



SHADOW GOVERNMENT

Notes from the loyal opposition

Could Trump Be a Post-Partisan Unifier?

BY LINCOLN P. BLOOMFIELD, JR. NOVEMBER 15, 2016 - 6:42 PM



"We never win anymore." ▶

President-elect Donald Trump perturbed American politics with his persistent taunt that the nation's affairs were being mismanaged, with adverse consequences for U.S. interests. It was easy for some to take exception, pointing out the many areas where Americans excel. But anyone following not just domestic but world affairs would be justified in thinking that U.S. influence, reputation, and power have been declining in the face of challenges to international stability from undemocratic rival powers and violent nonstate actors in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

In electoral contests from Alaska to Florida, Arizona to Pennsylvania, North Dakota to Texas, and in most of the states in between, Trump's blunt message struck a chord. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton was indeed well informed, experienced, prepared, and backed by a large cadre of credentialed policymakers,

including many already serving under President Barack Obama. And while this close election could have gone either way, popular agitation for “change” was a decisive factor in electing a challenger who brashly elbowed aside not only the incumbent party, but the Republican establishment as well.

Time will tell if Trump — reviled during the campaign by partisans in both parties — chooses to pursue a “post-partisan” agenda defined less by ideology or fealty to special interest dogmas than by whether a policy will produce results and move the country forward. That would indeed represent change in Washington. Could the divisive tactics that brought success in the campaign ironically enable the new president to embrace bold, unifying approaches that neither party could have realistically proposed?

Democrats are reacting to the surprise and disappointment of their loss with a mix of grace and anger. Republicans need to reflect as well. The George W. Bush administration, in which I served, did many good things, but allowed one cabinet department to mishandle the Iraq intervention, with catastrophic consequences. In neither Iraq nor Afghanistan did the administration pursue achievable objectives decisively once the regimes in Kabul and Baghdad were deposed. War spending and longterm commitments to soldiers and their families spiked, and the national debt increased rapidly. As the nation went to the polls in 2008, the devastating financial crisis had struck. Balanced historical verdicts on the 43rd presidency will not overlook these facts.

Having lost the White House in 2008, many Republicans in and out of Congress directed their energies and invective at the Obama presidency. While this may have won seats in midterm elections, it positioned leading Republicans, unwittingly of course, in essentially the same camp as the most dangerous and violent enemies of the United States. Blocking any legislation supported by the nation’s highest elected official, turning their rhetoric inward against the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, in wartime no less, and then seeking in issue after issue to curb executive power, may have seemed perfectly normal to some in the GOP. But from the perspective of hegemons, dictators, terrorists, crime bosses, and warlords around the world, a weak presidency, internecine beltway jockeying, and Washington gridlock suited them just fine.

This tough verdict about some in the Republican party in no way excuses the Democrats from responsibility for the perception shared by many average Americans that the country is not on a winning trajectory in the world. Trump’s lack of experience with war and peace issues preempted any critical assessment of Democratic foreign policy stewardship.

As adversaries and allies alike watched a humanitarian intervention in Libya morph into the destruction of the Libyan state; as they saw a confused and shifting response to the peaceful popular uprising in Egypt by a younger generation demanding better governance; as they puzzled at Washington’s initially passive reaction to the Houthi takeover in Sana’a, Yemen, soon followed by the panicked evacuation of the U.S. and European embassies and a descent to war; and as they watched Obama threaten the use of force in Syria and then withdraw it entirely, leaving the Syrian crisis to spin out of control, some lasting consequences

were set in motion.

We will never know whether Russian President Vladimir Putin would have introduced Russian forces into Syria, in alliance with Iran's regime, and undermined the international effort to effect a transition of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power, had Russia faced a more resolute Western response to its territorial grab of Crimea in Ukraine. We will never know whether Iran might have truly given up its nuclear program at the P5+1 negotiating table had judicious U.S. military power been used to enforce political demands for a halt to the Assad regime's destruction of much of Syria. Nor will we know if the politics of East Asia would be equivocating in deference to Chinese power had the U.S. more clearly and resolutely opposed the excessive territorial air and sea claims advanced by Beijing along the so-called nine-dash line.

