



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Donald Trump Confronts the World

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October 26, 2020

How time passes when you are having fun. Four years ago the most unusual presidential campaign of recent times was nearing its close.

On foreign policy, at least, it was evident that Donald Trump was not just another Washington apparatchik bewitched by the conventional wisdom. He would not spend his free time asking members of the infamous Blob for advice on which new country to bomb or invade.

Neoconservatives were especially worried. Trump criticized stupid wars and faithless allies with equal avidity. He broke with the GOP establishment and joined the rest of the population in criticizing the disastrous Iraq War. Year before he ran for office he published barbed ads denouncing the Europeans, Saudis, and South Koreans for scrimping on defense while expecting Americans to cover their lengthy defense tabs.

He attacked his predecessor's "reckless, rudderless and aimless foreign policy, one that has blazed the path of destruction in its wake." Even more dramatically, Trump declared: "unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength. Although not in government service, I was totally against the war in Iraq, very proudly, saying for many years that it would destabilize the Middle East."

OMG, what if he is serious, exclaimed members of the Blob in unison!

Four years later he has delivered mostly disappointment. He had promise, potential, possibility. But he dissipated most of that, leaving an extensive list of might-have-beens. Perhaps he would feel unbridled if reelected, and therefore free to pursue his original antiwar objectives. Or he might concentrate on implementing his worst, most explosive, belligerent inclinations.

Trump, the Good. The high point of the Trump presidency might have been trashing the Blob, as President Barack Obama's Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes called the bipartisan foreign policy establishment. Merely having a president who disparaged the usual warmongering elite was a major positive. A president who did not assume that every spot on earth, whether land or water, was "vital" to U.S. security and therefore warranted a base, deployment, alliance, commitment, guarantee, red line, or some other promise to waste American lives and wealth defending whatever had become the "vital" interest du jour.

Also beneficial was Trump's inelegant complaint about endless alliances devolving into defense doles for prosperous, populous allies. He never went the logical next step, proposing to shift security responsibility onto Asian, Middle Eastern, and European states. Rather, he sought to turn American personnel into de facto mercenaries, renting them out to rich friends who bought

US weapons or constructed bases in return. Still, Trump offered an entertaining change from Washington officials desperately seeking to "reassure" allies of America's absolute, perpetual commitment – and then wondering why those same governments continued to expect the US to do the heavy lifting.

Another slight win was the president talking about withdrawing American forces from distant conflicts from which they should have long ago been removed. The mere mention of the possibility was a welcome advance. Although he proved unable to halt even one endless war – demonstrating his persistent lack of seriousness, attention span, and follow through – his threat to do so triggered a collective meltdown of Blob members forced to imagine a world in which Washington was not deeply involved in every conflict on every continent, no matter how terrible the combat or irrelevant the interest. Trump's incomplete, unfulfilled pronouncements caused war-happy neoconservatives and liberal internationalists alike to engage in a tsunami of wailing, gnashing of teeth, and frenzied self-flagellation. They ever more loudly warned of the end of the liberal order and imminent descent of the new Dark Ages even as sane, even normal and well-adjusted Americans instinctively recognized that there was no reason for successive administrations to nation build in Afghanistan, confront multiple hostile forces in Syria, or sort out Libya's painfully long implosion.

Engaging North Korea diplomatically also was a major positive, even though Trump characteristically failed to follow through, turning policy implementation over to National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – who spent much of his tenure attempting to start a war with Iran – leading to easy sabotage. No one in Washington seriously believes there is the slightest chance that Kim Jong-un will yield his entire nuclear arsenal, let alone do so before receiving any economic benefits and security guarantees. Still, the president demonstrated the potential for direct negotiation and obvious benefits of establishing diplomatic and economic links.

In practice, these good actions primarily created warm feelings of *schadenfreude* as the bipartisan War Party realized that it no longer could count on a president sharing its willingness to send other people off to war. Which suggested the possibility of eventually electing someone both committed to and capable of implementing a truly noninterventionist, pro-peace policy. One centered on advancing US interests while respecting the rights of other nations and promoting a better international order.

Trump, the Bad. Alas, much of the president's international policies have been bad. Such as his war on trade and immigration, both of which enrich the US materially and culturally. His foolish trade war against most of the world hurt American consumers, exporters, and producers. People of modest incomes suffered disproportionately. Barring immigration of the talented and entrepreneurial slowed economic growth and job creation. Rejecting refugees from war and victims of persecution contradicted America's founding values and sullied America's good name.

The president's lack of follow through on, well, almost everything made him a figure of contempt with the Blob and even his appointees, who often ran their own foreign policy. No matter how often he insisted that he wanted to bring home US troops, members of his own administration rolled him. Indeed, to keep America entangled in Syria they suggested a new and inane justification for illegally maintaining a 600-member garrison – to steal the country's small oilfields. Everyone else in the administration wanted the US troops to create a Kurdish state in

Syria, force out the Russians and Iranians, oust Assad from power, establish a new, liberal political order, and perhaps do other, unstated but wonderful things. None of these objectives was either a sensible or prudent use of American military power.

