

Trump admits U.S. stupidity in Middle East, then acts stupidly himself

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During a White House press briefing on the COVID-19 pandemic on April 20, 2020, U.S. president Donald Trump candidly confessed to the stupidity of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Referring to trillions of dollars spent on America's never-ending wars, Trump asked, "How stupid have we been?"¹ Yet two days later, he stupidly gave an order to "shoot down and destroy" Iranian gunboats allegedly harassing U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf.²

In the midst of a raging coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. president has distinguished himself by his unmitigated absence of leadership. Since the end of February, the former reality TV show star has turned a daily press briefing, which is supposed to be for giving the latest updates on COVID-19 to the American people, into a substitute campaign rally to tout his latest imaginary accomplishments and find fault in others for his abysmal lack of managerial skills. Trump's main concern has been his ratings, but he has assured viewers that his daily press conferences, which could be categorized as self-serving, surreal sermons periodically punctuated by isolated information from others, is not about him. "Nothing's about me," Trump has stated after having relinquished the podium to others for a paltry 13 minutes out of a 90-minute session.³

Grandiose, self-congratulatory, bombastic statements, of course, have been Trump's hallmark since entering the presidential race in 2015. "I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created," he unabashedly uttered in his speech announcing his candidacy in June of 2015. Now, because of Trump's ineptitude in handling the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. economy is imploding with an estimated unemployment rate of 20 percent, higher than during the global financial crisis of 2008.⁴ But rather than take responsibility for mishandling the coronavirus crisis, he has chosen to blame China, repeatedly referring to the SARS COV-2, the pathogen responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak, as the "Chinese" virus. Yet back in 2015 during his candidacy announcement, Trump gushed, "I love China. The biggest bank in the world is from China," because the bank's U.S. headquarters is located in Trump Tower.⁵

Trump also made it clear in his fateful presidential bid that his regime would be targeting Iran. After insisting that he advised against the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, he claimed that Iran had the oil that ISIS did not have. Next, he accused Iran of taking over Iraq, and that "they're taking it over big league." Claiming that the U.S. spent \$2 trillion on the Iraq escapade, the president-to-be lamented, "And we have nothing. We can't even go there." Referring to the JCPOA, the so-called Iran nuclear deal, Trump exposed his Zionist allegiance by suggesting, "He [Obama] makes that deal, Israel maybe won't exist very long. It's a disaster, and we have to protect Israel." Regurgitating the time-worn trope of stopping Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, the future U.S. president accused Secretary of State John Kerry of "making a horrible and laughable deal, who's just being tapped along as they [Iran] make weapons right now."⁶

There is no question that American policy in the Middle East has been rife with stupidity, the longest running example of which is the unquestioning U.S. support for the apartheid Israeli regime, the root cause of most regional issues. Backing Iraqi dictator Saddam in his bloody 8-year-long war against Iran, then opposing him in 1991, and finally toppling his government in

2003 is a case study in how not to conduct international relations. Trying to eradicate terrorism from the Middle East after selectively supporting and defunding various extremist organizations is a contradiction in terms that would be transparent to any average college student majoring in international relations. For example, supporting the predecessor of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan for ten years in its resistance campaign against the former Soviet Union's military occupation, and then declaring war on it as the terrorist organization responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center, is sheer geopolitical lunacy.

Continuous support for repressive regimes in the Middle East, such as is the case in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and elsewhere, obviously contradicts the notion that the U.S. is the champion of democracy and human rights. Last year, the mercurial Trump reversed U.S. policy on Libya, deciding to withdraw support for the internationally recognized government in Tripoli and then backing Khalifa Haftar in his violent attempt to overthrow it. A half century ago, the argument was that supporting a U.S.-aligned dictator was better than risking a popular uprising, which could place the country in the Communist camp. Today, with Trump at the helm of the U.S. ship of state, supporting autocratic regimes in the Middle East serves the twofold purposes of suppressing popular Islamic movements, and keeping allies supplied with oil while attempting to bring down Iran by choking off its oil exports.⁷

