

Trump Is a Bad Joke That America Has Played on Itself—and the World

Judah Grunstein | Wednesday, July 1, 2020

In November 2008, just days before the U.S. presidential election, Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin was the high-profile victim of a prank call from a team of Canadian comics

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/sarah-palin/3369196/Transcript-of-Sarah-Palins-prank-call-from-Nicolas-Sarkozy.html>)

pretending to be then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy. More recently, in August 2019, Sen. Lindsey Graham let his guard down with a team of Russian prank callers pretending to be the Turkish defense minister. Both suffered significant embarrassment when recordings of the conversations were subsequently released. In a way that was shocking but not surprising, the calls both revealed and confirmed the gap between what politicians say in public and what they say in private.

Though there are no recordings available yet, according to the latest reporting by CNN's Carl Bernstein, government leaders around the world have been receiving similar prank calls for the past three years from a man with access to the Oval Office telephone lines. The conversations, however, turn the familiar tropes of political prank calls on their head.

To begin with, the man on the White House phone these past three years has not been pretending to be the U.S. president—he is the president. Moreover, according to Bernstein's reporting, there is actually little difference between Donald Trump's public and private declarations. To the dismay of potential pranksters everywhere, with Trump, what you see is what you get, and no impersonation will ever be as outrageous as the original. Finally, although Trump ostensibly plays the role of the prank caller in the conversations Bernstein describes, the joke is on him. One can only imagine the initial surprise over his unvarnished and apparently unhinged monologues giving way to sheer entertainment delight for the likes of Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who must have been exchanging wide-eyed looks with their aides and suppressing laughter throughout—once they had convinced themselves they were actually speaking with the U.S. president.

The levity is almost welcome after the tragic events of the past three months in the U.S., from the Trump administration's failed response to the coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths, to the president's incendiary reaction to the George Floyd protests against racism and police violence. Before that, too, Trump's efforts to seal off America to immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers from Muslim-majority, Latin American and African countries were despicable, and the human costs of those efforts inexcusable.



President Donald Trump speaks on the phone with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the Oval Office of the White House, in Washington, Jan. 28, 2017 (AP photo by Andrew Harnik).

Trump has often fed off the outrage he has provoked, assuming a larger than life stature in the eyes of supporters and critics alike. But in this, the final stretch of his first and hopefully final term as president, it is perhaps this image that should stick: that of a prank gone wrong, an unintentionally comic figure, a buffoon who doesn't realize that everyone he thinks he has impressed is in fact secretly laughing at him. Little deflates a bully's bubble more quickly than turning him into the object of ridicule. Trump is a physically large man, but he is not larger than life. In fact, he is woefully small for the responsibilities of his office.

Still, if Trump can be thought of as a joke that America has played on itself, it was a joke that was also played on the world, given America's global role. A lot of attention has been given to the ways in which America will have to repair the damage Trump has done (</trend-lines/28829/never-more-adrift-william-j-burns-on-repairing-the-damage-trump-has-done>) should he be voted out of office this November. But as America has retreated from its historical role of global leadership, hobbled by the self-inflicted wounds of the Trump presidency, the rest of the world has not stood by passively. It, too, will face a reckoning when Trump leaves office.

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If Trump is a prank sprung upon the world by American voters, how then has the world responded?

In many ways, the rest of the world managed to compensate for, if not entirely fill, the vacuum left by America's retrenchment. Notably, the Paris Agreement on climate change survived the U.S. withdrawal from it intact. And even if little progress was made on meeting its goals (</articles/28424/on-climate-change-un-talks-depends-on-national-politics-most-of-all>)—and, more importantly, improving on them—the conversation around the climate crisis has only grown more urgent and even gained traction. Green parties in Europe have made gains too, most recently in France's local elections this past weekend. And policy proposals like a "Green New Deal" and "building back better" after the coronavirus pandemic (</podcast/28739/what-it-will-take-to-build-back-better-after-the-coronavirus-pandemic>) are now mainstream, rather than radical.

Likewise, the liberalized global trade regime has also proven robust despite Trump's hostility toward it. Following his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal in the opening days of his administration, the other 11 signatories pushed ahead to conclude the agreement with minor modifications (</articles/23702/progress-toward-a-retrofitted-tpp-sent-a-strong-signal-against-protectionism>). And while the U.S. has engaged in trade wars with China as well as a wide range of American allies and partners, the European Union has concluded or implemented free trade deals with Japan (</articles/25201/japan-s-deal-with-the-eu-is-a-big-win-for-the-multilateral-trade-regime>), Canada, Vietnam and the Mercosur bloc in South America (</trend-lines/28077/can-the-landmark-eu-mercosur-trade-deal-be-successfully-implemented>).

That trade picture has since been clouded by protectionist reactions to the coronavirus pandemic, as many states have sought to safeguard supplies of crucial medical equipment. But for the most part, the rest of the world has shielded itself as best it can from Trump's mercantilism and carried on as before, promoting free trade among themselves.

But while the EU has taken a leading role in shoring up the global trade regime, the same can't be said for its efforts to limit the damage Trump has done elsewhere. The multilateral nuclear deal with Iran, for instance, has not entirely collapsed after Trump withdrew from it and reimposed punishing sanctions on Iran and any entities that do business with it. But it is essentially in suspended animation. The European signatories to the deal, who invested huge diplomatic efforts over the course of many years to secure it, tried equally hard to salvage it, but were unable to come up with any meaningful workarounds that would offer Iran a lifeline from U.S. sanctions. It was an illustration of the hard realities of America's outsized power, but also the EU's failure to build itself into a counterweight to the U.S. as a global power. The only other potential contender for such a role, China, has mastered the discourse of multilateralism and international cooperation. But the gap between its words and behavior make it clear that Beijing's global ambitions do not necessarily include aspirations to leadership—and certainly not leadership based on enlightened self-interest.

The Middle East offers an even more dramatic vision of the dangers of America's retreat under Trump. And for all the laughs they might have enjoyed at Trump's expense over the past three years, Putin and Erdogan are a big reason why. Their proxy war in Syria, which they now seem to have exported wholesale to Libya, is a case study in the kind of G-Zero chaos that alarmists over America's relative decline have been warning about for years. But Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, in their catastrophic war in Yemen; Israel, in its planned annexation of parts of the West Bank; and Iran, in its reckless provocations throughout the Middle East, all share the blame. Trump is not faultless, of course, having empowered U.S. partners in their irresponsible agenda, while fanning the flames of conflict with Iran and doing nothing to push back against Putin's excesses. But the region's leaders bear enormous responsibility for the mess they've made.

Trump has certainly damaged America's global standing and done real harm to the international order. But if America's relative decline is structural and secular, rather than a temporary hiatus, it will continue even if a president with more conventional views on America's global role takes office in January 2021. How the world responded to Trump, then, is an indicator of what lies ahead. Although there is reason for cautious optimism about the prospects of such a post-American world, it is far from a laughing matter.

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