

The Imperial Presidency of Donald Trump: A Threat to American Democracy and an Agent of Chaos in the World?

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With awareness and foresight, this incisive article on the US empire and the concurrent demise of democracy in America was published on February 15, 2017 shortly after Trump's presidential inauguration.

In the words of Julius Caesar, "you cannot build an Empire with a Republic."

"In order to obtain and hold power a man must love it. Thus the effort to get it is not likely to be coupled with goodness, but with the opposite qualities of pride, craft and cruelty. Without exalting self and abasing others, without hypocrisy, lying, prisons, fortresses, penalties, killing, no power can arise or hold its own." Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), (in 'The Kingdom of God is Within You' 1894.)

"The megalomaniac differs from the narcissist by the fact that he wishes to be powerful rather than charming, and seeks to be feared rather than loved. To this type belong many lunatics and most of the great men of history." Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), (in The Conquest of Happiness, ch. 1, 1930.)

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), 16th President of the United States, 1861-65; (N. B.: Originally found and attributed to Lincoln in a biography entitled "Abraham Lincoln, the Backwoods Boy" by Horatio Alger Jr., pub. in 1883.)

"Perhaps it is a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home is to be charged against provisions against danger, real or pretended from abroad." James Madison (1751-1836), Father of the US Constitution, 4th American President, (in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, May 13, 1798.)

"When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross." Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951), (It Can't Happen Here, 1935, a novel about the election of a fascist to the American presidency.)

When 46.1% of Americans who [voted](#), in November 2016, to elect a real estate magnate in the person of Donald Trump as U.S. President, they did not know precisely what they were buying, because, as the quote above says, we really know how a politician will behave only once he or she assumes power. Americans surely did not expect that the promised "change" the Republican presidential candidate envisioned and promised was going to be, in fact, "chaos" and "turmoil" in the U.S. government.

President [Donald Trump](#) (1946-) has surrounded himself with three politically inexperienced Rasputin-like advisers, i.e. his young pro-Israel Jewish son-in-law [Jared Kushner](#) (1981-), advising on foreign policy and acting as a speech writer, and his far right media executive and chief political strategist [Steve Bannon](#) (1953-) with an apocalyptic worldview, who is, moreover, a voting permanent member of the National Security Council ([NSC](#)). [Stephen Miller](#) (1985-), 31, also a young inexperienced senior White House adviser, completes the trio. He is working with Jared Kushner for domestic affairs and is also a Trump speechwriter.



Stephen Miller (1985-) Jared Kushner (1981-)

Three weeks after his inauguration, President Trump has turned out to be a much more erratic politician than could have been expected, even after all the inanities he uttered during the U.S. Presidential campaign.

I, for one, thought that once elected president and installed in the White House, he would abandon his tweeting eccentricities. —I was [wrong](#).



Stephen Bannon (1953-)

In fact, for a few weeks after inauguration day, on January 20, 2017, before the nominated secretaries of various government departments were confirmed by the Senate, and anxious to “*get the show going*”, the Trump White House behaved like an imperial junta, issuing a string of [executive orders and memos](#). The objective, seemingly, was to force the hands of the responsible departments and of the elected Congress, and to bend the entire U.S. bureaucracy to its agenda. It may have gone too far.



Indeed, when the heads of important departments like the Department of Defense (James Mattis, right) and the State Department (Rex Tillerson) were confirmed and assumed their functions, President Trump changed his mind on many policies about [Israel](#), [China](#), the [Iran Deal](#) ...etc.

[U.S. courts](#) have also thrown a monkey wrench in the blanket executive order closing the U.S. borders without recourse to the citizens of seven Muslim countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen), for spurious “*security reasons*”.

Let us recall how the inexperienced Trump White House has created chaos during the first weeks following inauguration day.

President Donald Trump has shown a propensity to govern by decree with a minimum input from government departments and from the elected Congress

A dangerous and potentially disastrous approach to government, in a democracy, occurs when a leader adopts the practice of [governing by decree](#), without constitutional constraints, thus forcing the hands of responsible departments, of the elected Congress and submitting the entire U.S. bureaucracy to his will by governing as an autocrat. If it were to continue on that road, the Trump administration could turn out to be more like a would-be *imperial presidency* than a responsible democratic government.



This term was first coined by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his 1973 book [The Imperial Presidency](#), in response to President Richard Nixon’s attempt to extend the power of the U.S. president, declaring “*when the president does it, that means it is not illegal*”. In my own 2003 book [The New American Empire](#), I dealt with the issue of American presidents having usurped over time the power to adopt a policy of global intervention, and the power to launch wars of aggression at will, with a minimum input from Congress.

President Trump seems to want to outdo President Nixon in considering the White House as the primary center of political power within the American government, contrary to what the [U.S. Constitution](#) says about the separation of powers.

