



The Trump Supremacy? A Year of an Unorthodox American President

James D. Boys looks back at Donald Trump's first year in office and finds that while much of the radical reform promised on the campaign trail has yet to materialise, the new administration has certainly raised eyebrows, and concerns.

As he prepared to leave the White House, an American president reflected on the impending transfer of power and on the political reality that was about to greet his successor, who had never previously held

political office. "He'll sit here, and he'll say do this, do that," he remarked to an aide, "and nothing will happen...he'll find it very frustrating."

This was January 1953, as Harry Truman prepared to escort General Eisenhower

to his inaugural ceremonies, a journey conducted in icy silence as the two men avoided even small talk. Sixty-five years later, little has changed. Despite having blasted his rhetorical way to the White House with talk of ending the "carnage" in the United States, "right here, and right now," President Trump's ability to deliver profound, sweeping change, remains as difficult to implement as it was for his predecessors. Following a year of frustrations and setbacks, however, we are

clearly witnessing the Trump Supremacy, as the former property developer, turned reality TV star, dominates political debate and discourse, at home and around the globe.

The radical reform that candidate Trump promised on the campaign trail, however, has yet to materialise as his first year in office comes to an end. His administration has raised eyebrows and concerns, but has so far done little to alter the long-term policies or structures that have defined the United States for generations. He has also done little that could not be undone by a future president, in much the same way that Donald Trump has effectively dialled back many of the policies of his predecessor, Barack Obama.

This is due, at least in part, to the manner in which President Trump has chosen to govern. Despite berating President Obama for his use of executive orders, Donald Trump has also utilised these as an instrument to implement policy, rather than seeking to legislate through congress. Such orders are binding as long as they retain executive approval, and can be over-riden by subsequent administrations. They are unmade, therefore, as easily as they are created, with a signature of the presidential pen. By electing to rule by executive decree, President Trump is ensuring that many of his programmes are effectively built on sand, and could easily be overturned by any subsequent administration seeking to roll them back. For those seeking an eventual repudiation of the Trump era, this is a potential blessing. For those seeking any meaningful, long-lasting reform to emerge from the Trump White House, however, this should be a major concern.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Trump presidency is not impacting the United States in a profound fashion. It is. Just not necessarily in the manner that many imagined when he took the oath of office on January 20, 2017.

First year in office

In its first year in office, the Trump administration has presided over a continuing decline in the rate of unemployment, continued job creation, the passage of a radical overhaul to the US tax system, the successful appointment of Neil

Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, and a rapid expansion of the US Stock Market (which included the fastest 1,000-point increase in history and also the biggest single day fall in the Dow Jones's history). These successes ensure that the Trump administration will continue to have a long-lasting impact on the United States long after the end of the Trump Presidency, regardless of how long the President serves in office.

Nevertheless, it has been a frustrating first year in office for the Trump administration. Its attempt to impose a 90-day travel ban on a list of nations including, but not limited to, Iran, Iraq and Syria was held up on appeal in a variety of courts before finally being implemented and eventually lifted; attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) revealed the complexities of implementing legislation even when one party controls the House, the Senate and the presidency; the President's campaign pledge to build a wall along the Mexican border has stalled and now appears destined to be consumed into a broader immigration reform effort as detailed in the State of the Union address. Linking border security to the future of the Dreamers, however, is likely to alienate support from Democrats, vital to secure passage of any legislation in the Senate. Finally, as the administration's first year came to a close it was rocked by revelations in Michael Wolff's book, *Fire and Fury*, which detailed the turmoil in the Trump West Wing, and in particular the tensions between Steve Bannon and the President's daughter and son-in-law, Ivanka and Jared Kushner. Whether wholly accurate or not, the book sold 1.7 million copies in its first month, establishing itself as the first must-read on the Trump administration in office.

Trump's popularity problem

Despite his repeated rhetorical bluster, Donald Trump remains a deeply unloved President. Throughout many of the early primaries in 2016, he failed to break the 35 per cent barrier, ensuring he prevailed in a field that was divided over support spread out among 16 other candidates. Only in the final days of the General Election did his support surge to ensure his unlikely and unexpected victory in the Electoral College, though not in the popular vote.

Trump's victory was aided in large part by the presence on the ballot of the Libertarian and Green Parties, that did much to draw support from Hillary Clinton in key battleground states, including Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Florida.

His current popularity remains where it was in the first months of 2016, hovering around 35 per cent, the lowest for any modern president at this stage in an administration, and only 12 per cent higher than that of Richard Nixon at the nadir of the Watergate investigation. These figures would be considered fatal for any previous incumbent and raise doubts about Trump's ability to win a second term. No president in history has come back to win a second term from approval ratings this low so soon in their presidency. Truman and Nixon both polled ahead of Trump at this point of their first terms.

History reveals, however, that the greatest threat to a second term arises from a challenge within the incumbent's own party. Despite woeful results in the 1994 mid-terms, Bill Clinton was able to avoid an internal party challenge and to plan a successful re-election campaign. Donald Trump, therefore, needs to keep his party content. Alas, he appears unable to do so. Record numbers of incumbents are retiring and choosing not to seek re-election in 2018, endangering the GOP hold on both the Senate and the House of Representatives in an election cycle that was always going to be difficult for the party. President Trump only needs one of these disgruntled politicians to mount a serious challenge to undermine his ability to gain a second term. With 65 per cent of Americans failing to support his policies, he remains a huge target to be primaried in 2020, perhaps by Senator Flake of Arizona. Much, therefore, rests on the results of the 2018 mid-term elections.

