

Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency

DANIEL W. DREZNER*

Scholars have been implored to bring the statesman back into the study of international relations since the beginning of this century.¹ Over the past decade there has been a renaissance in the study of how the individual backgrounds of leaders affect their approach to foreign policy.² The dominant trend in this line of research has been to identify observable and verifiable aspects of an individual leader's biography—gender, prior military experience, pathway to power—to see if those traits have a persistent effect on their behaviour.³

The election of Donald Trump has supercharged this research programme. The presidency of so unorthodox a leader provides a natural experiment by which to test a variety of questions about American politics and American foreign policy.⁴ Some observers have followed the trend identified above, explaining Trump's style of leadership through reference to his background. However, in the case of the 45th president this standard approach has two major limitations. First, Trump's background alone cannot explain his style of political leadership. Even a cursory examination of the Trump literature reveals a peculiarity unique to this president: almost all his biographers, even his acolytes, describe him in terms one would use for a toddler. He offers the greatest example of pervasive developmental delay in American political history. Trump's individual psychology is sufficiently unique to require a highly focused analysis of his immature psychological traits.

Second, an exclusive focus on the individual is insufficient to explain Trump's effect on American politics and policy. It is equally important to examine how Trump's psychology intersects with larger institutional forces that predate his

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¹ Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, 'Let us now praise great men: bringing the statesman back in', *International Security* 25: 4, 2001, pp. 107–46.

² Robert Jervis, 'Do leaders matter and how would we know?', *Security Studies* 22: 2, 2013, pp. 153–79; Joseph Nye, *Presidential leadership and the creation of the American era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Elizabeth Saunders, 'No substitute for experience: presidents, advisers, and information in group decision-making', *International Organization* 71: suppl., 2017, pp. S219–47.

³ See e.g. Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, 'Honor and war: southern US presidents and the effects of concern for reputation', *World Politics* 68: 2, 2016, pp. 341–81.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, 'The rise and fall of US hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 63–80; Peter Trubowitz and Peter Harris, 'The end of the American century? Slow erosion of the domestic sources of usable power', *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, pp. 619–40.

arrival on the political stage. For example, what does Donald Trump reveal about the current strength of the presidency as a political institution compared to the past? From Richard Neustadt on, political scientists have traditionally argued that the US presidency is a fundamentally weak institution.⁵ Many current political scientists argue that Trump is a weak president compared to his predecessors.⁶ They have a case to make. By conventional standards, Trump's durable policy accomplishments have been meagre. He is only the third US president to be impeached.

At the same time, however, Arthur Schlesinger's *Imperial presidency* reminds us that in the postwar era the norm has been an empowered chief executive.⁷ Schlesinger's successors suggest that Trump has expanded the scope of presidential power beyond that of his predecessors.⁸ Examples range from an accelerated pace of treaty withdrawals through reliance on acting officials in his cabinet to using states of emergency to bypass Congress. This debate within American politics has also affected debates about Trump's influence on American foreign policy.⁹

President Trump himself has been on both sides of this debate. He has complained repeatedly about 'presidential harassment' from Democrats and the mainstream media. Five months into office, he claimed: 'No politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly.'¹⁰ At the same time, he has also bragged about his constitutional powers, claiming in June 2019 that 'Article II allows me to do whatever I want'.¹¹

These contrasting views of presidential power can be reconciled by understanding how Trump's psychological characteristics interact with the growing prerogatives of the US presidency. What makes Trump unique as a president is how much his individual psychology degrades his ability to be a conventionally effective president. Evidence for this comes from his supporters far more than his critics. Trump's staffers, subordinates, cabinet officers, fellow Republicans on Capitol Hill, and longstanding treaty allies of the United States trying to ingratiate themselves with this president have all characterized him as possessing the maturity of a petulant child rather than a man in his seventies. Psychological tropes such as a quick temper, short attention span and poor impulse control hamper Trump's political leadership.

At the same time, however, constraints on the presidency have been severely eroded in recent decades, enabling even a comparatively weak leader to be a powerful president. Trump assumed the office at the zenith of its power, and his will-

⁵ Richard Neustadt, *Presidential power and the modern presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

⁶ Matthew Glassman, 'Donald Trump is a dangerously weak president', *Vox*, 27 Dec. 2017; David Lewis, Patrick Bernhard and Emily You, 'President Trump as manager: reflections on the first year', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48: 3, 2018, pp. 480–501; Corey Robin, 'Why has it taken so long to see Trump's weaknesses?', *New York*, 20 Feb. 2019. See also Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes, *Unmaking the presidency: Donald Trump's war on the world's most powerful office* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The imperial presidency*, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

⁸ Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer, 'Have we had enough of the imperial presidency yet?', *New York Times*, 8 Jan. 2019.

⁹ Compare and contrast G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 7–23, with Patrick Porter, 'Why America's grand strategy has not changed', *International Security* 42: 4, 2018, pp. 9–46.

¹⁰ John Wagner, 'Trump says no president has been treated more unfairly', *Washington Post*, 17 May 2017.

¹¹ Jason Lemon, 'Trump insists that the constitution's Article II "allows me to do whatever I want"', *Newsweek*, 16 June 2019.

ingness to flout norms has empowered the office even further. For half a century, Trump's predecessors have expanded the powers of the presidency at the expense of countervailing institutions. Trump himself has attempted massive executive branch power grabs, but the underlying trends eroding formal and informal constraints on the president long predate his inauguration. They make the existence of a president with Trump's peculiar psychology far more worrisome now than it would have been even amid the heightened tensions of the Cold War. Crudely put, Trump is a weak man who occupies a powerful office, and the power of the office demands that greater attention be paid to Trump's unique psychology.

The Toddler-in-Chief

All US presidents must cope with a political caricature painted by the opposition party, with its inevitable focus on their least desirable qualities. Republicans depicted Barack Obama as an aloof, out-of-touch intellectual. Democrats characterized George W. Bush as an incurious simpleton, the puppet of craftier politicians. Both depictions possessed some small grains of truth. Two things are striking about Trump's caricature. First, in contrast to his predecessors, he is lampooned as a toddler. Second, the primary actors feeding this analogy are the president's political allies.