To be sure, other American presidents have issued executive orders and presidential memos early in their administration, but this was mainly to re-establish procedures that a previous administration had abandoned. They usually did not deal with fundamental and complex policies without debate, although many [did](#).

In the case of President Trump, his executive orders and presidential memos have not only been multiple, they also have dealt with fundamental policies, without consulting and requesting the professional input of the Secretary and of the department responsible, be it on healthcare, abortion, international trade, immigration, oil exploration, justice, etc., and without producing policy papers to explain the rationale behind the policy changes and without outlining the objectives being pursued.

When such a development of governing by decree has occurred in other countries, democracy was the loser, and the consequences for the leader and his country turned out to be disastrous.

President Donald Trump seems to be anxious to find pretexts to pick fights with other countries: For him, it seems to be the U.S. against the world

In a March 2007 [interview](#) with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, the future presidential candidate Donald Trump said that President George W. Bush had been a disaster in foreign relations and that he was *"the worst American president in the history of the United States"*, adding that he *"should have been impeached"* because he lied his way into a war of aggression against Iraq and sent thousands of people to their death. This is an assessment that he has [repeated](#) on numerous occasions.

However, ironically, President Donald Trump seems to be on the same track as George W. Bush regarding the country of Iran, using [lies](#) and [false claims](#) to pick a fight with that country, and in so doing, echoing the hysterical rhetoric of Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#). He has also recklessly insulted the heads of a half dozen [countries](#), even going so far as to threaten the President of Mexico to [invade](#) his country. As to his criticism of President George W. Bush, it seems that really, *"it takes one to know one"*!

President Trump should be reminded of what he [promised](#) as a presidential candidate. In a foreign policy speech delivered on Wednesday April 27, 2016, he declared *"Unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that caution and restraint are really truly signs of strength. Although not in government service, I was totally against the war in Iraq, very proudly, saying for many years that it would destabilize the Middle East."*

President Donald Trump has been less than candid regarding the influence of the Wall Street lobby on politicians, including himself

During the 2016 Presidential political campaign, candidate Donald Trump was very critical of politicians who do the heavy lifting for Wall Street firms in Washington D.C. On many occasions, Mr. Trump said that Wall Street is a symbol of a corrupt establishment that has been robbing America's working class and enriching the elite. He also tweeted point blank, on July 28, 2016, that Secretary Hillary Clinton was *"owned by Wall Street"* and that Wall Street banks had *"total, total control"* over his rivals Hillary Clinton and Ted Cruz, implying that they were unfit for the Office of the President. On October 19, 2016, Mr. Trump tweeted

that “*crooked Hillary is nothing more than a Wall Street Puppet*”, thus presenting himself as the populist defender of the working class against the financial elite.



But guess what? One of Mr. Trump’s first moves as President was to order the undoing of the banking regulations known as the Dodd-Frank legislation, which was adopted in 2010, after the 2008 subprime financial crisis. President Trump thus quickly answered the main request made by the very Wall Street mega banks that he had accused previously of corrupting Washington politicians. He went even further when he named a former Goldman Sachs banker, [Steven Mnuchin](#), (right) as his Treasury Secretary.

Also, Mr. Trump has reached to the mega-bank Goldman Sachs for help and support. He named Mr. Gary Cohn (1960-), president of [Goldman Sachs](#), head of the President’s National Economic Council, thus making sure that Wall Street bankers will have a big say in his administration’s economic and financial policies.

Was his lambasting of his opponents as Wall Street banks’ puppets simply campaign rhetoric without substance? That is certainly a question worth asking.

President Donald Trump’s continuous attacks against the free press and against independent judges who rule against his policies is an authoritarian approach to government and is a violation of the separation of powers

On Monday February 6, President Trump launched a barrage of [off-the-cuff intimidating insults](#) at the American news media, accusing them of “*refusing to report on terrorist attacks*”, without providing any evidence to back up such serious accusations. He has also attempted to [intimidate judges](#) who have to rule on the constitutionality of some of his decrees and threatened their [judiciary independence](#).

Such behavior is a violation of, and contempt for the [separation of powers clause](#) in the U.S. Constitution and is a frontal attack against the [free press](#).

This is not a trivial matter, because when an authoritarian regime wants to establish itself and avoid accountability, it usually attacks the legislative and the judiciary branches of government to pressure them to toe the line of the executive branch, and it tries to silence the very institutions that can put the false statements of politicians to the test.

President Donald Trump has a mercantilist view of international trade, which is rejected by nearly all economists

President Donald Trump seems to think that his country should have trade surpluses on goods and services vis-à-vis other countries, the latter being saddled with trade deficits, whatever the overall [balance of payments](#) of the United States, especially its capital

account, and whatever the domestic and foreign economic circumstances. This is economically false. That is not the way adjustments in the balance of payments of a country work, in a multilateral world.

