

**Article Review of Elliott Abrams, “Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy,”** *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2017).

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In his recent commentary in *Foreign Affairs*, Elliott Abrams invites us to view the Trump administration’s approach to U.S. foreign policy as somewhat ordinary. Trump challenged Washington with iconoclastic rhetoric and arrived in office with a circle of ‘believers.’ He promised to ‘drain the swamp’ of old Washington hands and pursue policies that place ‘America First.’ Still, much of the Republican establishment expected Trump, once elected, to ‘pivot’ from candidate to president. They assumed Trump would eventually rise to the challenge and to the requirements of the office. Inevitably, he would come to understand the enormous U.S. interests at stake, the awesome responsibilities of the presidency, and the broad obligations of leading the nation. At the very least, he would defer to those who knew their way around town, and the world. The result: Trump would leave the campaign behind and adopt a familiar policy approach.

Abrams detects such a pivot, despite its somewhat unorthodox form. The movement is not fluid—a bit herky-jerky for Washington’s taste—and the vocalizations are more than distracting. Yet, according to Abrams, the Trump administration walks the walk of a traditional U.S. administration even if Trump does not always talk the talk of a traditional US president.

By my definition, however, the Trump administration, which is tied inescapably to its leadership, is not ‘traditional’ in any meaningful sense of the term. Thinking otherwise is wishful, even fanciful. I say this in reviewing three meanings of the term.

First, traditional denotes ‘conventional’ behavior—terms that Abrams uses interchangeably. I admit to subjectivity when labeling the conventional. We likely disagree over the criteria for judging whether past policies or procedures constitute existing practice. What is striking about this administration, though, is the breadth of its challenge to convention.

The administration's departures from precedent do not amount to a reshuffling of priorities, that is, a greater (or lesser) emphasis on democracy promotion, counterterrorism, big-power rivals, alliances, arms control and non-proliferation, global human rights abuses, trade, poverty, disease control, or inequality. Rather, Trump's foreign policy reflects wholesale disdain for long-standing U.S. priorities. The evidence is abundant in policy. As president, Trump has sought new barriers to legal immigration (the Statue of Liberty's inscription notwithstanding); shied from criticizing Russia despite its meddling in the U.S. election, aggression toward Ukraine, and support for the Assad regime of Syria; proposed dramatic cuts in US foreign assistance spending; sought to undermine the European Union, which brought peace to Europe after two world wars; threatened to tear up multilateral trade deals for short-term gains; warned NATO allies to pay their 'fair share' for defense, or suffer the consequences, as if he ran a protection racket; withdrew from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement which, signed by almost every country, binds them only to their own (flexible) pledges (and then purged relevant agencies of personnel and resources that could impugn or offset the administration's action); and, through word and deed, reduced the standing of U.S. diplomacy as an instrument of global influence.

Indeed, Abrams oddly points to human rights as an area in which the administration's approach follows tradition when Trump has ignored, even encouraged, rights abuses by giving implicit and explicit support to authoritarian leaders (in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and the Philippines) and announcing more generally that how other governments treat their citizens is not our business. Abrams concedes all of this, even admits the difficulty in displacing "Trump's deep aversion to telling friendly authoritarians how to run their countries." Still, he views Trump's aversions on human rights in light of the coddling of dictators in prior administrations and trumpets the message that the Trump administration sent to Syria when firing cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield in retaliation for a Syrian government chemical-weapons strike. Abrams acknowledges that "one cruise missile attack does not define a president's foreign policy." To this, I add, one big explosion is not a human-rights strategy.

Evidence of the nonconventional pervades U.S. policymaking too. Where is the 'conventional' when White House advisors engage in open warfare through leaks, rumors, and intrigue, savaging their counterparts in efforts to control the presidential mind and agenda? Which prior president set priorities by looking for daily 'wins' to dominate the news cycle and allowing his fits of pique to sideline all else on the agenda? Which prior president handed a family member—his son-in-law, with no prior experience in government—the portfolio for the world's trouble spots, to manage presumably when he was not also addressing his full set of domestic responsibilities?