To be sure, Trump's political opponents have also deployed this metaphor. In December 2018, Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer accused Trump of throwing a 'temper tantrum' when a bi-partisan appropriations bill contained no new funding for a wall along the US–Mexico border. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi also blasted Trump for his obduracy during the 2018–19 government shutdown, telling reporters: 'I'm the mother of five, grandmother of nine. I know a temper tantrum when I see one.'¹² A few months later, Pelosi said that Trump has a short attention span as well as a 'lack of knowledge of the subjects at hand'.¹³

What is startling, however, is the frequency with which Trump himself, his subordinates and his supporters talk about him as if he were a small child. The president has made it clear that he is not the most mature of individuals. Trump told one biographer: 'When I look at myself in the first grade and I look at myself now, I'm basically the same. The temperament is not that different.'¹⁴ Most of his other biographers make a similar point: he has experienced little emotional or psychological development since he was young. Tim O'Brien, the author of *TrumpNation: the art of being the Donald*, warned after Trump's election that 'we now have somebody who's going to sit in the Oval Office who is lacking in a lot of adult restraints and in mature emotions'.¹⁵

¹² Chuck Schumer, quoted in Ben Kamisar, 'Schumer: Trump's "temper tantrum" over wall funding is leading to shutdown', NBC News, 16 Dec. 2018; Nancy Pelosi, quoted in Paul Kane, Philip Rucker and Josh Dawsey, "'She wields the knife": Pelosi moves to belittle and undercut Trump in shutdown fight', *Washington Post*, 16 Jan. 2019.

¹³ Glenn Thrush, 'Pelosi warns Democrats: stay in the center or Trump may contest election results', *New York Times*, 4 May 2019.

¹⁴ Michael D'Antonio, *Never enough: Donald Trump and the pursuit of success* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2015), p. 40.

¹⁵ O'Brien, quoted in Michael Kruse, "'He was surprised as anyone'", *Politico*, 11 Nov. 2016.

His subordinates and supporters have characterized him in a similar way. One person described advance work for Trump's first NATO summit as 'preparing to deal with a child—someone with a short attention span and mood who has no knowledge of NATO, no interest in in-depth policy issues, nothing'.¹⁶ A Trump White House staffer described one dubious press release as an action designed solely to appease the president, 'the equivalent of giving a sick, screaming baby whiskey instead of taking them to the doctor and actually solving the problem'.¹⁷ Both Secretary of Defense James Mattis and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly told officials that they viewed their jobs as being 'babysitter' to the president.¹⁸ Perhaps the most notorious example of a Trump official comparing him to a toddler appeared in an anonymous *New York Times* op-ed of 5 September 2018. The author does not explicitly say that the president is a toddler, but the implication is clear. Describing Trump's leadership style as 'impetuous, adversarial, petty and ineffective', the writer notes that 'it may be cold comfort in this chaotic era, but Americans should know that there are adults in the room. We fully recognize what is happening. And we are trying to do what's right even when Donald Trump won't'.¹⁹

Several of the quotes in the preceding paragraph are from anonymous sources. There are, however, plenty of on-the-record statements from prominent Trump supporters that make him sound like a rambunctious two-year-old:

- Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich: 'There are parts of Trump that are almost impossible to manage.'²⁰
- White House chief strategist Steve Bannon: 'I'm sick of being a wet nurse for a 71 year old.'²¹
- US Senator Bob Corker: 'It's a shame the White House has become an adult day care center.'²²
- Newsmax CEO and long-time Trump friend Christopher Ruddy: 'This is Donald Trump's personality. He just has to respond. He's been so emotional ... It takes a toll on him, and the way he deals with it is to lash out.'²³
- Fox News' Tucker Carlson: 'I've come to believe that Trump's role is not as a conventional president who promises to get certain things achieved to the Congress and then does. I don't think he's capable. I don't think he's capable of sustained focus. I don't think he understands the system.'²⁴

¹⁶ Robbie Gramer, 'NATO frantically tries to Trump-proof president's first visit', *Foreign Policy*, 15 May 2017.

¹⁷ Hunter Walker, 'Even some in White House are frustrated by the stonewalling on Donald Jr.'s meeting', *Yahoo News*, 12 July 2017.

¹⁸ Patrick Radden Keefe, 'McMaster and commander', *New Yorker*, 23 April 2018.

¹⁹ 'I am part of the Resistance inside the Trump administration', *New York Times*, 5 Sept. 2018.

²⁰ Quoted in Ashley Parker and Robert Costa, 'Trump's lack of discipline leaves new chief of staff frustrated and dismayed', *Washington Post*, 16 Aug. 2017.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/CNNSotu/status/962696451024355335>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 20 Jan. 2020.)

²² <https://twitter.com/SenBobCorker/status/917045348820049920>.

²³ Quoted in Ashley Parker, Philip Rucker, Tom Hamburger, Robert Costa and Matt Zapotosky, "'Buckle up': as Mueller probe enters second year, Trump and allies go on war footing", *Washington Post*, 13 May 2018.

²⁴ Urs Gehrig, 'Tucker Carlson: Trump is not capable', *Die Weltwoche*, 7 Dec. 2018.

- US Senator Lindsey Graham: ‘The president’s been—he can be a handful—that’s just the way it is.’²⁵
- Former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan: ‘I’m telling you he didn’t know *anything* about government ... I wanted to scold him all the time.’²⁶

Trump subordinates make similar statements under oath. The Mueller Report confirms that when Trump aides have testified under penalty of perjury, they frequently characterize the president as possessing the emotional and intellectual maturity of a small boy. White House chief of staff Reince Priebus told Mueller’s investigators that when Trump was angry at his national security advisor Michael Flynn he would pretend that Flynn was not in the room.²⁷ Chris Christie, Steve Bannon and White House counsel Don McGahn all testified that Trump made requests that were ‘nonsensical’, ‘ridiculous’ or ‘silly’.²⁸ Bannon and McGahn, along with National Security Administration head Mike Rogers and White House communications director Hope Hicks, all described the president having temper tantrums when informed of bad news.²⁹ Multiple Trump administration officials described similar toddler-like behaviour in their depositions to the House impeachment inquiry.³⁰

Classified diplomatic cables from the British Ambassador to the United States leaked to a British tabloid newspaper paint a similar picture. Writing to the Foreign Office, Sir Kim Darroch characterized Trump as ‘inept’ and ‘incompetent’. He advised his superiors that in speaking to the 45th president, ‘you need to start praising him for something that he’s done recently’ and that ‘you need to make your points simple, even blunt’. He further warned: ‘There is no filter.’³¹ Darroch’s assessment was based on his own frequent interactions with Trump’s coterie of advisers. Other diplomats based in Washington confirmed that his judgements matched those expressed in cables they had dispatched to their own home countries.³² In response, Trump insulted Darroch repeatedly and then declared him *persona non grata* via Twitter.³³

How Trump’s psychology hampers his presidency

Three of Trump’s most prominent psychological traits have badly impaired his decision-making abilities: his temper tantrums, his short attention span and his

²⁵ Rachel Frazin, ‘Graham: Trump “can be a handful”’, *The Hill*, 7 Feb. 2019.

