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USA

Impeachment and Imperialism

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Donald Trump is the first modern politician who's used the U.S. presidency "as everyone knows, since the liberal media, punditry and presidential historians repeat it on a daily basis" to brazenly solicit a foreign regime's intervention for his personal benefit in electoral politics. It's a damning indictment of the "big twit" in the White House. It also happens to be false. The notorious precedents aren't even secret anymore: Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, in their election campaigns, pulled the kind of tricks that Trump did with Russia in 2016.

During the 1968 campaign, Nixon reached out to the government of South Vietnam to ensure that outgoing president Lyndon Johnson's attempts at a last-ditch peace agreement would fail. Known as "the Chennault affair" for the rightwing operative Anna Chennault who carried it out, the full story is told by John A. Farrell [\[1\]](#). Indeed Nixon won that election, and the war would last another seven years, inflicting even more death and devastation on Vietnam than between 1962 (when John F. Kennedy began the secret bombing of South Vietnam) and the upheaval of 1968.

Fast forward: Reagan's 1980 campaign contacted the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran to ensure that U.S. diplomats held hostage in Iran would not be released until Jimmy Carter's presidency was done. As if hiding in plain sight, the story is laid out by Kai Bird [\[2\]](#).

Indeed, in a theatrical gesture the hostages in Iran were released on the day of Reagan's 1981 inauguration. Shortly thereafter Reagan's operative William Casey, installed as CIA director, authorized Israel to sell military equipment to Iran "a forerunner of the "Iran -Contra" clandestine sale of U.S. weapons to Iran, with the proceeds secretly allocated to fund the murderous contra war against Nicaragua.

It's difficult to overstate how the consequences have shaped today's chaos in the world, and in U.S. politics. The Reagan presidency was the era when the United States supported both Saddam Hussein in Iraq's invasion of Iran, and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda movement in the U.S. proxy conflict with the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The ultimate results have been the virtual destruction of Afghanistan, and later George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq with all the ruinous events that have followed.

And not only that "the counterrevolutionary U.S.-backed Central American genocidal wars of the 1980s, along with "free trade" that destroyed much of Mexican and Central American agriculture and the insane bipartisan U.S. "war on drugs," directly brought about the hemorrhaging of those societies and the desperate flight of so many people toward the United States. That's the direct background of today's crisis and the unspeakable brutality of the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers at the border.

What's New About Trump?

So much for the myth that Trump's appeal to Russia for dirt on Hillary Clinton in 2016, and his attempt to extort Ukraine for "opposition research" on Joe Biden in 2020, mark something new and an unheard-of degradation of "our democracy." But beyond the spectacular spread of this scandal "involving his attorney general, secretary of state and personal attorney as players in the extortion scheme" two fundamental points arise from these earlier cases as well as the present one.

First, there actually is something different about Trump. Contrary to some fashionable left rhetoric, Trump is not a fascist. Rather, he's a thief, or as Samuel Farber has perceptively put it, a "lumpen capitalist". [3] His fundamental loyalty is only to himself and his shady business interests. Yet those degenerate qualities also make him a useful tool for the real agenda of billionaires, corporate deregulators and privatizers, white nationalists, reactionary religious fanatics, and the fossil fuel industries with their all-out drive to maximize extraction and profits before the clock runs out for humanity.

That combination controls the agenda of today's Republican Party. Because its obscene reactionary social and economic agenda cannot hope to win a majority by democratic means, it seeks to rule permanently through voter suppression, racial gerrymandering, executive orders and stuffing the judiciary with rightwing cadres. The regime we're living under today has been gaining momentum long before Trump came along, and it will not disappear with him.

This is an authentic capitalist ruling class agenda, yet also one that could create a massive crisis for the system's economic stability and political legitimacy. With Trump's pseudo-populist rhetoric and crude nationalism, racist appeals and sadistic anti-immigrant orders he's a useful front man for the worst forces of reaction and greed. All that along with his love affairs with international dictators who know how to fawn on him, rather than ideology or mass mobilization, makes him a menace to humanity.

He's also unusually crude. Unlike types like Nixon and Reagan, Trump is confident to act right out in the open, including undisguised witness intimidation and incitement to violence. His "high crimes and misdemeanors," perpetrated on a daily basis, are barely hidden if at all.

His tactics for getting away with one week's scandalous behavior are to do something more outrageous the next, whether it's the Muslim travel ban or family separations at the border or dismantling every environmental protection, pushing the citizenship question on the census or his daily blatant, shameless lying.

In the process he's demonstrated what everyone now knows, including (especially) his aides and the Republican leadership that enables him "that the administration he's assembled is a bottomless corrupt cesspool, that his mind is an open sewer and his mouth a running toilet.

But what Trump's tenure has taught us is that for a considerable time, none of this brings him down. The Republican leadership and party faithful not only have stuck with him, they mostly love his performance even if they privately fear and loathe him. In general, the method works "so well that some of Trump's worst atrocities are hardly even noticed. A case in point is the brutal reduction of the number of refugees to be admitted annually to a miniscule 18,000 " at the very moment when close to 70 million people globally are displaced by war and assorted natural and unnatural disasters.