Where is the conventional, moreover, in the disregard—indeed, flagrant disrespect—shown by the president, for the opinion of seasoned government officials? Which prior president showed such disinterest in policy that the President's Daily Briefing had to be reduced to a few bullet points, maps, and pictures, to keep the president's attention? Which president would have elevated personal loyalty above competence, ideology, and even party affiliation in staffing positions throughout government? Which president would have held professionals guilty of original sin by pointing to the Iraq-intelligence fiasco as reason not to buy the U.S. intelligence community's conclusions concerning Russian interference? For that matter, what other president has sought to dismantle the U.S. Department of State, a vestige of conventional practice? Even Richard Nixon, though detesting the liberal establishment, sought mainly to work around, and outsmart, not destroy it. Nixon could only dream about cutting the State Department budget by thirty percent.

Here, the challenges to convention represent no less than a frontal assault on norms that have long governed presidential conduct in government. Trump's flaunting of convention – which Trump attributes to his

pursuit of “a different kind of presidency”<sup>1</sup>—promotes rivalry and distrust within government, fuels partisanship, and undermines the confidence of all Americans in governing institutions by relaying the message that politics is a game, without consequences beyond who wins and who loses.

Second, traditional implies ‘standard’ behavior. Although Abrams treats these terms as synonymous, “standard” comes with additional meanings.

Specifically, standard behavior suggests consistency in behavior, something that is certainly missing from Trump’s presidential communications. Presidential tweets, off-the-cuff remarks at campaign-style rallies, and press-conference diatribes are critical communications for they speak to administration intentions and behavior. Whether tweets—like the presidential ‘directive-by-tweet’ on transsexuals serving in uniform—are ‘official’ is somewhat beside the point. That White House advisors choose to reinterpret, or discount, these statements when they prove inconvenient only serves, backhandedly, to ratify their importance. No less important to undermining consistency is what Trump has left ‘unsaid.’ When the president deliberately omits reference to U.S. obligations under Article 5 of the NATO treaty in a meeting of alliance leaders in Brussels, while chastising allies for their paltry defense contributions, what are they to make of that? One could argue that the truth emerged, days later, in Trump’s statement that the United States was committed to the collective defense of Europe.<sup>2</sup> But choreography is everything; and Trump knew that when he delivered the initial message. Perhaps nothing speaks to the less-traditional nature of this presidency more than the fact that, for nearly seven decades, the United States bound itself to Europe through unrelenting repetition of the United States’ defensive obligation in both word and deed. The U.S. deployed its conventional and nuclear forces to hammer that point. Believing that even that measure was insufficient, leaders ensured that the U.S. defense commitment was echoed intentionally in ceremony, presidential visits, port visits, consultative routines, high-level meetings, military exercises, and all the like. Adversaries were to have no doubt about where the United States stood in the event of an attack. Put simply, tradition thrived on repetition, as it does now. The national anthem, after all, is played at every ball game, not just the Super Bowl or when time permits.

Trump’s eccentricities aside, questions arise over consistency in administration policy. That some of the examples that Abrams employs appear outdated—a few short weeks after they appeared in print—is telling. Can anyone predict with any confidence today what the Trump administration will do when the Iran nuclear deal is again up for recertification? Whether the administration will hold firm in Afghanistan, escalate U.S. involvement, or withdraw? How the administration will balance efforts to fix trade relations with China, with stopping China’s encroachments in the South China Sea and acquiring its influence over North Korea? Whether the administration will tilt more, or tilt less, toward Israel when peace negotiations likely falter? Trump has promoted the virtues of unpredictability, as he did during his campaign: “We must as a nation be

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Pace, “Trump at 100 days: ‘It’s a different kind of presidency,’” *Associated Press*, 24 April 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/c9dd871023064917932966816d6c2c2d>.

