

America and the World - 2017 and Beyond "Trump The Tweeter"

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If Hilary Clinton had been elected President it would have been a relatively easy to describe her foreign policy commitments, preferences, and likely responses to possible challenges. She is on record at some length on numerous issues as Senator, Secretary of State, and Democratic presidential candidate. Trump, by contrast, is a newcomer to the policy world, and a total novice when it comes to foreign policy. He made some dramatic pronouncements during his campaign and since his electoral victory has largely communicated by late-night tweets. It is hard to say anything meaningful in 140 characters, although the President-elect has demonstrated how easy it is to use this format to garner publicity and show disdain or ignorance of diplomatic norms and existing American policies.

Given the great uncertainty surrounding Trump's likely foreign policy, I am giving myself the more feasible task of describing Trump's personality and style and its implications for foreign policy. There can be little doubt that presidential personality and style greatly influence, if not shape, the process by which foreign policy is made, and that process in turn has a significant impact on the substance of policy. Alexander and Juliette George demonstrated these links convincingly in the case of Woodrow Wilson, and other scholars have done the same for Franklin Roosevelt and almost every other president since.² Wilson's deep aversion to compromise characterized his behavior as President of Princeton and of the United States, and was arguably responsible for the Senate's rejection of the League of Nations. Franklin Roosevelt's desire for control led him to set up a government of overlapping responsibilities with cabinet and agency heads deliberately at

¹ This essay was written on 05 December 2016.

² Alexander and Juliette George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (Mineola: Dover, 1964).

loggerheads.³ Ronald Reagan had little substantive knowledge of foreign policy, a short attention span, a horror of nuclear war and his role of Commander-in-Chief in this regard, and responded more to people than to ideas.⁴ All of these characteristics made him a successful interlocutor with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, and greatly facilitated a peaceful end to the Cold War.⁵

What might we expect from Donald Trump? It is hazardous to analyze someone's personality from afar, but presidents are fair game, and the President-elect has given us no shortage of insights into what makes him tick. He comes across as someone with a short attention span and even shorter fuse. He is insecure and constantly seeking attention, recognition, and respect. Yet, his efforts to achieve them – attention aside – are often counterproductive. They also border on the pathological as he is willing to lie and ignore or distort facts to buttress his ego. Consider his claim that “the Hispanics Love me—they were chanting for me” after being met by protesters at the US-Mexico Border enraged by his insulting depiction of Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals.⁶ Or, his outrageous assertion that he really won the popular vote “if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.”⁷

In one twenty-four hour period in early December Trump's provocative tweets began with an incendiary and legally ill-informed pronouncement that people who burned the American flag should be stripped of their citizenship. Then came statements of policy, about Carrier air conditioning and a vague promise to separate himself from his business interests. They were followed by indiscreet tweets about all the people he was considering for the position of Secretary of State. The pattern of publicity seeking tweets hopped randomly from topic to topic, treating each in a superficial way, with no apparent concern for the consequences to himself, the people mentioned, or the office of the presidency. Trump has always thrived on publicity and acted the same way in business and on the NBC reality television show, “The Apprentice,” where he gleefully served as chief protagonist and impresario and routinely contradicted himself. Putting the best gloss on Trump's approach to the presidency, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich observed that he was not at all comfortable with a “corporate staffed background,” but had a personality-driven and improvisational one. It seems reasonable to infer that his presidency is likely to resemble his business dealings and television life.⁸

On 20 January a politically inexperienced and naïve narcissist will take the oath of office. Tweets will all but replace press conferences, unless his son-in-law and others are able to restrain him. He will take foreign policy

³ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: Science Editions, 1960).

⁴ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, “The End of the Cold War as a Non-Linear Confluence,” in Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Ending the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), 189-218.

⁵ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein,

⁶ Heather Saul, “Donald Trump declares ‘the Hispanics love me – they were chanting for me’ after being met by protesters at the US-Mexico Border,” *The Independent*, 24 July 2015.

