

Death by a Thousand Cuts (and Tweets): The Impending Train Wreck of U.S. Foreign Policy

April 7, 2017

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Through decades of personal encounters, U.S. diplomats and other State Department representatives have deeply impressed me with their decency, common sense, patriotism and profound understanding of the world. Along with members of the military and the intelligence community, these committed individuals are at the front lines of America's engagement with the world. Often, they do so with insufficient resources at their disposal. They endure hardships and take considerable risks, and some even make the ultimate sacrifice.

They deserve all the support we can muster as a nation. They help keep us safe and make the world around us a safer place – a world from which we cannot take a holiday, let alone escape, not even into “Fortress America”.

Hence, the idea of cutting the international affairs budget is foolish. Slashing it by almost a third, as proposed by President Trump, is outright shocking. It reflects utter ignorance of its crucial importance for our security and well-being. Moreover, it also implies an appalling disdain for the dedication and sacrifice of some of America's finest¹.

If a foreign power wanted to weaken America's security and standing in the world and bring it down a few giant notches from its contested perch, this is where it would start. Diplomacy would be the first in its crosshairs, not the military which still enjoys a considerable safety margin² compared to other armed forces overseas. (The intelligence gathering apparatus is, of course, always a prime target; deliberately undermining it by publicly disparaging it is thus not only reckless but exposing us all to potentially existential dangers.)

The country's reputation has already suffered immeasurably as a result of the utterings and tweets of Mr. Trump, both as candidate and president. Allies and friends are in shock, while America's adversaries cannot believe their luck. Adding drastic budget cuts would not only amplify their elation, it would add insult to the immense injury already inflicted upon the U.S. both internationally and domestically.

¹ For a historic overview of the role of diplomacy, see *America's Diplomats*, a Foreign Policy Association documentary, New York 2016, available at <http://americasdiplomats.com/>

² “Top 15 Defense Budgets 2015”, in: *The Military Balance 2016*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, <https://www.iiss.org/-/media//images/publications/the%20military%20balance/milbal2016/mb%202016%20top%2015%20defence%20budgets%202015.jpg?la=en>

At home, if President Trump's budget passes, the ongoing disparagement of the intelligence community will be accompanied by an even more tangible assault on our career diplomats and development aid workers. The resulting loss of institutional knowledge and memory will have dire consequences, adding to an already alarming recent brain drain³. What a thoughtless waste of some of the best human capital this country has to offer.

Abroad, fixing the damage already done will require Herculean efforts, such as strengthening existing programs and pursuing policies that show America at its best. Many of them (now at risk of being curtailed or cut) are essential if the country wants to credibly claim – or rather, reclaim – its moral high ground. However, without a commitment to fundamental values and the rule of law in international affairs that will be unattainable. Mr. Trump's and Secretary of State Tillerson's noticeable disinterest in and indifference towards human rights⁴ will most likely keep it that way, namely out of reach.

Claiming or reclaiming the moral high ground appears to be a moot point given President Trump's implied ridicule of the very notion. Few of his statements demonstrate this better than his toxic assertion⁵ that the behavior of the U.S. government was no different than the criminal shenanigans of Mr. Putin. (In Mr. Putin's case this is particularly galling given his ruthlessness at home and the war crimes being condoned and perpetrated under his watch [if not on his command] in Ukraine and Syria.)

Should Mr. Trump's announcements become actual U.S. foreign policy, the resulting conflicts of conscience for those tasked with carrying it out will make any previous ones look almost quaint. The deep concern among diplomats about this issue is understandable and palpable⁶.

Should the unthinkable occur, it would be historically unprecedented as U.S. diplomats would have to potentially justify the committing of crimes⁷ against humanity (e.g. see Mr. Trump's apparent affinity for torture and collective punishment) as well as war crimes (e.g. see Mr.

