

---

# Trump Versus the Government

---

## Can America Get Its Story Straight?

---

*Elliott Abrams*

**A**s he reaches the halfway mark of his first term, President Donald Trump is finding the vast U.S. government to be both an instrument of and a frequent barrier to the implementation of policies that he desires. Reflecting on his frustrations, he might be amused by an old anecdote about the struggles of one of his predecessors. As the diplomat Charles Frankel recalled in his memoir, a White House visitor once presented a proposal to President John F. Kennedy. “That’s a first-rate idea,” Kennedy said. “Now we must see whether we can get the government to accept it.”

The distinction between the president and the government is not a product of the Trump era, but it has become one of the administration’s defining characteristics. Rhetorically, the president has often squarely rejected the U.S. foreign policy consensus of recent decades. He has questioned the United States’ commitment to allies in Asia and Europe, fumed about U.S. wars in the Middle East, and lauded the leaders of Washington’s geopolitical rivals. But speeches are one thing and official action is another. Although Trump’s pronouncements have ruffled feathers, his administration’s policy has been marked more by continuity than by change. The United States remains in NATO, thousands of U.S. troops are still deployed throughout the Middle East, and Washington is pursuing a hard line against China and Russia.

What explains this divergence? In part, it may be the result of an intentional ploy by a president who thrives on chaos—a good cop,

---

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS** is Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. He served in senior National Security Council and State Department positions in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations.

bad cop routine in which Trump states a maximalist position and then leaves it to his subordinates to discover a compromise. Part of the gap, however, appears to be the result of an effort by some within the government, and even in Trump's own cabinet, to blunt his initiatives, carrying on business as usual in direct opposition to the wishes of the president.

Trump's opponents may applaud this internal resistance, but it brings with it problems of its own—namely, uncertainty as to where the United States really stands. When foreign states cannot predict what mix of Trump's objectives and the United States' more traditional goals will ultimately be translated into policy, allies will be slow to support U.S. initiatives and enemies may take chances that a clearer stance from Washington would have led them to avoid.

### **THE ADMINISTRATION'S TWO FACES**

There is a long history of conflict between U.S. presidents and the U.S. government. In January 1977, President Jimmy Carter announced his intention to follow through on a campaign promise to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea, despite widespread resistance to the move at the CIA and the Department of Defense. As Morton Abramowitz, a top Pentagon official at the time, later recalled, "We began a rear-guard action—delay it, water it down, mitigate the decision as much as possible." Faced with stonewalling, Carter eventually abandoned the policy. The pattern is familiar, and it is limited neither to the United States nor to democracies. "All the irate decrees of Frederick the Great concerning the 'abolition of serfdom' were derailed," the sociologist Max Weber wrote about eighteenth-century Prussia, "because the official mechanism simply ignored them as the occasional ideas of a dilettante."

"Dilettante" is no doubt a kinder description than what many in the federal government would use for the president, yet the dynamic documented by Weber is on full display in Washington. For years before assuming the presidency, Trump called for an end to the war in Afghanistan; in 2013, he tweeted, "Let's get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghans we train and we waste billions there." But after eight months in office and what he called "many meetings" with "my cabinet and generals," Trump concluded that "the consequences of a rapid exit are both predictable and unacceptable." Similarly, he has long wanted U.S. troops out of Syria, and in March



Dissent in the ranks: Trump and Mattis in the Oval Office, March 2017

2018, he said they would be leaving the country “very soon.” But in September, the administration’s Syria envoy, James Jeffrey, stated that “the new policy is we’re no longer pulling out by the end of the year.”

Perhaps the clearest example of the gap between the president and the government is the United States’ Russia policy. To the horror of his domestic critics, Trump has often praised Russian President Vladimir Putin and expressed a desire for improved relations with Moscow, sometimes going so far as to publicly support Russian positions. Just before the 2018 G-7 summit in Canada, Trump stunned his counterparts by telling them, “Russia should be in this meeting,” even though the country was kicked out of the G-8 in 2014 for annexing Crimea. And after the media reported that Trump said that Crimea is Russian because everyone living there speaks Russian, John Bolton, his national security adviser, was forced to clarify: “That’s not the position of the United States.”

