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Is Trump Another Obama on Foreign Policy?

By Lucy Steigerwald
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United States foreign policy involves miserable choices. Were George W. Bush's two boots on the ground wars worse than Barack Obama's dabbling in six different countries with war robots, and his precedent-setting assassinations of American citizens? Was FDR worse than Harry Truman for pure body-count, even though the latter is responsible for the only use(s) of an atomic bomb on human beings in history? Did Richard Nixon's spasms of Chinese diplomacy skills somehow make up for what he did to Cambodia? Trying to decide if Woodrow Wilson, or Lyndon Johnson, or any of the other myriad war presidents are worse than the other is a grim, endless task.

There's a certain subjectivity in presenting the most disastrous of the disastrous award, but the end results sure look similar to one another. There is blood and blowback. Innocent people die, but terrorist cells and insurgents and civil wars continue on.

The shiny, new, politics-free status of Donald Trump made him a Rorschach test for hopes and fears on foreign policy. And Trump's propensity for taking all sides of each issue made him even harder to pin down. Here we are more than six weeks into his tenure as president, and the first reports of his plans and his decisions are coming in, and are being mused over by supposed experts.

When a new president is elected, skeptics of empire get nervous. They often fear that the worst – perhaps the long-feared war with Iran will come. Or, they get optimistic, perhaps overly so. Trump mocked Dick Cheney foreign policy. Perhaps he's the noninterventionist of our dreams (or, you know, at least the isolationist).

The question of what Trump's presidency is is not ready to be answered. On the other hand, he appears to be something less dramatic than either his ardent supporters or his most fearful haters suggested. In fact, Trump may be a lot like Obama in terms of foreign policy, but with more delegation to the Pentagon, and even more use of Special Forces. That, along with his putting CIA drone strikes back on the agenda (something Obama stopped in 2013) has also proven Trump to be the guy who thinks the "experts" in foreign affairs should be deciding what intervention is necessary. Perhaps then Trump may not be a terrifying war-starter. Perhaps he may just go a little farther down the road that Obama cleared and began to pave. The road that W. started down, and in fact nearly every president before him worked on smoothing to greater or lesser extents. This is how it works with empire, and an executive branch that claims more and more power.

A *Foreign Policy* piece calls Trump's decisions so far "medium-footprint." This is also something they consider to be more optimal than a lot of previous options (to make a note that this isn't exactly a peacenik perspective being cited). The piece compares Trump to Obama in his later years, as the Islamic State gained strength, and the US responded more decisively with what they initially refused to call boots on the ground in Iraq.

If Trump continues on this path, it will be easy enough for most people to put foreign policy on the backburner. He has started enthusiastically with drone strikes, but the US learned to ignore those years ago. Obama tipped his toes into Yemen, but the Trump administration is ready to brutalize it. They hit the country 40 times in five day already, adding to the misery that the people there have been suffering while trapped in the middle of a war.

Add this underwhelming-to-the-folks-at-home collection of airstrikes to the smattering of small-scale domestic terrorist attacks, usually by self-proclaimed ISIS soldiers, that will most likely continue for the foreseeable future, and here we are. It would take someone more optimistic about intelligence communities and government officials than I to think that authorities can do much about these tragic attacks except for harass and harangue various innocent people by spying and profiling.

However, these attacks, such as the one in London from earlier this week by a supposed ISIS soldier, are enough to scare people, and to reassure them that the status quo endless war on terror is working for the US and its allies. And if Trump neither attacks Iran, nor pulls US troops from abroad, or even gets out of NATO, or any other extreme, who will object to the occasional special forces raid or bombing raid that kills an unknown number of civilians in some country known to us only for being wartorn? The answer is very few people.

I know some radical, anti-empire people who were hoping for a Trump win. Not because they believed that he was really going to bring about peace, but because he was unpredictable and unknown enough to in theory bring about changes to the US. That's a more daring gamble than

backing traditional hawk Hillary C. But the temptation to root for progress in instability was at least initially understandable.

It's early yet, but if I were willing to bet on how things end up with Trump (assuming he manages a full term) I would say it won't be as dramatic as any of us imagined in our worst nightmares or our happiest daydreams. In fact, like Obama, Trump may end up just bad enough to spy, oppress, and attack people the world over, but not bad enough to provoke any real backlash or uprising. Trump may well end up worse on criminal justice, and his desire to remove some of the supposed safeguards on use of military force that Obama paid lip service to could make him a bit worse in the long-run. But maybe not. More importantly, it's the endless tower of empire and executive power that will not be toppled by Trump, or by his successor, or the president after that.

President Trump's trip to the White House may have been a shock, but his stay there isn't necessarily going to be as much of a surprise. A few score of dead across the Middle East each week, and a US denial that any were civilians. We've been here before, and it doesn't appear that we are leaving soon.