



The Lost Opportunities of the Trump Administration

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Absent an unexpected showing of significant electoral fraud, Joe Biden will become America's next president. The government of the world's most powerful nation will be directed by a decrepit lifetime politician known for his often exquisitely bad judgment and almost complete lack of creative thinking.

He won his party's nomination as the least ideologically offensive candidate, seen as most likely to triumph over President Donald Trump. The Democrat's chief advantage over Trump was the widespread desire for a semblance of national normalcy, which had vanished amid the latter's constant cascade of invective, falsehoods, vanity, errors, narcissism, outbursts, ignorance, insults, amorality, blunders, and deceit. Forget policy. The feeling was, enough already!

Come January Biden will possess the raw power – though not legal authority – to bomb, invade, and occupy any nation on earth on the slightest whim. He likely will continue a foreign policy which presumes that it is Washington's duty to reorder and uplift the globe, irrespective of the cost in American lives and wealth. Alas, policymaking in the Imperial Capital remains dominated by its participants' persistent invincible ignorance and endemic failure to learn from experience: the architects of past disasters will continue to deliver extensive death and destruction abroad at great human and fiscal cost at home.

The substance of Trump's foreign policy was better than its presentation, especially in comparison to what might have been. Had Hillary Clinton, Queen of War, triumphed in 2016 – with conflicts in the Balkans, Iraq, and Libya to her credit – more American lives and wealth would have been squandered in futile crusades abroad. U.S. foreign policy would have been social engineering writ global. She would have employed the usual suspects, especially the egregious Susan Rice and Samantha Power, to wander the globe promoting more murder and mayhem with a humanitarian gloss. Friendly powers would have more fully enjoyed their role as cosseted and subsidized client states, concentrating on domestic concerns while Americans paid for their defense against foreign dangers.

To Trump's credit he did not start any new wars. That is a singular achievement. The last five presidents – Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Ronald Reagan – all went to war, and did so more than once. Most of the unsuccessful presidential nominees of recent years, especially the wrongly sainted John McCain (suggested campaign slogan: "A new war on every continent every day!") and rightly rejected Mitt Romney (a more polite, less angry version of the ever-belligerent McCain), would have dragged the US into even more conflicts.

Trump was not blameless. He intensified drone strikes and the campaign against the Islamic State; he nearly triggered conflict with Iran and North Korea; he initiated economic war against friends and foes alike. However, when presented with the opportunity to escalate, he almost

always backed away. In contrast to his most militaristic appointees, John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, he really didn't want to start a war.

Trump's greatest failing, though, was being a rhetorical president, allowing those around him to sustain the interventionist status quo in practice. Although he had some good instincts, he lacked the attention span, interest, knowledge, and commitment to follow through and end even one war.

Also, he was quickly and completely captured by some of Washington's most enduring and powerful interests. For instance, during the 2016 campaign he once indicated the importance of balance in dealing with Israelis and Palestinians. But that was his last such utterance. He subsequently subcontracted US policy toward the Palestinians to Benjamin Netanyahu's hardline right-wing coalition, which is determined to create a greater Israel.

More broadly, the president allowed Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, a murderous oppressor at home and brutal aggressor abroad, to shape the administration's approach elsewhere in the Mideast. Trump's fixation on Iran, and especially his assumption that Tehran could be starved into surrendering its independence, was perhaps the president's single worst policy.

In other areas he abandoned opportunity for change. Had he announced in 2017 that all US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of the following year, America's longest war would today be at an end. It would have been difficult for incoming President Biden to return forces there. Now Biden likely will maintain, and perhaps even increase, America's presence – irrespective of ongoing negotiations with Taliban. The Kabul regime has an incentive to ensure diplomacy's failure in order to preserve US military support.

Syria is another own goal by the president. The desire of almost the entire foreign policy establishment, from inveterate war hawks to improbable "humanitarian" warriors, to jump into a civil war on the side of the local al-Qaeda affiliate demonstrated a veritable lust for war in the name of social engineering. Almost a decade later American personnel are still in the devastated land, with the hysterically inflated simultaneous objectives of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad, forcing out the Russians, ousting the Iranians, protecting the Kurds, conciliating the Turks, and suppressing the Islamic State. Although none of these tasks appeared to much interest the president, he was taken with the idea of illegally seizing Syria's oil, for purposes unclear. Thus, US troops remain in Syria, and could be augmented by the incoming administration.