Yet at the same time as Trump was sounding dovish notes at the G-7, U.S. troops were in northern Poland participating in Trojan Footprint, “the largest NATO special forces training exercise in recent memory,” in the words of Anne Applebaum, a *Washington Post* columnist and forceful Trump critic. A June 2018 editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* correctly pointed out that Trump’s Russia policy “has been tougher than Barack Obama’s.” It continued: “He’s signed off on

strengthening NATO deployments to Eastern Europe and admitting Macedonia to the alliance. He has dispatched Javelin antitank missiles to Ukraine, let the Pentagon attack Russian mercenaries in Syria, sanctioned Vladimir Putin's cronies, and expelled Russian spies in solidarity with Britain." Even Michael McFaul, who served as U.S. ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration, has called the Trump administration's Russia policy, "pretty good." "I support almost all aspects of it," he admitted in an interview. "It's just that the president doesn't seem to agree with it."

### **IN SEARCH OF A TRUMP DOCTRINE**

The divide between the president's words and his administration's actions raises the question, What is Trump's actual policy? Have his officials convinced him of the need to be tough with Russia, or are those sanctions and exercises and deployments the product of cabinet members, such as Bolton, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, struggling to maintain the policy they favor despite the president's own views?

Some evidence points to the latter. In September 2018, an anonymous Trump administration staffer wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed that "many of the senior officials in [Trump's] own administration are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations." Such resistance is unsurprising. The president has a Hobbesian worldview and is skeptical of allowing international commitments and diplomatic pleasantries to stand in the way of pursuing what he perceives to be U.S. national interests. This runs counter to the instincts of most career diplomats, military officers, and analysts, who see alliances as the very heart of U.S. power and influence. The resulting tension within the administration is often on public display. In a graduation speech at the U.S. Naval War College last spring, Mattis mentioned Tadeusz Kosciuszko, the Marquis de Lafayette, the Comte de Rochambeau, and Baron von Steuben—foreign veterans of the U.S. Revolutionary War whose statues stand in Lafayette Square, across from the White House—as "reminders . . . that America does not stand alone." It was pretty clear whom he was reminding.

In some cases, Trump's conflict with the government reflects a populist impulse to represent the views of voters who feel left behind by an out-of-touch elite. On trade, for instance, Trump has bucked the bipartisan consensus by criticizing "unfair" deals, imposing tariffs,

and adopting an aggressive negotiating stance toward allies and rivals alike. Most in Washington agree that the global trading order has greatly benefited the United States, but there are millions of Americans it has harmed. They rightly believe that their concerns have been ignored by the great and the good in government, at universities, and on Wall Street. In June, *The Economist* chided Trump to “remember the words of Henry Kissinger: order cannot simply be ordained; to be enduring, it must be accepted as just.” But that is precisely the point: to many Americans, the system that elites ordained for them has come to seem unjust.

Trump has similarly channeled popular frustrations about the cost of U.S. alliances. At NATO’s July 2018 summit in Brussels, he reportedly threatened to leave the alliance unless the Europeans stepped up their defense spending. Although shocking to seasoned diplomats, such rhetoric resonates with Americans who recognize that alliances are critical for Western security but who also feel that the United States has disproportionately borne the burden of paying for them. As rich a country as Germany, for example, spends only 1.2 percent of its GDP on defense, compared with the United States’ 3.5 percent.

Despite Trump’s unorthodox rhetoric, moreover, many of his positions fall well within the Republican and, indeed, the U.S. foreign policy mainstream. In 2011, Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, warned of “a dim if not dismal future” for NATO unless the Europeans spent more. And although Trump has been criticized for his friendly relations with enemies, including Putin, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, such outreach was celebrated when Obama made similar overtures to Cuba and Iran. Trump’s novel combination of harsh and undiplomatic language, hard bargaining with friends, and outreach to foes can sometimes bring clear benefits: thanks in part to Trump’s tough line, NATO members increased their overall defense spending as a percentage of GDP for a second consecutive year in 2017, after zero increases from 2009 to 2016.

