

Trump's overriding success is as radical agent for change

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US President Donald Trump challenged the existence of Santa in a phone call to a seven-year-old girl.

It climaxed a week in which the credibility of the Trump presidency dissolved and with it a lot of America's — above all its capacity to hold the trust of allies. But also its capacity to run any kind of Middle East policy for more than months at a time. Or to present to the world some coherence in its own government.

Before the crisis over Syria-Afghanistan-Jim Mattis, it was possible to believe America had a president who was a genius without talent. The paradox admits some promise in the madness, for example, of a nuclear deal with North Korea or a dramatic opening of the Chinese economy.

This promise is sabotaged by the lack of core political talent, even before last week's end-of-year cluster bomb.

Trump can unthinkingly open a rift with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. His unloosed musings about Jamal Khashoggi advertised differences between him and the CIA. No other president would have come close to such solecisms. But his attacks on the Federal Reserve and its chairman confirm something more than the spite in the tweets: an easy lapse into hatred towards America's own institutions.

Strikingly without talent at political basics, he is also transformative. His most radical impact has been to remake the Grand Old Party as Trump Republicans. He has become the GOP's sole owner and proprietor. He stands in relationship to it as a brazen Bonapartist: the leader above party, the party now ancillary to the man on the white charger.

When he expanded by two seats the Republican majority in the Senate he was able to be seen as capable of holding an electoral college majority, if not a popular majority, at the 2020 presidential elections.

That means, if he can rebuild a cabinet and stabilise policy, an eight-year presidency. Right now that may be hard to imagine — until one contemplates the condition of the Democrats and the fact Trump appears to own the issues of trade and immigration as understood at least by the white working-class voters who gave him his geographic majority.

In his first two years he has changed America's international personality. He is catastrophically incompetent but nonetheless a radical change agent. His genius is largely destructive and has a large element of the accidental.

Writer Jan Morris referred to Abraham Lincoln's 'lackadaisical genius'. When I read that I thought of Lincoln's crablike movement to negro emancipation and his untidy, slow-building domination of cabinet, party and congress. Yes, 'lackadaisical genius' was apt. Lincoln was a master of political improvisation. Yet it was based on political experience. Eight years in a state legislature, one term in congress, losing candidate in a nationally publicised Senate race distinguished by the serious content and sinewy argument of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

Trump is the only US president without experience in elective or appointive office or in military command or time as a judge. It shows in how he arrived at his decision on Syria.

The wars in the area of the US Central Command are the longest in US history. There is a respectable conservative case for pulling back imperial overreach. After all, the administration's tax cuts have squeezed the chance of the dazzling arms build-up rhapsodised about two years ago, let alone any domestic infrastructure rebuild.

But there was no commissioned Pentagon study or work by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to co-opt the defence and security establishment. The commitment to pullouts was on a whim in a phone conversation with the Turkish President. There was no attention to subtleties of timing or wording.

Up until now the harshest criticism of Trump as President came over his Helsinki summit with Vladimir Putin in July. A political tyro would have demanded from advisers a script that put on record he accepted the advice of US agencies that Russia had intervened in the 2016 elections. He would have been equipped with forceful, eloquent words insisting that it must not happen again — tough, ringing words for the summit's opening exchange and for the media conference with Putin. 'Nobody wants progress in US-Russia relations more than I,' he should have been primed to say. 'But it's dependent on interference in our politics never being repeated. I made it clear to President Putin at our meeting — unmistakably clear. And I repeat it here.'

But he was armed with no such script. US media were incredulous. He endured the harshest criticism of his presidency, to now at least.

Meanwhile Trump's failure to seize opportunities to project themes of unity and uplift — part of the job — is a striking contrast with even second or third-tier presidents. His inaugural address was a doomsday portrait of a gutted and bankrupt America. His State of the Union address on January 30, his most convincing attempt at presidential communication, couldn't rise above gruesome themes of gangland murders by foreign criminals. Tragedy strikes and Trump hits the wrong note. A gunman kills 11 Jewish worshippers in Pittsburgh and the President attacks the synagogue for not having an armed guard. Forest fires devastate California and he attacks forest managers and threatens to cut off funding.

This restless, combative resentment contrasts with the instincts of Ronald Reagan. In 1986 White House TV sets showed a cloud of vapour engulfing the space shuttle Challenger 73 seconds after takeoff and debris falling to earth.

In her memoir, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, Peggy Noonan, Reagan's speechwriter, recorded the ease with which she and the president settled on the necessary words. Quoting poetry, Reagan said the lost crew had 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'. Democrat Speaker Tip O'Neill had tears.

Trump would have attacked the competence of NASA engineers. Or the corrosive influence of climate scientists on its staff.

Yet incompetence at the presidential tasks sits side-by-side with a genius for recasting US politics. Trump has transformed his own party from one optimistic about free trade and immigration to one signed up to trade barriers and sealed borders. 'I am a tariff man,' he declares, sending the market into a nose dive. In the mid-terms he dumps arguments over US economic strength for a fear campaign over dark-hued foreigners advancing on the border.

