

# Gambling on the Unknowable Trump

Donald Trump's victory may have shaken up the System but it also revealed a recklessness (or a desperation) among Americans in handing over such immense power to someone so untested, says Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

At this moment of unprecedented upheaval, it is striking that some things never change. We are being subject to a tidal wave of interpretation and speculation as to what a Trump administration means for American foreign relations in regard to inter alia Russia, Syria, the Iran nuclear deal, the "pivot to Asia," trans-Atlantic ties and, of course, Mexico.

It is entirely natural for a distraught political elite to wonder what comes next from this unstable, quixotic showman who soon will be sitting in the White House. It is neither natural nor appropriate, though, to make believe that Washington in experiencing a transition of power to be approached in standard terms. The unpalatable truth is that we have no idea as to what Trump will do or not do.

Trump's campaign remarks are the sole evidence available for indications of the direction that he will take. That is an extremely flimsy basis for forecasting actions abroad. For two reasons. Candidates' calculated sound bites while running almost never are a reliable guide to their thinking – in its rudimentary form or as it takes shape under the influence of real life conditions and the counsel of advisers.

Consider Barack Obama, a far more thoughtful, sober and intelligent man. Remember the objective of eliminating nuclear weapons (rather than committing \$1 trillion to the development of a more "usable" arsenal). Remember closing Guantanamo and reining in electronic surveillance of Americans. Remember ending the engagement of American troops in the "GWOT" (we now are fighting in 38 places by one means or another).

Remember "resetting" relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia to emphasize dialogue. Remember the stated goal of normalizing relations with the Mullahs in Teheran instead of treating them as inherently hostile to America. Remember promoting democracy as the long-term cure to what ails the Middle East (instead, backing full tilt the Gulf autocracies, including Saudi Arabia's homicidal war on the Yemeni people; Sisi's oppressive autocracy in Egypt; and Israel's increasing brutalization of the Palestinians).

## Points of Demagoguery

Second, Trump's comments about foreign policy were mere points of demagoguery meant, as with everything else he said, to appeal to the primitive instincts of an aroused audience. There is not the slightest sign that he had thought seriously about any of it. Donald Trump finds serious thinking itself an alien mental activity.

Moreover, he has few experienced advisers in his entourage. Apart from some conversations with retired General Michael Flynn, the off-beat former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the chairman of his national security advisory panel, James Woolsey, former Director of the CIA, his "advisers" have been a collection of odd-balls, non-entities and dogmatists. Woolsey himself is an uber-hawk whose views on all matters of consequence align with those of the neocons, the Cheney-like hard nationalists and Hillary Clinton – and are diametrically opposite to Trump's much publicized iconoclastic remarks.

So what we will be seeing between now and the Inauguration, and afterwards, is a mad rush by a horde of aspirants for the power and access to occupy Donald Trump's mind – if they can find it.

This is the brutal reality. Since it provides little of substance for the habitual commentators, they are inclined to play a game of make-believe – conjuring supposedly meaningful evidence from what is a kaleidoscope of emotional outbursts and a fantasia of day dreams.

There is good reason to believe that within six months of Trump's taking office, when his administrations undertakes its first half-baked measures abroad, the think tank crowd will be writing articles and monographs on "The Trump Doctrine."

In other words, the same mentality that helped get us into this mess. Americans have become committed to a new categorical imperative: I sound off, therefore I am.

If Truth be told, the America we have known and imagined is ended. It never will return. In terms of relations with others, image is of enormous importance. The United States has gained great advantage from being seen as exceptional. From its earliest days, it fascinated and gave inspiration as the first working democracy, as the embodiment of the hope-filled New World, as the land of the common man and common decency.

Later, as it grew into a world power, it held the allure for many as being somehow beyond the world's pervasive tawdriness. These images held even as

contradicted by slavery and racism, by imperial wars of expansion, by signs of hypocrisy. America did tip the balance in favor of the right side in two world wars; it did demonstrate uncommon magnanimity in its support for German and Japanese reconstruction and democracy. Even when playing the game of power politics, it retained a measure of credibility as the one underwriter and arbitrator to whom others might resort.

The resulting “soft power” or “soft influence” has been a unique asset. Already dissipated to a high degree over the decades of the Global War On Terror, it now is destined to fade into a shadow of its former self. A blatantly racist, xenophobic, studiously ignorant, and belligerent country cannot retain the respect of other governments or the high regard of their peoples.

A country so feckless as to choose Trump the buffoon as its President is mocking itself. The negative impact will be compounded as the United States is riven by internal conflicts of all kinds, repressive actions and perhaps another serious economic crisis.

