NORTH AMERICA 12.03.2018 | Claus Leggewie

A president just like Trump?

Donald Trump likes to liken himself to former US president Andrew Jackson. But does the comparison really hold?

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Around this time last year, US president Donald Trump paid a visit to the plantation home of Andrew Jackson near Nashville, Tennessee. He wanted to pay tribute to the seventh president of the United States on the 250th anniversary of his birth.

After the visit, Trump drew a parallel between himself and the former president, one of the most controversial in the nation's history. 'Jackson first took on and defied the arrogant elite,' he said. 'Does that sound familiar to you?'

Trump wasn't the first one to point to the likeness between Jackson and himself. When he was elected in 2016, journalists quickly called attention to both superficial similarities and deeper, more meaningful resemblances between the two men.

A conservative revolution

It's no surprise that Trump chose to hang a portrait of Jackson above his desk in the Oval Office. Both Jackson, in office from 1829 to 1837, and Trump are famous for their impassioned political style, for shamelessly fusing politics and personal business interests, and showing a populist contempt for intellectuals and elites.

As a president, Jackson shifted attention from the western frontier to the industrialising east, from the settlers' religiously informed sense of community to the capitalist pursuit of money in a nation of self-made men.

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Alexis de Tocqueville, the 19th-century French historian and keen observer of early American

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political life, characterised President Jackson as someone fond of 'trampl[ing] on his personal enemies, whenever they cross his path, with a facility without example.' Does *that* sound familiar to you?

In his 1945 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Age of Jackson*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr portrayed the founder of the Democratic Party as a moderniser in the same mould as former presidents like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Schlesinger saw him as a people's president and champion of federal power who wanted to fight corruption and vested business interests.

Bills, bills

These days, historians assess Jackson and his legacy as the most notorious 'Indian killer' in American history much more critically. Jackson's name now tends to bring to mind a dark chapter in 19th-century US history – the forced and bloody relocation of more than 100,000 Native Americans from their ancestral homelands in the south-east to present-day Oklahoma.

The former president, a singularly autocratic ruler, also expanded the country's borders to include the then-Spanish territories of Texas and Florida.

In a sign of the times, President Obama announced plans to replace Jackson's face on the $20 bill with that of the African American abolitionist Harriet Tubman toward the end of his second term.

Since then, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has seemed to backtrack on the redesign of the bill, saying the country has 'a lot more important issues to focus on'.

History and hope

Trump certainly isn't the first president to suggest that he is following in the footsteps of his predecessors. Many US presidents have likened themselves to the Founding Fathers of the republic, while simultaneously vowing to lead the country into an even brighter future – promising a combination of history and hope.

But are the personalities and policies of the seventh and 45th president of the US really that similar? And does the comparison help explain the muddled and chaotic foreign policy of the Trump administration?

Trump and Trumpists are eager to liken themselves to Jackson and his followers because of his nationalist agenda first and foremost. In their view, Jackson, a major slave owner and fierce anti-abolitionist, protected white America from native Americans and black slaves. He also supported the Texas revolutionaries who fought for independence from Mexico and annexation into the US.

Like Jackson used to stir up farmers with his fiery orations, Trump's speeches have rallied blue-collar and white middle-class Americans. And just like Jackson led a conservative revolution against the elites, Trump pledged to make a clean sweep in Washington in his 2017 inaugural address.

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Putting together his administration after the election, Trump snubbed many neoconservative veterans of the Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush years. He sidestepped the conservative think tanks in Washington and mostly recruited inexperienced personnel from other circles instead.

Jefferson, Hamilton and Wilson

Tapping into a renaissance of nationalist sentiment in the Jacksonian vein, Trump has charted an anti-globalist course, vowing to protect Americans from outward influences and declaring NATO obsolete. He has aggressively insisted on unilateral foreign relations, ignoring the interconnectedness of today's world order – an ideology that the American foreign policy expert Walter Russell Mead has termed Jacksonian.

Mead distinguishes it from three other schools of thought, each named after a former president or Founding Father: Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Woodrow Wilson.

Jeffersonian denotes a minimalist approach to foreign policy that is focused on 'achieving American strategic goals at the lowest possible risk and cost'. A Hamiltonian administration sees the confident promotion of American business inside and outside the country's borders as its chief task. This also means proactively protecting international stability. A Wilsonian approach to foreign policy favours a liberal world order and fights authoritarianism around the globe, preferably through multilateral organisations such as the UN.

What has prevailed throughout most of US history is a blend of all these approaches. The lowest common denominator has been a policy of restraint, often only reluctantly abandoned. If the United States has served as guarantor of global security since 1945, it has been in spite of this policy of restraint.

No clear line

Trump's rhetoric against global free trade, multilateral foreign relations and a new 'axis of evil' with 'rogue states' like North Korea and Iran has been somewhat consistent since he was voted into office last November, the most aggressive anti-globalist on the ballot.

But when it comes to his actual actions and notwithstanding Trump's claims that he is just like Jackson, no clear line has emerged – Jacksonian or otherwise. Fourteen months after his inauguration, many diplomatic positions such as that of ambassador to the European Union are still vacant and no clear picture of a Trump foreign policy has emerged. The list of contradictions, instead, gets longer every day. Two of his central campaign promises seem highly uncertain. The Mexican border wall will certainly *not* be built, and the US' withdrawal from the Paris climate treaty will only take effect after his term has ended – if at all.

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So why are Trump and Jackson so often compared? We are faced with symbolic framings even in international relations. These framings cannot just be dismissed as abstract, artificial or irrelevant.

For instance, after 9/11, neoconservatives used such framings to argue in favour of the Iraq war. It allowed them to prevail over a pragmatist like Colin Powell.

Europe First

This doesn't mean that foreign policy is purely ideology-driven. There are many reasonable people in the State Department, Congress and the intelligence community who might be okay with the president's goal of making America great again, but who staunchly oppose his methods. Even Trump himself surely has other things in mind than emulating Jackson.

How should Europe react to Trump then? Foreign policy think tanks are calling for a Hamiltonian moment. They want to see a federal European state, a fiscal union and a collective military force. If such Europe First

calls succeed in gaining traction and following, Trump's biggest achievement may become that he unwittingly saved both the European Union and multilateral international cooperation.

Other than that, there is little left of *history and hope*. In just 14 months, Trump has destroyed what was left of America's good reputation. The US haven't been this unpopular in a long time and the days of the US as a global superpower seem irrevocably over. Many Americans – and Europeans – are left with just two hopes: that Trump's term in office will be limited to four years and that, hopefully, he won't do all that much damage.



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