Both political parties, however, face considerable hurdles during the Trump Supremacy. The GOP has clearly cast its future to the whims of the President, and not necessarily to its advantage. Several key elections have been lost, most notably in Alabama, where Judge Roy Moore's candidacy was a major contributing factor to the loss of this long-time Republican Senate seat. Trump's role in that election

was far from convincing and bodes ill for any potential role in the 2018 mid-terms. Not uniquely, Donald Trump appears to be a politician whose charisma is sufficient to get himself elected, but whose ego perhaps prevents him from bringing others along with him. The saving grace for the Republicans, then, may come from an unlikely source: The Democrats. Whatever challenges are faced by the GOP, the Democratic Party is far from united and faces similar challenges, most notably an elderly leadership that appears out of touch with Millennials and activist party members. When the most regular politician to appear on television in defence of progressive policies is Senator Bernie Sanders, who is not even a registered Democrat, the party is clearly in severe trouble, with a dearth of credible, young, dynamic candidates able to challenge for national prominence.

Overshadowing everything for Trump is the Mueller investigation. So long as the Republicans control congress, the hearings on Capitol Hill will doubtless continue to be drawn out and prove toothless. A change in control in the mid-terms would change that dynamic, but the Mueller investigation appears certain to continue regardless of the results in November, notwithstanding a sudden and dramatic intervention on the part of the President. The Russia probe has already led to the premature departure of senior officials in the White House, either directly or indirectly. Steve Bannon, Sean Spicer, Anthony 'The Mooch' Scaramucci, and Michael Flynn, are only the most prominent members of the administration to have left in its first year, and will undoubtedly not be the final departures. Vice President Pence is maintaining a notable distance on many occasions, and appears to be as absent from the White House as the First Lady, with both eschewing the traditional roles prescribed by tradition and recent precedent. There is, it appears, safety in distance from the Oval Office.

This is particularly problematic for an administration that has struggled to attract high-level individuals, with many establishment figures refusing to sign on to the 2016 campaign, or to join the White House staff. A full year into the new administration, senior posts remained

unfilled, with the State Departments in particular hit by reduced recruitment and the early retirement of career diplomats. This has been exacerbated by the administration's performance in office, the spectre of potential impeachment, and allegations of obstruction of justice, ensuring that the Trump White House has become a toxic environment with the threat of subpoenas and mounting legal fees for all concerned.

Trump abroad

All is not lost, however, and it is notable that President Trump chose to visit the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2018 as his first year in office drew to a close. Although not the first sitting president to address the event, this was perhaps the most anticipated address ever given at Davos. Despite having campaigned against global economic elites, Donald Trump, like all good salesmen, told his audience what they wanted to hear. He touted the improving state of the US economy, and of US successes since his election, declaring that the United States was once again open for business. 'America First,' he insisted, 'does not mean America Alone.'

A key moment at the Davos gathering was the bilateral meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Theresa May. Despite undulating relations between the White House and Downing Street during 2017, the first year of the Trump presidency ended on an upturn for the Special Relationship. Having been the first foreign leader to be welcomed to the Trump White House, Theresa May was not seen to have done herself any favours in the process. The image of Donald Trump holding her hand as they walked together at the White House was widely derided. The relationship cooled following a Twitter tiff between the two leaders, contributing to the initial cancellation of a presidential visit to London designed to coincide with the opening of the new US embassy. Within weeks, however, Trump and May were shaking hands at Davos and the visit was re-scheduled, albeit somewhat toned down from the state visit that had originally been expected.

In the final analysis, both nations and both leaders need one another. As the UK moves into a post-Brexit environment, it

needs a new harbour and where better than the United States? The UK and the US are each other's largest foreign investors. Almost a fifth of UK exports went to the US in 2016/17, confirming it as the largest single nation destination for UK exports, amounting to £3.5 billion annually. Mutual investment accounts for at least one million jobs in each nation. Likewise, as Donald Trump looks to secure his position as a president who brought jobs back to the United States, he needs to secure a trade deal with the UK to continue the current levels of trade, with 11 per cent of all UK imports originating in the US in 2016/17. Finally, as President Trump moves to renegotiate international trade deals, and the UK prepares to leave the EU, opportunities appear to present themselves for the long overdue Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Area (TRAFTA), a concept discussed between the Clinton White House and John Major's government in 1995, but an idea whose time may have finally arrived under the Trump Supremacy.

Conclusion

As the Trump presidency enters its second year, all that can be guaranteed is that nothing can be guaranteed. The Chaos Candidate of 2016 has transformed into the Chaos President, with turmoil obscuring any successes, the day-to-day operations at the White House, and the administration's domestic and international standing. Even the assumption that the President will remain in office cannot be taken for granted, considering the severity of allegations surrounding potential obstruction of justice and the increasing possibility of Democratic control of both houses of congress following the 2018 mid-term elections.

All that can be said, without fear of contradiction, is that it's all about to get even more interesting in Washington DC.

*James D. Boys is an Associate Professor of International Political Studies at Richmond University, London and author of **Hillary Rising: The Politics, Persona and Policies of a New American Dynasty (Biteback, 2016).***