---

*The divide between the president’s words and his administration’s actions raises the question, What is Trump’s actual policy?*

---

In fact, defenders of the administration argue that in most respects, Trump is a normal president. He is tougher on Russia—and far tougher on Iran—than Obama was. And despite stating his desire to disengage from what he sees as endless and unproductive wars, he has kept U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. His administration's official foreign policy documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy, reflect the Republican consensus.

Where he diverges, his supporters claim, is merely in his push to right certain imbalances that have built up over recent decades. This has led to real accomplishments—not just greater defense spending by NATO allies but also a new, renamed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and a better trade deal with South Korea—and to reasonable demands, including for fairer trade relations with China. Trump's style has provoked enraged criticism from the self-proclaimed resistance (comprising most of the mainstream media and nearly all elected Democrats), which treats every minor breach of protocol as a prelude to the apocalypse. But if one looks past the hysteria—so the argument goes—there is far more continuity, and far more success, in the current administration's foreign policy than Trump's critics will ever acknowledge. In many cases, animosity toward the president has precluded balanced policy analysis.

### **AMERICA THE UNPREDICTABLE**

Trump's defenders make a fair point. Many of the attacks on Trump are exaggerated, and the media spectacle surrounding his presidency has done little to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of his administration. There are of course such weaknesses—but constructive criticism of the president should ideally come from those who sympathize with Trump and his policies and would like to see them succeed.

Unfortunately, there are too few of these people in office. One of the real problems with the Trump administration has been its inability to find and retain qualified staff. As George Shultz, who served as secretary of state under U.S. President Ronald Reagan, wrote in his memoir, “In the end, it is the president’s foreign policy, so key people who help him shape it and carry it out . . . should be on his political wavelength.” Finding like-minded staff has been difficult for the president. Many Republicans do not wish to serve in his administration, and many who would be willing to do so have been excluded for

opposing him in 2016. And then there are those, such as the anonymous official writing in *The New York Times*, who go in, only to discover that they are not on his wavelength after all; turnover has been high. As a result, the administration has struggled to employ qualified and effective implementers of Trump's foreign policy vision. Instead, it has been slow to fill vacancies and has often had to rely on acting officials who are veterans of the establishment and oppose the president's worldview.

Trump's critics may see this as a blessing. It is not. More than a traditional president, Trump relies on excellent staff work. His leadership style seems to assume that bureaucratic conservatism and even resistance come with the territory. He innovates, breaks china, tries new approaches to enemies, and offends allies, leaving it to his advisers to figure out when and where to mend fences or even reverse course. A leader leads, and then subordinate officials work out the details. In such a system, the loyalty and skill of those officials are especially critical.

---

*Trump's foreign policy remains a work in progress.*

---

Staffing problems have, in turn, exacerbated the danger of unpredictability. Because no one knows whether officials at various levels of the administration are implementing a version of Trump's orders or simply ignoring his preferences in favor of their own, neither U.S. officials nor foreigners can be sure where U.S. policy stands or where it will end up. For instance, is the United States permanently committed to NATO, or only so long as Mattis is running the Pentagon? When, this past July, Trump was asked on Fox News about defending Montenegro, a NATO member, the president responded by hanging the Montenegrins out to dry: "They're very aggressive people. They may get aggressive. And, congratulations, you're in World War III." Although the Trump administration's support for NATO has in many ways been quite strong, such comments may cause Montenegro and other NATO members, not to mention Putin, to wonder how the president would react in a crisis.

This unpredictability is fed by a sense that Trump does not see the United States' alliances as the enormous assets that they are. In October, Mattis reminded an audience at a security conference in Bahrain, "Over more than four decades in uniform, I never fought in a solely American formation." But the president sometimes speaks of

alliances as an unfair burden rather than a source of real and potential strength. “Our allies care about themselves. They don’t care about us,” he said in March 2018. On other occasions, he has referred to the United States’ “so-called allies.”

