



Essay on the decision-making process and the ideology to come of the Trump presidency¹

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This commentary offers a prospective analysis on the future decision-making of President Trump through the combination of available data on his persona and Foreign Policy Analysis theories. First, the analysis develops the personality of the President-elect – his character traits, his decision-making style – and questions the potential relation structure that could be implemented between Donald Trump and his advisors². Second, the article addresses the ideology inspiring the future President. Finally, it surveys the possible constraints he could face during his presidency.

CHARACTER AND STYLE

Actually one cannot foresee the kind of policy President Trump will lead in the months to come. Yet it is possible, through the use of Foreign Policy Analysis, to have a better understanding of how his decision-making process will unfold. Indeed, each decision-maker tries to form his decisional team according to his style, character and personality.

Thus it appears that the presidential style will be strongly managerial (*CEO presidency*). President Trump will set the main guidelines of his policy and

leave the details and its execution to his advisors. This does not necessarily imply a passive behaviour on behalf of the President nor that he will not invest himself in his tasks. To put it simply, he will not indulge into micro-management. In addition, his character will have an impact on his decision-making. Traits that are sure to mark his presidency are the following: 1) direct and blunt style, not always appreciated by public opinion and allies; 2) resentfulness and austerity, manners that seldom bear fruit in politics; 3) a power of persuasion, which translates into radical postures – even though during negotiations these evolve towards more moderated positions generally corresponding to the favoured option (a simple tactic that has revealed itself to be extremely efficient during his electoral campaign); 4) an absolute self-confidence, a firm spirit and a strong belief in face-to-face meetings. Hence, the President-elect attaches a great importance to relations and personal contacts; extreme personalization of high level relations can often be an asset both in domestic and external policies.

The future President enjoys the underdog position. He is a man who hides his cards and above all appreciates being coined as a loser. What

Nixon said about Reagan applies also to Trump: many politicians have underestimated him³. It is in these moments that Trump appears strong and most fearful. As Nixon wrote about some politicians: “just like great dramatic actors, they incarnated their public role so perfectly that they nearly identified to the character they had created”⁴. Beyond his impatient, impulsive and irascible nature, Donald Trump clearly seems to lack curiosity and nuance, henceforth interpreting the world in a Manichean fashion. Nevertheless, the fact that he is not an intellectual neither underscores an incapacity to lead a country nor an impediment to understand complex reasoning. As the strategist von Clausewitz observed: “the war chief needs not to be a learned historian or a publicist. Yet he must be familiar with the superior life of the state, he should correctly understand and appreciate tendencies, patterns, affected interests, issues to solve, agitating personalities; he does not need to be a subtle observer of men, a rigorous analyst of the human nature, yet he must understand the character, the thought processes and the standards, the mistakes and the specific qualities of those he must command”⁵. Both Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter, to name but

a few, were considered as intellectuals; this trait did not stop them from being considered as mediocre heads of state. Conversely, neither Eisenhower nor Reagan were intellectuals, yet today they are considered in numerous works as excellent heads of the executive, mainly because they had the capacity to take quick decisions and to focus on the *big picture*⁶. Without the shadow of a doubt, Trump corresponds to the second category. He is a macro-manager and quite the *risk taker*. Decision-makers more tolerant in the face of risk have a higher confidence in their choices. This category of leaders stands convinced that they can reduce or overcome risks – a conviction deriving from their confidence in their capacity to take better decisions. Leaders enjoying a high (sometimes too high) level of self-confidence can however foster actions entailing negative consequences, whether it'd be regional or systemic. In addition, the larger the self-confidence is *vis-à-vis* a complex analysis of events, the more the decision-maker will tend to be guided by a cause or an ideology. Hence, he will not hesitate to (re)interpret facts and the environment according to his vision of the world. The risk of this approach is to advance blindfolded, where the decision-maker refuses to acknowledge and adapt to nuances and ambiguities⁷.

