

The flipflopping of American leadership

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In a meeting seven months ago, President Donald Trump asked U.S. Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan if he should rename Denali back to Mount McKinley. They said no, explained why, and he dropped the issue. In another era, this wouldn't have been a national news story. And it wouldn't be today if Trump's political instincts hadn't been groomed by two decades of American flipflops witnessed by the entire world.

Let's start with fiscal policy. In all but four years since 1969, the federal government spent its way to the \$20 trillion debt we now own. The only surpluses were the last four budgets enacted under President Bill Clinton. But as Stephen Moore wrote for the CATO Institute at that time, Clinton didn't deserve the credit. Those were a "a byproduct of the GOP's single-minded crusade to end 30 years of red ink."

That single-mindedness evaporated after George W. Bush was elected president. "Reagan proved that deficits don't matter," Dick Cheney told Bush's Treasury Secretary after the 2002 midterm elections. His vice president was right. Not in terms of fiscal responsibility, but popularity. In 1984, Reagan was reelected in a landslide despite signing annual budget deficits almost three times more than those of his predecessor.

Bush, with the GOP controlling Congress, revived Reagan's red ink legacy. During his eight years, the national debt doubled, and the debt ceiling was raised seven times without a fight.

After Barack Obama was elected president, the GOP flipped back to being fiscal hawks and turned raising the debt ceiling into a national crisis.

Like Bush, Trump lost the popular vote. But the GOP-controlled Congress seems intent to follow Cheney's logic as a popular mandate to conveniently forget how Reagan's formula of tax cuts and military spending tripled the national debt.

For the foreign policy partner to our flip-flopping economic policies, I'll turn to the conflict with North Korea.

In 1992, initiatives taken by President George H.W. Bush produced the "Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" signed by the North and South. In 1994 Clinton signed the framework in which the North agreed to a three-stage elimination process of their nuclear weapons program.

Disputes over North Korea's compliance persisted throughout Clinton's presidency. But like the elder Bush, he was committed to diplomacy.

So was Colin Powell. Two months after the younger Bush was inaugurated, the new secretary of state told reporters they planned “to engage with North Korea and pick up where President Clinton and his administration left off.”

The next day, Bush said he didn’t trust the North to live up to any agreement and indicated those talks wouldn’t happen anytime soon. The North interpreted his reversal as a return to hostilities and canceled scheduled meetings with the South.

Less than a year later, Bush declared that North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, “constitute an axis of evil” seeking to arm “themselves with weapons of mass destruction.” North Korea then withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

We’ll never know if North Korea could have been trusted to abide by the agreements they signed. But we’ve contributed to the crisis we’re facing now because we couldn’t keep them either.

In a more predictable fashion, the same story is unfolding with Iran. In March 2015, while negotiations over its nuclear weapons program were underway, 47 Republican senators sent a letter to Iranian leaders stating the next president could unilaterally withdraw from any agreement Obama signed.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was finalized five months later. Signatories to it include three of our European allies, Russia and China.

This month Trump refused to recertify it and asked Congress to consider imposing new sanctions. Sullivan, who vigorously opposed the agreement from the start and signed that letter, now thinks in order “to keep U.S. leadership ... we shouldn’t walk away from it.”

It’s not the only agreement Trump walked away from. He withdrew from the Paris climate agreement too. And he’s rolling back the policy of engagement with Cuba that Obama initiated.

These displays of economic and foreign policy instability aren’t just problems with how the country is governed. They put the credibility of U.S. leadership on a downward spiral. And with the blessings of a bitterly divided electorate, the Trump presidency is in the process of completing the flush.