

The image shows the word "YAHOO!" in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. The letters are slightly irregular and have a hand-drawn feel. The exclamation point is also purple and has a small dot. The logo is centered on a light gray rectangular background.

The Donald Trump-Kaiser Wilhelm Parallels Are Getting Scary

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At this point, it is not exactly headline news that America is being “led” (if that is even the right word) by a bizarre and erratic president. Nine months into the Donald Trump administration, all those Republican foreign policy experts who warned he was “unfitted to the office” during the 2016 campaign have been proven right.

This situation may be something of a first for Americans (though some other presidents had their quirks), but plenty of other countries have had to deal with outlandish buffoons (or worse) who somehow made it to high office. Trump is frequently compared to former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, another glib, unscrupulous, lying, preening sexual predator who managed to keep getting elected even though his personal conduct was deplorable and his policies were a disaster. Strutting and corrupt popinjays like Benito Mussolini, Carlos Menem, and Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the Central African Republic come to mind as well, along with other dictators who constructed cults of personality about themselves and treated their countries as a personal possession.

But lately I’ve been struck by the parallels between POTUS 45 and the last Hohenzollern emperor: Kaiser Wilhelm II. I’m not the first person to notice the similarities — Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute wrote a nice piece on this topic back in January — but the common features go beyond their individual characteristics. Not only do Trump and the kaiser share some unfortunate personality traits, but there are also striking similarities between conditions in Wilhelmine Germany and the situation in the United States today. There are also some important differences, but they are not entirely reassuring.

Consider first the personalities of these two leaders. Wilhelm II was by all accounts a pretty smart guy, but he frequently acted like a spoiled teenager and was prone to rash and bellicose remarks that undermined Germany’s image and international position. In a notorious 1908 interview with the *London Daily Telegraph*, for example, he declared, “You English are mad, mad, mad, as March hares.” One wonders what he would have said on Twitter. Wilhelm also had little patience for domestic opposition, saying, “I regard every Social Democrat as an enemy of

the Empire and Fatherland.” Not to be outdone, Trump has called the U.S. media the “enemy of the American people.”

Historian Thomas Nipperdey once described Wilhelm as “superficial, hasty, restless, unable to relax, without any deeper level of seriousness, 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 — as Bismarck said early on in his life, he wanted every day to be his birthday.”

Another distinguished historian, the late Gordon Craig of Stanford, offered a similar appraisal, writing that “[Wilhelm] had as much intelligence as any European sovereign and more than most, but his lack of discipline, self-indulgence, his overdeveloped sense of theatre, and his fundamental misreading of history prevented him from putting it to effective use.”

Craig also describes Wilhelm as “never having learned anything thoroughly” and “constantly on the move,” and German Army Chief of Staff Alfred von Waldersee described Wilhelm in the 1890s as having “a certain understanding of parade-ground movements, not, however, of real troop-leading... He is extraordinarily restless, dashes back and forth, ... intervenes in the leadership of the generals, gives countless and often contradictory orders, and scarcely listens to his advisers. He always wants to win and when the decision ... is against him, takes it ill.”

Sound familiar? The similarities don’t end there. Both men led lives of privilege from birth: Wilhelm was heir to the German throne and Trump inherited a sizable fortune from his wealthy real estate developer father. Wilhelm was understandably sensitive about his congenitally withered left arm; Trump seems defensive about his “small hands.” Wilhelm loved military displays and said he had “found his family” while serving in the Potsdam Guards; Trump attended military school and admires generals despite his ignorance of military affairs and his own efforts to evade military service. And, like Trump, Wilhelm was fond of traveling with a large and expensive entourage (at public expense, of course), while neglecting his public duties.

So much for the personal parallels. Now consider some other similarities between Wilhelmine Germany and the contemporary United States.

For starters, both countries exhibit the familiar warning signs of excessive military influence. In Germany, the Army was essentially “a state within the state,” and scholars such as Craig, Gerhard Ritter, Fritz Fischer, and Jack Snyder have all documented how military dominance distorted German thinking about its security and led to an overreliance on military power and an overly confrontational foreign policy. The German military used domestic organizations like the Navy League and the writings of co-opted academics to make its case to the German people; in America, the Pentagon runs its own public relations operations and weapons manufacturers give generously to think tanks that favor increased defense spending.

Moreover, Germany under Wilhelm abandoned Bismarck’s sophisticated reliance on diplomacy and subordinated that function to the dictates of the General Staff. When asked about the wisdom of the Schlieffen Plan, for example, Foreign Minister Friedrich von Holstein replied “if the Chief

of the General Staff . . . considers such a measure imperative, then it is the duty of diplomacy to concur in it and to facilitate it in every way possible.” Instead of war being “politics by other means,” German diplomacy was supposed to support whatever cockamamie scheme the generals dreamed up.

Wilhelmine Germany did face genuine strategic challenges, with a resentful France on one side and a rising Russia on the other. Yet Berlin consistently exaggerated the actual dangers it faced, especially when one remembers that it eventually took on France, Russia, and Great Britain (and later the United States) and nearly won. Even worse, Germany repeatedly acted in ways that solidified the alliance that opposed them, instead of working assiduously to undermine it. When exaggerated German fears about a hypothetical future decline led its leaders to launch a preventive war in 1914, they were (as Bismarck might have put it), “committing suicide for fear of death.”

