

Mr. Trump goes to Helsinki

I began this short essay in reaction to the remarks of the English actor and producer John Cheese, whose droll works I have greatly enjoyed. In the piece (appended below) he is not quite the comedian I have enjoyed and here he lets his invective obscure what are real and urgent but not amusing issues. He apparently opened the sluice gate on what became a deluge of criticisms of Mr. Trump. Some were certainly deserved, but the general tone in the media was that nothing Mr. Trump did was worthwhile and, rather, that everything he did was disastrous. Such blanket condemnation always seems to me suspicious. So, let me offer some perspective and ask such simple questions as is what Mr. Trump is doing actually works, appears to work or digs even deeper pits into which we could fall, or what?

I begin with the immediate questions in foreign affairs:

1) Mr. Trump certainly did not “solve” the issue of nuclear weapons in North Korea. He could not have done anything significant on the nuclear issue. Unless he is totally stupid, he must have known what President Kim’s response would be to a request to cut back or cut out nuclear weapons — “we will denuclearize in parallel as you denuclearize; not otherwise or before.”

Moreover, unless Mr. Kim is totally stupid, he would have approached the meeting with the memory of what happened to Messrs. Saddam Husain and Muammar Qaddafi when they gave up their nuclear weapons programs.

Thus, before anyone even thought of a “summit” at Singapore the nuclear issue was closed. North Korea is a nuclear power. Full stop.

If Mr. Trump did not know that before he got on the plane, we should be worried about his mental ability. And the fact that he went blithely ahead raises serious questions about whom, if anyone, he listens to.

But, what he did not set out, at least publicly, as an objective was enormously important and on it he made a perhaps life-saving contribution. Recall that we were drifting toward war. Even if that war had remained only conventional — and no nuclear weapons were employed — it is likely that several hundred thousand people in South Korea, including a couple of hundred thousand Americans, would have been killed. And, since it is unlikely that Mr. Trump, or any American president, could have stopped there, the chances are good that we would have plunged into a new Korean war that could only have been worse than the one fought in the 1950s. Bad as these events would have been, I am convinced that we were closer than we realized to a nuclear war. Faced with defeat, Mr. Kim would have had nothing to lose by using such weapons as he had.

At least temporarily, Mr. Trump stopped the drift toward war; thus, rather than faulting him for failing to accomplish what he had no chance of accomplishing, —getting the North Koreans to give up their nuclear program which he had, perhaps foolishly, announced to be his objective — we should be enormously grateful for what he actually did — reducing the danger of war. What he accomplished was of great importance whether or not Mr. Trump understood what he was doing.

2) On NATO: If the NATO members react to his bullying by raising their contributions, Mr. Trump's rudeness will get the credit at least among his followers.

Let me be clear since this figures so much in the comments made in the media: I personally am revolted by bad manners and do not like being lied to by my government. But, as a historian and occasional negotiator, I know that boorishness is the rough edge of diplomacy. It is not common in diplomacy because it is dangerous, is ugly and may not work, particularly among states that are roughly equal in power. But, because it is uncommon, it has a shock value. From his business experience Mr. Trump knew that it sometimes worked and probably because of his personality he found it congenial. But let us be clear, he could have drawn on many historical precedents.

I confess that at least twice in my diplomatic experience I violated good manners or protocol with heads of states. I did not do so in the way Mr. Trump did, but my difference was a matter of degree.

More immediately, even though it is doubtful that Mr. Trump or his immediate entourage knew of them, similar negotiating tactics were laid out in a whole school of Cold War writings. Thomas Schelling in *The Strategy of Conflict* and others of his ilk put heavy emphasis on being unable or unwilling to listen or see — “the blind man has the right of way.” Trump just substituted recklessness for blindness. The NATO chiefs obviously found him unreachable by logic, fellow-feeling or shared fears. He laid out his case and then just walked out. That is the proper tactic in the “game of chicken.”

For entirely different reasons, I question whether he did as much harm as the pundits allege.

To reveal my personal viewpoint, for over 20 years I have thought that NATO was at best irrelevant and at worst provocative, but previous presidents have never looked critically at it. It was the proverbial sacred cow. Both Democrats and Republicans just let it go on chewing its cud. Whether or not for the right or the wrong reasons, and whether or not in ways that would otherwise damage relations with trading partners and allies, Trump has uniquely brought forward the question of its value and — perhaps in a larger sense than he realizes — its cost.

What are the real costs? Like most organizations, NATO is affected by the ambitions of its staff and its constituents. Certainly, it has been affected by “mission creep.” If it finds an opportunity, whether or not the opportunity is beneficial, it is tempted to seize it. Such was the push into Russia’s “near foreign” zone. Threatening Russia on its frontier certainly did not give the West more security or even any tangible economic or political gains. But it could have led to war.

I see no sign that Mr. Trump or our military, diplomatic or intelligence chiefs had carefully evaluated the outcome of actions we were taking, but, as a by-product of Mr. Trump’s annoyance over what he regards as an unfair allocation of funding obligations, NATO (including, of course

our officials) is likely to be forced to make a long-overdue and more general reconsideration of its role, its utility and its costs. This, I suggest, is likely even if, as his tweets indicate, Mr. Trump is simply dead wrong on such issues as Germany's subservience to Russia in the energy field.

