

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## What Trump Has in Common with the Last German Emperor

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President Donald Trump appears *sui generis*. Other troublesome populists, like Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, hold power. But no other nation of great influence is governed by someone so little rooted in reality and so much dominated by personality.

However, the president has a historical soul mate who ruled a century ago. The similarities are striking, though their lives obviously differed in important ways. One wonders: was the German Empire's Kaiser Wilhelm II reincarnated as President Trump?

Wilhelm II was born in 1859 in the house of Hohenzollern. A grandson of British queen Alexandrina Victoria, he grew up in a life of wealth and privilege, though he suffered from a withered left arm as a result of a birth injury. This may well have contributed to his psychological need for affirmation, a subject that Thomas Mann deftly explored in his novel *Royal Highness*.

He took power in 1888 after the death of his grandfather and father. Wilhelm rejected the liberal views of his parents (his mother was British and unpopular among German conservative circles) and favored traditional autocracy. Also, he was determined to rule as well as reign. In contrast, his grandfather, Kaiser Wilhelm I, had mostly left governing to the famed "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck.

Still, Wilhelm II was no dictator. Germany had a strong constitutional order and an elected Reichstag with a broader franchise than Great Britain. However, the cabinet answered to the kaiser, not the parliament. In that sense, Imperial Germany looked a lot like modern-day America, where the president is both head of state and government, and thereby manages the executive branch, in contrast to Westminster parliamentary rule.

The German Empire was not a superpower, but it was a rising great power. It possessed the world's second-largest economy, had surpassed Great Britain in industrial strength and enjoyed a substantially larger population than France. The German army was the world's best army. Kaiser Wilhelm's attempt to match British naval strength failed, but the potent Kriegsmarine could not be ignored by London. Berlin also acquired a small network of overseas colonies.

The kaiser was particularly interested in international affairs. He dismissed Bismarck in 1890 and embarked upon what he termed the “New Course.” Bismarck was no liberal peacenik, but once he unified Germany and consolidated the empire’s gains, he sought stability. He was uninterested in colonies, opposed a naval race with Great Britain, and sought to keep France and Russia apart. Had his policies remained in place, World War I almost certainly would not have erupted in August 1914. Bismarck famously observed that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. He was right.

Kaiser Wilhelm was aggressive, thoughtless and extraordinarily maladroit. He earned a lengthy litany of criticisms. The *Economist* recently observed that he “grew up to be emotionally needy, bombastic, choleric, hyperactive and hypersensitive. His personality combined with the militaristic authoritarian culture of the Prussian court to create a monarch who was extraordinarily ill-suited to lead the most powerful country in Europe.”

Historian Thomas Nipperdey called the kaiser “gifted,” but also “superficial, hasty, restless, unable to relax, without any deeper level of serious, without any desire for hard work or drive to see things through to the end, without any sense of sobriety, for balance and boundaries, or even for reality and real problems, uncontrollable and scarcely capable of learning from experience, desperate for applause and success.”

That sounds an awful lot like the current occupant of the White House.

Kaiser Wilhelm insisted on gaining Germany “a place in the sun” by fair means or foul. Although he was nothing like Adolf Hitler in power or intention, he managed to offend ally and adversary alike. There was no Twitter then, but in 1895 the kaiser dispatched an encouraging telegram to the Boers, who were resisting British troops in the Transvaal. This won neither him nor Germany any friends or plaudits across the English Channel.

In 1900 German soldiers joined an international expedition to suppress the anti-Western “Boxer Rebellion” in China. He told them: “Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.” The term “Hun” was put to propaganda use against Germany during World War I.

Five years later, he inflamed tensions with France by visiting Morocco and backing the kingdom’s independence against Paris. His conduct also offended friendly states and lost Berlin support at the international conference called to defuse the crisis. In 1908, Kaiser Wilhelm gave an indiscreet, boastful, condescending interview in the *Daily Telegraph*, a leading British paper. During the interview, he called the British “mad” and said the German navy targeted Japan. So hostile was the reaction at home, as well as overseas, that the chastened monarch tempered his future foreign ventures.

During the European crisis after the June 28, 1914, assassination of Austria-Hungary’s Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to that empire’s throne, Wilhelm pushed for an aggressive response before unsuccessfully attempting to halt the rush to war with the famous “Willy-Nicky” telegram to his cousin, Russian Tsar Nicholas II. Kaiser Wilhelm was gradually sidelined during

the war and forced to abdicate by the Reichswehr after Germany sought an armistice in late 1918. Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg ran the show. Kaiser Wilhelm lived out his life in exile in the Netherlands and died under Nazi occupation in 1941.

In both personality and lack of discretion, the Kaiser and the Donald seem to have a lot in common. Thankfully, history never fully repeats itself, but the two remind us of the truth of abolitionist Wendell Phillips' observation that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

America has a more powerful legislature, an active opposition and a better developed civil society than imperial Germany—all of which should help hold President Trump in check if his more dubious personality traits lead to trouble. Nevertheless, the presidency has amassed extraordinary authority. Congressional Republicans so far have been largely pusillanimous and understandable popular anger against institutions, such as the media, undercut their influence.

One need not look to history to recognize that the next four years are likely to prove challenging. But President Trump's closest historical model suggests the urgency of preparing an effective, nonpartisan opposition. Surely, this is a time to be vigilant in the defense of freedom.

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