Contrary to the visible stupor of many analysts and politicians, it is anything but a surprise to hear the next President express himself in a stereotypical or dichotomic fashion regarding American foreign policy as he has little experience in the field. On the subject, it is interesting to look back at what T. Preston wrote about President Truman since it can be pertinently applied to Donald Trump: "Although Truman saw the world in "black-and-white," absolute terms, he was surrounded by advisers like Marshall and Acheson who brought a much more nuanced, complex views to the inner circle. As a result, Truman's tendency toward impulsive, decisive decision making in the absence of broad policy debate was

compensated for by expert staff who slowed the process down and injected careful policy deliberations into the discussions. Though decisiveness is one of the greatest strengths for such presidents, it clearly must be tempered by staff so that it remains a strength and does not become a liability"⁸. Under a Trump administration, the real danger lies in a situation in which the absence of nuances from the President's perceptions would be reinforced and sustained by advisors chosen according to their radical positions (e.g. Michael Flynn). This situation is a tangible risk and could lead the United States towards a radical foreign policy (see below part on Jacksonianism) and an acute danger of groupthink.

Furthermore, Trump is a low cognitive complexity decision-maker: he will be less tolerant to retroaction and to contradictory information. Hence, he will cherry-pick received information by eliminating those that do not correspond to his core beliefs. It is possible to glance once more at the works of Preston, who linked cognitive complexity with decisional structure. According to him, while decision-makers with a low cognitive complexity will ensure themselves the control over the decisional system, adopting a hierarchical approach and discussing a retained option rather than potential alternatives (e.g. close decision-making process); decision-makers with a high cognitive complexity will privilege a collegial system, more informal, granting access to complementary information and open to debate (e.g. open decision-making process⁹). Yet, this difference in cognitive complexity is not necessarily linked to the quality of the decision. Low complexity does not imply a bad decision (and vice-versa)¹⁰. It will depend on context.

In addition, Trump is instinctive. Various leaders in politics or within the private sector rely on their intuitions to make a decision. For R.S. Larsen, former CEO of Johnson & Johnson: "Sometimes taking time to thorough-

ly analyse all the given options is impossible. You have no other choice than to rely on your gut feel"¹¹. This statement joins the point of view of another CEO, Richard Abdo for whom: "decision must be taken quickly. This means that we need to do our best with the relevant information at our disposal and let intuition guide us"¹². That being said, intuition can lead to mistakes and is not necessarily a guarantee of success. In order for intuition to be efficient, one must be alert, curious and should accumulate information; a behaviour that some call "constructive intuition", which seems to elude Trump.

Ultimately, by taking Barber's typology, one might witness the rise of an "active-negative" or "passive-negative" presidential style. The "active-negative" style illustrates a hyperactivity which never meets an acceptable degree of personal satisfaction. This type of President reflects an impulsive, impatient and sometimes aggressive, character. The "passive-negative" style depicts a President who has little interest towards his position, trying to delegate his presidential tasks¹³.

For his part, Thomas Preston develops a more thorough analysis of the presidential style via two dimensions: the degree of control, participation and engagement on the one hand, and general sensitivity to context (openness to advices, necessity of information, knowledge on the political environment, etc.) on the other hand¹⁴. In the frame of the first dimension, Trump could correspond to a "Magistrate-Delegator". The *Magistrate* model is defined by a power will, but also by a limited political experience on the decision-maker's end. Magistrates endeavour in keeping personal control over the decision-making process through centralization and by surrounding themselves with a restrained circle of advisors. Though they determine the contour of the policy to come, they delegate its formulation and execution to their advisors. Before taking a decision, they analyse advices and

diverging points of view presented by involved advisors. The *Delegator* type is characterized by a limited political experience and by an absence of need to exercise power. His decisions rely on his experiences and the advisors' knowledge; he delegates a great part of the decision-making process.

In the second dimension of Preston, Trump corresponds to the *Maverick*, characterized by a lack of political experience and by a stereotyped vision of the world. This category of decision-makers does not require an overabundance of information. Their decision-making process relies on their own views and principles, which are often determined by analogies. Although lacking experience, the *Maverick* has the intelligence of structuring his decision on the analysis and the knowledge of his advisors, one can hope, doubts aside, that the Trump Presidency will be organized accordingly (namely a competitive system/ team of rivals).