⁷ Michael Shear and Maggie Haberman, “Trump Claims, With No Evidence, that ‘Millions of People’ Voted Illegally,” *New York Times*, 27 November 2016.

⁸ Alexander Burns, “Trump's theatrics invite drama,” *New York Times International Edition*, 2 December 2016.

advice from a small circle of advisors who are likely to rise and fall in influence to the degree they flatter their boss. In addition to family members who will surround him in the White House he has made cabinet and other appointments that do not bode well for a balanced or responsible foreign policy. Half of his advisors come from Wall Street and most of the rest from the military. If confirmed by the Senate, the Secretary of Defense, director of intelligence, and national security advisors will for the first time be ex-military.

All three men are unrepresentative of the armed services in their politics and personalities. They are more extreme in their political views, not at all team players, and share to varying degrees Trump's view of the Washington elite as corrupt and incompetent. National Security Advisor Lt. Gen Michael T. "Mad Dog" Flynn convinced himself in the absence of any evidence that Iran was behind the storming of the American embassy in Benghazi. He is something of a cult figure among Republicans by virtue of being forced to step down as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency for his outspoken criticism of President Barack Obama's Middle Eastern policies. He is famous for being intolerant, telling subordinates that "the boss is always right," and surrounding himself with "yes men."⁹ Nominated Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis, was removed by Obama for his opposition to negotiations with Iran and criticisms of the President's alleged failure not to take Islamic fundamentalism seriously enough.¹⁰ Then there is the new head of the CIA, former congressman Mike Pompeo. He called CIA waterboarders heroes, backs National Security Agency (NSA) collecting any kind of data it wants, and has called for the execution of leaker Edward Snowden.

With men like these whispering in the President's ear, I offer the following predictions:

The administration will become increasingly isolated. Trump is unlikely to consult widely within government, but limit himself to his inner circle of officials and advisors and perhaps some outside political and personal contacts. His occasional contacts with career officials are likely to be one-way conversations, some of them unpleasant in tone and substance. These officials will feel increasingly frustrated, and all the more so for having to work for political appointees who brook no dissent and try to force what they are likely to consider misguided or even crackpot ideas and policies on them. There will be lots of leaks and departures. Since the election I have already received three inquiries and one application from high-ranking State Department and military officials for the long-distance PhD program at War Studies.

The importance of the inner circle of advisors will heighten the power conflicts among them. They will do their best to control the President's access to information and push their preferred policies. There will be significant differences among them, more I suspect, about their relative importance than about policies. To a greater degree than usual the policies they support will be those judged instrumental in winning presidential favor.

Trump will continue to publicize opinions on social media on subjects he knows nothing about. This medium, in contrast to press conferences and interviews, keeps him physically isolated from his audience and gives others no chance to confront him directly on the truthfulness or wisdom of his remarks. He can back

⁹ Matthew Rosenberg, Mark Mazzetti, and Eric Schmitt, "In Trump's Security Pick, Michael Flynn, 'Sharp Elbows' and No Dissent," *New York Times*, 3 December 2016.

¹⁰ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Ex-Marine Picked to Run Pentagon," *New York Times International Edition*, 3-4 December 2016.

away from ill-considered tweets, but at some cost. They are also likely to increase disenchantment with him in the bureaucracy and Congress and possibly sow further discord among his intimate advisors if he advocates policies they find difficult to support. Infighting will replicate the environment of Trump the candidate. The President could end up increasingly isolated and the victim of self-referential information and opinions. And all the more so if he keeps refusing CIA daily intelligence briefings on the grounds he is “like, a smart person.”

