

Simplicity. With Nukes.

*Method in the Madness? Or is the Madness the Method?
Do efforts to parse Trump's policy agenda miss the mark?*

Frances Cowell, February, 2025

Executive orders, soon watered down or quashed by the courts, bold declarations, later retracted, senior administration officials contradicting each other - and themselves: you can forgive foreign policy experts' frustration in trying to glean sense or coherence in the in-coming U.S. President's policy agenda.

National leaders usually aim to advance the national interest, enhance national prestige or seek to resolve intractable problems in troubled parts of the world. But the current U.S. President seems intent instead on trashing the U.S. economy, destroying its credibility abroad and inflaming international tensions by endorsing violent land-grabs everywhere. It is hardly surprising that even the most seasoned experts are flummoxed. Yet the common thread may be simpler than many think.

"I know a temper tantrum when I see one."¹ Certainly, at times the U.S. President, technically, the most powerful person in the world, can conjure the image of a two-year-old fingering the pin of a live hand-grenade and delighting in grown ups' panic at his every small gesture. The worst consequences of the first Trump presidency's "stupefying ignorance"² were mercifully tempered by grown-ups in key administration positions. But the baby Donald has learned since then.

Unfortunately, what he learned has nothing to do with statecraft, governing in the national interest or respect for international law.

The lesson that seems to have stuck is that, to get your way, you need to surround yourself with biddable types and get rid of the grown-ups who might try to talk sense into you or one day hold you to account. It is no coincidence that so many important administration jobs are now filled by poorly qualified yes-people, including the odd crackpot³.

You're not a kid anymore

Now, go back to November 2016 and recall that one of Trump's first acts as President-elect was to settle, out of court, three fraud lawsuits. Simple scams that unmasked the petty con-man, complete with the simple, short-sightedness of a petty con-man. What distinguishes him from other petty crooks is the property fortune he was born into, which added scale, but nothing innovative or worthy of merit. Like nearly all petty con-men, Trump's idea of clever business is to burn

¹ <https://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/pelosi-remarks-at-bill-signing-for-legislation-guaranteeing-back-pay-for>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-says-donald-trump-betrays-a-stupefying-ignorance-that-makes-him-unfit-to-be-us-president-a6766871.html>

³ <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2025/01/29/kash-patel-is-a-crackpot>

creditors and investors: six times between 1991 and 2009, Trump businesses cheated them by declaring bankruptcy. Since its stock-market listing in February 2022, Truth Social has lost its investors over one billion dollars. Trump's criminal convictions prove not only that he is a fraud, but toward women he is a thug. Temper tantrums and vengeance lists reveal a selfish and spiteful child. He has the nuclear codes.

Checks and balances?

The U.S. Constitution gives the Congress the power to constrain irresponsible presidential acts as part of its celebrated checks and balances. That it seems not to do so is part of a decades-long trend: the long-documented wilful failure of Congress to temper presidential excesses. Scholars have also noted the tendency of successive presidents to exploit lapses in oversight in order to grab more powers and to withhold critical information from Congress⁴. Some call it the "Imperial Presidency"⁵. The effect is amplified by the tendency since the early 1970s toward charismatic presidential candidates chosen by party members in primaries rather than more moderate choices of senior party chiefs⁶.

Trump boasts his "unpredictability" as part of his "method": cosying up to adversaries while attacking allies is presented as his version of the Madman Strategy. There are two problems with this. First, those boasts of "craziness" and "unpredictability" show that he knows precisely what he is doing, thereby undermining the credibility of his "madman" claims. Second, as Stephen Walt and others point out, the Madman Strategy has a poor record in achieving its aims: as he puts it, "Being unpredictable may make sense in sports or poker, or even on a battlefield, but it's a losing strategy for a great nation's foreign policy."⁷

How, and to what ends, will Trump use his near absolute power? He is hardly the first national leader to put personal ahead of national interests. But he takes it to a new level, at least among G7 states. An early example is his plan to displace two million innocent and long-oppressed civilians so as to profit from yet another grubby deal with a local government to rezone beach-front for a property re-development. Paid for in tears and blood; the Middle East in flames for generations to come.

An incompetent, compromised administration in hock to the caprice of a compromised, volatile and self-interested president, with at best limp congressional oversight. Is the U.S. on the way to becoming a clientele state? Or worse? Consider Trump's frank admiration for despots, such as President Putin and Kim Jung Il of North Korea.

⁴ N. Ornstein, T. Mann, « When Congress Checks Out », *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 6 (Nov. - Dec., 2006), pp. 67-82

⁵ Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. (Arthur Meier), 1917-2007. *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

⁶ Bruce Ackerman, « The Decline and Fall of the American Republic: Obama's Libyan Intervention », Max Weber Lecture n° 2011/02, European University Institute.

⁷ Walt, S.M., "Things Don't End well for Madmen" *Foreign Policy*. 16 Aug, 2017. See also Roseanne W. McManus, Scott Sagan, Jeremy Suri, Samuel Seltz, Caitlin Talmadge Jonathan A. Schwartz and James D. Boys, among others.

The mindset may be narrow and short-sighted, but the consequences of U.S. presidential actions are complex, far reaching and enduring. A two-year-old with a live hand grenade is benign by comparison.

What can be done? Mr Trump may have learned some things since his first presidency, but that is not to say he has grown up. Like most children, he is easily manipulated. Flattery is his ice cream; the bogey-man that scares him is being seen to be weak. Bribery and fear will sway him. Simple, really.