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The Emperor vs the Adults: Donald Trump and Wilhelm II

François Heisbourg

[He had] a taste for the modern – technology, industry, science – but at the same time [was] superficial, hasty, restless, without any deeper level of seriousness, without any desire for hard work ... without any sense of sobriety, or balance and boundaries, or even for reality or real problems, uncontrollable and scarcely capable of learning from experience, desperate for applause and success ... He wanted every day to be his birthday – unsure and arrogant, with an immeasurably exaggerated self-confidence and desire to show off.¹

This condensed version of one German historian's judgement on Kaiser Wilhelm II seems tailor-made for another leader, US President Donald Trump, self-styled on Twitter as the @realDonaldTrump.²

Comparaison n'est pas raison, goes the French saying, and all historical analogies are imperfect by nature. The world of the Kaiser and that of the new American president in some ways have little in common. There never was an @echteWilhelmII running the German Reich, even if it is all too easy to imagine a reincarnated Kaiser using Twitter.

Some analogies are less imperfect than others, however. Trump-as-Wilhelm-II works because it is grounded in personality and character traits. So it is not only a historical analogy: humans evolve slowly, and there is nothing surprising about finding, within the span of a century, two leaders sharing quasi-identical personalities. This is arguably the case between the

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German emperor and the American president, including in the manner in which the personalities express themselves, albeit via different mediums. Wilhelm II's propensity to go on semantic rampages in the press or in public addresses is closely reminiscent of @realDonaldTrump's tweetstorms. 'No Chinese will ever again dare look cross-eyed at a German', proclaimed the Kaiser to the troops setting off to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in what became known as the 'Hun speech'.³ Calls arose for his abdication in 1908 after he managed to insult most of Germany's partners in an intemperate interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. As in the case of Trump's Twitter feed before and after the presidential election, examples abound of Wilhelm's basic lack of limits.

There are plenty of dysfunctional leaders to be found in history – particularly in hereditary systems in which the legitimacy of a new ruler does not rest on his (or her) success in a worldly struggle for power. George III in Britain or Ludwig II in Bavaria come to mind. What gives relevance to a Trump–Wilhelm II analogy, as opposed to, say, the less useful Trump–Ludwig II parallel, is a combination of broadly comparable institutional and international realities.

Imperial powers

During Wilhelm II's reign (1888–1918), Germany could have been described as a halfway democracy. Its government was ultimately responsible to the emperor, not parliament or an elected president. The emperor was commander-in-chief of armed forces which planned their operations and ran their organisation largely unsupervised by the government, let alone by the Reichstag. Universal male suffrage had not been introduced in Prussia, the most powerful of Germany's constituent states. The members of the federal parliament were elected by universal male suffrage, however, and parliament had the power of the purse. The Social Democratic Party had become its largest single force by 1914.

The United States, by contrast, is a well-developed, deeply rooted democracy with an elaborate and powerful set of checks and balances devised by the framers of its centuries-old constitution. Its second-to-none armed forces are placed under the direct control of the executive branch and

closely scrutinised by an attentive and well-endowed legislative branch. But the president, as commander-in-chief, has imperial powers when it comes to launching military operations, so long as they do not entail the essentially symbolic and largely vestigial step of declaring war. The constraints of the War Powers Act and the power of the purse only make their effects felt over a matter of months. Since the cabinet is answerable to the president, its members have no constitutional power to thwart his will. With the creation of the National Security Council, the president has also acquired his own defence and security-policy apparatus. There are good reasons why the idea of an 'imperial presidency' caught on after Arthur Schlesinger published his book of that title in 1973.⁴

In response to the Kaiser's idiosyncrasies, key components of the German state's civilian and military leadership attempted to limit the monarch's ability to directly control the instruments at his theoretical disposal. He could and did override these institutional constraints, however, when he felt it to be necessary. This was facilitated by the interest that individual bureaucracies and their leaders could have in improving their position or achieving their policy objectives by playing with, rather than against, the Kaiser. There was no clear connection between military planning and the political objectives of a chancellor kept in the dark, and of a Kaiser who was not interested in the details until it was too late.

When a crisis erupted, the resulting confusion and opacity helped prevent timely and appropriate decision-making, and would have done so even if the Kaiser, the chancellor or the head of the general staff had been seriously minded to avoid major war. This is the sad story which unfolded from the 'blank cheque' given to Austria-Hungary in early July 1914 (a Kaiser-driven initiative), to the Kaiser's belated realisation, in early August, that this crisis was not going to end well. The previous quarter-century had already witnessed not only extraordinary brinksmanship by the Kaiser, with the Moroccan crises bringing Europe to the brink of war, but, no less egregiously, his ill-fated input into policy: firstly, by bringing Russia into the camp of France, shortly after getting rid of Bismarck, then by gradually transforming a generally friendly relationship with the British Empire into a state of enmity. No number of 'adults' were united or strong enough to

control a Kaiser who was not simply a loose cannon but who also had some highly corrosive and strongly held ideas of his own, such as launching an arms race with Britain; securing Germany's 'place in the sun'; fighting the Yellow Peril; and supporting jihad by the Muslim world against the British, French and Russian empires.