³ Ivo Daalder, "The White House's troubling deconstruction of diplomacy", *Financial Times*, March 14, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/57aeeec88-07e4-11e7-ac5a-903b21361b43>

⁴ Felicia Schwartz, "Rex Tillerson Skips Customary Presentation of U.S. Human-Rights Report", *Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rex-tillerson-skips-customary-presentation-of-u-s-human-rights-report-1488582430>

⁵ Abby Phillip, "O'Reilly told Trump that Putin is a killer. Trump's reply: 'You think our country is so innocent?'" , *Washington Post*, February 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/02/04/oreilly-told-trump-that-putin-is-a-killer-trumps-reply-you-think-our-countrys-so-innocent/?utm_term=.8aff0f64d3e5

⁶ John M. Koenig, "America quickly losing moral high ground under Trump", *Seattle Times*, February 4, 2017, <http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/america-quickly-losing-moral-high-ground-under-trump/>

⁷ See Art. 7 (Crimes against humanity) and Art. 8 (War crimes) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, available at http://legal.un.org/icc/statute/99_corr/cstatute.htm

Trump's irresponsible remarks about the use of nuclear weapons⁸ or about stealing Iraq's oil [the next time the U.S. occupies the country]).

If the president comes to his senses and, in the process, sidelines those zealots in his inner circle who are feeding his basest instincts, our diplomats will be spared this moral quandary. If not, resistance to approaches this inimical to U.S. national interests will have to come from within the executive branch, from Congress, from the judiciary and, last but not least, from civil society, i.e., the rest of us.

It is encouraging to note that congressional and military leaders⁹ are indeed opposed to the flagrant violations of international law that Mr. Trump's flights of cruel fancy would entail. There is a similar gulf between the president's views of America's international affairs budget and military representatives who understand the larger geopolitical context¹⁰.

The chasm between the Trump White House and the military is deeply concerning. While the president proposes a far-reaching deconstruction of the State Department, Secretary of Defense Mattis had this to say about increasing military spending at the expense of cutting back on diplomacy and development: "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately. So, I think it's a cost benefit ratio. The more that we put into the State Department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of an apparent American withdrawal from the international scene."¹¹

This is when, under normal circumstances, the Secretary of State would step up and exert his influence and authority. Yet Mr. Tillerson, incredibly, agrees with the proposed ravaging cuts to his department¹².

It is more than troubling that, from an outsider's perspective, Secretary Tillerson has also allowed his department to go adrift: leaderless, rudderless, without a compass and soon

⁸ Bruce Blair, "What Trump Doesn't Get About Nukes", *Politico*, February 11, 2017,

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/trump-putin-call-nuclear-weapons-214768>

⁹ Jeremy Diamond, "Trump: Defense Secretary Mattis can 'override' me on torture", *CNN*, January 27, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/27/politics/donald-trump-defense-secretary-override-on-torture/>. Whether Mr. Trump will keep his promise to let him be overruled by Secretary Defense Mattis remains to be seen

¹⁰ See the letter by over 120 retired generals to the leaders of the U.S. Congress regarding the cuts [http://www.usglc.org/downloads/2017/02/FY18 International Affairs Budget House Senate.pdf](http://www.usglc.org/downloads/2017/02/FY18%20International%20Affairs%20Budget%20House%20Senate.pdf)

¹¹ Zach Silberman, "The Military Understands Smart Power", U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, March 8, 2013, <http://www.usglc.org/2013/03/08/the-military-understands-smart-power/>

¹² Carol Morello, "Tillerson tells State Department employees that budget cut reflects new priorities", *Washington Post*, March 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-tells-state-department-employees-that-budget-cut-reflects-new-priorities/2017/03/16/1880475e-0a4c-11e7-a15f-a58d4a988474_story.html?utm_term=.14241b6244fe

deprived of the means to make it safely to any sensible destination. No wonder Foggy Bottom “felt like a ghost ship”¹³ during a recent visit by one of its eminent former diplomats. Possible explanations for Tillerson’s behavior – namely that he has been sidelined, he may be out of his depth and/or may lack motivation to turn things around because he seems not to have wanted this job in the first place – are all equally worrisome¹⁴.

Congress will have a historically unique opportunity to prove itself and show that it, at least, puts the nation’s interests first. One way to stymie the proposed budget from becoming enacted would be to adhere to the Budget Control Act¹⁵. Sequestration is an odd way to govern a country. However, as this case shows, it can act as an important check to prevent an out-of-control administration from committing senseless acts.

