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World watches the shrinking of the American presidency

It is difficult to overestimate the geopolitical risks of this moment – or the (both disturbed and eager) global scrutiny now being given to the American president.

Aggression is growing along the westward reach of Russian influence and the southern boundary of Chinese influence. Intercontinental nuclear capacity may soon be in the hands of a mental pubescent in North Korea. In the Middle East, a hostile alliance of Russia and Shiite powers is ascendant; radical Sunnis have a territorial foothold and inspire strikes in Western cities; America's traditional Sunni friends and allies feel devalued or abandoned; perhaps 500,000 Syrians are dead and millions of refugees suffer in conditions that incubate anger. Cyber terrorism and cyber espionage are exploit-

**Michael Gerson**

ing and weaponizing our own technological dependence. Add to this a massive famine in East Africa, threatening the lives of 20 million people, and the picture of chaos is complete – until the next crisis breaks.

It is in this context that the diplomatic bloopers reel of the last few days has been played – the casual association of British intelligence with alleged surveillance at Trump Tower; the presidential tweets undermining Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his Asia trip; and the rude and childish treatment given the German chancellor. When Donald Trump and Angela Merkel sat together in the Oval Office, we were seeing the leader of the free world – and that guy pouting in public.

Every new administration has a shakeout period. But this assumes an ability to learn from mistakes. And this would require admitting mistakes. The spectacle of an American president blaming a Fox News commentator for a major diplomatic incident was another milestone in the miniaturization of the presidency.

An interested foreigner (friend or foe) must be a student of Trump's temperament, which is just as bad as advertised. He is inexperienced, uninformed, easily provoked and supremely confident in his own judgment. His advantage is the choice of some serious, experienced advisers, including Defense Secretary James Mattis, national security adviser H.R. McMaster and deputy national security adviser Dina Powell. But success in their jobs depends on the listening skills of Donald Trump.

Mere incompetence would be bad enough.

But foreigners trying to understand America must now study (of all things) the intellectual influences of White House chief strategist Steve Bannon. His vision of a Western alliance of ethno-nationalist, right-wing populists against globalists, multiculturalists, Islamists and (fill in the blank with your preferred minority) is the administration's most vivid and rhetorically ascendant foreign policy viewpoint. How does this affect the alliances of the previous dispensation? That is the background against which Trump's peevishness is being viewed.

Foreigners see a president who has blamed his predecessor, in banana republic style, of a serious crime, for which FBI Director James Comey testified Monday that there is no evidence. They see an administration whose campaign activities are being actively investigated by the executive branch and congress. If close Trump associates are directly connected to Russian hacking, foreigners will see the president engulfed in an impeachment crisis – the only constitutional mechanism that would remove the taint of larceny from the 2016 election.

And foreigners are seeing politics, not national security, in the driver's seat of the administration. Tillerson was given the job of secretary of state, then denied his choice of deputy for political reasons, then ordered to make a 28 percent cut in the budget for diplomacy and development. Never mind that Tillerson has been left a diminished figure. Never mind that stability operations in Somalia and Northern Nigeria – the recruiting grounds of Islamist terrorism – would likely be eliminated under the Trump budget. Never mind that programs to prevent famines would be slashed.

When asked if he was worried about cutting these programs during a famine, budget director Mick Mulvaney responded: "The president said specifically hundreds of times ... I'm going to spend less money on people overseas and more money on people back home. And that's exactly what we're doing with this budget." The benighted cruelty of such a statement – assuming that the only way to help Americans is to let foreign children die – is remarkable, and typical.

The sum total? Foreigners see a Darwinian, nationalist framework for American foreign policy; a diminished commitment to global engagement; a brewing scandal that could distract and cripple the administration; and a president who often conducts his affairs with peevish ignorance.

Some will look at this spectacle and live in fear; others may see golden opportunity.

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VALLEY VOICE

Wise 'green power' moves can bolster national security

One consideration regarding this country's energy policy that is seldom discussed in public forums is how having a decentralized energy generation and distribution system would contribute to our national security. An aging power grid that relies primarily on electrical generation created far away from where the energy must be transmitted and used is subject not only to catastrophic failure on account of natural disasters, but also cyber security threats, sabotage, and outright failures. Furthermore, major reliance on fossil fuels, which has the imperative of using thousands of miles of pipeline and/or power lines and other distribution methods subject to attack (either physical or cyber), does not serve national security interests.