The damage to America’s standing in the world should hardly be a surprise; yet many are inclined to underestimate the effect. One cannot appreciate what we have become by talking to foreign friends on the Washington circuit, or by listening to the polite regrets of those around the world who are interviewed by the media. Walk the streets of cities abroad for unscripted reactions to this historic act of national self-mutilation.

We can expect that whoever winds up in senior policy positions in a Trump administration will downplay these intangibles – if they even acknowledge them. In this, they will be encouraged by the tradition of self-delusion that has become a feature of American thinking about its place in the world.

Think of the Middle East where just about everything that we have been doing since 2001 has been guided by a fantastical view of the region – from Iraq, to Syria, to Yemen, to the Gulf, to Turkey, to Palestine and Israel.

### **Divorced from Reality**

This tendency to divorce ourselves from reality so as to perpetuate myths of American omnipotence and superiority is also witnessed at the operational level. Consider these examples:

–The U.S. habitually characterizes anybody who resists our use of force against them as evil and criminal. Thus, the insurgents in Iraq are “anti-Iraqi” forces; the Houthis in Yemen are Iranian proxies, the Palestinians are nothing but terrorists, the Russian population in the Donbas region of Ukraine are Russian commandos directed from the Kremlin with the aim of unraveling all of Europe and

NATO, etc. etc.

–American policy-makers find it convenient to pursue strategies that entail squaring circles. The outcome is predictable. The outstanding case in point is Syria where for four years they have committed themselves to ousting Assad by force while continuing the fight against violent Islamist groups. That has placed us in the absurd position of allying with Al Qaeda (providing indirect material, and indirect political support) while still fulminating about the grave danger of terrorism.

–We present ourselves as the promoter and well-wisher of democracy while giving unstinting support to oppressive regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and elsewhere while facilitating the ouster of democratically elected reformist leaders in Honduras, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and Brazil.

These self-delusional practices have prepared the psychological ground for the grand illusion to come in assuming that the America of Trump will continue to draw the world's admiration and its deference to American leadership.

### **Normalizing Trump**

The inclination to “normalize” the transition in treating Trump, his utterances and his odd-lot entourage as if they somehow could be squeezed into conventional molds is understandable. It is a manifestation of an unwitting coping strategy for coming to terms with the shattering event of his election.

Americans in general are pursuing a similar psychological strategy for the sake of preserving the conception of themselves and their country deeply rooted in their consciousness. Hence, the impulse to minimize the singularity of this revolutionary development without precedent – not only in the United States but anywhere in the democratic world. This is one instance where American “exceptionalism” is not prized.

This is a natural reaction to a brutal Truth about Americans – and its dire consequences. For the choice of Trump reveals most Americans as immature and prone to juvenile behavior. To vote for Trump is the ultimate act of political immaturity.

There are, of course, identifiable reasons why many were drawn to the flamboyant candidate, why his demagoguery resonated, why his exaggerated imagery struck a receptive nerve. However, for that emotional response to translate into the actual selection of this man to be President crosses a critical threshold.

Children – at times – let emotion rule their conduct. Children only weakly feel the imperative to impose logic and a modicum reason on their impulses. Children

disregard consequences. Children overlook the downside in their implicit weighing of the balance in giving in to those impulses or not. Grown-ups do not.

Immediate satisfaction – at all and any cost – does not eclipse other considerations for adults. Even a child’s tantrum usually lasts no more than ten minutes or so. The tantrum of Trump voters has lasted 18 months.

That’s pathological – anyway you cut it. Admittedly, some Trump supporters share his perverted view of the world – even if contradicted by his own personal history. Let’s say 12 to 15 percent of the electorate. A larger slice was represented by dyed-in-the-wool Republicans who relished sticking it to the Hillary and the Democrats to such a degree that their thrill at the spectacle overcame their realization that Trump was unfit for the office. Indeed, many probably expected him to lose and, therefore, felt free to go along for the fun of it.

That leaves roughly 10 to 20 percent of the electorate who placed their emotional gratification above their responsibilities as citizens and above the wellbeing of the Republic. That is the difference between the nearly 50 percent he received and what a broad rejection would represent. They constitute the hard core of the culpable juveniles.

What about those who could not stand Hillary, who felt an irresistible impulse to express that feeling somehow? Many options were open to them: abstain, vote for one of the minor candidates, go to the gym and exhaust oneself on an elliptical trainer, get drunk, smoke some weed, pick a fight with one’s spouse. Any of these represents more grown-up behavior than voting for Donald Trump.

By comparison, in France when Jean Marie Le Pen – candidate of the racist far-right party, the Front National – FN, made it into the second round of their presidential election, he and his party were rejected by 82.2 percent of the electorate. In other words, the French rallied together to reject Le Pen. That is what a mature polity does. And Le Pen is sane, albeit a crypto-fascist.

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