



Executive Overreach: Still Going Strong Abroad

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Before Election Day, I found the prospect of a Donald Trump presidency almost as ridiculous and terrifying as the idea of Charlie Sheen with nukes. Things haven't gone as badly as I feared: Our political system—on the home front, at least—has been surprisingly resistant to one-man rule.

In part, that's because being a successful autocrat requires a modicum of competence and self-restraint, qualities Trump lacks. A competent authoritarian wouldn't dare "so called judge[s]" to overturn his edicts; fantasize on Twitter about silencing critics and prosecuting political foes; or confess to obstruction of justice on national TV, as Trump practically did when he told NBC News that he fired former FBI Director James Comey over "the Russia thing." Imagine Dick Nixon being dumb enough to attach the Enemies List to a press release or deliver the juiciest selections from the Watergate tapes in a series of fireside chats. Imagine anyone else turning 3 percent growth and 4 percent unemployment into a sub-40 approval rating.

And yet abroad, the Imperial Presidency remains as unconstrained and menacing as ever. Who needs "the power to persuade" when a 16-year-old congressional military authorization can be used to wage war at will, almost anywhere in the world? Our "America First" president seems unperturbed by mission creep that's led to boots on the ground in places as far-flung as Tongo Tongo; instead, Trump has deepened entanglements on every battlefield Obama left him, ramping up airstrikes, kill-or-capture missions, and civilian casualties.

Hamstrung at home, the president has every incentive to overcompensate abroad. Washington elites have lauded Trump as "presidential" only twice: in March, when he followed his teleprompter during a congressional address, and in April, when he ordered a drive-by missile attack on Syria. He seems to find issuing orders easier than sticking to a script. Asked "will you attack North Korea?" in September, he responded: "We'll see."

So far, the Trump administration has delivered more farce than tragedy. But our luck can change at any time.

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