It's a measure of the radical transformation of Republicans to recall that in 2016 Trump's main primary rivals, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and John Kasich, had shown no interest in taking the party in a protectionist direction. Now none challenges him. Republicans opposed to Trump's agenda, such as senators Bob Corker and Jeff Flake, have been squeezed out, making congressional Republicans resemble the pliant hacks who sat in the French Assembly under Napoleon III, members of a party that existed only to nurture its comic, overbearing leader.

That the US will not return to any sort of normal after Trump is confirmed by changes his presidency has forced in his opposition. When Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 28, won a congressional primary this June proclaiming her socialism, she signalled left-wing Democrats aligned with Bernie Sanders were coming to the fore. To be sure there are alternative currents in the Democratic Party, one symbolised by Sherrod Brown, 66, who last month held his Senate seat in Ohio by appealing to working-class voters on pensions and protection. *Vanity Fair* described him as 'a quintessentially Midwestern rust belt white male pol'.

But a presidential contest drags the party to the Left and will relegate white male moderates in favour of the party's younger, female, non-white voter base. To prove this, senator Cory Booker is running on the message of 'radical love', a long way from the cool parsing of the last African-American to run for their party's nomination. Senator Kamala Harris lifted her profile with the assault on the Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination and might be portrayed as an apostle of strident identity politics like senator Elizabeth Warren. They are a few of what one Washington journalist guesses are up to three dozen equally viable Democratic candidates.

The liberal internationalism and economic centrism of the Clintons is all but dead as the Democratic Party drifts to resemble Jeremy Corbyn's British Labour — a comparison not yet complete but starting to look less preposterous as Democrats sign up to neo-socialist programs such as free college for all, Medicare for all and worker reps on Wall Street boards. At the very least you can bet the next Democrat president won't be busting to lay down new trade deals, push military power, re-enter Middle East quagmires or return troops to Afghanistan.

This is all Trump's doing.

Some commentators home in on elements of continuity in US foreign policy. But this cheerful impulse to normalise the Trump phenomenon is undermined by the President's improvisation and the unilateralist instincts of advisers such as John Bolton and Peter Navarro. Washington now extends a level of trust to a communist dictatorship in North Korea it does not extend to its European and Canadian allies, whose leaders the President publicly mocks.

US diplomacy in the Middle East is bound with hoops of iron to the most chauvinist advocates of a greater Israel. Not an onion skin separates the White House from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. When the time comes, for example, it's hard to see the administration resisting annexation of the West Bank.

Any pretence at an honest-broker role is abandoned and the alliance with the Saudi royals is the one other pillar of US strategy. Links between Jared Kushner and Saudi's Crown Prince resemble a romance between royal houses.

In Asia no US partner or ally believes Washington can be counted on. This applies to South Korea, Japan, Singapore and India. They can hardly forgo any partnerships with China in a multipolar world where the US is spouting America First.

Which of the 10 foreign ministries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations would be advising their prime minister or president that the US is the more reliable force in their region? If Washington policy can now be summed up as ‘We’re America, bitch!’, it has to be taken at its word. A cold war with China is not just Trump’s doing but — again a touch of genius — captures the consensus in Washington that is, as Larry Summers puts it, in ‘trauma’ at a Chinese economy that will one day be twice as big as its own. Worse, America is seized by the idea that in 10 years it will lose its lead in information technology, robotics and artificial intelligence.

Trump’s America is ‘viciously polarised by race, ethnicity and gender’, according to Democrat congressman Bill Pascrell. Add this to America being strategically challenged and you have a large part of the explanation of Trump’s radical force.

In Beijing it’s possible to meet Chinese reformers who think Trump could be doing China a favour. They want to see more ‘reform and opening up’. They don’t think China’s future lies in pumping up state enterprises, which occupy less and less of the economy.

Trump’s threats of aggressive trade war should be met with a bold opening, the reformers argue. That would involve treating foreign direct investment in China as an OECD government.

It would involve recognising that China in the past two years has caught up with America in patents and trademarks, according to the World Intellectual Property Organisation. Confirming the trend, Huawei is fighting legal battles in 30 jurisdictions warding off rivals stealing its innovation.

China can hasten its transition to a mature economy with a stake-holding interest in protecting intellectual property.

Bring that notion to the table and Chinese President Xi Jinping may present an offer that Trump’s trade advisers would find hard to scorn — especially with the New York Stock Exchange having demonstrated its neuralgic sensitivities.

If Xi seizes this chance, Trump takes credit. He’s already spoken about a big, bold deal and even Navarro told CNN he was impressed by Xi’s offers on the sidelines of the G20. If trade war is averted then the idea could be kept alive that America is being led by an idiot, but an idiot of genius. Even if speeding up China’s arrival at Western economic norms was never his objective. And even if the genius resembles that of the chimp handed a loaded revolver in a laboratory experiment.

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