One sees a similar pattern in the United States today, where threat-inflation is endemic, the utility of force is exaggerated, and the role of diplomacy is neglected or denigrated. Professional militaries have powerful tendencies to inflate threats, because worrying about remote dangers is part of their job and doing so helps justify a bigger budget. As Britain’s Lord Salisbury observed more than a century ago, “if you believe the doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe.” They are also prone to think that force can solve a multitude of problems, when it is in fact a crude instrument that always produces unintended consequences.

Consistent with this pattern, the United States routinely views third-rate powers like Serbia, Iraq, Iran, and others as if they were mortal dangers, treats problems like the Islamic State as if they were existential threats, and tends to assume these difficulties can be solved by blowing more stuff up or sending in another team of special forces. The results of these efforts have been mostly disappointing, yet hardly anyone in Washington is willing to question this approach or even ask our commanders why “the world’s best military” isn’t winning more often.

As Rosa Brooks has ably shown, this trend began long before Trump became president, but his own policies are making it worse. We have a general atop the Pentagon for the first time since the early 1950s, another heading up the National Security Council, and yet another as White House chief of staff. At the same time, we have a clueless secretary of state who is either deliberately trying to destroy the State Department or is doing so in fit of absent-mindedness. Like Wilhelmine Germany, in short, U.S. foreign policy is increasingly long on brawn but short on brains.

Wilhelmine Germany and Trumpian America share another trait: an inability to get their finances in order. Germany was Europe’s most dynamic economy before World War I: It had overtaken Great Britain as an industrial power and was leaving France far behind. It also boasted outstanding universities and a world-class scientific establishment. Yet the German *state* was chronically starved for funds, even as it tried to maintain Europe’s most powerful army, build an expensive modern navy, and pay for social programs that were quite generous by the standards of the time.

And why was Germany in this pickle? Because neither wealthy *Junker* landowners nor rich German industrialists wanted to pay taxes, and both groups had the political influence to stop the government from raising them.

Does this situation sound like any other country you've heard of? 21st-century America suffers from chronic budget deficits at the state and federal levels, in good part because 1) it spends far more on defense than any other country, 2) it provides lots of entitlement programs for its citizens, and 3) its wealthiest members keep demanding tax cuts, and the riches they already have allow them to buy a lot of political support for this proposal. Meanwhile, the things that really did make America great in the past — good public education, world-class infrastructure, world-class universities, and institutions that helped assimilate new arrivals — are all atrophying for lack of resources and political commitment.

To be sure, there are many ways in which Wilhelmine Germany and Trumpian America are different. One of them may reassure you; the other may keep you up at night.

The good news is that America's overall security situation remains far more favorable than Germany's was. Kaiser Wilhelm and his associates did in fact have a hostile great power on either side, a deteriorating relationship with Great Britain, and an ally (Austria-Hungary) that was more of a liability than an asset. The United States, by contrast, remains the only great power in the Western hemisphere, the only possessor of truly global power-projection capabilities, and the owner of a robust nuclear deterrent — and it has valuable allies in several key regions (at least for now). What historian C. Vann Woodward called America's "free security" may still help us survive the incompetent leadership of the current occupant of the Oval Office.

Let us hope that is the case, because another critical difference is more worrisome. Germany's ruling elite understood Wilhelm's deficiencies and did a good job of keeping him away from the actual levers of power. During the July Crisis that led to World War I, in fact, Wilhelm was staying at a palace outside Berlin and was for the most part out of the loop, in good part because Chancellor Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg knew the kaiser was a loose cannon and didn't want him screwing up the chancellor's own plans to exploit the crisis. Wilhelm scribbled lots of bellicose marginalia on diplomatic messages and conjured up various scenarios for resolving the crisis, but nobody paid much attention either to his rants or to his more sensible suggestions (such as the stillborn "Halt in Belgrade" proposal). Ironically, Wilhelm II bore little direct responsibility for the war, whatever his personal defects may have been.

By contrast, Trump is still in charge of the executive branch, and for the most part it is doing his bidding. The "adults in the room" (James Mattis, H.R. McMaster, John Kelly, etc.) may have been able to temper some of Trump's worst instincts, but he's still managed to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, alarm key allies, cause a precipitous drop in global confidence in the United States, undermine the Iran deal, fuel escalating tensions on the Arabian Peninsula, and repeatedly pour gasoline on the delicate situation with North Korea. Because top officials are still listening to him and still following his orders, Trump's personality defects are more worrisome and consequential than Wilhelm's were.

All of which suggests that we may need more effective means for constraining the Divider-in-Chief. The Founding Fathers created a divided government because they understood deeply flawed people sometimes get elected, and they did not want the country to be overly vulnerable to one person's flaws or ambitions. They also created mechanisms to remove such a leader when circumstances warrant. I hope it does not come to that, but for now I'll take some comfort that such mechanisms exist.