially among seniors. So did his law-and-order tweets following the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and his use of the National Guard and various federal forces to remove peaceful demonstrators near the White House so he could have a photo-op in front of a nearby church holding up a bible. Trump's failure to control himself and confront unpleasant political realities made him the first sitting President in a quarter-century to lose his bid for reelection, and the first modern office holder to deny his defeat and question the legitimacy of the electoral process. As I predicted in an earlier draft, he retained most of his base but alienate other Republicans and energize more Democrats to vote.

Returning to the Jervis experiment, there can be little doubt that a president willing to flout convention, tradition, and the law, and to remake domestic and foreign policy can do so – so long as he has the support of his political party and they control one or both houses of congress. Trump was not the least bit tamed by the responsibilities of high office, the need to act in the interest of the nation, and to uphold, or at least take seriously, the policy commitments of his predecessors.

The appropriate comparison for purposes of experimentation is not between Trump and other presidents but between Trump and contemporary dictators like Victor Orban of Hungary, Vladimir Putin of Russia, and near-dictator Xi Jinping of China. Trump admired these leaders because he saw them as tough and effective and wanted to emulate and be respected by them. They used the control over political parties, the military, bureaucracy, and media to establish and maintain their power. They did what they could to make that power as absolute as possible. Trump followed suit but not succeed. The media remain independent and so too did some of the judiciary. Most importantly, the military made clear that it would not allow itself to be used to pull the president's political chestnuts out of the fire. Despite efforts by Republican controlled states to do all they can to keep minorities from voting, the election process, while far from perfect, remained outside of his control. The November election reveal just how robust the American political system is. Trump's initial refusal to recognize defeat, deny the legitimacy of the election, not congratulate the winner, and refuse to make briefings and office space available to him and his team were all unacceptable violations of long-standing norms, but did not effectively hinder the transition to a new administration.

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⁵ Stephen M. Walt, “Trump Is Failing His Dictatorship Test,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 February 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/14/trump-is-failing-his-dictatorship-test/>, accessed 10 June 2020.