

Trump Rises in the Polls

And he is pursuing important foreign-policy objectives in China and Mexico.

by Conrad Black



It is strangely satisfying to observe President Trump slowly rising in the polls, like the astonishingly slow lift-off of a rocket or an aircraft. The poll of polls of the last week has him at 43 percent, hardly brilliant, but a little better than Obama eight years ago, who had the greatest political honeymoon in the United States since Dwight D. Eisenhower. The general ambiance is settling. The highbrow Right has ransacked the kitchen and has no more sinks to throw at Trump. It is unprecedented for a former CIA director who has so much hanging out for his sponsorship of partisan activity in a general election to be cyber-foaming at the mouth, as John Brennan is, but after 18 months of it, no one cares or notices. The senior justice and intelligence figures who tried to tamper with the election and then muddy the waters with the Russian-collusion nonsense will have ample time and need to explain themselves.

Of course the most rabid commentators are still there. But some of these are showing miraculous signs of reason. It was almost reassuring to hear the *New York Times*' Tom Friedman last week addressing the *Morning Joe* drop-in center for those unable to cope with the Trump era, and advising us to prepare for the emergence of George W. Bush and Barack Obama as bipartisan leaders of a national salvation and restoration effort following the complete meltdown of the Trump presidency. It made me nostalgic for this amiable man's earlier fixations, on laptops for all the world's children and on the evils of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and his creation of the "Obama Doctrine" of the merits of appeasing all hostile governments, starting with the Myanmar colonels, the Castros, and the Iranian ayatollahs.

Immediately after the 2016 election, he was declaring that the Russian interference in the election was an "assault on American sovereignty comparable to Pearl Harbor and 9/11." The fact that equating violent acts of war that killed thousands of people (and sank five battleships at Pearl Harbor) to a few million dollars spent on Facebook in vague and ineffectual advertising might seem disproportionate did not register with him. Now, Mr. Friedman assured us, the two previous presidents have been very quiet, preparing for their mission of rescue. Only a week before, I saw Mr. Bush saying that Trump "makes me look pretty good, eh?" He left office with a 28 percent approval rating, the economy in the worst crisis since 1933, and a long-running war in Iraq that was not serving American strategic interests. No, he doesn't look pretty good at all. Mr. Obama and his wife have been quite outspoken: Mrs. Obama the other day was calling her husband the good parent who made the children "eat [their] carrots" and do their homework while Trump just indulged them. (Doubling the national debt while flat-lining the economy and appeasing America's enemies under Friedman's Obama Doctrine is a novel definition of carrots and homework, but I always admire a supportive spouse.) There is no historical precedent for former presidents' playing an

important role in the direction of government and the last two do not enjoy a deep reservoir of public confidence.

But while some of the commentariat are reassuringly persistent in their insane views, as the president routinely describes much of the media as liars, unmasked, unhelped eruptions of commentator decency occur. In the standoff in which 90 percent of the national media is hostile to Trump but is impotent and countered by his command of social media and the talk shows, Bill Maher had an attack of nobility. He is usually on all fours with Jimmy Kimmel (who stooped to mocking Melania Trump's accent last week; English is her fifth language) and Stephen Colbert. Maher stated that although he did not like Laura Ingraham, he disapproved of the opinionated David Hogg, the self-elevated spokesperson for the students of the Parkland, Fla., school where 17 people were murdered on February 14, who called on advertisers to boycott Ingraham's program because she pointed out that he had complained about being rejected for admission by four universities. I want to salute Mr. Maher; I respected him for having once been friendly with my exotic friend Ann Coulter, but I can't bear watching him and have generally found him snide, unfunny, and simplistic. The fact that he took the position he did reveals a man of underlying decency and civility.

If the politically active and influential people can start back toward disagreeing with one another while upholding reasonable standards of civilized parlance and behavior (and if Maher can do it, the rest can), the morale of the whole country will rise. Should such a trend begin, the president will certainly have to do his part. I don't blame him for his publicly expressed detestation of those in the media who accuse him of being a traitor, a crook, a moron, and a mental case, and he is better and wittier at hurling the muck around than his enemies are; and of course he does so from a great official promontory. But if there is any discernible movement

to normalize political discourse, it is the duty of the country's leader to encourage it.

From the less frantic sections of the media, there seems to be a slightly greater disposition than there has been not to overreact to the president's unorthodox informality in enunciating some policies. The hysteria about a trade war with China is declining. China has violated World Trade Organization rules against demanding industrial intelligence as a requisite for exporting to China, and spuriously claims that such practices are voluntary on the part of the exporter. Successive administrations and many other countries have tolerated this as a price to pay for the benefit of having that immense country move steadily into the world economy and political society. But it is taking far more than it gives, shredding the rules most other important countries live by, and has a very large and artificial trade surplus with the United States. Donald Trump said he wouldn't stand for it and he is right to do as he promised.

Of course China is a powerful country, but so is the United States. China's debt is 300 percent of its GDP (about thrice the U.S. percentage) and it still has, to the extent of about 40 percent, a command economy; it is not invulnerable. The dialogue will presumably now move to the incomprehensible minutiae of the trade specialists, but the result is that the U.S. will be relieved of a significant part of its trade imbalance, and China will be less reckless in ignoring the requirements of a rules-based international trading system. The president is playing a subtle game, in taking this line while expressing respect and admiration for China and its president, Xi Jinping.

Somewhat similarly, Mexico, especially as it is about to elect a Marxist president, could not be allowed to continue to export millions of unskilled peasants and immense quantities of dangerous drugs into the U.S., while raiding American manufacturing and exporting unemployment as well as the

replacement products to the U.S., and encouraging the migrant American companies not to remit their profits. It was an outrage, and from an infinitely less formidable country than China. Trump said he would stop it and he will. If the Democrats go the distance on open borders and sanctuary cities, and against the right of census-takers to establish citizenship, they will be massacred at the polls.

In the Middle East, Turkey, Russia, and Iran are natural rivals and any agreements among them are fluid and fragile. The U.S. and the West generally support the major Arab powers as well as Israel. In suggesting that the 2,000 Americans in Syria may be withdrawn, Mr. Trump is presumably telling the Arabs and the Europeans, who love to claim some status in and knowledge of the Middle East (impossible to prove from their performance there since the late Roman Empire), will have to do more of the heavy lifting. This is a delicate game in the most cynical and unstable region of all, and this president and his new secretary of state and national-security adviser are the best equipped Americans to cope with it since Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. None of it is easy.

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