PRESIDENT-ADVISORS STRUCTURE

The relation between the president and his advisors is of utmost importance in the foreign policy decision-making. It is mainly this relation that determines the way information is analysed and understood. Each president in office decides how to structure and lead foreign policy in his administration. Indeed, presidents benefit from a consequent leeway in the organization of the White House's staff and on how it is integrated in the decision-making process. Consequently, the structure and the decision-making process vary from a president to another. Furthermore, the leader's personality will have an impact on the decision-making structure, not only through the choice of advisors and in the organization of the process, but also through established rules: the degree of tolerance to contradictory debate, the type of admissible advisors, etc. The personality, the charac-

ter, the style and the political experience of Donald Trump will inevitably affect the structure and the dynamic of the advisors' group, its efficiency, as well as the quality of the decision¹⁵. According to A. George¹⁶, who relies on the works of R.T. Johnson¹⁷, by taking into account these factors, the relation between the president and his advisors can be characterized either by competition, formalism or collegiality. It is probable that Trump will demand an absolute loyalty from his collaborators and that we will fall in a logic of *team play*. Accordingly, contrary to the traditional competitive structure of unexperienced presidents, which opposes advisors with different points of view, we could find ourselves with a president willing to organize his "President-advisors" decisional structure in a more formal fashion.

The *formal structure* takes a pyramidal form with the President at the top. It is composed of a series of decisional layers which filter information. This approach analyses bottom-up flow within the administrative ladder. Moreover, this model is characterized by restricted debates, central management, and by a preponderance of the advisors' roles as well as defined procedures. As C.-P. David explains: "It is a structure relying on a discrete participation of departments to the decision-making process. Pushed to the extremes this model can create a real presidential dictatorship over organization"¹⁸. The most harmful aspect of this structure is the absence of bureaucratic expertise, which remains a tangible risk if the advisors of President Trump are characterized by strong ideologic convictions.

That said, by choosing Mattis (Secretary of Defence) and Tillerson (Secretary of State), both Hamiltonians¹⁹, as well as the neocon Bolton (Deputy Secretary of State)²⁰, the system could turn to be more competitive than expected. Everything will depend on the level of access they will have to the President. On a surprising note, Tillerson was not the one to select his deputy (Bolton)²¹ but Pres-

ident Trump.

It is furthermore important to underscore an increasingly worrisome evolution in the decision-making process as a whole: the importance of close advisors' positions (such as spin doctors, a president's bodyguards rather preoccupied by the image and the ego of a decision-maker than by substantive issues) on external policy matters. Furthermore, there exists an explicit shift of decision-making from departments towards staff and advisors of the White House. In this regard, the National Security Council (NSC) has witnessed a tremendous transformation, going from fifty people under George H. Bush to 400 under Obama. This is unlikely to change under the upcoming Trump presidency. The exclusion of Cabinet and administration members in favour of a restricted inner circle can have troublesome consequences. Indeed, if a part of the circle is more preoccupied by the image of the decision-maker, loyalty, entailed consequences could include: the loss of expertise and advisors, the absence of control by the Congress, exchange of restricted opinions, no contradictory debate.

Will he listen to his secretaries? Or will they be a mere facade for the real decision-making process taking place at the heart of the White House with (i.e.) the NSC? In practice, this could mean that President Trump (known for rewarding loyalty), might only trust M. Flynn, his National Security Advisor thus shunning his Secretaries of State (probably Tillerson) and Defence (probably General Mattis). In other words, the situation could lead to dysfunctions such as groupthink²²; those having the ear of the President being part of the same reference group²³: Jacksonianism.

TRUMP AND THE IDEOLOGY OF JACKSON

By using the typology of W.R. Mead, Donald Trump seems to be influenced by a bit of Jeffersonianism and a lot of Jacksonianism (see below). Yet, with time – and according to the

advisors roster (e.g. general Mattis, Nikki Haley, Tillerson) – he could become more Hamiltonian (that is identifying with realism and globally corresponding to a pragmatic approach to international relations, focusing on national interest, selective engagement, trade agreements, mistrust towards nation-building, etc.).