To put it bluntly, if he acts as the bull in the china shop, as he certainly does, maybe some of the crockery is no longer of use and just clutters up the shop.

3) Favoring Mr. Putin's opinions over those of his own team, our intelligence, military and diplomatic bureaucracies: This has two aspects. The first is how reliable the American experts are. The record is not exactly stellar. In case after case they proved wrong; sometimes they did not even evaluate options: To wit, the Chinese people were just waiting to welcome an American armed and funded Chiang Kai-shek back home. Remember the "missile gap?" It existed but in exactly the opposite way we thought. The Bay of Pigs? The Cuban people were sure to welcome us with open arms. So were the Afghans and the Iraqis. For seventy long years, we have been assured that the Taliban have been on their last legs. And, on and on.

Intelligence is necessarily imperfect. It comes down to the best guess, what analysts call "the appreciation," of such facts as can be assembled.

The second aspect is that those who assemble the "facts" as well as those who evaluate them are not only subject to human error, but their reading are also affected by prejudice, ambition and political pressure.

In my time on the Policy Planning Council I several times requested a "National Intelligence Estimate" and was then allowed to sit in on what was then called the National Intelligence Board as it evaluated the estimate it was to give me. This was purposely a very sober action. But I found that the professionals in the CIA had to accommodate to what they called "flag" opinions: particularly the military members would say "this is probably right, but we do not associate ourselves with this opinion."

Allow me a third and different notion: It surely is of value to know what others outside our bureaucracies think. In my own negotiations, I always listened with great care to what the foreign leaders with whom I was speaking said. Their viewpoint was often very different from ours, perhaps was less accurate, but since it was the basis of which they acted, it deserved close attention.

Thus, while Mr. Trump may have been indiscrete in praising Mr. Putin's viewpoint, he was certainly not wrong in listening to it.

4) Domestic consequences of relations with Russia: everyone in the media seems to focus on the probable Russian attempt to influence the American election. We have indicted a dozen Russian agents. Big deal!

Let's be realistic: Governments always try to make other states do what they want and to forego what they oppose. Sometimes they do it with money, sometimes with propaganda, sometimes with threats and sometimes with violence. These acts date back at least to the great strategists of ancient India and China and we associate them with Niccolò Machiavelli. Of course, one might say, all that is past; we live in a new world where everything is out in the open and we are, after all, a people who live for independence and value self-determination. Balderdash!

Does no one remember our history? At the end of the First World War, we invaded Russia to try to overthrow the Revolutionary Communist government. At the end of the Second World War, we bought the governments we wanted in Italy and France ; then we secured them and Germany with the Marshall Plan; we bombed, strafed and silenced those we regarded as unfriendly in Greece reinstalling a monarchy; we created a whole new state to our liking in Palestine with money, arms and diplomacy; we tried to keep Chiang Kai-shek in power, by putting our troops in China despite his obvious lack of support of his own people; then there was Vietnam which formed a pattern we have followed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Libya and now Yemen and Syria We are said to have our military, intelligence "intervention" forces (and our various economic programs) now active in over a hundred countries.

Bashing the Russians for tampering with our politics may be play well in domestic politics but it is really rather silly. Of course they do. And no one does it more than our dearest friend Israel. As the British used to say of their activities, just don't get caught. That is the real sin the Russians committed.

Anyway, we still have laws on the books for selling our country for private advantage: it is call treason. If anyone, particularly a government official or elected represented does it, there are existing ascribed penalties. But, let's be honest: if these were enforced almost the whole House of Representatives would be in jail.

5) international aspects of US-Russian relations:, whether or not Mr. Trump (and/or his family) has other and probably unsavory reasons to cozy up to Mr. Putin was this a reason to break off the Helsinki meeting? Some pundits and many of my fellow liberals obviously think so. They were wrong. It is surely wiser to discuss our differences and emphasize points of agreement than to huff and puff. All the huffing and puffing of our presidents and their administrations since Ronald Reagan have produced nothing we hoped they would.

Our major weapon against the Russians is sanctions. We use them against a whole range of countries. Can anyone show that they have worked? They have been applied without notable result often for years and have made enemies for our country by the millions. Why is this? In simple terms it is because in Russia as elsewhere depriving people of their needs or desires infuriate the common people (who rightly blame us for their hunger, frustration or inconvenience), but they do not trouble the leadership. That is because regimes, including the previous Communist regime and the current nationalist regime in Russia subsidize their leaders and protect them from our actions. What we do impacts only on those outside the decision-making circle. Thus, it is ineffective in bringing about a change in policy and probably makes the population more inclined to support their leaders. We cannot seem to learn this point. Sanctions don't work.

And, beyond all of this, the fact is that Russia is both a great power and a nuclear power. In one form or another we are going to have to coexist on the same Earth or neither us if likely to survive.

