

# H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

## *Disrupt and Expose, but Clarify: Trump's Legacy*

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**M**uch has happened since July 2017 when my previous contribution to this H-Diplo project appeared.<sup>1</sup> The central purpose of that essay was to push back against those who were then castigating President Donald Trump for tearing down a norms-based liberal international order that successive U.S. administrations had ostensibly erected since World War II. I strenuously questioned the existence of any such order. The purpose of this essay is to suggest that the Trump wrecking-ball may yet yield something useful.

In the first year of Trump's presidency, references to *norms* proliferated. Noted foreign policy analysts and big-name newspaper columnists trumpeted respect for norms as a hitherto rarely noted signature of U.S. policy.<sup>2</sup> Disregarding norms offered evidence of defective statecraft. Trump was a norm-buster par excellence. Trump, therefore, was a bad president.

In many respects, of course, Trump has been worse than a bad president. Time and again, he has proven himself to be an abysmal one. I shall refrain here from rehearsing the now-familiar litany of his shortcomings. Let it simply be said that he is to the presidency what the CIA's George ("slam dunk") Tenet was to the craft of intelligence or the reckless Judith ("It was the best that I could do at the time") Miller of the *New York Times* was to responsible journalism: an embarrassment<sup>3</sup>. (Of course, unlike Tenet and Miller, who promoted needless wars, Trump in his erratic and impulsive way has sought to avert them).

Back in July 2017, I judged U.S. adherence to international norms during prior decades to have been spotty at best. We certainly can't blame Trump, for example, for Washington's repeated failure to resolve disputes "by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, ... or other peaceful means," as the Charter of the United Nations requires. Nor is Trump to be held accountable for the United States' noncompliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which obligates signatories to "facilitate the cessation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons, the liquidation of all their existing stockpiles, and the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons." And we certainly can't tag Trump with responsibility for the U.S. refusal to sign or ratify various norm-setting international agreements such as the Law of the Sea (1991), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996), the Ottawa Treaty (1997) banning the use of anti-personnel mines, and the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008).

All the hand-wringing about Trump's disregard for norms is a dodge. It's an excuse to avoid thinking seriously about what the election of Donald Trump in 2016 actually signified. The fact that the American people chose him – spare me, please, complaints about the popular vote, the electoral college, Russian meddling etc. – expresses the essential meaning of his presidency. If ever American politics offered a choice not an echo, it did so when Donald Trump ran against Hillary Clinton. As it turned out, what he was selling many Americans were buying. Sixty-two million citizens voted for him: the organs of the 'establishment' have not yet come to terms with that irreducible fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, "The 'Global Order' Myth," *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series*, 13 July 2017, <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AS-Bacevich>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Sykes, "The Pig Picture: Trump Team's Disregard for Global Norms," *Axios* (7 June 2018), <https://www.axios.com/trump-administration-foreign-policy-disregard-norms-3d7e141c-6ff2-4fec-8e22-20ec0e991b83.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Woodward: Tenet Told Bush WMD Case a 'Slam Dunk,'" *CNN* (19 April 2004); Judith Miller Defends Her Reporting at the "Times," *National Public Radio* (11 November 2005).

We can parse the implications of that 62,000,000 in multiple ways. But for readers of H-Diplo one particular implication takes precedence over all others: Trump voters endorsed his promise to repudiate the approach to foreign policy that successive administrations had followed since the end of the Cold War.

That approach had promised peace, prosperity, and perpetual American primacy. It delivered war, division, and American decline.

By putting “America First,” Trump was going to turn things around. Yet Trump is not a strategist; he is a huckster. His campaign slogan was devoid of content. Once in office, he created little and disrupted much. As far as America’s role in the world is concerned, Trump has been an agent of chaos.

“In the midst of chaos,” Sun Tse observed, “there is also opportunity.”<sup>4</sup> I’ll press the point further: Out of chaos can come clarity. Sometimes a bout of chaos paves the way for enlightenment. Chaos reveals what is false. If we are lucky, that just might define Trump’s historical legacy.

Along with *norms* (and *narrative!*), *inflection point* has emerged as one of the abiding clichés of the so-called ‘Age of Trump.’ Well, yes: It would appear that we have indeed arrived at an inflection point in global history. Whether defined by a reshuffling of great power rivalries, the demise of white supremacy, or the onset of ruinous climate change, this inflection point exposes as illusory the claim that America is history’s ‘indispensable nation’ – an assertion as preposterous as (if less vile than) Hitler’s claim to have created a ‘Thousand Year Reich.’

Where is the evidence? It’s found in grotesque military miscalculation. As strategic blunders, Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom rank alongside Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa in 1941. The wars that the United States undertook in Afghanistan and Iraq unfolded on a mercifully smaller scale than Hitler’s genocidal assault on the Soviet Union. Yet for the invaders the results were comparable: Gone for good were lives and treasure squandered to no purpose. Gone for good was a reputation of invincibility.

The American foreign policy establishment has yet to acknowledge the immensity of these twin failures. Its members have merely chosen to move on to a new problem set, with a Cold War pitting the United States against China the flavor du jour.

It has long been my view that Trump will rank among our least significant presidents. Most of the damage he has done can be repaired – even the damage done by the occupation and looting of the Capitol mere days before the end of his term in office.

Yet I cling stubbornly to the hope that Americans may actually learn something from this dismal chapter in our history. The Trump Moment invites the American people to disenthral themselves from the neo-imperial delusions of the post-Cold War period. Should Americans avail themselves of the opportunity to learn from the recent past, then the Trump Moment may actually yield something of benefit: foreign policies based on prudence, pragmatism, and restraint rather than ideological fantasies.

Trump may be a lousy president, but he may yet prove to be a great clarifier. Think about it: 74 million Americans voted to give him a second term. That number should command our attention.

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<sup>4</sup> Goodreads, “Quote from *A Arte da Guerra* by Sun Tzu,” n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/659546-in-the-midst-of-chaos-there-is-also-opportunity>.