DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 23.04.2021 | Marco Bitschnau

The Trump presidency: just a shard of dystopic memory

As Joe Biden is wrapping up his first 100 days, the Trump presidency seems all but forgotten. Perhaps that's because it didn't shape an era after all

The new US president has now been in office for three months – and is approaching the mythical 100-day mark. The media likes to frame this as setting the pattern for the rest of a presidency, looking for teething difficulties, scandals and tittle-tattle, intrigues and controversies. In the case of Joseph Robinette Biden Jr, however, the inventory has already been completed: nothing to write home about, everything as expected.

The former vice president has consistently been pursuing a 'steady as she goes' approach. He is governing his country with a confidence-boosting mixture of grandfatherly dignity and cool professionalism. Bit by bit and backed by many veterans of the Obama administration, he wants to get the US back on course for the twenty-first century.

Above all, that means revisiting his predecessor's decisions and re-establishing lost trust on the international stage. Whether it be the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, the so-called *Muslim ban* or the prohibition on trans-people in the armed forces: step by step the Trump administration's most egregious gaffes are being annulled by presidential decrees. Almost forty*executive orders* had already been signed by mid-April, twice as many as Barack Obama had signed by the same point in his presidency.

Furthermore, in his virtual addresses to the G7 Summit and to the Munich Security Conference, the contrast between the Biden and the Trump administrations was striking. 'Democracy doesn't happen by accident', the new president declared. 'We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it, renew it.' A paean to a self-evident truth that had not been heard from Washington, D.C. for a very long time.

What will remain of Trump?

So quickly, indeed, is the symbolic façade of the previous administration being dismantled that soon quite a different question has to be posed: What exactly is going to remain of Donald Trump? Deprived of his principal instrument of government – his Twitter account – the ex-president, languishing in Mar-a-Lago, has largely faded from public consciousness and at most re-emerges in the form of shards of dystopian memory.

Trump at the zenith of the Black Lives Matter protests standing in front of St John's Episcopal Church stony-faced and wielding a Bible. Trump suggesting that Americans might try injecting themselves with bleach – 'sarcastically', needless to say. Trump petulantly confronting his colleagues, arms folded, at the G7 Summit in Charlevoix. Trump lying and denying, bullying and dissembling, serving up enormous fast-food buffets in the White House, and in a particularly grotesque incident during the election, on the telephone in the style of a Mafia Don.

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Many of these antics have already fallen into merciful oblivion or at least soon will. As everyone knows, nothing ages as quickly as yesterday's scandal. Unfortunately, the same applies to scandals that are in reality full-blown tragedies. One such is Trump's indirect responsibility for what are now more than 560,000 Covid-19 deaths in the US, from a virus that he initially declared to be harmless and the responsibility for which he later palmed off onto some higher power.

And what about his much more direct responsibility for the hundreds of representatives and senators who feared for their lives when a mob incited by the president invaded the Capitol building. But because the US vaccination programme is advancing so rapidly and the end of the pandemic at least appears to be in sight, the 'storming of the Capitol' is likely to be perceived rather as a desperate final act of a wretched presidency. More a declaration of political bankruptcy than a true democratic watershed.

Expectation management

It would certainly be fitting. After all, if Trump's actions have exhibited a recurring pattern in the past four years it would be a twofold expectation gap. Hopes and fears have both emerged as the product of an easily excitable public whose political hypothalamus the man from Queens knew exactly how to stimulate. Was there anything that *wasn't* predicted of this presidency? The United States was going to exit NATO, globalisation was being rolled back and the nation state was set to regain its former glory.

An age of populism had dawned and even an Iranian or a new Korean war could not be ruled out. Unrealistic horror fantasies of Trump casually playing with the nuclear briefcase, dubbed the nuclear football, were as popular in private gatherings of the Global North as they were in newspaper feature sections.

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In the end, little or nothing of this transpired. The United States is still a member of NATO, populism is marking time, and the unrealistic fear of war has fizzled out just as quickly as it emerged. In other words, the Trump presidency scarcely brought any real change. Not even for the so-called "forgotten men and women" from the Mid-West small-town America, who are now paying the price of their delusions, could the rules of the modern knowledge economy be suspended with a bit of vulgar patriotism.

It was a presidency that was somewhat extravagantly heralded as shaping an era – but which then turned into little more than an absurd interlude. Disorienting, ultimately futile buffoonery, but an electoral accident of which little else will remain than the memory of a president who needn't – and shouldn't – have become one.

Rising from the Ashes

Naturally objections can be raised against this standpoint. But I don't find them convincing. It is often argued, for example, that Trump's real legacies are his judicial appointments, especially the three new Supreme Court justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. However, it tends to be overlooked that Trump (28 per cent) appointed far fewer federal judges than, for example, Obama (38 per cent) and the Supreme Court has scarcely mutated into a Trumpian stronghold.

There is undoubtedly a conservative majority, but the situation is much less clear-cut than it may appear at first sight. For example, last June the judgment in *Bostock vs Clayton County* was announced, pioneering the first establishment of labour law protection against discrimination of LGBTQ people. The author of the progressive majority opinion was none other than Trump appointee Neil Gorsuch. Later on, he and his colleagues did virtually nothing to prevent the alleged steal (the rigging of the election).

It cannot be ruled out, of course, that Trump will try to make a comeback and run again in 2024. But the glitter has rubbed off. The roaring tribune of the people on whom millions of Americans had projected their hopes of radical change has turned into a bad-tempered social media outlaw and election loser, whose integrity is now being called into question even in the Qanon camp.

Much more sensible than peddling comeback scenarios would be to try to grapple with the patent malfunctioning of our political perception. All too often we imagine ourselves to be witnessing historic events that in the fullness of time turn out at best to be mere side issues. Not so much events as non-events. The past four years have provided an outstanding example of that, and Trump, for all his inadequacies, was a capable instructor.



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