Foreign audiences may take offence at Trump’s tweets as the Chinese did when he tweeted a return greeting to Taiwan’s President. Beijing’s response led to escalating messages that expanded the substantive focus of controversy.¹¹ Other foreign audiences will discount most of Trump’s public statements, if they do not already. They will rely more on messages through regular diplomatic channels. This, in turn, can create problems if those officials with whom they communicate have little authority and if these messages increase the tension between them and the President. It is easy to imagine an escalating struggle over communications. Not all foreign leaders will be put off by Trump’s tweets. Those about whom he says something nice will feel elated, if not empowered and say nice things in return. Some leaders – most likely dictators -- will consciously play this game and flatter Trump in the hope of gaining his public approval. They may see domestic gains in doing so and the possibility of minimizing foreign reaction to their treatment of the neighbors or own peoples. Democratic leaders everywhere will feel exasperated and at the same time constrained for personal and political reasons from playing this game.

Ronald Reagan tended to judge countries on the basis of their leaders. Trump could take this kind of judgment to a new level. He freely admits that he likes Russian President Vladimir Putin because the Russian leader has spoken favorably about him.¹² A similar dynamic appears to characterize his attitudes towards Britain’s ex-United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, Turkey’s President Recep Erdoğan and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Almost all of Trump’s foreign contacts are business people with whom he has had dealings in the course of licensing his name for hotels and golf courses. He will meet diplomats and other leaders in the course of his presidency, but perhaps see them and their countries through the prism of his business contacts. Either way, this intensely personal orientation is likely to give him, shall we say, peculiar views of these countries, and put him conflict with the State and Defense Department, many senators, and allies.

Trump prides himself on being one of the world’s greatest negotiators. Part of the reason he has savaged so many recent treaties and agreements, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iran nuclear deal is his need to assert that he could have done better. Trump is accustomed to negotiating agreements in real estate, not delivering on what he has promised, and then offering aggrieved parties a percentage of what they should have received. His recent settlement of the suit against him in Florida regarding fraud on the part of Trump University is the most recent example. He may behave the same way with states, beginning with Iran. If so, he will quickly discover the cost and difficulty of backing out of and renegotiating “deals” that involve multiple parties, most, if not all, of whom see the status quo as preferable to uncertainty.

¹¹ Jane Perlez, “China Amplifies Warning on Taiwan and Trump Takes a Tougher Line,” *New York Times*, 5 December 2016.

¹² Jeremy Diamond, “Timeline: Donald Trump’s Praise for Vladimir Putin,” CNN, 29 July 2016; Bryan Schatz, “A History of Donald Trump’s Bromance with Vladimir Putin,” *Mother Jones*, 5 October 2016.

Worst-case analysis could prompt some bizarre scenarios, including one in which Trump's erratic behavior and failure to satisfy key voter constituencies gives the Democrats a big advantage in the off-year congressional elections. An increasingly isolated and ineffectual president could simply resign – or find consolation in conspiracy theories, never far from his consciousness in the best of times. He could allege that economic or foreign policy failures were the result of a conspiracy against him by Democrats, diplomats, Muslims, and Hispanics. He would most likely be supported by Michael Flynn -- if he were still national security advisor -- as he and his son have spread false news stories on line linking Hilary Clinton to underage sex rings and other crimes.¹³ Allegations of this kind, launched in social media broadsides, might arouse some of his supporters. They could also give rise to calls for impeachment on the grounds of mental instability.

In the best-case scenario Trump allows himself to have “handlers,” who prise his cell phone from his hands and only return it when he has demonstrated good behavior. His more irresponsible appointments, like Flynn and Mattis, could self-destruct à la Alexander Haig during the Reagan administration. Under pressure from Republican senators they could be replaced by more responsible figures. They in turn might encourage him to reach a modus vivendi with the State Department and U.S. foreign policy become more orderly, at least how it is conducted. Trump would still remain an intensely insecure man seeking confirmation of his talent, which would leave him vulnerable to exploitation at home and abroad.

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¹³ Matthew Rosenberg, “Trump Advisor Has Pushed Clinton Conspiracy Theories, *New York Times*, 6 December 2016.