Certainly supporting the unpopular, autocratic ruler of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, over the democratically-elected government of Mohammad Mossadegh was a huge blunder. Likewise, Nixon's decision to assign the Iranian autocrat the role of U.S. security surrogate in the Persian Gulf region, which made the shah responsible for some 60 percent of the world's oil on behalf of Washington, was dangerously dim-witted. While the surrogate strategy in theory also called for Saudi Arabia to share the responsibility for safeguarding the flow of oil to the west, in practice, Riyadh's rulers were incapable of fulfilling their part, without so much as a navy to rely upon at that time. This meant that Washington, in reality, had placed all its bets on the shah,⁸ a profoundly foolish policy, which led to the complete befuddlement of U.S. policymakers following the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

For the most part, Trump has maintained the Middle East policies of his predecessors, but has executed some boneheaded blunders of his own, the first of which was his unilateral exit from the JCPOA in May 2018.⁹ Next was declaring the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a foreign terrorist organization in April 2019,¹⁰ shortly after which Iran's parliament reciprocated by designating all U.S. military forces in the Middle East, in particular CENTCOM, as terrorists, and the U.S. government as a sponsor of terrorism,¹¹ which is indisputably true. But the most foolish mistake, whose consequences have been only temporarily suppressed by the need to confront the coronavirus pandemic, is the terror assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, on January 3 in Baghdad along with Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units.¹² While Iran has executed an initial punitive strike against U.S. occupation forces in Iraq, it remains to be seen what further steps may be taken in retaliation for this lawless act.

Despite Trump's lucid lack of capabilities in the field of international relations, he is unquestionably correct in his assertion that America's policies in the Middle East have been stupid. Yet such institutionally ingrained idiocy on Washington's part has received bipartisan

support for many decades. Consequently, it would be sophomoric to expect that a whimsical observation by a petulant president under pressure of a once-in-a-century pandemic, which happened to arrive in an election year, would result in any meaningful change in U.S. policy.

Endnotes

¹ “Remarks by President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Members of the Coronavirus Task Force in Press Briefing,” *The White House*, April 20, 2020, accessed April 22, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-members-coronavirus-task-force-press-briefing-29/>.

² Darlene Superville, Jon Gambrell and Robert Burns, “Trump tweets order to destroy harassing Iranian gunboats,” *Associated Press*, April 22, 2020, accessed April 22, 2020, <https://apnews.com/1420524aced220ec659dcf0f260b6576>.

³ Dan Zak, Ben Terris and Sarah Ellison, “It’s 5 o’clock. Do you know where your president is?” *Washington Post*, April 20, 2020, accessed April 22, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/its-5-oclock-do-you-know-where-your-president-is/2020/04/20/0083e8dc-8199-11ea-8013-1b6da0e4a2b7_story.html.

⁴ William M. Rodgers, “New Data Show That the True March Jobless Rate Could Near 20 Percent,” *The Century Foundation*, March 31, 2020, accessed April 22, 2020, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/new-data-show-true-march-jobless-rate-near-20-percent/?session=1>.

⁵ “Here’s Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech,” *Time*, June 16, 2015, accessed April 22, 2020, <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Steven A. Cook, “Loving Dictators Is as American as Apple Pie,” *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2019, accessed April 22, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/26/loving-dictators-is-as-american-as-apple-pie/>.

⁸ Michael T. Klare, “Arms and the Shah,” in *Tell the American People: Perspectives on the Iranian Revolution*, ed. David H. Alpert (Philadelphia: Movement for a New Society, 1980), 48-49.

⁹ “President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal,” *The White House*, May 8, 2018, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>.

¹⁰ “Statement from the President on the Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” *The White House*, April 8, 2019, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-designation-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-foreign-terrorist-organization/>.

¹¹ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, “Iran designates as terrorists all U.S. troops in Middle East,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2019, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-rouhani/iran-designates-as-terrorists-all-u-s-troops-in-middle-east-idUSKCN1S61GB>.

¹² Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J.S. Davies, “Will Trump’s Blunders in Iraq Lead to War With Iran?” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 3, 2020, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://fpif.org/will-trumps-blunders-in-iraq-lead-to-war-with-iran/>.