At a certain point that's impossible to precisely predict, Trump's kind of behavior can become a liability "to the institutional system to which he has no loyalty, or to his party. It might be when an economic downturn looks like a serious threat. Or perhaps when it appears that he might drag the Republicans down in 2020. Or when his precipitous, treacherous betrayal of the Syrian Kurdish forces drives the U.S. military, diplomatic and "national security" elites into a frenzy.

But while these are dangers for Trump's regime and enablers, as this statement was drafted they haven't yet reached the point of a decisive rupture between the broader interests of the system and its current venal "executive committee." Instead there's an impeachment crisis "which like our election season may be nasty, brutish and long " that erupted as the revelations of Trump's political extortion of Ukraine gave the hesitant Democratic leadership

no real choice.

We don't believe that the impeachment inquiry came about through "pressure from the masses" or the progressive minority of Congressional Democrats pushing it. Rather, the fact that Trump was openly repeating his 2016 appeal to Russia, by shaking down the new Ukraine president to work with Trump's filthy attorney general Barr and his unhinged personal lawyer Giuliani, simply meant that with no Democratic response he'd be free to just keep doing it.

At this early stage we won't try to guess where the impeachment process goes. The outcome depends not on the Democrats, but on the Republicans and their base. We're not predicting that Republican support for Trump will collapse; but if it does, we suspect that it won't happen in ones and twos, but rapidly. On the one hand, no Republican in the Senate or inner circle can afford to be the first defector. On the other, no doubt those who are closest to him know that there's a whole lot more criminality waiting to be uncovered, or covered up.

It's Imperialism, Stupid

There's a more basic, second point to pursue here. If we look back to those earlier machinations of Nixon and Reagan, and connect the dots to Trump's 2016 and 2019-20 gambits, the element of continuity is clear enough. It's about imperialism. That's what gives the presidency the power to coerce and manipulate foreign leaders (and in Trump's case of course, their ability to manipulate him too).

Imperialism, and the accompanying ideology that the United States has the inherent right to dominate the world, inevitably in the 20th and 21st centuries created an imperial presidency and its corrupt opportunities. Donald Trump is the malignant outgrowth partly of that tendency — along with the profound failures of U.S. capital to meet the basic needs of huge sections of the working and middle classes left behind in the rush to globalization and corporate "prosperity."

To see the logic of imperialism, look at the Democrats' and media's main charge leveled against Donald Trump, which from Ukraine to Syria goes: "He's threatened our national security with his behavior that undermines our professional diplomatic and intelligence services, and causes our allies not to trust U.S. leadership."

The complaint is not about the sadistic U.S. sanctions that are contributing to starvation and death from lack of basic medical supplies in Venezuela, or the severe hardship in Iran from the drive to strangle the economy of that country (where there used to be a reservoir of popular admiration for the United States — no longer). Throwing away the lives of millions of people isn't the problem. Rather, it's "weakening our leadership."

In this debate the massive war crimes of Nixon and Reagan are bracketed to the side as "mistakes" or "excesses" because, in the conventional accounts, they acted in the framework of strong U.S. "leadership of the Free World" in the Cold War. A couple of million dead and many millions of poisoned Vietnamese, and the shattered societies of Afghanistan and Central America, were acceptable collateral damage since ultimately "our" side won the Cold War and the Soviet Union dissolved.

Nixon was finally brought down, not by his 1968 secret maneuvers to keep the war going so he'd get elected, but by the 1972 break-in at the Democratic Watergate Hotel headquarters — carried out by his secret "Plumbers" gang, which was created to plug the leaks about how badly the war was going.

Socialists, to put it mildly, do not worship at the feet of the "Founders" and "Framers" of the United States and its

Constitution. They had issues – slavery, genocide, extreme patriarchy among them. But in the framework of their time, they did understand some things. Evidently they recognized that a crook like Donald Trump could become president and use the office for self-enrichment, including colluding with foreign powers.

That’s why, for example, they included a clause forbidding “emoluments” as well as an impeachment process as a check on tyranny. What’s not clear is whether they could envision the corruption not only of a president but of a major political party, and a big part of a federal judiciary, mobilized to enable and protect him. They could hardly have imagined the massive coercive power of a global imperial hegemon with its “military-industrial complex” and political apparatus, subject to presidential orders and whims.

In that sense, Trump’s accusers have a point when they say that the practice of U.S. representative government (such as it is) stands at considerable risk. But let’s not forget that the state institutions whose “integrity” the Democrats are eager to defend include the monstrous national surveillance apparatus, the FBI with its murderous history of repression of dissident movements and leaders, and the CIA with its global record of interventions and assassinations.

How the current crisis plays out for Trump’s own criminal presidency is a big open question. But it’s important to impeach more than Trump. Restoring a “status quo before Trump” is no answer to the mess capital has made. We need a revolutionary insurgent movement to impeach imperialism too!

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[1] “When a Candidate Conspired with a Foreign Power to Win an Election,” www.politico.com, August 6, 2017

[2] “Some –Conspiracy Theories’ Turn Out to be True,” Los Angeles Times, June 20, 201

[3] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/10/donald-trump-lumpen-capitalist-class-elections>.