

THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN EMPIRE AND THE PRESIDENCY OF DONALD TRUMP

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1/17/19

The United States is in the throes of an unprecedented, indeed historic, political crisis. In many ways the crisis is existential, in that it could occasion the collapse of the US political party and government mechanisms. Such a collapse would make governance practically impossible. The nation could cease to have an organizing political center. Arthur Schlesinger the liberal historian theorized that the US two party system works as a means of governing because it governs from what he called the *vital center*. The perceived extremes of both parties are isolated, as the center of both become in actuality the governing party. Hence, in terms of governance the Democrats and Republicans are virtually the same. That vital center has collapsed. Calls to impeach Trump, and to remove him from office by any means possible, including extralegal measures, represent the collapse of the traditional center; laying the foundation for a crisis of governance and of rule.

At this time the rulers are unable to rule in the old ways, and the people refuse to be ruled in the old ways. However, the people do not yet have the capacity to take power and to change the power equation in their favor. We, therefore, are in a stalemate. Uncertainty abounds. The corporate media especially *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *CNN* have labeled Trump an agent of Vladimir Putin and guilty of the high political crime of treason. At the very center of the divisions within the nation and the ruling class specifically is the question of the future of the US Empire. Trump's moves in the direction of imperial retreat are viewed as a threat to US global hegemony.

The drama of the political crisis reached a new stage with Trump's announcement in December 2018 that he was withdrawing all US troops from Syria and half of US forces from Afghanistan. This announcement led to the resignation of his Secretary of Defense James Mattis and an outpouring of criticism from generals, the mainstream media, leading politicians and political commentators. Mattis gave notice that he would be leaving his post at the end of February; Trump responded by firing him immediately. As the Mueller investigation into alleged collusion between the Trump campaign and Russians, was moving forward and many hoped to a conclusion, on January 15, 2019 *The New York Times* published an article claiming they had information showing that Trump was an agent of Putin. They reported that the FBI, in 2017, launched an investigation of President Trump "to consider whether the president's own actions constituted a possible threat to national security" and specifically "whether he had been working on behalf of Russia against American interests." This investigation occurred around the same time generals and national security experts in the Trump administration briefed him on matters of national security at the Pentagon. Bob Woodward in his book on the Trump White House *Fear* reported that Trump rejected summarily the interventionist

and war policies of his generals and foreign policy experts at a secret meeting. According to Woodward Trump was unwavering in his opposition to the generals a war policy.

Events of the last several weeks take place against the backdrop of a daily assault upon Trump by almost the entire corporate media, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *The Public Broadcasting Network*. Calls for his removal from office are now louder and angrier than at any time in the past two years. There are even calls for a coup d'état to save the nation from Trump. We have reached a dangerous moment in this struggle. Political uncertainty defines the moment. With impeachment and removal of Trump from office the main call of his opponents.

Impeachment in the US legal and political system is the first step to removing a president from office for alleged crimes and misdemeanors while in office. Impeachment is a process of bringing an indictment. The lower house of the Congress, the House of Representatives, brings it. Democrats have the majority there. However, to remove a President from office it would take a majority vote of the upper house the Senate, where the Republicans are the majority. While Trump could be impeached it is doubtful he would be removed from office through legal means. Yet the calls for his removal have only become louder and angrier from the media, the intelligence services, including the CIA, the FBI, the National Intelligence Agency, the Democratic party and wide sections of the intelligentsia, liberals, many conservatives, socialists, and social democrats. In spite of this coalition of anti-Trump forces Trump holds on to 90% of Republicans and close to 40% of Independents. His poll numbers range between 39% and 45%, which are respectable for modern US presidents. So while the elites are calling for his removal nothing has substantially changed among ordinary voters.

The financial collapse and the Great Recession that followed are the immediate roots of the current crisis. It is estimated that something close to \$20 trillion were spent by the government to save the banks and transnational corporations. While working and middle class people faced austerity policies, unemployment, loss of their homes, many driven into poverty and other forms of social and economic catastrophe. By 2016 the capitalists had recovered, but the people had not. The stock exchanges registered historic highs. About 50% of Americans sank into poverty or very close to it. For Black Americans the situation is far worse with close to 75% are in or near poverty. The 2016 Presidential election brought dramatically to the fore the political contradictions between the ruling elite and the masses of people; something not seen in over 70 years.

Trump had never run for office, he was a maverick who at times supported Democrats and at other times Republicans. In America's two party duopoly neither party is progressive, each pursues permanent war and austerity policies and upholds the system of neoliberal globalization. The Democrats have branded themselves the party of social liberalism on issues that appeal mainly to the petit bourgeoisie and the upper middle classes. They highlight their stances on abortion rights, the rights of upper middle class women, some civil rights and Black rights, LGBTQ rights and issues concerned with identity politics. Their policies like the Republicans advanced deindustrialization,

breaking up of unions, international trade pacts such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). While trade union leaders almost unanimously supports Democrats they have been rewarded with trade pacts that export jobs and immigration policies designed to break unions and lower wages, austerity policies and permanent war. The Republicans over the last thirty years have become the party of the majority of white Americans, a good part of them being white workers. They voted Republican for many reasons including anti Black and anti-civil rights stances, anti-immigrant platforms and conservative social values with respect to women's rights and LGBTQ issues. Something happened in 2016 that altered what the Republican Party is and expanded its voting base to include traditional Democratic Party voters and trade union members in numbers not usually seen. This unusual election produced Donald Trump and altered the national political landscape. Let's not forget more than 95% of the polls had Hillary Clinton winning. Trump's election was a shock to the political system.

