

Special Providence

There is an old saying that “God has a Special Providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States of America.” In terms of foreign policy, we can urgently hope that it still applies.

The world today is more volatile than at any time since 1945. In the new global *disorder*, climate change, surging population growth, and limited resources imperil weak states. Old fashioned geopolitics flourishes in ethnic and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East and in territorial disputes and a menacing arms race in East Asia. Russia and China seem bent on regional hegemony. Technology and trade have brought the world closer together. But globalization has also created vast inequality, which, along with a mammoth refugee crisis, has sparked rampant nationalism, especially in Europe. “An anchorless world,” journalist Roger Cohen calls it, “an angry unmanageable world....”

The new U.S. administration seems singularly ill equipped to deal with this world. The president himself is a blank slate and a loose cannon in foreign policy, both ignorant and arrogant, potentially a lethal combination. His international experience consists of hotels, beauty contests, and wrestling. In terms of preparation and temperament, he may be the least suited person ever to hold the office. He is impulsive, and contemptuous of tradition and protocol. Inasmuch as he has a world view, it is parochial and nationalistic, centered on the vague and tainted concept of America First and built around the bizarre belief, long cherished in isolationist doctrine, that Uncle Sam has been “Uncle Sucker,” a nation shamelessly exploited by others.

Trump’s approach threatens protectionism and trade wars, the breakdown of alliances, and perpetual crises. His peculiar affection for Russian president Vladimir Putin could ease tensions. But it might also tempt Moscow to take steps that could force an American response—

and set off a perilous escalation, as in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Or the nation that may have helped Trump win the presidency could ultimately be his undoing in terms of a domestic political backlash.

Incoming presidents with short foreign policy resumes usually select experienced and knowledgeable people to advise them. Not so with Trump. The poorly qualified national security adviser, Gen. Michael Flynn, lasted but three weeks and resigned in scandal, leaving the all-important National Security Council in chaos. The presence there of Steve Bannon, a person with no foreign policy experience and a confirmed ideologue committed to disruption of established ways, is alarming. As inexperienced as his boss, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will have a steep learning curve. It is ironic that seemingly the most reliable of the president's national security appointments is a former Marine general, Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, who bears the nickname "Mad Dog."

The first weeks of the Trump administration offer no reassurance. With his late-night tweets and blustery phone calls, the president has managed to offend many of those he has talked to, including, of all people, the Prime Minister of Australia! His executive order on travel, refugees, and immigration provoked a worldwide furor. His questioning of the one-China policy, and Tillerson's comments on the contested South China Sea islands have heightened already tense relations with Beijing. The administration has not only been impulsive and impetuous, but has also demonstrated rank incompetence.

The foreign policy bureaucracy might in ordinary times be a stabilizing force, but so far this president has demonstrated his contempt for them and has told some to get on board or resign.

Congress is too divided, gridlocked, and focused on domestic issues to offer constructive advice or check dangerous tendencies. In the Obama years--and historically--while complaining of presidential abuse of power, members of Congress have been happy to let the White House set policy--and then cast blame if things go wrong. Mavericks like John McCain and Lindsey Graham may question presidential actions. But in the absence of broader support they can do little more.

Established policies are not always as easy to change or trash as neophytes in government believe. Sometimes, the path of expediency—as well as wisdom—is to go with policies in place. After some early missteps, Trump seems to be doing this with China. In time, some of his policies may look more like Obama's than either would care to admit. Sometimes after early blunders, JFK's Bay of Pigs' debacle, for example, administrations learn from hard experience and right themselves. Perhaps, Mattis and Tillerson, assisted by experts in their agencies, will emerge as stabilizers. The replacement of inept or unqualified officials such as Flynn may also help.

Citizens concerned about the Trump foreign policy should educate themselves on the issues, question the administration's "alternative facts," and make their voices heard.

And hope for some of that "Special Providence!"

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