

TRUMP: TEACHING IN A TIME OF CHANGE

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Major political change may be fascinating to study, but it can be disconcerting to live through. For almost 80 years, Britain has maintained a close relationship with the United States in global politics. This “special relationship” may be, as Hill (2019, 129) describes it, a “cliché”; however, as with similar interstate alliances, it is one that has enabled “institutional complexity and bureaucratic inter-penetration.” This does not mean that the history of the relationship has been smooth or that the leaders of the two nations have always been close. However, the linkage between the two nations on matters of security and intelligence, trade, and shared diplomatic outlook has meant that the relationship endures even when presidents and prime ministers may diverge. In this context, a disruptive president may cause problems, but the institutions and bureaucracy will persist and the special relationship will be revived in time to the benefit of both sides.

Donald Trump is a disruptive president. He first intervened in my teaching of US foreign policy as the element sent to disturb the consensus on American global leadership. When discussing the notion of grand strategies in US foreign policy, it is customary to refer to the possibility of neo-isolationism (Dueck 2006; Posen and Ross 1996). It is equally customary to dismiss this notion as highly unlikely. However, as the 2016 presidential election campaign unfolded, it became necessary to realize that assumptions about grand strategies, the liberal international order, and global trade that appeared settled and unchanged irrespective of which individual or party was in the White House now may be challenged. At that point, Trump was a disruptive innovation sent to undermine existing structures and beliefs. As such, he acted as a useful teaching tool, a counterpoint to consensus as a way to explore foreign-policy assumptions.

The initial impact of Trump among the student cohort was amplified by his presence on social media. It was not necessary to be supportive of the message to be drawn into the spectacle. Although not a gifted orator, Trump had proved himself to be an effective communicator with his mastering of the Twitter platform. With 82% of young people in Britain favoring the internet as their primary news platform (Ofcom 2018, 2), Trump was accessible, providing an ongoing commentary on his campaign and then his presidency and his disputes with media, personalities, and fellow global leaders. In Britain, this Twitter activity probably reached its height when, in November 2017, Trump retweeted material posted by the far-right anti-Muslim group, Britain First. The retweets caused great controversy and brought a rare public rebuke from the spokesperson of the British Prime Minister (BBC News 2017). Students could choose to be inspired, enraged, or even entertained by Trump’s Twitter output, but it was difficult for them to ignore it. Trump had refashioned the bully pulpit for the digital age.

Thus, the initial phase of the Trump era challenged our ideas about American power and our understanding of how leaders should communicate and act. Trump’s political rise coincided with Britain’s own period of introspection: following a referendum in June 2016, it voted to leave the European Union. In Britain, both Brexit and Trump have proved divisive. Given these divisions, what is the responsibility of teachers? Writing about the difficulties inherent when teaching students in Britain about Brexit, Johns (2017) returned to a consistent theme of teaching: objectivity.

Johns argued that there are three factors that inhibit the pursuit of objectivity. First, lecturers’ teaching is shaped by their assumptions; pure neutrality is not possible. Second, when these assumptions are shared by a community, they are not questioned. Third, individuals “blur the distinction” between what they believe and what they want to believe. To illustrate the problem, Johns (2017) turned to the US president: imagine the dilemma of “trying to form and to teach objective assessments of the Trump presidency separate from their subjective horror at its existence and conduct.”

To resolve this dilemma, a possible solution is to take Trump out of Trumpism. For teachers and students of Trump, it is necessary to turn off Twitter. The president’s social media feed is distracting, disrupting, and relentless. Therefore, it may be better to step back from the daily controversies to consider the broad themes of policy. As much as the actions of President Trump as an individual may repel, the themes of his foreign policy represent a realist recalibration after the post–Cold War liberalist ascendancy (Schweller 2018). Certain policy strands are not new: American primacy, distrust of international institutions, and skepticism about the science of climate change have been persistent themes in Republican thinking for two decades or more. Concern that NATO members are not contributing to the collective security of Europe and that American troops should be removed from the Middle East echo the views of President Obama. That these policies have been wrapped up with a resurgent nativism is different. However, to ascertain these broader themes, it is necessary to advise students to step away from the daily distractions.

Therefore, teaching politics and international relations in a time of change leads us back to the basics of good critical thinking: seeking an objective analysis, recognizing our own biases, and highlighting both what is new and what is familiar. Through this approach, we aim to provide our students with the skills needed to engage with a changing world. ■

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KOREAN-US POLITICAL PARALLELS AND THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY

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As the Trump administration has emphasized the primacy of national interests under its “America First” banner, particularly in the areas of trade deficit with South Korea and the cost of keeping US troops there, Korea and the United States have