Opinion

News



U.S. President Donald Trump arrives for a news conference Aug. 26, 2019, at the end of the G-7 summit of industrialized nations in Biarritz, France. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



by Michael Sean Winters

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As I was watching this year's G-7 summit in Biarritz, France, it was impossible not to wonder about the long-term damage President Donald Trump is doing to U.S. interests. His fetish for making nice with dictators like Russian President Vladimir Putin while dissing trusted democratic allies like those gathered in the south of France has undone decades of work by diplomats and presidents of both parties. How much of the damage can be repaired if the American people, in their wisdom, hurl him from office next year?

At the Biarritz summit, world leaders tried to gently register their complaints about Trump's erratic and disruptive policies without getting the president angry. "Even Trump favorites like Boris Johnson, the populist new prime minister of Britain, tread carefully," The New York Times reported. "On Sunday, Mr. Johnson expressed qualms about Mr. Trump's trade war with China, but appeared to take pains not to offend the easily offended president."

The role of personality in the conduct of foreign affairs is not new. Franklin Roosevelt mistakenly thought his ability to charm Joseph Stalin would prod the Soviet dictator into allowing free elections in Poland and other eastern European countries being liberated by the Red Army. Jimmy Carter's personal integrity and tireless patience helped forge a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Never have we had a president whose emotional neediness was so evident as with Trump, nor one whose knowledge of complicated issues was so limited. Our next president, whoever that is, will be the object of worldwide relief, a deliverer from the madness, and she will be able to convert some of that goodwill into restoring our historic alliances.

Other consequences of Trump's — what to call it? It is not policy. Let's say some of the consequences of his diplomatic petulance will outlast his presidency.

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The president's knack for perpetual disruption undermines the kind of confidence businesspeople and investors seek before making long-term decisions. "In private, auto executives say that, for now, the uncertainty is a greater concern than the potential material impact of the tariffs," reported The Times in a recent article about the president's on-again, off-again trade war. "One auto executive who spoke on the condition of anonymity said the industry was more worried that it cannot predict what might happen next or how bad it might get."

The silver lining here is that if Trump is hovering around a 40 percent approval rating with a strong economy, what will happen to his approval rating if the economy stalls or worse? None of us can wish for a weak economy because real people at the margins get hurt the most. But I think we can, with a clean conscience, voice the hope that if there must be an economic correction, six months out from the election would be a good time to have it.

Trump's trade war with China is hitting the agriculture sector hard, soybean farmers in North Dakota very hard, and some of the damage is his own doing, not the painful consequences of a necessary struggle with an economic competitor. He bragged last spring that he was close to a deal with China, and soybean farmers planted their crops. The talks collapsed, and so did the price of soybeans. Chinese buyers have switched to Brazilian suppliers, and it will be difficult for U.S. farmers to get back in that market even if the trade war is resolved. Even Trump's own Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue admitted earlier this summer that U.S. farmers were "casualties" in Trump's trade war. It is important that the U.S confront Chinese trade policies, but if you do it in concert with our allies, you have a better chance at success.

On the most pressing issue facing the world, Trump's four-year term represents four years lost in the fight against catastrophic climate change, four years we can never get back. When asked about climate change at this weekend's G-7 summit, Trump announced, "I think I know more about the environment than most people." He listed a host of fossil fuel projects he has undertaken, including drilling in the Arctic. He said he wants clean air and water. He confused doing an environmental impact statement for a prospective golf course with knowledge about climate change. Unsurprisingly, the president said nothing about the fires raging in the Amazon.

As I write, a fossil fuel power grid, enormously inefficient and susceptible to damage from another hurricane, is being rebuilt in Puerto Rico. The island gets about one percent of its electricity from renewable sources despite having ample wind and solar resources. The money spent rebuilding the archaic grid is gone forever.

Foreign powers may be relieved if Trump loses next year's election, but they will never forget that enough American voters gave him a shot in the first place. The worldwide sense of the U.S. as the most stable, reliable ally, let alone "the leader of the free world," will not be restored as easily as it was ruined. The damage this reckless narcissist of a president will have accomplished by this time next year is impossible to foretell. It is anyone's guess if his departure from public office will be in time to repair the damage, not only to the nation but to the planet.

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

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