

# 2024 – America's Year of Living Dangerously



by Victor Davis Hanson

**Lame-duck presidencies, especially in the last six months of their final term, in general can offer opportunities for America's enemies to take advantage of a perceived vacuum as one government transitions to the next.**

But these normal changeover months are especially dangerous when a perceived weak or appeasing lame-duck president is likely to be replaced by a strong deterrent successor that will likely serve as a corrective to his disastrous policies.

James Buchanan (1857-1861), a northern but pro-South president, was a particularly anemic chief executive. He had done little if anything to try to deal with the growing rift

between North and South, especially the furor over the Dred Scott decision and Bloody Kansas. Even when warned, Buchanan did little to beef up the U.S. Army or increase its weapon stockpiles to deter any potential secessionist state.

After Buchanan declined to run for a second term, the South understood that the abolitionist and anti-slavery Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln might well be elected in 1860—given the North/South split within the Democratic Party. And they understood that President Lincoln might well use force to stop secession.

Therefore, in the waning days of the Buchanan administration, after Lincoln's victory, seven southern states seceded during the presidential transition, a confused North reacted little, more would follow, and a terrible Civil War became inevitable.

During the waning days of the crippled second term of Richard Nixon in summer 1974, communist North Vietnam saw a once deterrent president fatally weakened by Watergate. It was encouraged by a renewed antiwar movement, a likely soon anti-war Congress, and the next president, Gerald Ford—a probable caretaker soon to be replaced by an anti-war Democrat. And so in late 1974 and 1975, the communists renounced ignored peace accords, judged correctly that the directionless US would not help South Vietnam stop a massive invasion from the North, and thereby won the 12-year-long war.

As the Jimmy Carter administration began to wind down and as it was increasingly judged as weak abroad, the new theocratic revolutionary government in Iran stormed the U.S. embassy and took hostages in November 1979. Throughout the next year, Tehran systematically humiliated the U.S., mocked an impotent Carter administration, and rebuffed all U.S. efforts to secure the return of the hostages.

The Soviet Union as well saw the dying and still inert Carter term as ripe for exploitation and so invaded Afghanistan a

month later, in December 1979. It too concluded that there would be a year of continued timidity in Washington before a likely remedy from a Republican president—in this case, Ronald Reagan, who had declared his candidacy a little over a week after Iran took hostages with clear promises to restore U.S. deterrence abroad.

We are now once again entering one of these dangerous moments, compounded by a weakening of the armed forces. During Biden's tenure, the U.S. military has suffered historic shortfalls in recruitment, the disastrous humiliation in Afghanistan, a new DEI commissariat that wars on meritocratic promotions and assignments, the politicization of generals and admirals, the hyped but otherwise inane effort to root out mythical white supremacists and "domestic terrorist" bogeymen from the ranks, and the expulsion of some of our best soldiers for their reluctance to be vaccinated, many of them having developed natural immunity from prior infection.

The Pentagon is short on ships and planes. U.S. weapons stocks are dangerously low, drained by the abandonment of billions of dollars of equipment to the Taliban, the resupply efforts to Ukraine and Israel, the failure of the Biden administration to fund the restocking of our munitions and to ramp up resupply production—and a \$35 billion national debt fed by \$2 trillion annual deficits.

Add eight million illegal aliens who pranced over a nonexistent southern border, nearly uninhabitable big-city downtowns, an epidemic of violent crime, and a president who resuscitates mostly to blast half the country as "semi-fascists" and "ultra-MAGA" extremists.

Add it all up, and the world abroad agrees America is in a strange, self-inflicted decline and will not or cannot defend its interests, or for that matter itself.

In particular, both enemies and neutrals have accordingly

drawn a number of self-interested conclusions about the waning Biden administration and what may follow:

1. That Joe Biden, to their apparent delight, has in the last three years reversed the Trump deterrence policies and thus has green-lit their aggressions.
2. That given the ensuing chaos, they have further agreed that Biden's growing unpopularity with the American people makes it likely that both he and his appeasement policies will be gone by January 2024.
3. That Donald Trump may well return to office. That would mean a much worse deal for Russia, China, Iran, and its terrorist satellites, and thus recognition that 2024 is a brief window of opportunity for aggression.

Putin remembers that Trump blasted 200 Russian mercenaries in Syria, got out of a bad missile deal with Moscow, upped sanctions on Russian oligarchs, flooded the world with cheap oil, destroying Russian oil export profits, sold once-canceled offensive weapons to Ukraine, and warned what would happen if Putin invaded Ukraine. Of the last four administrations, Trump's was the only one that saw no Russian cross-border invasions.

China remembers that Trump slapped tariffs on its mercantilist market economy, accused China of birthing the COVID virus at its Wuhan virology lab, increased military spending, forced NATO to spend another \$100 billion on munitions, and jawboned more alliance members into upping their military contributions. Beijing knew that to send a spy balloon across the continental United States between 2017-21 would have meant its destruction the minute it entered U.S. airspace. China did not serially threaten Taiwan during the Trump era—and may believe that this year could be the last chance in a decade to confront Taiwan.

Iran has concluded two things about 2024: 1) they do not wish to see another Trump presidency on the horizon that took out

its top-ranking terrorist-general Qasem Soleimani, slapped sanctions on its oil, yanked the U.S. out of the flawed Iran Deal, declared the Iranian Houthi satellites a foreign terrorist organization, cut off all aid to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, moved the U.S. closer to Israel, and warned Hezbollah of consequences should it start a war with Israel; and 2) that the present Biden abdication will likely be short-lived and thus now may be the time to take advantage of a currently directionless global superpower that either will not or cannot deter Iranian aggression.

So what should we expect in 2024? Lacking a strong U.S. patron and sponsor, Israel will be subject to more international calls to leave Gaza, to negotiate with Hamas, and to give up the idea it can “destroy” Hamas.

Hezbollah will likely up its daily barrage of missiles into Israel.

Iran will become more overt in supplying Russia, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis with weapons.

China will increase its threats to Taiwan and weigh carefully the costs-to-benefits of attacking the island.

The common denominator? All our enemies are right now calculating how best to use their gift of the next 12 months from a non-compos-mentis president and his neo-socialist team that either believes the U.S. is at fault for much of the world’s pathologies or is too terrified to do anything about them.

In sum, adversaries believe there is a rare window of opportunity in which the U.S. uncharacteristically does nothing to deter its enemies, back its allies, or win over neutrals. And over the next year, we can only pray they are mistaken.

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