The question that must be answered is what is it about Trump that has produced this type of response from a large part of the people and on the other side from the ruling elite. In short his stated goal of retreating from empire explains the major part of the ruling elite's opposition to him, and interestingly the positive response from a good part of the working class and middle class.

Let's look at part of his record on foreign policy. Throughout the 2016 campaign and as president he has argued that NATO was too expensive, that it was obsolete and signaled that the US was prepared to leave it. He called for détente with Russia while the vast majority of the elites are ramping up a new Cold War with Russia. He was attacked for his Helsinki summit with Putin. His meeting in Singapore with Kim Jung Un leader of North Korea was likewise criticized as unproductive and ill prepared. His instructing the US military to cease war exercises against North Korea was attacked as being soft on an enemy nation He, nonetheless, called for US forces to be removed from South Korea and positively assessed the prospects of negotiation with North Korea over its nuclear weapons and missiles. On China, while he has pursued a trade war with China, which has been put on hold while trade negotiations go forward, he has, however, refused to adopt policies of military confrontation over Taiwan and China's action in the South China Sea. Trumps first act upon becoming President was to rescind the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a pact that would exclude China. His stated goal of removing 2000 troops from Syria both recognizes the sovereignty of Syria and the Assad government, as well as the legal presence of Russia and Iran in Syria. This is highly significant because during the campaign Trump stated many times that he rejected the policies of regime change and intervention, hence of permanent war, especially in the Middle East. This is a major break with the policies of the Bill Clinton, George W Bush and Barak Obama Administrations. Over the past 17 years \$6 trillion dollars have been spent on wars in the Middle East and close to 1.5 million people killed. In Syria alone since 2011 600,000 have been killed and 15 million people displaced. In Iraq conservative estimates put the number at 600,00 dead. Trump rejected Hilary Clinton's proposal to confront Russia in Syria and establishing " a no fly zone", which would have meant war with Russia. By proposing to remove the troops Trump is acknowledging the legitimacy of the Assad government and thus its right to ask for assistance from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. In a

certain sense this represents a softening of the US provoked hostilities with Iran. Furthermore, the plan to withdraw half the troops in Afghanistan and with plans to end US military operations.

What is Trumpism?; I argue that Trump represents a disruptive force in terms of US war and empire strategies. He is perhaps the most pro peace President since John f Kennedy. Rather than his words or those of people in his Administration we have to look at his action. Gareth Porter, investigative journalist and historian, ask the question “Could Trump take down the American empire”. Porter argues, “But Trump’s unorthodox approach has already emboldened him to challenge the essential logic of the U.S. military empire more than any previous president. And the final years of his administration will certainly bring further struggles over the issues on which he has jostled repeatedly with those in charge of the empire.” Richard Haass president of the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations writes in a recent edition of Foreign Affairs magazine that the US Empire is in decline; he concludes the US elites must manage the deterioration of the US Empire. While Haass is strongly anti Trump his and Trumps positions on the future of US Empire seem to be about the same.

At last, Trump represents a retreat from over 70 years of US Cold War and now new Cold War policies of the dominant sections of US elites. By opposing most current US wars, he represents imperial retreat. His talk throughout 2018 of pulling out of NATO and its global operations, including in Ukraine and Afghanistan must be considered in this equation. All of this is a move away from US military hegemony and the idea of a unipolar world militarily dominated by the US and towards a multipolar world consisting of multiple centers of power.

The battle within the US elites is hardly coming to an end. It is, therefore, important to understand the parameters of this struggle. Donald Trump is a defender of capitalism, he is by no means anti-imperialist, and he is, nonetheless, a factor for peace.

In early December 2018 Trump tweeted that US military spending was “crazy” and suggested in 2020 it be cut by more than 10%. He stated that in the near future he would meet with presidents Xi of China and Putin of Russia to talk about a meaningful halt in military spending. This is a very positive development.

Most crises can also present opportunities. This one is no different. An informed and organized peace movement that says YES, we agree that US Empire must be ended, US imperialism must retreat from its war and military policies and the waste of military spending must be turned to rebuilding the US. This is in the class interests of working people and the poor. A new type of peace movement anchored to the class interests of workers is called for and is possible. Progressive and revolutionary forces must accurately analyze the current crisis and come up with ways to take advantage of it. We are on the cusp of a new moment of history, one that could lead to a significant shift in the relationships between the people and the ruling elites in the US. This is an opportunity for progressive and radical change.