American forces also are still in Iraq, mostly as part of the president's counterproductive campaign against Iran. Of course, US personnel based there are vulnerable to attack. Pompeo, with a passionate commitment to war with Iran, insisted that current policy was working splendidly even as he announced that he might have to close the US embassy because it was targeted by Iranian-inspired rocket attacks. So much for the claim that deterrence against Tehran had been reestablished. Although Biden might be wary of returning troops to Iraq, those likely to surround him on foreign policy probably will push him to do so.

NATO has been another profound Trump policy failure. The president spent years denouncing allied free-riding (really cheap-riding, but the principle is the same). Why should prosperous, populous European states spend more on their militaries when they don't fear Russia and believe that America would save them if necessary? Previous US officials kvetched about Europe's failure to live up to its responsibilities but did nothing other than whine prodigiously, which did

little to change behavior. The Ukraine crisis finally got the attention of European governments and spurred some modest increases in military allies, before Trump came on the scene. His complaints might have helped accelerate the trend, but his officials undercut him at every turn, reassuring European governments of America's eternal commitment to their defense, and spending more money on and sending more troops to the continent.

The situation of South Korea is much the same. The president long criticized the Republic of Korea for not providing sufficiently for its own defense. He could have set up a schedule for withdrawing US troops, backed by the sale of whatever military equipment Seoul desired. Instead, he postured, issued a few threats, tempered his demand for increased host nation support, and left the relationship fundamentally unchanged. A Biden administration can easily turn back the clock, reaffirming America's generous defense subsidy for yet another needless defense client.

Alas, the future will grow only more dangerous. Possessing missiles theoretically capable of reaching the US, the North will possess an effective deterrent even to American involvement in a conventional war on the peninsula. Should Washington seek a reprise of 1950 by leading a winning conventional campaign northward, Pyongyang, like Samson, could threaten to bring down the entire temple with a strike on the American homeland. How many cities would America's president be willing to sacrifice to protect the South?

To his credit the president engaged North Korea's Kim Jong-un against the desire of most members of what Ben Rhodes called the Blob, the usual members of the foreign policy establishment, but Trump failed to recognize that Kim would never surrender his nuclear arsenal for a few vapid wishes of good will. Failing to pursue a more realistic course, based on mini deals trading some nuclear disarmament for some sanctions relief, doomed negotiations.

Equally fundamental but even less explicable was the president's perpetual personnel failure. He surrounded himself with conventional interventionists (Rex Tillerson and H.R. McMaster) and enthusiastic advocates of economic strangulation and aggressive war (Pompeo and Bolton most spectacularly).

The problem was not just the administration's top ranks. One of the most important problems with American foreign policy is that most administrations use the Blob as their primary recruiting pool for foreign policy hiring. So did Trump, who filled his administration with fans of the interventionist status quo. There are scores of important positions – the deputy and other senior posts on the National Security Council, head of policy planning and other top State Department jobs, similar if lesser known spots with the Defense Department – that the president could have filled with people generally opposed to the long-established policy of perpetual intervention. Yet Trump dropped the opportunity to create and credential a cadre of mid-level activists who believed that Washington's chief responsibility is to defend America, not reorder the globe.

Although the president ostentatiously rejected some war-forever Neocons for being "Never Trumpers," a number of critics, such as Elliot Abrams, still ended up in high profile jobs. The president's consistent willingness to elevate people who disagreed with his philosophy and vilified him personally remains mystifying. Only as election day approached did he select alternative voices, such as Douglas Macgregor for ambassador to Germany and Will Ruger as ambassador to Afghanistan, both excellent choices, but named too late to win confirmation.

Donald Trump's failings are manifold and obvious. Still, the mere fact that he rhetorically broke with the brain-dead foreign policy which continued to dominate successive administrations was an unexpected and important advance. Which makes his many lost opportunities that much more painful.

On January 20, Trump's mistakes will allow Joe Biden to reimpose the suffocating, failed foreign policy status quo that over the last two decades yielded thousands of American dead, tens of thousands of American wounded, hundreds of thousands of foreign casualties, millions of displaced peoples, and trillions of dollars wasted. If the new president wants to heal the nation, he should end this seemingly endless cycle and chart a new course.

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