Jeffersonianism is rather suspicious of any excessive engagement in international affairs. Foreign policy must cause the least possible harm to welfare and to American democracy. Hence, it opposes Wilsonianism and Rousseauism, which defend a very active foreign policy. On the contrary, this movement is rather isolationist, against the “raison d’Etat”, suspicious of the army; war must be considered as an unfortunate last resort. It is also opposed to free trade and to alliances. It defines American interests in a strict way and opposes high defence spending. Finally, it is distrustful of international organizations, deemed as unrepresentative of democratic values²⁴. Some characteristics of this movement can be found in the ideology of Trump. Nonetheless, the Jacksonian current appears more determining, it stems from the American heartland (South and Midwest). W.R. Mead describes Jacksonianism, as follows:

It is the most disapproved current abroad as well as the most denounced within the United States. The presence of Jacksonians within the senatorial comity of foreign affairs forms the despair of highly civilized and cultivated people due to their blockage of the Kyoto Protocol, their lack of interest regarding the UN or the IMF, their reduction of development assistance, etc. When the figures of the other schools of thought speak about American foreign policy issues, the persistence and the power of the Jacksonian current [often] constitutes a priority. While the disappointment might be exaggerated, only reflecting divergence of interests and values, it is true that Jacksonianism

depicts the most obstructionist school of thought; the one that least supports Wilsonian initiatives for a better world, understand the least Jeffersonian calls for a patient diplomacy to complex situation, or least accepts the trading strategies of Hamiltonianism. [...] The main reason why Jacksonian politics is so poorly understood is because Jacksonianism is less a political and intellectual movement, than the expression of social, cultural and religious values which symbolize a large part of the American public opinion [...]. Jacksonian America represents a traditional community, with a sense of common values and shared destiny; [...] it is neither an ideology nor a built movement with a historic direction or clear political organization. That being said, Jacksonian America produced [...] political leaders and political movements, one after the other, and will continue to benefit of an important influence in the United States regarding foreign policy matters in the years to come²⁵.

While Hamiltonians uphold a realist policy, defending vital interests, yet open to the world, trade exchanges and alliances; Jacksonians have a *stricto sensu* interpretation of the national interest. Given the absence of supranational authority and the mistrust generated by this void, Jacksonians see states in a security dilemma (in an even greater way than Hamiltonians). In the absence of a political world authority or of a moral code, one cannot escape the anarchical system; thus each state must attend to its defences. This statement is illustrated by the principle of “self-help”²⁶. Each state must ensure its own security, implying a reinforcement of defence capabilities. Hence the usage of force remains a possibility not to be excluded. Furthermore, Jacksonianism does not consider international law or international institutions. In times of war, one must resort to all means at disposal and aim for nothing less than the total ca-

pitulation of the opponent.

In addition this ideological current attaches a great importance to the honour code (white flag, respect of civilians), particularly in times of war. Thus, the adversaries that do not respect it will not see any rule of war applied to them. It further rejects the implication of the United States in alliances, binding treaties and wars which have no consequences nor stakes regarding the national interest. For the defenders of this policy, one must maintain power projection on the American soil. Hence, it is futile to station a great number of units abroad, yet it is rather useful to reduce their number and size (closure of American bases abroad). Conflicts should be solved by regional powers, the United States should only step in when vital interests are at stake. In that case, no other power or international organization must constrain it. Under the aforementioned circumstances, the Jacksonian approach places itself in complete opposition to Wilsonian idealism. Contrary to the latter, it has a firm nationalist approach to international relations. Yet, it would be preposterous to limit Jacksonians to isolationists and patriots, the reality is much more complex and their vision (in some aspects) is rather close to classic realism. Although it shares some common features with the Hamiltonian current, Jacksonianism does not always master the mechanisms of international relations, seeing these only through the prism of the United States. A last and important characteristic of Jacksonianism is the resolve in a decision’s execution, which often leads to backtrack denial – even if the decision reveals itself as inadequate or counter-productive.