To see how renewable energy sources and battery storage technologies can form the underpinnings – along with other technologies – of a more comprehensive energy policy, one only has to look to the U.S. military. According to an article in ECN ("Deployable renewable energy systems power critical equipment on the battlefield," by Chris Warner, www.ecn-mag.com), the military uses ultra-portable battery storage devices along with solar power systems and generators to power microgrids. Such systems enable the powering of equipment that cannot be tied to a main electric grid. They also address the challenges associated with transporting fuel and protecting the supply chain on the battlefield. It is worth noting that cities such as San Francisco and New York are developing "solar+storage for resiliency" projects ("Preparing for emergencies with wind, solar, energy storage and microgrids," by John Shenot, microgridknowledge.com). According to Shenot, electricity storage along with microgrid capabilities are more flexible and less expensive than traditional diesel backup solutions. As someone who lives in earthquake country, I

**Debra Vogler**

would find it of great interest to hear how our local, county, and state governments are actively investigating the implementation of relevant technologies so that in the event of a major disaster, citizens can have a modicum of essential power for their home needs. There are other technologies not dependent on fossil fuels that could be developed for wider deployment in addition to incentivizing the adoption of those that have already been widely publicized (e.g., Tesla's Solar Shingles and Powerwall).

Besides the obvious benefit of being able to provide power to citizens in the midst of a disaster or national crisis, the widespread implementation of renewable energy technologies is a boon to job growth. Earlier this year, The Desert Sun ("California hits 100,000 solar jobs as industry grows at record pace," Feb. 7) reported that the state of California "led the country with 100,000 solar jobs in 2016." Innovation in renewable technologies also enables the U.S. to be competitive on the global stage while enhancing national security.

It's well past time that we as citizens view national security beyond the simple ideas of fossil fuels providing energy independence or profligate spending on ineffective walls, and put resources into those elements that will keep the U.S. competitively technologically, provide jobs, and deliver major payoffs to millions of our fellow citizens in times of crisis.

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YOUR VOICE

Different worlds

If Donald Trump or Paul Ryan get sick or hospitalized, odds are that they don't have to worry about losing a pay-check or risk facing eviction and foreclosure due to a medical emergency.

Yet, Trump and Ryan are not willing to cut their own health insurance benefits because austerity does not apply to the so-called policy architects. Austerity only applies to those who were lucky enough to get health insurance, yet were unable to spend endless sums of money to influence the corrupt pay-to-play election system.

Earl Ammerman IV, Palm Springs

On Obamacare changes

Screaming headlines, talking heads, lead stories on the five-minute news segments on every radio station ... "14 million Americans to lose ..."

What the stories don't explain upfront is that these Americans will have the right to choose and probably 14 million of them will not want to have health insurance for pregnancy costs, given that many are 28 year old males or similarly not needing of such cov-



ADAM BERRY/GETTY IMAGES

Desert Sun readers differ on the current efforts to rewrite national health care policy.

erage.

Republicans have to fight back and get this Obamacare nonsense flushed down the toilet. Americans should have affordable health care (not health insurance necessarily).

If we have a "right," it is for competitive and independent health care providers.

Tom Pinard, Palm Springs and Wrightwood

A cynical bill

Paul Ryan's disingenuous assertion that Americans will now be freed from the health care mandate to "choose" what level of insurance they want is both laughable and cynical. Part of the bill currently proposed by Republicans allows insurance to charge consumers a 35 percent penalty if they have a coverage gap exceeding 63 days.

So if I lose my job and do not get immediately reemployed at a job that offers health insurance (oh, that's right, that's not going to be a mandate any more either) I have the "choice" to go uninsured or to pay whatever insurance companies are charging at that point or, if I miss the 63-day window, I have the "choice" to pay whatever insurance companies are charging plus 35 percent!

There is no incentive in this bill for "competition" in the insurance markets. They will all charge within a few percentage points of each other for similar coverage as usual. The poor will pay more than they can afford or risk having no coverage and it virtually eliminates the portability so necessary to those in mobile, vulnerable employ-

ment industries such as hospitality, sales and temporary work.

Maureen H. Forman, Palm Springs

A better use of funds

Robin Hood took from the rich and gave to the poor. Our current administration is going to take from the poor to give to the rich.

The money given to the rich should instead be used to lower interest on student debt to perhaps 2 percent or 3 percent.

There is something wrong when our future generation has to pay the government for years in order to make a decent living and pay taxes.

D.D. Simpson, Palm Springs

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