²⁶ Tim Alberta, *American carnage: on the front lines of the Republican civil war and the rise of President Trump* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), p. 489.

²⁷ *Report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election* (Mueller Report) (Washington DC: Department of Justice, 2019), vol. 2, p. 32, n. 155.

²⁸ Mueller Report, vol. 2, pp. 39, 81, 85.

²⁹ Mueller Report, vol. 2, pp. 51, 54, 57, 79.

³⁰ Dana Milbank, ‘The United States is being run by a toddler’, *Washington Post*, 8 Nov. 2019.

³¹ Isabel Oakeshott, ‘Britain’s man in the US says Trump is “inept”’, *Daily Mail*, 7 July 2019.

³² David E. Sanger, ‘“It could have been any of us”: disdain for Trump runs among ambassadors’, *New York Times*, 10 July 2019.

³³ Siobhán O’Grady and Claire Parker, ‘UK Ambassador Kim Darroch’s private cables were frank: Trump’s public response was a “nasty diplomatic step”’, *Washington Post*, 10 July 2019.

poor impulse control.³⁴ Trump does not stand out from other presidents because he gets furious. He stands out in how frequently his temper emerges, and how frequently it has sabotaged his administration. Press coverage yields an abundance of examples. President Trump once yelled at Chief of Staff John Kelly so viciously that Kelly told his staff that ‘he had never been spoken to like that during 35 years of serving his country’. He screamed at Attorney General Jeff Sessions so loudly that Sessions later described the incident as ‘the most humiliating experience in decades of public life’. The president rang up National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster once for the sole purpose of screaming at him.³⁵ Contemporaneous reporting suggests that Trump’s decision to kill Iranian General Qasem Soleimani was based on an irate reaction to TV footage showing the US Embassy in Baghdad being breached by Iranian-backed mobs.³⁶

Trump’s temper tantrums have led to poor decision-making and pathological staff strategies for coping with it. Anger leads to short-term, impulsive decision-making that might feel good in the moment but leads to disastrous consequences soon afterwards. Angry outbursts make negotiations more costly and conflict escalation more likely.³⁷ Trump’s inability to secure significant concessions in trade agreements and arms control treaties reflects this dynamic. The president’s out-of-control temper has caused staffers to delay or shorten their own travels, as well as those of the president, in order to avoid setting him off.³⁸ Most disturbingly, his temper has clearly distorted the selection of information with which his staff provide him, on anything from political analysis to national security. For example, his intelligence briefings have been skewed to avoid presenting him with information that contradicts his public statements, to ensure that he does not get angry.³⁹

The 45th president is also handicapped by a short attention span. Trump biographers have repeatedly stressed this aspect of his behaviour. One warned that Trump ‘doesn’t have the attention span’ to handle the day-to-day rigours of the presidency.⁴⁰ Another said: ‘The reason he gets surprised by these political problems is because he’s not detail-oriented. He has a really short attention span, and he’s profoundly impatient.’⁴¹ Political allies and subordinates have confirmed this trait. Republican Senator Charles Grassley told reporters: ‘I’m not sure if you

³⁴ Space constraints prevent an exploration of other toddler traits, including oppositional behaviour, too much screen time and knowledge deficits. For more on these traits, see Daniel W. Drezner, *The toddler in chief: what Donald Trump teaches us about the modern presidency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

³⁵ All quotes in this paragraph are from Zack Beauchamp, ‘“Toxic on a day-to-day level”: how Trump is mismanaging the White House’, *Vox*, 5 Oct. 2017.

³⁶ Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, Maggie Haberman and Rukmini Callimachi, ‘As tensions with Iran escalated, Trump opted for most extreme measure’, *New York Times*, 4 Jan. 2020.

³⁷ Todd Hall, ‘On provocation: outrage, international relations, and the Franco-Prussian War’, *Security Studies* 26: 1, 2017, pp. 1–29.

³⁸ Josh Dawsey, ‘White House aides lean on delays and distraction to manage Trump’, *Politico*, 9 Oct. 2017; Josh Rogin, ‘Trump to skip key Asia summit in Philippines to go home earlier’, *Washington Post*, 24 Oct. 2017.

³⁹ Greg Miller, Greg Jaffe and Philip Rucker, ‘Doubting the intelligence, Trump pursues Putin and leaves a Russian threat unchecked’, *Washington Post*, 14 Dec. 2017; John Walcott, ‘“Willful ignorance”: inside President Trump’s troubled intelligence briefings’, *Time*, 5 Feb. 2019.

⁴⁰ Barrett, quoted in Kruse, ‘“He was surprised as anyone”’.

⁴¹ Quoted in Toluse Olorunnipa, ‘“It’ll happen fast”: Trump creates problems and then rushes in to solve them’, *Washington Post*, 29 March 2019.

talk to him face to face, he hears everything you say.’⁴² Gary Cohn, Trump’s first chief economic adviser, complained:

It’s pointless to prepare a meaningful, substantive briefing for the president that’s organized, where you have a bunch of slides. Because you know he’s never going to listen. We’re never going to get through it. He’s going to get through the first 10 minutes and then he’s going to want to start talking about some other topic.⁴³

On the global stage, Trump’s inability to sit still and focus damages the standing of the United States in two ways. First, his short attention span means he can miss nuanced shifts in another country’s position on an issue. Second, his restlessness can often lead to violations of diplomatic protocol, which are viewed as a sign of disrespect by other foreign leaders.⁴⁴ The problem is compounded by his knowledge deficits.⁴⁵ Because he lacks basic background information, his policy briefings would, all else being equal, have to be longer than normal, thereby guaranteeing that Trump’s attention will wander before receiving all the necessary information. Furthermore, without an ability to sustain focus, it is easy for bureaucratic actors to delay implementation of an idea to see if the president’s attention shifts elsewhere. Indeed, Trump’s White House staff have repeatedly used delaying tactics in response to direct orders.⁴⁶ A repeated theme of this administration is the president’s desire to do something, followed by staff inaction, followed by a tweet announcing a shift in policy, followed by staff confusion about what to do in response, followed by uncertainty about whether Trump will pursue his line or not. The result is a series of policy announcements that generate poor follow-through and bad implementation.