How unusual and perilous a time we live in if our best hope for keeping the country from harming itself is the resistance within government itself, and the American people at large.

Many of my encounters with U.S. diplomats have been in the Midwest, specifically in the state of Wisconsin. Their profound knowledge of the world as well as their understanding of the concerns of their fellow citizens is remarkable. Likewise, there seems to be a genuine public appreciation for the sacrifices diplomats make and the personal risks they take.

Similar events dedicated to international affairs and open to the general public have impressed upon me, time and time again, the fundamental sincerity of the American people. They show a willingness to listen and to learn about America’s place in this world that so often seems chaotic and confusing. Their openness is one of this country’s most distinctive strengths. Hence it is not surprising that several surveys¹⁶ show that the vast majority¹⁷ do not subscribe to the noxious nationalism that is being stirred up and spread by President Trump and his innermost circle.

¹³ Nicholas Burns, “Trump’s cuts would cripple the country’s diplomats when we need them most”, *Washington Post*, March 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-cuts-would-cripple-the-countrys-diplomats-when-we-need-them-most/2017/03/03/c7bd4dd4-0029-11e7-8ebe-6e0dbe4f2bca_story.html?hpid=hp_no-name_opinion-card-f%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.0a0ea06bb0da

¹⁴ Jonathan Freedland, “Rex Tillerson is clearly out of the loop and out of his depth in Trumpland”, *Guardian*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/22/rex-tillerson-out-loop-trump-secretary-state>

¹⁵ Annie Lowrey, “Why Sequestration Is Poised to Kill Trump’s Budget”, *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/donald-trump-meet-sequestration/519798/>

¹⁶ Dina Smeltz, Ivo H. Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, “America in the Age of Uncertainty”, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 6, 2016, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/america-age-uncertainty>

¹⁷ Steven Kull, “Americans on the U.S. Role in the World: A Study of U.S. Public Attitudes”, *Program for Public Consultation*, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, January 2017, http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PPC_Role_in_World_Report.pdf

Foreign visitors are usually struck by America's friendliness and hospitality. They are left with an image of a country that, while not perfect, is aware of many of its shortcomings and even willing to discuss them with strangers – an America that is self-confident enough to invite scores of people through government-sponsored programs¹⁸ to experience the country first-hand.

Countless volunteers across the nation graciously host these foreign guests. This sort of citizen diplomacy is an important part of educating the world about us and us about "them," "one handshake at a time."¹⁹ Unscripted and unchoreographed, visitors are allowed to freely explore the essence of America. At the end of their exploration they are free to make their own judgment: is it reflective of their experience, or of the president's cheerleaders in the crude, jingoistic media?

The extraordinary benefits of these exchange programs must surely make America's adversaries cringe. They would much rather see America's image eternally tarnished by biased and fake news accounts about the daily "carnage" in this dystopian place that preposterously calls itself the United States of America. Incidentally, those caricature-like images of America are not that far removed from how its own president painted the country in his gloomy and foreboding inaugural address.

The proponents of "America First" delude themselves that previous administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, neglected U.S. national interests. This is a bogus argument. It merely serves as a smokescreen to hide the fact that bullying others and breaking America's ties to the outside world is ill-considered and harmful. This includes the administration's condescension toward multilateral institutions. Weakening them would be yet another gift to those determined to topple the liberal international order and, in its wake its core pillar, the United States. The navel-gazing advocates of this bizarre and self-defeating doctrine are oblivious to how much these institutions contribute to our peace and prosperity.

If this myopic vision becomes reality, America's place in the world will become a lonely, isolated one, its security and well-being fundamentally jeopardized. And yet, this is what the "America First" nationalists in the Trump administration seem more than willing to risk. It is beyond naïve to think that such policies are not going to backfire and cause blowback that may haunt us for a long time to come.

In addition to the aforementioned exchange programs, even those related to refugees are in jeopardy. This is at once heartless and short-sighted. Heartless because closing the doors and

¹⁸ Such as the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' International Visitor Leadership Program, <https://eca.state.gov/ivlp>

¹⁹ This quote stems from Sharon Miller, President Emerita, National Council for International Visitors (now Global Ties U.S.), <http://www.globaltiesus.org/>

cutting funds at a time when the need for refugee care²⁰ and resettlement²¹ has never been greater is morally indefensible and betrays America's core values²². It is also short-sighted because the refugee crisis will not go away. Quite the opposite, it will be exacerbated if the world's most powerful and richest nation, the one that could make the biggest difference, pulls back.

