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Donald Trump and the Erosion of American Greatness Moral Emptiness

by Roger Cohen

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Some say Donald Trump's presidency does not present an existential threat to the American Republic. But after a year of MAGA, it has become clear that a disaster is unfolding whose consequences for humanity and decency will be substantial.

Ten months into the Trump presidency, the world has not gone over a cliff. Nuclear brinkmanship with North Korea has not produced Armageddon. That this must be considered an achievement is testimony to how alarming Donald Trump's erratic belligerence has been. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany has concluded that Europeans must now take "our destiny into our own hands." Dismay is widespread. The post-war order, stripped of its American point of reference, is frayed to the breaking point.

This is no surprise. Trump's election, like Britain's perverse flight from the European Union, reflected a blow-up-the-system mood. The tens of millions of Americans who elected Trump had few illusions about his irascibility but were ready to roll the dice in the name of disruption at any cost.

The president, who continues to act principally as the rabble-rousing leader of a mass movement, is the ultimate provocateur. He jolts the facile assumptions of a globalized liberal elite. Rising inequality and rampant impunity for the powerful certainly demanded such a jolt. But the question remains: How dangerous is Trump to the world and the American Republic?

One school of thought argues: Not very. For all the presidential mouthing and angry ALL-CAPS dawn tweeting, there's no sign of the wall on the Mexican border; and NATO is no longer "obsolete" (at least some days of the week); and the "One China" policy has not been scrapped; and the Iran nuclear agreement endures for now, despite Trump's outrageous refusal to recertify it; and the United States embassy is still in Tel Aviv; and the North American Free Trade Agreement hangs on. Even Trump's decision to quit the Paris climate accord has not yet been made effective.

So perhaps Defense Secretary James Mattis and H.R. McMaster, the national security adviser, have ring-fenced Trump's recklessness. Perhaps they have neutralized his ahistorical ignorance. Trump's "America First" may be a slogan of impeccable fascist pedigree, but it will not upend the world.

I wish I could believe this, but I am dubious. A disaster is unfolding whose consequences for humanity and decency will be substantial. America's word, which has constituted the undergirding of global security for more than seven decades, is a fast-devaluing currency. Trump is likely to become more capricious in the coming months. The investigation by Robert Mueller into possible collusion between the Kremlin and the Trump presidential campaign has already led to the indictment of the president's campaign manager, Paul Manafort. War was ever a great distraction from domestic difficulty.

Stepping into the Void

Already, Russian president Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping of China are stepping into the void. This is inevitable. The message from the Trump White House is one of withdrawal - from global responsibility above all, be it for the environment, European stability or the fate of the Middle East.

If the Iran nuclear deal is working but Trump chooses to trash it because the Islamic Republic did not become a benign power overnight - the deal was about centrifuges not Iranian support for Bashar al-Assad's butchery in Syria - then why on earth should any other nation conclude a treaty with bait-and-switch America?

The most terrifying thing to me about the insults hurled in recent weeks between Trump and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, was that it was impossible to distinguish between them. The American president had descended to the level of a tantrum-prone totalitarian despot.

Trump vowed to "totally destroy" North Korea and called Kim "Rocket Man on a suicide mission." The United States, he proclaimed, was "locked and loaded." Kim, in return, called Trump "a rogue," a "gangster," and a "dotard," the last a word not much in vogue since the 17th century. Americans scurried for their dictionaries to discover that a dotard was a senile fool.

The unfunny thing is that when two thin-skinned men with nukes, grudges and mysterious hair hurl insults at each other, and one of them is the American president, there is no cause for comfort. Wars begin in unforeseeable ways; with nuclear brinkmanship, accidents happen.

Call all this a disturbing Asian flurry if you like. But something deeper is going on. The United States has often fallen short. Ken Burns' remarkable documentary on the Vietnam War has been a recent reminder of this. So, of course, were Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo. Yet, over time, American reinvention does its work and the idea flickers to life again: that we are a nation of laws; that all Americans, whatever their beliefs or faiths, have rights and responsibilities under the law; and that this law establishes checks and balances designed to safeguard our freedom and our democracy and our decency, the values we carry out into the world in the belief that if they cannot always deliver the best, they may at least avert the worst.

Contemptuous of Principle

Separate the United States from these principles and there is not much left. America's claim to leadership is voided permanently, if stripped of a moral component. The German *Bundesrepublik*, America's child, ushered into being under American tutelage, knows this as perhaps no other nation.

To all of this, Trump seems oblivious. He is contemptuous of principle. Words cascade from his mouth and they mean nothing, because when a man of moral emptiness tries to exhort a nation to greatness the only thing communicated is pitiful, almost comical, hypocrisy.

President Trump has yet to meet a strongman who does not elicit his sympathy or a multilateral organization that does not prompt his disdain. The Saudi King, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines and Vladimir Putin are fine. Merkel in "bad, bad Germany" is not. I hear that Merkel and Trump scarcely speak to each other. This is worrying. Germany is the most important country in Europe and a core American ally.

Under Trump, the State Department has been eviscerated: a proposed 30 percent budget cut, countless critical posts unfilled, a secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, who has contrived to be ineffective and demoralize his staff. At the same time, military budgets have soared. Trump loves soldiers and has little time for diplomats. When all you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.

My deepest concern is that Trump actually believes the post-war order was just a means to rip off America; and he buys, if anything, into Putin's macho authoritarianism and spheres of influence for the Great Powers. We saw how well that worked in the run-up to World War I.