Trump also suffers from poor impulse control. One biographer, Tim O’Brien, observes that Trump ‘doesn’t regulate his own emotions, he’s not a disciplined thinker.’⁴⁷ Indeed, Trump’s trust in his own instincts and impulses is so strong that it has profoundly shaped how his White House operates. Trump disdains any form of strategic planning. As one of his advisers explained, ‘He gets frustrated when there is a plan. He’s not a guy who likes a plan ... There’s an animosity towards planning, and there’s a desire to pick fights that have nothing to do with us.’⁴⁸ Rex Tillerson, Trump’s first secretary of state, explained the difficulties he encountered in advising the president:

What was challenging for me coming from the disciplined, highly process-oriented ExxonMobil corporation, to go to work for a man who is pretty undisciplined, doesn’t like

⁴² Damian Paletta, Erica Werner and Taylor Telford, ‘GOP senators raise alarms, criticize Trump as US–China trade war heats up’, *Washington Post*, 14 May 2019.

⁴³ Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), p. 271.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, ‘Trump discussed pulling US from NATO, aides say amid new concerns over Russia’, *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 2019.

⁴⁵ On Trump’s knowledge deficits, see Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, *A very stable genius: Donald Trump’s testing of America* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

⁴⁶ Ashley Parker and Greg Jaffe, ‘Inside the “adult day-care center”: how aides try to control and coerce Trump’, *Washington Post*, 16 Oct. 2017; Elaina Plott, ‘Ignoring Trump’s orders, hoping he’ll forget’, *The Atlantic*, 15 May 2019.

⁴⁷ O’Brien, quoted in Kruse, “‘He was surprised as anyone’”.

⁴⁸ Adviser quoted in Jonathan Swan, ‘Trump’s strategic planning inspiration: Mike Tyson’, *Axios*, 16 Jan. 2019.

to read, doesn't read briefing reports, doesn't like to get into the details of a lot of things, but rather just kind of says, "This is what I believe."⁴⁹

Many of Trump's high-profile decisions—withdrawing forces from Syria, launching a trade war with China, threatening to close the border with Mexico—were made impulsively.⁵⁰

The negative effects of poor impulse control on political leadership are clear. Emotional impulses can cloud cost–benefit analyses, a fact that has debilitated even the most successful presidents.⁵¹ Perhaps the most important reason not to act on impulse is that such moves undercut a leader's ability to make credible commitments. In politics and foreign policy, a leader's word matters a great deal. Contrary to folk wisdom, leaders rarely lie in world politics, because they do not want to damage their reputation in international negotiations.⁵² Little wonder, then, that global surveys show that far more people distrust Trump than they do Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping.⁵³ Trump's impulse control has been so poor that foreign diplomats have learned to discount many of his threats. As one Mexican diplomat put it, "He has shown us that what's black at 9 a.m. can be gray at 3 p.m. and white at 7 p.m."⁵⁴

Is Trump a weak president?

The combination of Trump's political inexperience, temper tantrums, poor impulse control and short attention span has impaired his presidency. These psychological traits help to explain why numerous political scientists claim that Trump's policy accomplishments have been meagre compared to those of past presidents.

Despite Republican control over both houses of Congress during the first two years of his presidency, Trump was able during this period to secure the passage of only one significant piece of legislation: the tax bill. He failed in his efforts to get Congress to provide appreciable funding for his border wall with Mexico. Federal bureaucrats resisted the president's ethically dubious orders by using leaks, delays, memos, dissent channels, whistleblowing, official complaints and congressional testimony.⁵⁵ Even on policies where the Trump administration has been perceived as doing something, it has been ineffective.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Aaron Blake, 'Rex Tillerson on Trump: "undisciplined, doesn't like to read" and tries to do illegal things', *Washington Post*, 7 Dec. 2018.

⁵⁰ On Syria, see Peter Baker and Lara Jakes, 'In Syria, Trump distills a foreign policy of impulse, and faces the fallout', *New York Times*, 10 Oct. 2019; on the trade war, see Elaina Plott, 'Trump's two crutches', *Atlantic*, 4 June 2019; on the border, see David Nakamura, Josh Dawsey and Seung Min Kim, 'Twelve days of chaos: inside the Trump White House's growing panic to contain the border crisis', *Washington Post*, 9 April 2019.

⁵¹ Hennessey and Wittes, *Unmaking the presidency*, pp. 243–4.

⁵² Anne Sartori, *Deterrence by diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); John Mearsheimer, *Why leaders lie: the truth about lying in international politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵³ Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Janell Fetterolf and Shannon Schumacher, *Trump ratings remain low around globe, while views of US stay mostly favorable* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 8 Jan. 2020).

⁵⁴ Karen DeYoung and Josh Dawsey, 'For inured foreign officials, the sting of Trump's tweets has begun to dull', *Washington Post*, 30 April 2019.

⁵⁵ Juliet Elperin, Lisa Rein and Marc Fisher, 'Resistance from within: federal workers push back against Trump', *Washington Post*, 31 Jan. 2017; Yoni Appelbaum, 'Memo to Trump: this is why you're losing', *The Atlantic*, 15 June 2017.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Chait, 'Trump has lost his war on the war on coal', *New York*, 18 Feb. 2019.

In foreign affairs, Trump's biggest success has been the defeat of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; but that was achieved only through continuation of a strategy mapped out under the Obama administration. His fitful efforts to withdraw US forces from Syria led to sufficient pushback from the military to allow for a residual force to remain. A US official likened the Defense Department's effort to persuade Trump to keep some US troops in Syria to 'feeding a baby its medicine in yogurt or applesauce'.⁵⁷

Trump has failed to convert US leverage into appreciable gains in either trade deals or arms control agreements. His trade wars have cost the US economy more than the stimulus provided by the 2017 tax cuts and contributed to a manufacturing recession in 2019.⁵⁸ None of his administration's 'maximum pressure' campaigns have yielded any concessions.⁵⁹ His hard-line policies on immigration have not stemmed the tide of Central American families crossing the southern border to seek asylum. His one truly disruptive initiative, a series of summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, has produced more symbolism than security.

Trump has also failed to persuade the American people of the rightness of his policies. Despite a crescendo in rhetoric from the administration about the threat posed by unchecked immigration, in 2018 Gallup found a record-high 75 per cent of Americans believing immigration to be a good thing for the United States.⁶⁰ The following year, despite the president's protectionist rhetoric, Gallup found public support for free trade at 74 per cent, the highest level in the past 25 years.⁶¹ Polling on Trump's most high-profile policy moves confirms their unpopularity. Either pluralities or majorities oppose the tariffs that were implemented in 2018. Majorities disagree with Trump's tweeted claim that 'trade wars are good, and easy to win'.⁶² CNN found that Americans preferred by 63 per cent to 25 per cent maintaining good relations with allies to imposing tariffs. Nearly two-thirds of Americans—65 per cent—believed that other world leaders did not respect Trump.⁶³ If Neustadt is correct in his view that the chief power of the presidency is the ability to persuade, then Donald Trump has been a weak, ineffectual president.⁶⁴

An ongoing theme as his presidency has progressed is that fewer people fear him on social media. In March 2019 the *New York Times* reported that US-based companies had learned that Trump's threats were empty: 'The president's scatter-shot attention span has diminished his power to persuade the business world to

⁵⁷ Karen DeYoung, Dan Lamothe, Missy Ryan and Michael Birnbaum, 'Trump decided to leave troops in Syria after conversations about oil, officials say', *Washington Post*, 25 Oct. 2019.