If U.S. policy came to reflect that view consistently—which it has not during the first two years of the Trump administration—no amount of bureaucratic resistance could prevent those alliances from eroding in ways that would be hard to repair. As Mattis suggested in his speech to the Naval War College, alliances are the foundation of U.S. security and one of the chief features that distinguish the United States from China, Iran, and Russia, all of which have few allies.

Trump similarly goes too far in his suspicion of trade. It is perfectly appropriate for him to take a tougher line in trade negotiations, especially given his support among blue-collar Americans who feel that they have been harmed by previous deals. But not every single bilateral relationship must show a positive trade balance every year. Trump himself has stated that his tariffs are tools for getting fairer deals, not ends in themselves, and his success in renegotiating NAFTA is evidence that his more aggressive line can work. But China will be the ultimate test. Here, rather than the bilateral negotiations favored by the president, a more productive approach would be to work with partners such as Canada, Japan, and the EU to force China to play by the rules. But whether acting alone or in a coalition, if Trump can use huge tariffs to win Chinese concessions on trade and investment, he will have won a significant victory.

Finally, Trump has still not grasped that enormous benefits come from having a moral foundation for U.S. foreign policy. He has too often acted as if the United States were merely one nation among many, out solely to maximize its wealth and power. Yet the world’s most powerful country needs to uphold a global system that condemns, and tries to prevent, some forms of aggressive conduct and growing tyranny. Washington’s opponents clearly recognize that the spread of democracy is in the United States’ interest, which is why they try to subvert democracy when and where they can. Trump has sometimes indicated his own support for democracy and human rights—criticizing, for instance, the abysmal human rights records of Cuba, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. He should understand that supporting these values more generally will help put “America first.” Nixonian realpolitik, moreover, is not a political winner; Americans do not actually

believe that there are no moral distinctions between the tyrants of the world and the United States and its democratic allies.

## **THE ROAD AHEAD**

Trump's foreign policy remains a work in progress. He did not assemble the current team until Bolton arrived in April 2018, and now, for the first time, the president appears to have senior advisers he fully trusts. The number of vacancies on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department is slowly but steadily falling, and it is possible that during the second half of Trump's term, the gap between the president and the government will shrink, in both size and importance. Trump's views on U.S. troop commitments, for instance, have already shown an evolution toward the government's stance. When, in March 2017, he announced that he would not be withdrawing from Afghanistan, he explained, "All my life I've heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office, in other words, when you're president of the United States."

But Trump's foreign policy will not be a regression to the mean. He will never be persuaded that he should seek, or care about, popularity at Davos or in Brussels; he will always try to extract the last ounce of U.S. advantage from allies as well as opponents; he will remain mistrustful of multilateral agreements that limit the United States' options; and he will not abandon the rhetoric that got him elected and that so alarms his critics at home and abroad.

In his first two years as president, Trump has had one great piece of luck: there has been no great international crisis to test his nerves and his approach to world politics. If none arises in the next two years, he will be able to show American voters in 2020 that despite all the criticism, his foreign policy did not lead to tangible defeats or to war. Furthermore, he will be able to argue that the gains of a more aggressively nationalist stance outweigh its costs. His critics, including his opponent in 2020, will face the difficult task of convincing Americans that the costs of Trump's foreign policy, many of them intangible, were unacceptably high.

That is a debate worth having, but the critics' refusal to weigh Trump's foreign policy fairly and their focus on his rhetoric and personality make it extremely unlikely to happen. A more nuanced argument about the president will have to await his departure from office two—or, perhaps more likely, six—years from now. ☀

The contents of Foreign Affairs are protected by copyright. © 2004 Council on Foreign Relations, Inc., all rights reserved. To request permission to reproduce additional copies of the article(s) you will retrieve, please contact the Permissions and Licensing office of Foreign Affairs.