The reality of Trump's autocratic tendencies should not be waved away. He is not harmless. Liberals paid a heavy price for failing to look facts in the eye at the last election. The Trump phenomenon - his appeal to millions of Americans - endures. It demands to be understood, at a time when tens of millions of other Americans hold him unfit for office - a charlatan, a fraud and a serial liar. I've been a foreign correspondent for much of my life, and visiting Trump country from New York is very similar to traveling to another country as a foreign correspondent.

A Voice from Trump Country

Here's a voice from Trump country: People have to choose between heating their homes, buying food or buying health care and you want them to worry about the survival of the planet or transgender stuff? I respect business and I distrust government. I don't want illegal immigrants taking our jobs. I don't like liberals who shop at Whole Foods talking down their noses at me because I shop at WalMart. I don't want God and guns chased out of the country. White lives matter, too, you know. That Hillary forgot that - and was punished. We lost our discipline and our moral code in this country. So we need honest Trump to shake things up and get our country back.

"I want my country back!" This is the universal cry of the global wave of rightist reaction. It's Trump's "America First." It's Brexit. It's Marine Le Pen's nationalists against the globalists. It's Germany's nationalist AfD grabbing nearly 100 seats in the Bundestag. It explains the vogue word of the moment: sovereignty. Trump used it more than 20 times in his United Nations speech in September.

Behind all this lies a potent emotion: fear. This was Trump's great intuition - and he has formidable, feral intuitions allied to a fiendish energy. He saw, helped by Steve Bannon, that multiple American fears could be fused into a permanent nationalist campaign.

Demographic fear (the end within the next couple of decades of America's white majority); economic fear (the dislocations of globalization); cultural fear (of the urban elite who want to chase guns and God out of the country); primal fear (the white flip-out over having a black president); fear of the stranger (the immigrant hordes); fear of national decline (Chinese power rising and those endless post 9/11 wars without victory); fear of the future (automation and the end of work); fear of terrorism (the Muslim jihadi among us); fear of speaking your mind (the liberal tyranny of the politically correct).

Take all this, inject the potent galvanizing force of Fox News and Breitbart (with their dime-a-dozen scapegoats), wrap it in a heavy dose of angry nationalism and drain-the-swamp elite-bashing, and a winning guerrilla offensive was there to be mounted.

You just had to see it. Liberals in their arrogance didn't - until it was too late. They didn't see Wisconsin at all. They hardly saw Michigan. They still fail to see - as most Europeans fail to see - that many smart, decent Americans support Trump. His reelection for a second term, even since the Manafort indictment, remains more likely than his impeachment. I would put the chances of the former at 25 percent and the latter at 10 percent.

A Terrifying Shrug

Yet, he is dangerous. Trump has already blurred the line between truth and falsehood. He has attacked the judiciary and a free press. I had an alarming experience recently. Trump had lied, as he routinely does, about two phone calls, one from the president of Mexico and one from the head of the Boy Scouts. The calls, supposedly to congratulate him, did not exist. They were pure

inventions. Asked if Trump had lied, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "I wouldn't say it was a lie."

I actually remember shrugging. And it was the shrug that was terrifying. This is how autocrats - or would-be autocrats - cement their power. They wear you down. They take you down the rabbit hole. They want you to hear the great leader declare that $2+2=5$ - and shrug.

Recently, the president tweeted: "With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!"

This is Putin territory. This is Erdogan territory. We don't know yet how far the president is prepared to go in silencing critics who do not meet his test of patriotism, while inviting his supporters to give free rein to their inner bigot. But Mueller and, eventually, a reelection campaign will tempt Trump to go a long way.

I lived in Berlin a couple of decades ago and saw the capital return after the Rhineland sojourn in bland Bonn. The city was a construction site. Cranes hoisted the new but the past - a constant admonition to a united Germany - was not erased. This was the consummation of the miracle: Germany unified, within NATO, its borders no longer contested. The German problem that over decades had caused sleepless nights to thousands of American diplomats and agents had been resolved.

I would cross the Polish border sometimes. Poland is close to Berlin, as Poles know well. I had to pinch myself, with the border near invisible, to recall that these were "Bloodlands," in Timothy Snyder's phrase, the last resting place of millions. Yet here, only decades later, there stretched before me the tranquility that NATO, the European Union and statesmanship had brought.

None of this would have happened without the trans-Atlantic alliance, without the Berlin airlift and the Marshall Plan, without America as a European power - without everything Trump appears to hold in contempt. Constancy and strength in pursuit of strategy are wearing on their opponents. Chaos, on the other hand, gives foes a sense of opportunity.

Cannot Be Fixed in Stone

It was not only Germans who enjoyed what Helmut Kohl once called "the blessing of late birth." In some way, every post-war European did. We succumb at our peril to amnesia. It is for the young to forge the 21st century. That is right and natural. The precepts of the last century, and its power structure, cannot be forever fixed in stone.

Yet we should not forget from what horror *Pax Americana* emerged. As Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron flesh out a distinct European destiny - as they should in this era of Trump - they must be mindful of preserving the American bond, in the hope of better days. They must also speak out strongly for the values Trump's America has forsaken.

Perhaps Senator John McCain, a great friend of Europe now battling brain cancer, has offered the best rebuke to Trump:

"To refuse the obligations of international leadership and our duty to remain 'the last best hope of earth' for the sake of some half-baked, spurious nationalism cooked up by people who would rather find scapegoats than solve problems is as unpatriotic as an attachment to any other tired dogma of the past that Americans consigned to the ash heap of history.

"We live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil. We are the custodians of those ideals at home, and their champion abroad. We have done great good in the world. That leadership has had its costs, but we have become incomparably powerful and wealthy as we did. We have a moral obligation to continue in our just cause, and we would bring more than shame on ourselves if we don't. We will not thrive in a world where our leadership and ideals are absent. We wouldn't deserve to."