Within a few weeks of President Trump's inauguration, an oddly similar contest was under way between a freewheeling president and a group of adults balancing a sense of responsibility with the necessary expression of loyalty. Vice President Mike Pence, at the Munich Security Conference, provided a good example, first telling the audience that he had a message from the president expressing his full support of NATO, then stating: 'With regard to Ukraine, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable, even as we search for new common ground, which, as you know, President Trump believes possible.'⁵ This finely tuned 'I said/he said' sequence is what the French call *un balancement circonspect*, which means what it looks like. And as in the Kaiser's day, there is no shortage of people who are ready to go along with the boss for reasons of ideology, self-interest or what they see as the national interest. Stephen Bannon and John Bolton are part of this ecosystem, no less than James Mattis and H.R. McMaster. And at the end of the day, the commander-in-chief has the first and the last word if he wishes to use his imperial prerogative in matters of war and peace. He also has his own, sometimes long-held, 140-character views: multilateral trade agreements are a bad deal; alliances are transactional; Muslims should be kept out of the country; a wall should separate Mexico from the United States; China is gouging the US economy; and a deal should be sought with Russia.

A world ready for Wilhelm II

This would be serious enough if today's international system were reasonably stable, along the lines of the Cold War dispensation or of the unipolar moment of the 1990s, or indeed of a multipolar world in which the major players were satisfied powers and in which elements of global discipline were in place. This is clearly not the case: Russia proclaims its rejection of the post-Cold War system in Europe and seeks a post-Western order, while China extends prudently but relentlessly its ambitions in its neighbourhood;

the Middle East is in a state of worsening turmoil; and the European Union is on the brink of disintegration following Brexit, a prospect which provokes no concern on the part of President Trump. There are some resemblances here with the situation prior to the First World War, not only because it is a multipolar dispensation, but also because of the doubts permeating the participants in the system of alliances. In 1914, each member of the two contending systems (the Triple Alliance of Berlin, Vienna and Rome; the Anglo–Franco–Russian Entente) had doubts about the reliability of their partners. This led them to hedge either by shifting away (Italy gradually moving from the Triple Alliance to the Entente) or by engaging in behaviour designed to force their allies' hand (such as the German–Austrian and Franco–Russian interactions in July 1914).

Such hedging was not required in America's alliance system before President Trump's election, given the unconditional nature of the corresponding commitments. These were strong enough to resist even substantial disagreement on a broad range of issues, from Suez to Iraq, not to mention Vietnam or the recurring burden-sharing debate. Yet by stating during the election campaign that NATO's Article V is conditional, Donald Trump has made it so.⁶ Once Copernicus had stated that the Earth revolves around the Sun, it wasn't possible to put it back where Ptolemy had intended it to be. Hedging has now become a necessity. As before the First World War, this can take several forms (sometimes simultaneously): cosying up to Russia or China; investing more in national or EU defence; going bilateral with the US; entertaining the nuclear option; and so on. Precisely because the options for hedging are multiple, this makes for an intrinsically more unstable global system. That observation is disturbing in its own right. It becomes alarming when it is linked to the peculiar problems posed by President Trump's personality and the power he exercises in the American institutional framework.

One of the quips made at international conferences these days goes as follows: Donald Trump is the bipolar president of a multipolar world. Hopefully, this is an exaggeration.

Even a robust analogy has its limits. But a weak analogy may still have virtue if it prompts thought. The final extension suggested here is that the Middle East contains the potential for generating the kind of wars (initially regional, subsequently global) which began in the Balkans during Wilhelm II's reign. A major but declining power, Austria–Hungary, seizes on a real provocation (the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife) to cut down to size, as soon as possible, a threatening upstart (Serbia) thanks to a blank cheque from a powerful ally (Germany): in the merest of nutshells, this is how the First World War began. In the Middle East today, perhaps, a major power (Saudi Arabia) doing poorly on all fronts (Syria, Iraq, Yemen) feels threatened by a resurgent power (Iran) and seizes on a provocation to lock its American ally into war.

This does not pretend to be a prediction, even if it is a serious worry. But it is a reasonable description of a disorderly world, riven by rivalries between revisionist and status quo powers, against the backdrop of institutional confusion in a Trump-shocked Washington DC.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Nipperdey, in *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, as translated in Richard Evans, *Reading German History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), p. 39.
- 2 The comparison has occurred to others. See, for example, Doug Bandow, 'What Trump Has in Common with the Last German Emperor', *National Interest*, 31 January 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/what-trump-has-common-the-last-german-emperor-19265?page=show>.
- 3 Wilhelm II, speech in Bremerhaven, 27 July 1900, in Manfred Görtsmacker, *Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1996).
- 4 Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).
- 5 'Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Munich Security Conference', 18 February 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/02/18/remarks-vice-president-munich-security-conference>.
- 6 See François Heisbourg, 'The Future of the U.S. Alliance System', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 December 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/future-us-alliance-system>.