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## Donald Trump: The 'Manchurian (Neoconservative) Candidate'?

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He took barely three months to reveal the truth. Donald Trump is the true Manchurian Candidate, only a tool of Neoconservatives rather than Communists. A new movie is sure to come and undoubtedly will be a smash, the biggest ever with the most Academy Awards ever, at least if President Trump has his way.

Donald Trump ran as a populist. Some conservative critics imagined that he was a plant pushed into the presidential race by the Clintons to ensure Hillary's election. If true, that plan sure backfired.

It's looking more likely that he was a Neoconservative plant instead. The Neocons, whose objective is a war on every continent, multiple permanent military commitments persisting until the end of time, and massive armed services ready to bomb, invade, and occupy every square foot of the earth, realized that they were chiefs without Indians. Most Americans were more interested in defending the U.S. than the rest of the globe. Average folks didn't see much reason to bankrupt the nation attempting to remake other societies, irrespective of history, religion, ethnicity, geography, and culture. People didn't like having their relatives in uniform treated as gambit pawns in a global chess game by Washington's ivory tower warriors.

The Iraq debacle left a particularly bad odor. The "cakewalk" generated thousands of dead and tens of thousands of wounded Americans, sectarian civil war, hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of displaced Iraqis, mass religious persecution and "cleansing," al-Qaeda in Iraq turned Islamic State, and enhanced Iranian influence. Heck'eva job, Georgie Bush!

Donald Trump turned out to be the perfect answer for the Neocons. He'd supported the Iraq war but claimed to be against it. And he became almost the only Republican presidential contender to criticize the invasion ordered by the last Republican president. He also urged withdrawing from Afghanistan, which no one else even mentioned. These stands offered perfect camouflage for his Neocon inner self.

Then he made a populist pitch to win the votes of Americans who were tired of being stuck with GOP candidates who wanted the U.S. to be the global 911 number. During the campaign he criticized nation-building and aggressive war. He advocated staying out of Syria's civil war, focusing instead on ISIS. He opposed President Barack Obama's proposed attack over Syria's apparent use of chemical weapons and said congressional authority was necessary for such a strike.

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Georgia and Ukraine, which were irrelevant for U.S. security. Trump suggested talking to North Korea's Kim Jong-un and said the U.S. didn't get its money's worth from the alliance with the Republic of Korea. The GOP candidate even questioned Washington's defense of the oil-rich Saudi royals.

Overall, President Trump called for an "America first" approach, which his critics treated as a horrid throwback to the bad old days when the U.S. didn't attempt to patrol the globe and engage in social engineering far and wide. He still urged a military build-up, promised to defeat ISIS, and demonized Iran. But his foreign policy views represented a dramatic break from those of President George W. Bush and subsequent GOP presidential nominees John McCain and Mitt Romney. For the first time in years, the Republican contender was more in tune with the interests and views of general citizens than elites.

Alas, having taken office, he's obviously been activated by his Neocon controllers. He now is shifting U.S. foreign policy in precisely the opposite direction. Most important, more wars are in the offing. There will be more subsidies to more allies. And American military personnel will continue to be tossed about the world to serve the interests of populous and prosperous allies rather than the United States.

For instance, any "reset" with Russia has gone by the boards. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson explained that better relations would require Moscow to disgorge Crimea, which no one believes is going to occur. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley appeared to be acting as secretary of state when she insisted that Russia be punished for backing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Score one for the Neocons.

NATO has gone from "obsolete" to a wonderful, fabulous organization which should be kept around to ensure the Europeans don't have to do much to protect themselves. The president has taken credit for the fact that Germany's share of GDP devoted to the military skyrocketed from 1.19 percent last year to 1.22 percent this year. Now he can rest on his laurels, just like the German and other European governments. And NATO expansion continues, with the administration backing admission of the military and economic powerhouse Montenegro. Monaco will probably be next on the administration's agenda.

Score two for the Neocons.

President Trump has been in full bluster mode regarding North Korea, glorying in the "armada" he was sending to threaten Pyongyang while his appointees acted as a Greek Chorus insisting that "all options are on the table," meaning military action. However, talking with the North apparently was decidedly, completely, and fully off the table. No longer any silly nonsense about negotiation.

Score three for the Neocons.

A succession of administration officials—Secretary Tillerson, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, and Vice President Mike Pence—trooped to Seoul to reassure the South Koreans. No more criticism of a country with 40 times the GDP, twice the population, and massive technological and industrial edge over its adversary for acting helpless and relying on America for its defense. And no more talk that maybe the South should develop its own nukes, allowing Washington to extricate itself from the Korean imbroglio.

Score four for the Neocons.

Now Donald Trump wants to make U.S. involvement in Presidents Bush's and Obama's wars forever. The administration is talking about a permanent garrison in Iraq, to back continued sectarian rule in Baghdad. The president now plans to stay in Afghanistan and even is considering a major increase in military forces there. Finally, President Trump has proposed creating "safe zones" in Syria, which would require a major military deployment, while administration officials are talking about promoting regime change, their only disagreement being over timing, whether Assad's ouster should wait for the Islamic State's defeat.

Score five for the Neocons.

On occasion the president is still falling short of Neocon orthodoxy. There's his attack on foreign "aid," for instance. The Neocons like giving away Americans' money as well as making war. Perhaps he hasn't been fully activated yet. Or perhaps restoring those programs will be left up to Congress.

Moreover, the president has yet to buy into the Neocons' democracy agenda. He's cheerfully praised Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is more brutal than was Hosni Mubarak. President Trump was the first major leader to congratulate Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's victory in the latter's rigged referendum to ratify constitutional changes creating an elective dictatorship. And the Pentagon is increasing aid to the Saudi royals, a totalitarian kleptocracy which launched an aggressive war against its poor neighbor, Yemen.

Although these policies would seem to violate Neocon orthodoxy, which holds that democracy promotion is worth war, some Neocons have forgiven al-Sisi, since he ousted a member of the Muslim Brotherhood as president, and the Saudis, since they oppose Iran. Anyway, it is early in the administration. The Neocons have plenty of time to enlist his support for democracy-oriented wars. Attempting to overthrow Syria's Assad certainly would count.

The main area of disagreement is personnel. The president still takes criticism personally. Neocons who ostentatiously trashed him as being unqualified for president found themselves blacklisted. But a lot of positions remain open. There's still time for a reversal and appointment of those previously damned "in the national interest."

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Or President Trump could implement a Neocon foreign policy without Neocons. And if he doesn't end up turning around on foreign aid and democracy promotion, the differences still will be small. America will be patrolling the globe. There will be more wars and nation-building; there will be less diplomatic conciliation. The world will look pretty good from a Neocon vantage.

Taking candidate Trump's peace-oriented rhetoric seriously obviously was naïve. The president explained away his NATO flip-flop with the explanation that he didn't know anything about the

transatlantic alliance when he criticized it. Presumably he could justify all of his other changed positions in the same way: he knew nothing about North Korea, the South Korean alliance, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, war-making, and most other foreign policy topics.

While this could be true, a Manchurian Candidacy remains the most logical explanation. It also absolves me of responsibility for having gotten Donald Trump so wrong. After all, at this stage he's looking to become the most pro-war president in a long time.

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