What we do know is that Russia has moved missiles into Kaliningrad, on the Baltic Sea, and is making nuclear threats that could challenge NATO's ability to assure security and independence of the Baltic countries. We know that even though the Hague special tribunal ruled against China's territorial claims, there has been no meaningful Western response to China's construction of landfill islands with airfields and other military emplacements threatening a vital maritime area — and now the president of the Philippines talks of a strategic shift toward China after over 100 years of partnership with the United States, including a treaty alliance. We — and more significantly, our Asian allies — know that the signature geopolitical initiative in Asia by a Democratic president, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, was jettisoned by the party itself during the 2016 campaign.

We know that Iran will become, for the first time, a legally recognized nuclear power with no constraints once the provisions of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are carried out. And we know that four million Syrians have been displaced from their homes, most under attack or threat by the Assad regime, with many fleeing to Europe and contributing the destabilization of European politics. In foreign as well as domestic affairs, this was indeed a change election. "We never win anymore" resonated.

Trump walked in to the American political process a complete outsider, and repeatedly outpolled all contenders. He will take office in January as the head of state and government. Imagine what message that sends to the vast majority of internet-connected citizens across China and Iran, where real competition for power is banned while political dissidents are jailed and even executed, or in Russia, where more deceptive methods ensure a similar fate for any who would challenge the ruling clique.

Far from embracing his status as proof of America's truly open democratic process, however, candidate Trump extended his critique of the status quo to the foundations of international security on which American influence has long rested. On the left and the right in Washington, political figures and policy veterans very publicly warned against the Trump candidacy; yet he won. For many centrist Republicans eager to serve yet dedicated to revitalizing American-led alliance cooperation, mediating conflict, deterring aggression, managing extremism, upholding international norms and restoring international stability,

Trump seemed more interested in altering the terms of trade and demanding tribute from other governments than in mobilizing allies and waging peace through strength in the world. There is ample room here for reconciliation.

The new president has a chance to make a new beginning. Prevailing norms of partisanship would place personal loyalty above all else, and no one in Washington would be surprised if Trump shuns any who criticized him, even while he was disparaging the establishment. His main political debt, however, is to millions of Americans who perceive that the world is turning more hostile to American interests and voted for change.

Magnanimity and inclusion in Washington would be a change. Treating as the “home team” any and all talented legislators and policy hands, on both sides of the aisle, willing to set aside partisanship and serve on issue-specific task forces, overseas missions as presidential emissaries, or bipartisan advisory panels, would be a change.

Consulting candidly with relevant committee leaders in both parties before embarking on major foreign and domestic policies could reduce the partisan friction that has hobbled presidents for years. If people hadn’t noticed, Washington is learning to live with leaks. The Trump White House may find that the benefits of engaging, and trusting, Congress as a genuine partner in American foreign policy far outweigh the risks of disclosure.

Much was made, by this observer and others, of Obama’s ill-advised issuance of presidential “red lines” that opponents of American policy later crossed with impunity. Here is a red line that America’s 45th President could issue on January 20th: Political infighting stops at the water’s edge. No president will ever get a blank check, and the art of bipartisan dealmaking in the nation’s capital will challenge even a veteran businessman. Trump will need a consultative process to achieve buy-in from congressional leaders in both parties that is as unprecedented as it is unexpected. This would be the ultimate change: country over party in managing American power.

With a post-partisan face to the world, the United States could once more act, and lead, like the winner its citizens, and much of the world, are depending on America to be.

Photo credit: JIM WATSON/AFP/Getty Images **TAKE A LOOK**

The author is chairman of the non-partisan Stimson Center. He held policy positions in the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the White House during five prior administrations.