⁵⁸ Mary Amity, Stephen Redding and David Weinstein, *The impact of the 2018 trade war on US prices and welfare*, working paper no. 25672 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2019); Erica York, *Tracking the economic impact of Trump's trade war* (Washington DC: Tax Foundation, 16 Dec. 2019).

⁵⁹ Daniel W. Drezner, 'Economic statecraft in the age of Trump', *Washington Quarterly* 42: 3, 2019, pp. 7–24.

⁶⁰ Megan Brennan, *Record-high 75% of Americans say immigration is good thing* (Washington DC: Gallup, 21 June 2018), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/235793/record-high-americans-say-immigration-good-thing.aspx>.

⁶¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, *Slim majority in US see trade as benefiting American workers* (Washington DC: Gallup, 21 March 2019), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247970/slim-majority-trade-benefitting-workers.aspx>.

⁶² <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/969525362580484098>.

⁶³ The CNN poll results can be accessed at <http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2018/images/06/20/tel6e-.economy,.trade.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Neustadt, *Presidential power*.

bend to his will ... once fearsome tweet storms have devolved into ephemeral annoyances.⁶⁵ Foreign diplomats have had the same reaction to Trump's threatening tweets; the best thing to do is ignore them because they do not amount to much.⁶⁶

All of this is consistent with the perception that Trump possesses specific psychological traits that impair his presidency. The president's poor impulse control and temper tantrums render him incapable of credibly committing to any bargaining position; and this, in turn, has hampered his ability to negotiate with everyone, from Angela Merkel to the Taliban.⁶⁷ Threats of coercion are only effective if they are credible. Deals to settle disputes are unobtainable unless the president of the United States can follow through on pledges. Because other actors perceive Trump as possessing the constancy of a toddler, they see correspondingly less need to comply with his dictates.

Trump's cognitive constraints intersect the institutional constraints that all modern US presidents have faced. A constellation of formal institutions, informal institutions, laws and social norms have accumulated to function as a straitjacket on any holder of the office. The constitution explicitly gave the president very few unilateral powers and endowed the congressional and judicial branches with considerable abilities to check presidential overreach.⁶⁸ Scholars of American political development stress the erosion of patronage power and the rise of civil service protections as additional checks on presidential caprice.⁶⁹ Beyond black-letter constitutional law and statutory restrictions, a welter of norms have emerged to restrict the power of the presidency. Presidents have long been expected to behave in accordance with unspoken standards and customs. Some political scientists describe these practices as 'informal institutions': unwritten but socially shared rules that are created, communicated and enforced outside legal frameworks and official channels.⁷⁰ The combination of legal restrictions, bureaucratic autonomy and informal institutions explains why Barack Obama said immediately after the 2016 election: 'One of the things you discover about being president is that there are all these rules and norms and laws and you've got to pay attention to them. And the people who work for you are also subject to those rules and norms.'⁷¹

It is because of the accumulation of all these constraints that so many political scholars have argued that the presidency is a fundamentally weak institution. As noted above, Richard Neustadt argued that the president's chief power was the

⁶⁵ Alan Rappeport, 'How companies learned to stop fearing Trump's Twitter wrath', *New York Times*, 20 March 2019.

⁶⁶ DeYoung and Dawsey, 'For inured foreign officials'.

⁶⁷ Wesley Morgan, 'How Trump trips up his own Afghan peace efforts', *Politico*, 16 Aug. 2019.

⁶⁸ Josh Chafetz, *Congress's constitution: legislative authority and the separation of powers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹ Daniel Carpenter, *The forging of bureaucratic autonomy: reputations, networks, and policy innovation in executive agencies, 1862–1928* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, 'Pathways to the present: political development in America', in Brian Glenn and Steven Teles, eds, *The Oxford handbook of American political development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 27–47; Philip Rocco, 'The anti-analytic presidency revisited', *The Forum* 15: 2, July 2017, pp. 5–52.

⁷⁰ Julia Azari and Jennifer Smith, 'Unwritten rules: informal institutions in established democracies', *Perspectives on Politics* 10: 1, 2012, pp. 37–55.

⁷¹ Quoted in Appelbaum, 'Memo to Trump'.

ability to persuade other actors to act in accordance with presidential preferences. Without the ability to persuade, Neustadt concluded, the president's powers were feeble: 'In form all Presidents are leaders nowadays. In fact this guarantees no more than that they will be clerks.'⁷² Successive generations of scholars have echoed this point. William Howell and Terry Moe, for example, argued in 2016 that 'the Constitution sees to it—purposely, by design—that [presidents] are significantly limited in the formal powers they wield and heavily constrained by the checks and balances formally imposed by the other branches.'⁷³

The imperial presidency in the twenty-first century

Trump's individual psychology has undeniably hampered his ability to achieve policy goals, compared to past presidents. At the same time, the Trump presidency has also revealed the empowered nature of the office. Over the past century and more, the White House has amassed an increasing array of formal and informal powers, and Trump has been the beneficiary of these prerogatives. As the head of the executive branch, the president has at his disposal several ways of acting without consulting the other branches of government. These include executive orders, executive agreements, presidential proclamations, presidential memoranda, signed statements and national security directives.⁷⁴ As American history has unfolded, presidents have availed themselves of these forms of direct action at an accelerating rate. William Howell concludes: 'The president's powers of unilateral action exert just as much influence over public policy, and in some cases more, than the formal powers that presidency scholars have examined so carefully.'⁷⁵

Another reason for the erosion of constitutional checks and balances is that the other branches of government have voluntarily ceded authority to the executive branch. This has been most evident in foreign relations. Indeed, this was the wellspring of Arthur Schlesinger's concerns about an 'imperial presidency': 'Confronted by presidential initiatives in foreign affairs, Congress and the courts, along with the press and the citizenry, often lack confidence in their own information and judgement and are likely to be intimidated by executive authority.'⁷⁶ Congress has not formally declared war since 1942; but that has not stopped presidents from using military force dozens of times since then. Presidents have relied on the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force passed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to authorize the use of force in Somalia, Syria and Yemen; Trump used it to kill Soleimani. The vast system of alliances has further empowered the president to deploy military forces without consulting Congress.⁷⁷ Congress has demonstrated

⁷² Neustadt, *Presidential power*, p. 7.