<sup>2</sup> Robbie Gramer, “Trump Discovers Article 5 after Disastrous NATO Visit,” *Foreign Policy* (2017), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/trump-discovers-article-5-after-disastrous-nato-visit-brussels-visit-transatlantic-relationship-europe/>.

more unpredictable.”<sup>3</sup> As Richard Haass notes, however, “this can make sense as a tactic, but not as a strategy.”<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, standard behavior implies the coherence necessary to guide policy and practice. By this accounting, tradition keeps policymakers acting in harmony to serve established policy objectives. Indeed, good policy demands a fugue: a thematic echo that resonates throughout official Washington and the workings of agencies charged with implementation. Yet coherence was a casualty when, in the midst of a nuclear confrontation with North Korea, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Americans that they can rest easily—that there is no imminent threat of war—when the president was announcing to the world that the U.S. arsenal was now “locked and loaded,” ready to unleash “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>5</sup> Skeptics understandably ask whether the administration actually has a policy.

Now I appreciate that things are not always as they appear, and the seemingly erratic has its place in a grander strategy. On this score, some have noted Trump’s affinity for the so-called madman theory: feigning irrationality, a president can get his way in confrontations because no one will fool with a madman. By this theory, then, Trump’s behavior should stand apart from the norm, as represented by others in his administration. I have doubts, admittedly, about whether these ideas constitute a legitimate social-scientific ‘theory,’ shorn, as they are, of necessary conditions. Do they assume that one, and *only* one, of the two parties has read Schelling,<sup>6</sup> or that neither of the parties is actually mad? I have graver doubts about whether the ‘theory’ translates into coherent policy. A president who alternates between flattering his North Korean counterpart (and inviting him to meet) and threatening to blow his country off the map could arguably appear ‘mad’ to some observers, but will he appear sufficiently mad—especially with conflicting statements from other officials—for the policy to work? For that matter, will he then appear sufficiently accommodating (that is, less of a lunatic) to convince an adversary ultimately to cooperate, necessary also for the policy to work? True, there is virtue in a multiplicity of roles—a good cop/bad cop routine, casting Trump as the heavy—if that is in fact administration strategy. Yet there is also little in Trump’s decisional and consultative history to suggest that he will opt for deep strategizing over visceral emoting. The benefits of good cop/bad cop diminish considerably when it is not an intentional strategy: the players must know when they have gained what they can—and have the foresight to end the game.

Third, traditional behavior suggests embedded behavior. It is grounded in practice, the familiar, and the routine. It is often ‘understood’ simply as ‘the way things are.’ The machinery of U.S. diplomacy, with its thousands of foreign-service officers serving globally in assorted political-military, economic, consular, and

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Sullivan and Karen Tumulty, “Trump Promised an ‘Unpredictable’ Foreign Policy. To Allies it Looks Incoherent,” *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-promised-an-unpredictable-foreign-policy-to-allies-it-looks-incoherent/2017/04/11/21acde5e-1a3d-11e7-9887-1a5314b56a08\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-promised-an-unpredictable-foreign-policy-to-allies-it-looks-incoherent/2017/04/11/21acde5e-1a3d-11e7-9887-1a5314b56a08_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Haass, “Where to Go From Here: Rebooting American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump. The Locked and Loaded President,” *CNN*, 11 August 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/11/politics/trump-locked-and-loaded/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

management positions, testifies to such embeddedness. For that reason, tradition is threatened when the fabric of that structure is under assault. It is hard to conclude otherwise when assistant secretary positions remain unfilled at the State Department;<sup>7</sup> most U.S. ambassadors have yet to be nominated (including, at this writing, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea); dedicated foreign-service officers, at all levels, remain uncertain about their future foreign-policy roles; the incoming class of foreign-service officers was kept in limbo by a hiring freeze; and the next generation of U.S. leaders shies from government-service careers, which have now lost their luster.