When Donald Trump places all the emphasis on only one part of the balance of payments, the trade balance, he misses the point. For example, if a country lives beyond its means and borrows money from abroad, such foreign borrowing appears as an inflow of foreign capital in the country. Such an inflow of foreign capital causes an excess of domestic spending over its production, and that helps finance an excess of imports over exports of goods and services with the rest of the world. The capital account of the country shows a surplus, while the trade balance (more precisely the current account) indicates a deficit, thus balancing more or less each other.

The main reason why the United States is registering trade deficits is because it borrows too much from abroad.

This is partly due to the fact that the U.S. government runs [huge fiscal deficits](#), spending more than its tax revenues, and borrowing money both from the private sector and from foreigners, thus increasing the public debt. Such deficits often are the result of tax reductions and of increased military expenditures. The fact that the world economy uses [the U.S. dollar](#) as a [reserve currency](#) represents an interest-free loan that the rest of the world makes to the United States, which allows the USA to have a chronic trade deficit. Mr. Trump and his advisers would be wise to understand these truths of international finance.

If his administration wants to reduce the annual U.S. trade deficit with the rest of the world, the U.S. government should balance its books and reduce its foreign borrowings. [Trade wars](#) will not improve the U.S. trade balance if the country keeps over-spending and keeps borrowing from abroad. They would only make matters worse.

For many decades now, the U.S. government has piled up [debt](#) upon [debt](#) while running continuous [fiscal deficits](#), mainly due to the fact that it has been waging [costly wars](#) abroad, while financing such interventions with foreign money. This is a problem that American politicians must understand if they don't want their country to go bankrupt. This has happened in the past to other [overextended empires](#), and there is no reason why it should not happen today when a country continuously spends more than it produces. And wars do not produce anything, except death and destruction.

Hopes of putting an end to the Middle East chaos have greatly diminished

One of the positive results of the Trump election was the promise to end the deadly chaos in the Middle East. During the presidential campaign and once in power, Mr. Trump threw some cold water on that promise.

Firstly, in his March 21, 2016 [speech to AIPAC](#), he flattered his rich Zionist donors by announcing his intention to break with the half-century policy of most western nations that considers the city of Jerusalem a United Nations protected zone and an international city occupied by Arabs, Christians and Jews. He declared *"we will move the American embassy [from Tel Aviv] to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem."*

Secondly, on Thursday December 15, 2016, to make sure that everybody understands that he is one-sided in the more than half a century old Israeli-Palestinian conflict, President-elect

Trump announced his choice of a hardliner pro-Israeli settlements on privately-owned Palestinian lands for [U.S. ambassador](#) to [Israel](#) (in fact, [David Friedman](#), his former bankruptcy lawyer). The new ambassador didn't waste any time in professing that he was looking forward to doing his job *"from the U.S. embassy in Israel's eternal capital, Jerusalem."*

And, thirdly, seemingly forgetting that he had criticized Secretary Clinton for proposing a similar dangerously reckless policy, President Trump announced, on January 25, that he *"will absolutely do [safe zones](#) in Syria"*, seemingly without considering if it was legal to do so without the consent of the Syrian government, and without consulting with the three principal countries (Russia, Turkey and Iran), which had just concluded a peace plan for Syria. He opted instead to talk to leaders of Saudi Arabia and of the United Arab Emirates—two countries known to be sponsoring terrorism in Syria.

The world is afraid of President Donald Trump: Doomsday Clock scientists have concluded that humanity is just two-and-a-half minutes from the apocalypse



Late in January, the scientists in charge of the [Doomsday Clock](#) set the clock at just two-and-a-half minutes from the apocalypse, allegedly because of Donald Trump. They said that the businessman turned politician, with his disturbing and ill-considered pronouncements and policies, has the potential to drive the Planet to oblivion.

This means that they consider that the Earth is now [closer to oblivion](#) than it has ever been since 1953, at the height of the nuclear confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union.

The existential threats facing the Earth now come from the loose talk about using nuclear weapons and the proliferation of such weapons, as well as the observed acceleration of climate change.

Conclusion

All considered, the turn of events since the election of Donald Trump has raised a number of fears that a lot of things could go wrong in the coming years. Many of the policies advanced by the Trump administration are the wrong remedies for the problems facing the United States and the world. In fact, many of these ill-conceived policies are more likely to make matters worse, possibly much worse, than to improve them.

Things seem to have begun to change somewhat with the arrival of newly confirmed secretaries in the decision-making process and new advisers. Let us hope that cooler heads will bring experience, knowledge and competence to a Trump administration that cruelly needs it.

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