⁷³ William Howell and Terry Moe, *Relic* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), p. xvii.

⁷⁴ Philip J. Cooper, *By order of the president: the use and abuse of executive direct action* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 2. See also William Howell, *Power without persuasion: the politics of direct presidential action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁷⁵ Howell, *Power without persuasion*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Schlesinger, *The imperial presidency*, p. x.

⁷⁷ Mira Rapp-Hooper and Mathew Waxman, 'Presidential alliance powers', *Washington Quarterly* 42: 2, 2019, pp. 67–83.

neither the will nor the capacity to claw back those powers.⁷⁸ Similarly, after passing the disastrous 1930 Smoot–Hawley tariff that helped to trigger the Great Depression, Congress decided it could not responsibly execute its constitutional responsibilities on trade.⁷⁹ Over the ensuing decades, it delegated many of those powers to the president. Polarization has further debilitated congressional power. Political scientists have found that presidents are both more able and more likely to act unilaterally when the legislative branch is paralysed by party division.⁸⁰

Foreign policy is the arena in which the powers of the other branches of government have receded the most. President Trump has used his authority to withdraw from a panoply of international treaties ranging from the Trans-Pacific Partnership to the Iranian nuclear deal to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty. On trade, he has used his legal prerogatives to impose significant tariffs on a wide range of allies and adversaries. His administration imposed a travel ban on entry to the United States from several Muslim-majority countries, an action that has advanced neither American interests nor American values. His administration has overhauled a plethora of immigration policies to make them more restrictive,⁸¹ with effects including the separation of migrant families seeking asylum in the United States. He declared a ban on transgender people serving in the military. In each of these cases, Congress has been unable to restrain the president, and the Supreme Court has eventually sided with the Trump administration.

Ironically, before he was president, Trump repeatedly criticized Obama for executive branch overreach; and yet each year he has been in office, Trump has issued more executive orders than Obama.⁸² He is also enamoured of declaring states of emergency because these afford him greater power.⁸³ For example, he used his declaration of a state of emergency along the southern border to justify an unprecedented reallocation of Defense Department funds to pay for construction of a wall after Congress refused to fund it.

Trump has resisted congressional oversight on every level, repeatedly ordering executive agencies to rebuff valid legislative requests for documents and testimony.⁸⁴ Congress has responded by taking Trump to court, but the judiciary has proved to be a weak constraint on a presidency making full use of its powers. The courts demonstrated considerable deference to the executive branch long before Trump came on the political scene. In part, this is a matter of preserving

⁷⁸ On this point, see James Goldgeier and Elizabeth Saunders, 'The unconstrained presidency', *Foreign Affairs* 97: 5, 2018, pp. 144–56.

⁷⁹ See Douglas Irwin, *Clashing over commerce: a history of US trade policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), ch. 9.

⁸⁰ Andrew Rudalevige, *The new imperial presidency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 15. See also Howell, *Power without persuasion*, pp. 176–7.

⁸¹ Perry Bacon, Jr, 'Trump hasn't needed the wall to remake US immigration policy', *FiveThirtyEight*, 6 Dec. 2018.

⁸² Kevin Freking, 'Trump outstripping Obama on pace of executive orders', Associated Press, 19 Oct. 2019.

⁸³ Elizabeth Goitein, 'The alarming scope of the president's emergency powers', *The Atlantic*, Jan.–Feb. 2019.

⁸⁴ Burgess Everett and Josh Dawsey, 'White House orders agencies to ignore Democrats' oversight requests', *Politico*, 2 June 2017; Tom Hamburger, Karoun Demirjian, Josh Dawsey and Rachael Bade, 'Trump moves to resist House inquiries, setting up fight over congressional subpoena powers', *Washington Post*, 16 April 2019; Charlie Savage, 'Trump vows stonewall of "all" House subpoenas, setting up fight over powers', *New York Times*, 24 April 2019.

their perceived power. Judges have no enforcement capabilities, relying on the executive branch. They are therefore understandably reluctant to referee disputes between the congressional and executive branches. They have developed legal rationales, such as the political questions doctrine, to avoid hearing challenges to the president. Analyses of judicial rulings on questions of executive branch overreach reveal that the courts have largely refrained from directly confronting the president; when they do rule on challenges to presidential power, they side with the president more than 80 per cent of the time.⁸⁵ Furthermore, even when federal courts have ruled against the president, they have done so in as narrow a manner as possible. The result has been that the president has amassed significant levers of power subject to fewer checks and balances than Americans commonly realize.

In these efforts at resisting congressional and judicial constraints, Trump has been aided by conservative lawyers advancing a particularly strong version of unitary executive theory. This theory argues that the legislative and judicial branches should not interfere with presidential actions within the executive branch. In a speech of November 2019 to the Federalist Society, Attorney General William Barr asserted executive branch dominance in foreign affairs despite explicit provisions conferring powers over war and trade to Congress, claiming: 'The Constitution generally vested authority over [foreign affairs] in the Executive.'⁸⁶

A similar story can be told with respect to executive branch constraints on the presidency. The autonomy of the federal bureaucracy was under assault well before the Toddler-in-Chief was inaugurated. Beginning with the Nixon administration, successive presidents learned how to shape the permanent bureaucracy in accordance with their policy preferences.⁸⁷ One month into the Trump administration, White House adviser Steve Bannon proclaimed a daily war aimed at the 'deconstruction of the administrative state'.⁸⁸

The State Department is the cabinet agency that has suffered the most from this destruction. The attacks on the foreign service have been unrelenting. In the first week of the Trump administration, the 'Muslim travel ban' triggered a State Department dissent channel memo that garnered more than 1,000 signatures. The dissent channel was established precisely to protect diplomats who were making an argument contrary to existing US foreign policy. Nonetheless, in response, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer said: 'These career bureaucrats have a problem with it? I think they should either get with the program or they can go.'⁸⁹ The White House quickly forced several senior career ambassadors out of their

⁸⁵ Howell, *Power without persuasion*, ch. 6.

⁸⁶ The full text of Barr's speech can be accessed at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-william-p-barr-delivers-19th-annual-barbara-k-olson-memorial-lecture>.

⁸⁷ Ronald Randall, 'Presidential power versus bureaucratic intransigence: the influence of the Nixon administration on welfare policy', *American Political Science Review* 73: 3, 1979, pp. 795–810; Andrew Nathan, *The administrative presidency* (New York: Wiley, 1983); Andrew Rudalevige, 'Bureaucratic control and the future of presidential power', *White House Studies* 10: 2, 2010, pp. 51–68; Gary Hollibaugh, Gabriel Horton and David Lewis, 'Presidents and patronage', *American Journal of Political Science* 58: 4, 2014, pp. 1024–42.

