News



An Afghan soldier stands guard on a roadside in Ghazni, Afghanistan, April 22. (CNS/EPA/Ghulam Mustafa)



by Michael Sean Winters

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It is well-nigh impossible to connect the many, often conflicting, promises candidate Donald Trump made with any feasible policy approach to Afghanistan (or much else). Still, there was a dominant theme to his campaign: "America First!" The phrase, resonant of the American Nazi movement of the 1930s, expressed a mood and an unsophisticated worldview, both of which are problematic as the nation continues the never-ending task of assessing its role in the world.

Moods shape this president as they did few of his predecessors. It is all id all the time now. The original decision to go to war in Afghanistan also sprang from a primal urge, the desire to avenge the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. That primal urge was joined to two less ignoble but strategically fraught objectives: to bring the perpetrators of the attacks to justice and to minimize the risk of future attacks. But the country was calling for blood.

It would have been worse than useless in the wake of those attacks to point to the historical fact that two great empires, the British and the Soviet, had come to grief in the mountains of Afghanistan. We were the sole superpower, possessed of previously unimaginable military might and we were taking on an enemy who lived in caves. It was the 21st century versus the 14th.

As we now know, the 14th was more resilient than anticipated. Additionally, the United States faces fanatics in Afghanistan, and while democracies tire of war, fanatics live for it.

There are no good options in Afghanistan. Perhaps Trump's decision to send a few more troops to bolster the Afghan security forces will bring greater stability to that country. Perhaps not. The American people can be forgiven for wanting to bring all of our troops home, but imagine the outcry if, having abandoned Afghanistan to its fate, it becomes again a safe haven for terrorists capable of striking U.S. civilians in New York and not just U.S. troops in Kabul.

During the campaign, the America First theme was accompanied by a frequent counterpoint theme: America needed to spend less time in other parts of the world rebuilding those countries and more time rebuilding the industrial Midwest. Isolationism has a long and regrettable history in American politics. In this age of intercontinental missiles, transnational terrorism and cyber warfare, isolationism is

exposed as a delusion in ways it could not have been before, but it was always an unsophisticated worldview. Sophistication does not inoculate against all difficulties, but it takes care of quite a few.



President Donald Trump and Gen. Joseph Votel meet with service members at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida in February. (Department of Defense/D. Myles Cullen)

The fact that the campaign themes were crass does not mean they have stopped exerting a fascination on the mind of our president. Were virtually any other American sitting in the Oval Office, I would be more inclined to question the decision to follow the advice of the generals. In this instance, however, I suspect the generals' advice was preferable to any other conceivable decision-making process that might have emerged from Trump and his team.

It is a cold comfort, but a comfort nonetheless, that the president does not seem to have been motivated by political calculations. In an article at Breitbart, published before the speech, a headline stated the connection between Trump's campaign and

his current decision in no uncertain terms: "America First? With Steve Bannon out, globalists push for more war abroad."

Presumably, Bannon himself approved that headline after cleaning out his West Wing office last Friday and returning to Breitbart. The keeper of the flame of the president's base was putting the president on notice.

In a normal presidency, we would expect a president to sometimes take an unpopular stance because, having weighed the evidence, considered the policy options, and consulted with allies and experts, he or she feels that a particular course of action, though unpopular, is in the nation's interest. This is not a normal presidency.

The president's speech will ease his current tensions with Republican leaders on Capitol Hill. His restless base is unlikely to jettison its support for him: If his derisive comments about Sen. John McCain during the campaign, if the audiotape of him speaking in the most vulgar terms imaginable about his sexual conquests, if his equating neo-Nazis with those who protested neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, if none of these cost him support from his base, I doubt this latest decision will. It is shocking how many times most of us have thought, "Surely, this time he has gone too far," only to see him still standing in a day or a week. As he once suggested, he could shoot someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and it wouldn't cost him a vote. He is, to his base, covered in Teflon.

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The rest of the world is not his base. The rest of the world does not see Teflon when they look at Trump. We see incompetence, pettiness, ignorance, hubris. In that context, the decision announced Monday night is not dreadful. It would have been worse had he simply said, "To hell with it. America First. We are getting out of there."

I suspect he knows that should he refuse the advice of his generals, the political cost would be enormous and swift, even among those people who have the constitutional right to strip him of power, his own Cabinet.

It is not a comforting thought that our nation's proud tradition of civilian control of the military is, in this presidency, more dangerous than the reverse. As a nation, we

can be proud that John Adams reined in Alexander Hamilton, that Abraham Lincoln fired George McClellan and Harry Truman fired Douglas MacArthur, that John Kennedy ignored his generals when they wanted to invade Cuba.

But stop right there. Adams, Lincoln, Truman, Kennedy and Trump. Which one is not like the others? All of us can breathe a sigh of relief that Trump deferred to his generals, even if this particular decision turns out badly. Think North Korea.

The generals won. The Bannonites lost. The prospect of continued war in Afghanistan is grim indeed. Yet watching the president read his words off the teleprompter, I took comfort in the fact that those words were crafted for him.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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