Instead of educating a receptive but ill-informed public about how little we actually spend in relative terms on international affairs and how important it is to our national interest to keep (or better yet: increase) the level of funding for diplomacy and development, the president engages in willfully bashing both.

Only five percent of respondents²³ to a survey about the subject guessed the correct amount of the federal budget that goes into foreign aid, between 0% and 1%. Answers varied widely, the average guess was 26%.

The U.S. spends the smallest percentage of GDP of the rich industrialized countries on official development assistance, namely 0.17%²⁴. This is far from the internationally agreed upon commitment²⁵ of spending 0.7% of GDP.

Visiting any of the countries on the receiving end of U.S. aid will prove its benefits first-hand. This is what I experienced on visits to Africa, where strangers expressed how appreciative they and their families were for the generosity of the American people, in several cases for PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief)²⁶, initiated by the George W. Bush administration.

²⁰ Adrian Edwards, "Global forced displacement hits record high", United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 20 June 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

²¹ Leo Dobbs, "UNHCR report sees 2017 resettlement needs at 1.19 million", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 13 June 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/6/575e79424/unhcr-report-sees-2017-resettlement-needs-119-million.html>

²² David Miliband, "Donald Trump's Un-American Refugee Policy", *New York Times*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/opinion/donald-trumps-un-american-refugee-policy.html?ref=opinion>

²³ Bianca DiJulio, Jamie Firth, Mollyann Brodie, "Data Note: Americans' Views On The U.S. Role In Global Health", The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Jan 23, 2015, <http://kff.org/global-health-policy/poll-finding/data-note-americans-views-on-the-u-s-role-in-global-health/>
<https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/45539274.pdf>

²⁴ Development Assistance Committee (DAC), "Development aid in 2015 continues to grow despite costs for in-donor refugees", Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Paris, April 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/ODA-2015-detailed-summary.pdf>

²⁵ OECD, "History of the 0.7% ODA Target", original text from *DAC Journal* 2002, Vol 3 No 4, pages III-9 – III-11 Revised June 2010, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), <https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/45539274.pdf>

²⁶ See <https://www.pepfar.gov/>

While PEPFAR and similar health-related programs are expected to be spared, there are plenty of others whose proposed elimination will result in more misery, more loss of life, and less stability and security for all of us. As the broad political resistance to the planned cuts indicates, this is not a partisan matter²⁷. Should Mr. Trump's vision prevail, the notion of American magnanimity and enlightened self-interest will be overshadowed, if not replaced, by the image of a self-absorbed, egotistical, stingy, rich nation only out for itself. Our resulting international isolation would deepen the sense of insecurity that Mr. Trump has been so successful in fueling for his own narrow political purposes. This is the *opposite* of making America great. Resisting it is therefore a patriotic issue.

Resistance also entails opposing the dangerous worldview that has seeped into the highest echelons of power. The ugly nationalist ideology that hides behind the slogan of "America First" used to be confined to the lunatic political fringes. Contemporary history alone should help us recognize its uncanny resemblance to movements and regimes overseas that the U.S. all too often ended up fighting with American lives. It cannot possibly become the driving force of a nation that views itself as principled and great.

True patriotism calls for keeping such destructive dogmas from becoming policy. They would harm our national security and prosperity as well as our standing in the world – a world where our friends and remaining allies look at us with unparalleled trepidation, while our adversaries can hardly hide their schadenfreude and glee over the sheer extent of our self-inflicted wounds.

This article was published as a blog on the website of the Foreign Policy Association on April 7, 2017 (<http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2017/04/07/the-impending-train-wreck-of-us-foreign-policy/>)

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²⁷ U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, "Deep and Dangerous Cuts to International Affairs Budget Would Make America Less Safe", March 16, 2017, <https://medium.com/@USGLC/deep-and-dangerous-cuts-to-international-affairs-budget-would-make-america-less-safe-6c28387be5ee#.i13h3v8ae>