Another bad policy was claiming to want to improve relations with Russia while creating an ever more hostile atmosphere toward Moscow. Although the Putin regime is no friend of liberty, Russia is much reduced from the Soviet Union and doesn't threaten America anywhere; indeed, Europe can and should alone contain Moscow.

Yet Trump has given free rein to the perverse alliance of Neocons desperate for a permanent enemy and former Soviet-friendly liberal Democrats looking to score political points against him. This anti-Trump coalition has preserved the post-Cold War policy of treating Russia as an enemy – lying about NATO expansion, trashing Moscow's interests in the Balkans, pushing to bring Georgia and Ukraine into the transatlantic alliance, encouraging the overthrow of Russia-friendly governments. Then the Blob acted as if it was shocked, shocked when Putin responded with hostility. One can only imagine the wild hysteria that would overcome Washington if the positions were reversed, if Russia was overthrowing governments in Mexico City and Ottawa and seeking to bring those governments into NATO. Members of the Blob would lose their collective mind.

Equally bad is the administration's avid use of economic sanctions against any government that resists its dictates. Pompeo outdid himself by insisting, demanding, dictating, threatening, clamoring, and pressuring other nations to submit to US rules. Misusing American dominance of the financial system created growing international support for developing alternative financial mechanisms and payment systems and ending the dollar's status as a reserve currency, which would cost America dearly.

In the meantime, the administration's starvation-first policies enforced by sanctions on Syria and Venezuela and only slightly less harsh treatment of Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Russia failed to change the policy of any target state. To hurt Moscow and, perhaps even more important, sell more LNG in Europe, Washington even sanctioned Germany's Nord Stream 2 project with Russia. Yet US officials seem mystified that European officials contemptuously reject US demands that they fall in behind Washington's counterproductive campaigns against its enemy du jour. The Europeans have so far chosen Iran's theocratic autocracy over the administration.

Trump, the Ugly. The decision to turn American policy in the Middle East over to Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu created injustice, hardship, destruction, and death; threatened additional, even more destructive wars; and kept Americans entangled in a region of ever less importance to America. So disastrous and otherwise inexplicable is this policy that critics uncharitably speculated that the Saudis bought the allegiance of the president and/or his family with promises of future commercial deals.

The administration ignored MbS' brutal domestic rule and many international follies: invading Yemen, kidnapping Lebanon's prime minister, backing jihadists in Syria, subsidizing tyrannical regimes in Bahrain and Egypt, launching diplomatic and economic war against Qatar, and fomenting civil war in Libya. In Israel the administration advanced a "Deal of the Century" – for Netanyahu as he desperately sought reelection and Israeli settlers who wanted to annex the West Bank, not for Palestinians, who would be permanently treated as a source of cheap labor in a system of militarized-Apartheid.

The administration's fixation on Iran has been the worst aspect of subcontracting US foreign policy to Saudi princes and clerics and Israeli extremists and nationalists. The JCPOA, the Obama administration's nuclear accord, kept Tehran's nuclear program in check while offering the prospect of economic integration, thereby deepening the gulf between Islamist elites and the Western-leaning young. However, Trump abandoned the agreement, imposed pervasive sanctions, and demanded Tehran's de facto surrender. Since then Iran refused to negotiate as hardliners reasserted political control. The regime restarted its nuclear program, challenged Gulf oil traffic, attacked Saudi oil facilities, and used proxy forces to strike American bases in Iraq. The president nevertheless called his policy a success – even as Pompeo publicly whined that the US might have to close its embassy in Baghdad because of Iranian pressure. Quite a victory over Iran, Mikey!

The president also caused whiplash when he shifted US policy toward China from sycophancy to belligerency to meet his reelection needs. The People's Republic of China poses serious challenges to America but suffers from numerous serious weaknesses. The economy has systemic problems, the politics of Xi Jinping's tyranny may be unstable, and demographic challenges may leave the PRC old before it becomes rich.

Most important, Beijing does not threaten the US militarily. No one imagines an attack on the American homeland. Rather, Washington is challenging the PRC in East Asia – the equivalent of the Chinese navy steaming along the East Coast and into the Caribbean, while purporting to dictate American policy toward Cuba and Latin America. The US should work with like-minded states to defend Western interests while expecting friendly Asian states to manage their own defense. Most Beijing officials would like to see him gone, because of his unpredictability rather than hostility, although some believe Trump is useful since he has undermined America's international image.

Overall, Trump's foreign policy is decidedly negative. Which makes this another depressing presidential election for anyone who favors peace and an end to US warmongering abroad. Yet if Trump merely did what he promised, most importantly, exited Middle Eastern wars, he would vastly improve his record. Moreover, his performance must be compared to the likely behavior of the coterie of international meddlers and wannabe warriors surrounding Joe Biden. Alas, in many ways the latter looks even worse than Trump.

These days every presidential election appears to be a bait and switch. Candidates promise to initiate humble foreign policies and halt endless wars. Presidents start new conflicts and keep fighting old ones. Maybe, someday, someone will be elected who will break the mold in practice as well as rhetoric.

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