The “father” of containment — the nuanced strategy behind the Cold War — George Kennan, realized this fundamental fact. He laid it out in the Truman administration. His nuance was by no means a “soft” policy. He advocated and even participated in the planning of violent, covert, subversive attacks on Russia. But he sought to avoid large-scale military confrontation. Even this limited degree of nuance was overturned by his successor and architect of the “national security state”, Paul Nitze. Nitze sought confrontation and encouraged the arms race. Both men were cold warriors and the differences between them have been exaggerated. But Nitze was pushing toward large-scale war.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy listened very closely to Nitze’s followers, the “Big Bomb” people. Such strategists as Albert Wohlstetter, Herman Kahn, Henry Kissinger and Thomas Schelling fleshed out and rationalized Nitze’s general strategy. (Remember Wohlstetter’s catchy phrase “the delicate balance of terror”?) He and I were several times put on the same platform at the University of Chicago to debate what that phrase might mean in practice. I found it so horrifying that it was almost inconceivable. I still do.

Its implication was boiled down by that other Albert — Albert Einstein — when he said, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

If we don’t want our children to live in a stone age, we better cast our thoughts toward a strategy of peace rather than a strategy of war. That was the lesson I learned intimately in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

6) if this is the “bottom line” of our relations with Russia it is true also and in additional dimensions of our relationship with China. Indeed, in almost every category, China presents a challenge more insistent and less amenable to hostile acts than Russia. We can hurt Russia far

more effectively than we can hurt China. Short of nuclear war, it would be difficult for America to hurt China at all without grievous harm to ourselves. That is the bottom line in our relationship to China. We had better acknowledge it and shape our policies on the consequences.

Allow me a speculation that may not be inconceivable: Mr. Trump has shown himself unpredictable with at least two of the major players in the world, North Korea and China. He has found it possible to pull back from near-hostilities. Some people ascribe his actions to his love of publicity. Some even talk of the possibility of his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. If he is swayed by such considerations, he would assure himself not only of the Peace Prize but of the next election if he invited Xi Jinping to another summit. Why not? They need not discuss anything, just be photographed and shake hands, one on one.

7) Connected with China policy but not restricted to it is an international policy for which I find no rationale or benefit, world trade.

If Mr. Trump had learned nothing more about world affairs than the effects of restrictions — already tried in early modern Europe and junked by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* — he would not have launched his attack on free trade which almost every economist believes is the cause of our well-being. What he is doing is the economic equivalent to the nuclear “megadeath” policy.

I don't know how many people will actually starve or live in poverty as a result of it, but the International Monetary Fund (IMF) gave us, yesterday a startling statistic and a dire warning; The statistic is that the escalating tariff war will cost the world economy perhaps as much as \$430 billion; that figure is more than the total gross national product (GNP) of 85 nation-states. The warning is that America is “especially vulnerable.” Estimates of the number of jobs to be lost and businesses to be ruined is breath-taking. I find no primary, secondary or even accidental benefits of Mr. Trump's new trade policy. He has mortgaged he future of our children. And, again personally, as a child of the Great Depression, I know what that means.

8) Finally on international affairs, Mr. Trump has reconfirmed the disasters of his predecessors. Neither Democrats nor Republicans can make any claim to the high ground. I regarded George Bush as the enemy of America for his invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and his wide-spread use of subversion, assassination, rendition and torture, but only an uninformed observer could find Barak Obama much better. Indeed, Obama bombed more countries than any president we ever had. And, he certainly never did more than talk about an alternate policy.

In conclusion, I say again what I have said elsewhere; when I was a young man, America was respected and Americans were treated as honored guests almost everywhere. As I traveled the "bad lands" of Africa and Asia, I was everywhere fed, entertained and protected. Today, I am not sure of my personal safety anywhere. Is this what we have bought with our trillions of dollars spent on "security?" Have we learned anything? Do we know how to improve the quality of our lives? We had better demand answers to these fundamental questions. They, not Mr. Trump's boorishness, are the real issues before us.

Well, not quite in conclusion. I cannot deal here with the domestic actions of Mr. Trump. I find his actions there almost completely against our national interest; some will have done irreparable damage; many are callous, ugly and immoral while others evince greed, selfishness and disdain for fellow humans, our natural heritage and our future. But that is a topic for another day and perhaps another policy planner.

With best regards, WRP

Begin forwarded message:

From: Chas Freeman via Salon

Subject: [Salon] Message from John Cleese

Date: July 15, 2018 at 9:12:16 PM GMT+2

Message from John Cleese.....

My American friends are asking me about President Trump's observation that the British 'like him'

I regret this is quite unfounded. The explanation for this canard is that Trump is pronoid.

Pronoid is the opposite of paranoid. A paranoid person thinks, without any basis in reality, that everybody is out to get them. A pronoid person is someone who thinks, without any basis in reality, that everybody likes them.

The fact is that the British loathe Donald Trump. This is because he is the polar opposite of a 'Gentleman', who has qualities the British admire. A fine example is Gareth Southgate. To the British, a 'Gentleman' is a man who is modest, well-mannered, self deprecating, quietly intelligent, considerate of other people's feeling, and well-informed.

He is not vulgar, inflated, vain, boastful, noisily ignorant, sleazy and common as muck. I hope this clears up any confusion.