Paradoxically, however, such embeddedness presents the strongest reason to predict the triumph of tradition. Although Trump surrounded himself with advisors – Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, Sebastian Gorka, among others—who hail from the nationalist fringe of American politics, the administration must also depend on Washington professionals—senior military officers as much as high and low-level policy professionals—to get things done. Whereas these professionals constitute the ‘deep state’ enemy that Steve Bannon envisions, Abrams is at his best in recognizing the irony that, in failing to fill key government posts, the administration is defaulting to acting officials—Democrats most likely—with some ability to get things done. Some in government have pushed back; others have hunkered down, expecting, perhaps, that ‘this too will pass.’ They know what the administration will soon learn: change is difficult, U.S. power is not absolute, and productive resolutions require cooperation, not just bluster and threats, or headlong leaps into the unknown. The problems of the past do not reduce simply to feckless and duplicitous U.S. leadership; nor do they find solutions in ignoring history, as Jared Kushner confided to Congressional interns, was required to bridge the Israel-Palestinian divide.<sup>8</sup>

I concede, in the end, that my differences with Abrams’s interpretation reduce, in places, to a matter of emphasis. The continuities between this and prior administrations exceed the discontinuities, as we should expect given preexisting U.S. global power, responsibilities, relationships, and commitments. I concede further that Abrams is correct: we are only half-a-year into this administration, and much remains unsettled. For one, Steve Bannon has departed the administration, though he still has a voice (and a phone). Even at a distance, Bannon’s views will continue to resonate ideologically and politically for Trump, who obviously chose his advisors for a reason. Abrams is also correct that Trump has placed knowledgeable professionals in key national-security posts. Yet the administration almost strives for the ‘drama’ that President Obama openly disdained, and its problems run deeper than those of an absence of professional opinion. We should not assume that professionals speak with one reasonable voice, as if there were no daylight between their views, or their views and elected leaders. To quote the great French politician Georges Clemenceau on the subject, ‘War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men.’

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Yourish and Gregor Aisch, “The Top Jobs in Trump’s Administration are Mostly Vacant: Who’s to Blame?,” *New York Times*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/07/17/us/politics/trump-appointments.html?mcubz=0>; Christopher Woody, “Rex Tillerson Still Has a Skeleton Crew at the State Department to Deal with North Korea,” *Business Insider*, 5 July 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/rex-tillerson-vacancies-at-state-department-2017-7>.

<sup>8</sup> Ashley Feinberg, “Kushner on Middle East Peace: “What Do We Offer That’s Unique? I Don’t Know.” *Wired*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.wired.com/story/jared-kushner-middle-east/>.

Trump, a selective history buff, is unlikely to draw useful lessons from the First World War. Indeed, Trump shunted aside the Afghanistan War. First, he delegated decisions for an incremental force increase to his Defense Secretary, without a strategy to guide deployment. Then, he reluctantly accepted an advisory recommendation that amounted to staying the current course.<sup>9</sup> Trump, as he announced in his national address, would pursue a non-strategy. It was bereft of timelines, end-dates, troop-level specifics, short- or long-term goals, or transparency. Importantly, though, it promised a ‘win.’ I note, by contrast, that Barack Obama met with his advisors in nine difficult sessions, in fall 2009, to produce his 18-month surge strategy.<sup>10</sup> We can fault Obama’s decision on valid grounds but the fact remains that he repeatedly gathered his advisors, sought to understand the problem, deliberatively reviewed the evidence and options, and ultimately made his own decision.

If tradition finally wins out, it will do so because the voices of experience, at home and abroad, will successfully communicate the pitfalls of a bold ‘me-first’ strategy and the constraints on military or unilateral action. If tradition loses out, the effects will register, I fear, in the diminution in U.S. global standing, the breeding of unneeded conflict, the destruction of norms within government that make for effective policy, and the sacrifice of much ‘greatness’ that America has held as a global guiding force.

The bottom line: Abrams sees a Trump foreign policy that is “remarkably unremarkable.” I detect a policy that is ambivalently ambiguous, that could become decidedly worse.

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, “‘It’s a Hard Problem’: Behind the Decision: Debate, Infighting and Stalemate, and Finally a Bow to the Generals,” *Washington Post*, 22 August 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/its-a-hard-problem-inside-trumps-decision-to-send-more-troops-to-afghanistan/2017/08/21/14dcb126-868b-11e7-a94f-3139abce39f5_story.html).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Baker, “How Obama Came to Plan for ‘Surge’ in Afghanistan.” *New York Times*, 5 December 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/world/asia/06reconstruct.html?mcubz=0>.