⁸⁸ Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, 'Bannon vows a daily fight for "deconstruction of the administrative state"', *Washington Post*, 23 Feb. 2017.

⁸⁹ Nahal Toosi, 'White House slap at dissenting diplomats sparks fear of reprisal', *Politico*, 30 Jan. 2017.

positions, a move labelled the ‘Mahogany Row massacre’.⁹⁰ One diplomat was told that a Trump appointee would oppose any foreign service officers applying for leadership positions unless they passed the ‘Breitbart test’, referring to the online outlet that espouses populist nationalism.⁹¹ Another diplomat was fired just for mentioning President Obama in a speech.⁹² The State Department’s inspector general concluded that political appointees took punitive actions towards diplomats deemed insufficiently loyal to Trump.⁹³ These attacks have eroded the influence of career professionals and triggered an exodus of senior personnel.⁹⁴ However, when asked in the autumn of 2017 about the dearth of State Department officials, Trump replied: ‘Let me tell you, the one that matters is me. I’m the only one that matters, because when it comes to it, that’s what the policy is going to be.’⁹⁵

For all the claims made in 2017 that the ‘adults in the room’ would rein in Trump’s more capricious policy moves, his staff no longer serve as a significant constraint on the president. Instead, they are enablers, reverse engineering policies and providing justifications for Trump’s worst impulses. Trump’s acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney rationalized a White House advance staffer’s request to keep the USS *John McCain* hidden from Trump’s view during a May 2019 visit to Japan as ‘not an unreasonable ask’, given how Trump ‘feels’ about McCain.⁹⁶ Over time, Trump’s staffers and supporters have subtly shifted their defence of the president. In his first year in office, they would note that he was an unorthodox president learning on the job. Now they merely say that he is an unorthodox president. A year after the notorious op-ed claiming that adult staffers could restrain Trump, that same official acknowledged: ‘Americans should not take comfort in knowing whether there are so-called adults in the room. We are not bulwarks against the president and shouldn’t be counted upon to keep him in check.’⁹⁷

Not only are the formal guardrails weakened; so are the more informal ones. Longstanding norms designed to regulate political behaviour have faded. Even before Trump, rising levels of partisanship had permitted politicians on both sides of the party divide to raise the level of vitriol expressed towards the opposing party. Trump’s very election eviscerated many of the norms of political behaviour. He shot to prominence in far-right Republican circles, after all, by questioning whether Barack Obama was born in the United States.

⁹⁰ Ronan Farrow, *War on peace: the end of diplomacy and the decline of American influence* (New York: Norton, 2018), p. ix.

⁹¹ Ursa Zeya, ‘Trump is making American diplomacy white again’, *Politico*, 17 Sept. 2018.

⁹² Julia Ioffe, ‘Trump is waging war on America’s diplomats’, *GQ*, 3 Dec. 2019.

⁹³ US Department of State, Office of the Inspector General, *Review of allegations of politicized and other improper personnel practices in the Bureau of International Organization Affairs*, ESP-19-05 (Washington DC, Aug. 2019), and *Review of allegations of politicized and other improper personnel practices involving the office of the secretary*, ESP-20-01 (Washington DC, Nov. 2019).

⁹⁴ Ioffe, ‘Trump is waging war on America’s diplomats’; Daniel W. Drezner, ‘Present at the destruction: the Trump administration and the foreign policy bureaucracy’, *Journal of Politics* 81: 2, 2019, pp. 723–30.

⁹⁵ Elliot Hannon, ‘Trump on core State Department vacancies: “I’m the only one that matters”’, *Slate*, 3 Nov. 2017.

⁹⁶ Rebecca Klar, ‘Mulvaney: attempt to move USS *John McCain* during Trump visit “not unreasonable”’, *The Hill*, 2 June 2019.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, *A warning* (New York: Twelve, 2019), p. 50.

As president, he has been unconstrained by the traditional norms of the presidency. On his first full day in office, Trump delivered what amounted to a campaign speech at CIA headquarters, a clear breach of protocol. In his first week he issued an executive order codifying the travel ban without consulting any of the relevant cabinet departments. He fired James Comey despite a tradition of FBI directors staying on from one administration to the next. He fired his first chief of staff and secretary of state via Twitter. The formal press conference and daily White House briefings have been effectively discontinued; daily briefings at the Pentagon and the State Department have also been curtailed. Trump's use of presidential pardons has deviated widely from past practice. In particular, he has repeatedly intervened in the military justice system to pardon convicted war criminals despite opposition from Pentagon officials. His withdrawal of the United States from multiple international agreements is perfectly legal, but departs significantly from past diplomatic practice.

A president's agenda-setting power comes as much from rhetoric as from executive action, wielded by boosting preferred issues to the head of the political queue.⁹⁸ President Trump's ability to set the political agenda has not waned; indeed, he has succeeded in dominating the conversation since he was inaugurated more than any of his predecessors. He has declared the entire mainstream media to be the 'enemy of the people' and labelled his political opponents as 'treasonous' on multiple occasions. Terms like 'deep state' and 'fake news' are not only common political parlance in the United States; these terms have gone global as well. Trump dissembles so frequently about so many things that Americans have become inured to his false claims. As the political theorist Jacob T. Levy observes, 'Trump's speech, his especially outrageous and transparent lies, are words that have shaped the world: demonstrations of power, attempts to undermine the existence of shared belief in truth and facts'.⁹⁹

The nature of Trump's discourse—divisive, angry, infantile—has exacerbated pre-existing divisions within the United States.¹⁰⁰ As Peter Baker concludes, 'the old-fashioned idea that a president, once reaching office, should at least pretend to be the leader of all the people these days seems so, well, old-fashioned. Mr Trump does not bother with the pretense. He is speaking to his people, not the people.'¹⁰¹ Trump's rhetoric has not only eviscerated existing norms about political discourse, it has salted the earth.¹⁰²

In this one area, Trump's psychology has enabled him to go further than his predecessors to undermine informal institutions. Indeed, as Ezra Klein pointed out during the 2016 campaign, Trump's lack of shame was a political asset: 'He has the reality television star's ability to operate entirely without shame, and that

⁹⁸ This is akin to the 'second face of power': see Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, 'Two faces of power', *American Political Science Review* 56: 4, 1962, pp. 947–52.

⁹⁹ Jacob T. Levy, *The weight of the words* (Washington DC: Niskanen Center, 7 Feb. 2018), <https://niskanencenter.org/blog/the-weight-of-the-words/>.