This current is well embodied by the Heritage Foundation think tank; heavily represented among the actual foreign and defence policy counsellors of the President-elect (Flynn, Ledeen, Gingrich, Sessions...). Its main components are: unilateralism, arrogance, patriotism, American superiority, and aggressive policy rely-

ing on *stricto sensu* interpretation of national interests and, sometimes, failing to assess strategic and political fallouts.

A PRESIDENCY IN A CONSTRAINING CONTEXT?

As C. Roosens remarks: "One must not [...] lose sight that foreign policy is but a policy among others developed by a state. Thus it is subject to internal, ideological, partisan constraints. In the case of foreign policy, one must add the international constraint. Therefore foreign policy is built *with* domestic constraints and *according to* external ones on which nobody has control"²⁷. Hence a President must take into account the environment in which he works, that is: the ideologies, the political currents, the ambitions and interests, the countervailing powers (media, public opinion, Congress, lobbies...), the history of a country, the preceding decisions, the mistakes and the successes, etc²⁸. It is in this environment that the President must make choices and prescribe a given alternative instead of others. Thus the decision will not be the one of a President Trump making an isolated choice in a game with a predetermined set of rules. It will be the one of a President acting in a complex environment. What remains to determine is the extent to which this environment and its evolutions will be considered by the White House.

Ultimately a well-thought policy on behalf of the Trump administration will be determined by the following questions: 1) Will Trump listen to his advisors?; 2) Will he instruct himself?; 3) who will be the advisors?; 4) What will be the position of bureaucracy?; 5) Which ideology will be preferred (Hamiltonianism or Jacksonianism)? These are but some questions that will determine the form and the substance of the Trump presidency.

(ENDNOTES)

1 The author would like to thank Rodrigue Delrue, intern at the Baillet-Latour Chair, for the editorial support.

2 Of course, we do not neglect the role of other actors such as the various Departments, the Congress or the media, the think tanks..., yet we decided to focus on the centre of decision-making power. To a given degree, all of the above participate to the goals of the American Foreign Policy.

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5 Quoted in Aron, R., *Penser la guerre, Clausewitz (L'âge européen) I*, Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1976, p.220.

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8 Preston, T., *The President and his Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p.264.

9 Preston, T., « Following the Leader: The Impact of U.S. Presidential Style upon Advisory Group Dynamics, Structure, and Decision », dans Paul 't Hart, Bengt Sundelius et Eric Stern (dir.), *Beyond Groupthink, Group Decision Making in Foreign Policy*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

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13 Barber, J., *Presidential Character (Predicting Performance in the White House)*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1992, pp.8-11.

14 Preston, T., *The President and his Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, pp.14-28.

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16 George, A., *Presidential Decision-making in Foreign Policy*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1980, pp.150 and following.

17 Johnson, R., *Managing the White House*, New York, Harper&Rove, 1974.

18 David, Ch.-Ph., *Au sein de la Maison Blanche*, Canada, Les Presses Universitaires de Laval, 1994, p.139.

19 It seems that Tillerson was backed by James Baker (former Secretary of State), Condoleezza Rice (former Secretary of State) and Robert Gates (former Secretary of Defence): all Hamiltonians.

20 Even if Bolton is a hard-line neocon, his hawkish attitude towards Iran or/and his critic regarding the method employed against ISIS could reinforce the Jacksonians.

21 Remark : The nomination of Bolton (and Tillerson) could still be blocked by the Senate.

22 In the best case scenario President Trump will be able to put in place a functional competitive system, where advisers respect each other and give the President different options on an issue (avoiding also polythink).

23 Vertzberger, Y., *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decisionmaking*, Stanford University Press, 1993

24 Mead, W., *Sous le signe de la providence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2003, pp.198 and following.

25 Mead, W., « The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy », in *The National Interest*, n° 58, 1999. (<http://www.nationalinterest.org/issues/58/Mead.html>).

26 « *To achieve their objectives and maintain their security, units in a condition of anarchy – be they people, corporations, states, or whatever – must rely on the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves. Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order* ». (Waltz, K., *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979, p.111.)

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