¹⁰⁰ Ezra Klein, 'Trump is winning', *Vox*, 29 Jan. 2018.

¹⁰¹ Peter Baker, 'A president of the people or a president of his people?', *New York Times*, 16 April 2019.

¹⁰² Carla Norrlof, 'Hegemony and inequality: Trump and the liberal playbook', *International Affairs* 94: 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 63–89.

permits him to operate entirely without restraint ... [It] allows him to go where others won't, to say what others can't, to do what others wouldn't.¹⁰³ Justin Amash, once a Republican, now an independent representative, echoed that sentiment after Trump was inaugurated: 'Most people feel shame when they do or say something wrong, especially when it's so public. The president feels comfortable saying two things that are completely contradictory in one sentence ... It gives him this superpower that other people don't have.'¹⁰⁴ In other words, Trump's toddler-like psychological traits have enabled him to act in a more unconstrained manner than more mature leaders.

The institutional legacy of Donald Trump

Prior moments of the imperial presidency—the Civil War, Watergate—have triggered blowback that restored congressional power. Proponents of the persuasive presidency hypothesis may suggest that this could happen in reaction to Trump; indeed, since the 2018 midterm elections the House of Representatives has attempted to ratchet up oversight. Trump's successor might attempt to restore the guardrails.

Such a perspective underestimates the continuing and lasting damage Trump's presidency may wreak on the United States. For one thing, Trump has paid a small political price for his transgressions because he maintains the devoted support of partisan Republicans. In a polarized age, Donald Trump's immaturity has barely affected his standing within his party; indeed, his style of temper tantrums and unchecked impulses is now embraced by Republicans as 'unorthodox'. He has consistently polled close to 90 per cent approval among Republican voters. One survey in March 2019 revealed that 78 per cent of Fox News viewers believed that Trump has been the most successful president in American history.¹⁰⁵ The midterm elections forced out many of the moderate Republican members of Congress, such as Mark Sanford, who were willing to speak out against him. Others, such as Bob Corker and Jeff Flake, declined to run again. Trump can count on party loyalists in Congress to block measures that would constrain or reverse presidential overreach.

The other pillars of Republican power have fallen in line behind Trump. Self-proclaimed 'institutionalists' such as Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell went along with Trump's decision in March 2019 to declare a state of emergency at the southern border, even though that move undercut the authority of the legislative branch. As Tim Alberta concluded, 'if the first year of Donald Trump's term witnessed a president adapting to the philosophies of his party, the second year saw a party bending to the will, and the whims, of its president'.¹⁰⁶ As long as he is president, the Republican Party is Trump's party. Even though he has been impeached, the party-line vote in the House will enable Trump to continue to act without constraint with little fear of political retribution.

¹⁰³ Ezra Klein, 'The rise of Donald Trump is a terrifying moment in American politics', *Vox*, 10 Feb. 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Alberta, *American carnage*, p. 505.

¹⁰⁵ Maxwell Tani, 'Poll: 78% of GOP Fox News viewers say Trump is best president ever', *The Daily Beast*, 21 March 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Alberta, *American carnage*, p. 495.

The other lasting scar will be the carnage wrought in American foreign policy. At the end of his first year in office, Susan Glasser noted: ‘Seasoned diplomats who have seen Trump up close throw around words like “catastrophic,” “terrifying,” “incompetent” and “dangerous.”’ She continued: ‘I listened to a group of sober policy wonks debate whether Trump was merely a “laughingstock” or something more dangerous. Virtually all of those from whom I’ve heard this kind of ranting are leaders from close allies and partners of the United States.’¹⁰⁷ Henry Kissinger, who had praised Trump immediately after the 2016 election, was scathing in his assessment less than three years later:

The entire foreign policy is based on a single unstable individual’s reaction to perceptions of slights or flattery. If someone says something nice about him, they are our friend; if they say something unkind, if they don’t kiss the ring, they are our enemy.¹⁰⁸

Key US allies are now questioning the viability of longstanding alliances such as NATO. Polling data show that whatever soft power the United States possessed has dissipated under Trump.¹⁰⁹ It is unsurprising that the UN General Assembly laughed at Trump’s suggestion in 2018 that his administration had accomplished more than that of almost any prior US president.

Trump’s damage to America’s standing in the world will last longer than is commonly appreciated. Presidents execute more and more policies through executive action alone. Presidents can countermand or abrogate pre-existing executive agreements. Party polarization has eroded the notion that politicians need to govern from the centre.¹¹⁰ The alternation of presidents from the extremes of the American political spectrum will give each incumbent an incentive to reverse his or her predecessor’s policies. Grand strategy could follow the pattern of the ‘Mexico City’ policy, in which Republican and Democratic presidents flip-flop rules governing support for foreign family planning NGOs on party lines. The combination of worn-down guardrails and presidents emerging from the extremes of the political spectrum could fling US foreign policy between ultra-conservative and ultra-liberal approaches. In such a political climate, the credibility of US commitments ceases to matter. Sustainable grand strategy becomes impossible.¹¹¹

Trump’s presidency helps to explain the debate among American politics scholars about the relative power of the office. His inability to get much done through traditional means bolsters Neustadt’s argument that the presidency is a weak institution that relies primarily on persuasion. On the other hand, Trump’s foreign policy tantrums, power grabs, destruction of government organizations, evisceration of political norms and cowing of the Republican Party establishment illuminate the awesome scope of the modern president’s powers.

¹⁰⁷ Susan Glasser, ‘Donald Trump’s year of living dangerously’, *Politico*, Jan.–Feb. 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Michael Wolff, *Trump under fire* (New York: Holt, 2019), p. 253.

¹⁰⁹ Daniel W. Drezner, ‘The world hates President Trump’, *Washington Post*, 22 Jan. 2018. See also Wike, Poushter, Fetterolf and Schumacher, *Trump ratings remain low around globe*.

¹¹⁰ Stephen M. Utych, ‘Man bites blue dog: are moderates really more electable than ideologues?’, *Journal of Politics* 82: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 392–6.

¹¹¹ Daniel W. Drezner, ‘This time is different’, *Foreign Affairs* 98: 3, 2019, pp. 10–17.

For decades, political architects in both major parties had worked at building the presidency into the most powerful position in the world. As polarization gripped Congress, the president was viewed as the last adult in the room. And then someone with the emotional maturity of a small child was elected to that office. Each of the guardrails checking presidential power had eroded before Trump was elected president. Under the 45th president, they have almost completely disappeared. As president, Donald Trump has acted like many toddlers: he is bad at building structures, but fantastic at making a complete mess of existing ones.