

THE DONALD PIMPLE

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The President-elect of the United States is a festering pimple on the backside of a dysfunctional world order.¹

Immediately after the US election, a graphic diagnosis of the problem was offered by the French newspaper *Libération*. Its 10 November front page consisted of a black and white photograph showing a sinister image of a spooky guy thrusting out one of his (in)famous hand movements. 'AMERICAN PSYCHO' was the diagnosis.

The slang term 'psycho' means somebody with disordered thoughts and emotions, more or less out of touch with reality.² I want to argue that American psychos have not been the exception amongst recent occupants of the modern White House. These individuals have been on a spectrum of problematic relations with reality, exhibiting thoughts and emotions demanding serious concern.

Exhibit 1 is Ronald Reagan. When he came to power, Reagan's views (interacting with those of the sclerotic leadership in Moscow) represented an existential threat to the whole world. As the well-known *Los Angeles Times* journalist Robert Scheer showed, through devastating interviews and reports in his book *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War*

¹This is a revised and edited version of the talk given at the roundtable on Donald Trump and World Order in the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University, 29 November 2017. Many thanks are owed to friends and fellow panel members for lively conversations. In the spirit of that event, however, references below will be kept to the minimum.

²In a longer essay it would be possible to speculate about the meaning of Trump in relation to Bret Easton Ellis's best-seller, *American Psycho* (1991), with its stories of the disorders and delusions of supercharged capitalism in Manhattan.

(1981), presidential hopeful Reagan had views about the Soviet threat, and the possibility of surviving and winning a nuclear war against the other superpower, that were ignorant, naive, and delusional. The world was lucky to have escaped the Reagan-Brezhnev years without a nuclear catastrophe.

It is worth mentioning, as Exhibit 1a, the President's wife Nancy. Her legendary devotion to her husband included consulting an astrologer to help him organise his schedule. Reagan's Vice President and successor, George H. Bush, Exhibit 2, was exposed by Scheer as having gone along with his boss on the Soviet threat and the prospects of surviving and winning a nuclear war. Imagine the outrage today if Trump in his recent campaign had emulated Reagan and George H. Bush, and had expressed views about winning a nuclear war against Russia. And imagine discovering, in due course, that Melania Trump had consulted an astrologer. I was more immediately scared for the world in 1980, with Reagan coming to office, than I am now: but that is not to say that I am not very scared now.

Exhibit 3 is Bill Clinton, who earned the name 'Slick Willie' while Governor of Arkansas. It stuck. Clinton's two-terms in the White House led the *Vanity Fair* columnist Christopher Hitchens to call his book about the presidency *No One Left To Lie To: the Triangulations of William Jefferson Clinton* (1999). Slick Willie's sexual behaviour was infamous at the time, and remains so. To critics such as Hitchens, Clinton was so willing to blur private and public – though the President totally denied the connection – that he ordered the launching of cruise missiles at a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum three days after testifying about his own strike against the young White House intern Monica Lewinsky. The conjunction of the scandal/missile attack could have been a coincidence. What is not in doubt is that Clinton's Attorney General and some senior military advised the President against the missile strike, that medical provision in a poor country was disrupted, that casualties occurred at the time and later, and that the target (as the US government later admitted) was not the terrorist poison gas factory tied up with Bin Laden that had been confidently asserted at the

time. Frankly, it is difficult to believe the missile attack was not related to news management.

Liberals largely went missing in action during the Clinton presidency. He was let off the hook. He had star quality in a culture that idolises stars, and which is inclined to afford the anointed both credibility and licence (as is already happening to some degree with President-elect Trump). Supporters recognised the Slick Willie dimension of President Clinton, to a greater or lesser degree, but they were more taken by his image as a cool dude who was a modern guy - young, energetic, and photogenic - who played jazz and at his best talked the talk.

Words mattered for Clinton. They should have mattered more to his critics. Eyes were averted when it was reported that the President had ordered his diplomats not to use the 'g' word – genocide - in 1994 as the killings of Tutsi escalated in Rwanda. Clinton himself tried to play down the crisis, and obstructed international efforts to do more. A headline at the time declared: 'THE US WASHES ITS HANDS OF THE WORLD'. Four years later, in March 1998, this President without shame landed in Kigali, never left the airport, kept the engines of Air Force One running, and used the 'g' word twelve times.³ He lied to the Rwandan people that at the time of the genocide he had been ignorant of the terror that engulfed them.

Exhibit 3a is Hillary Clinton. Christopher Hitchens was not always right, but until his untimely death he always told it as he saw it. For years he had placed the Clintons under his microscope. Once asked whether Hillary was America's 'Iron Lady' – a comparison with Margaret Thatcher – he strongly rejected the very thought. The real Iron Lady, he said, would never have complained, as he pointed out that Hillary had, that 'the boys are ganging up on her'. More to the point, he claimed that Hillary had never shed a tear for others, only for herself in the pursuit of her ambitions. Rejecting the idea of applying the Iron Lady tag to Hillary Clinton – while recognising her great

³ Guy Arnold, *Africa. A Modern History* (2005), pp. 853-7

resilience – Hitchens simply asserted ‘she’s a psycho’.⁴ No public shame or scandal caused by her back-slapping, Rhodes Scholar husband was too painful to dent her struggle for office, continue the dynasty, and become the first woman to be President of the United States.

Despite all this, and despite the dodgy issues that always seem to surround Hillary Clinton (from her claims to have landed in Bosnia under fire in 1996, to the emails controversy when Secretary of State) she still got many more votes than Trump in the 2016 election. For many voters this was less because she was Hillary Clinton and more that she was not Donald Trump.

The disappointments of the Bill Clinton presidency were followed by eight disastrous years for world order under President George W Bush, Exhibit 4. Bush was the ultimate ‘chicken-hawk’ who became Commander-in-Chief of the world’s most powerful military. His campaign team on foreign policy – ‘The Vulcans’ – became his chief advisers once in office. They were self-regarding neo-Con self-promoting reality-makers. But their realities were based on such delusions as seeing (apparently) the lack of evidence as the best evidence of the presence of WMD in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, together with the delusion that inside every Iraqi was an American willing to risk all to get out. The monument to the delusions of Bush and his team, while they themselves presumably live in very comfortable retirement, is the on-going story of death, destruction, and destabilisation in and around the Middle East. The gap between the reality in their neo-Con mindset, and the facts on the ground, will continue to have a malevolent impact on the international scene for the rest of this century. Did any US President in recent times have such little knowledge of what he was doing as George W. Bush? And did any President surround himself with such strangers to international reality?

Barack Obama, Exhibit 5, despite being such a different sort of President to his predecessor, cannot be allowed to escape criticism. There has been, for

⁴ Christopher Hitchens, Hillary Clinton is no Iron Lady, ‘she’s a psycho’: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=o12Sd8LDWwE>

example, a tragic gap between Obama's uplifting words and the limitations of his actual heavy-lifting in some areas. One of his favourite tropes has been along the lines 'I will not rest until....' (We can each fill in the rest of the sentence with our favourite cause, whether it be 'veterans looked after', 'economy fixed', 'unemployed into work' or whatever). In practice, however, Obama has rested a-plenty, most notably his 300+ rounds of golf.⁵ No one would begrudge a President taking time out to rest, but is so much golf – and the lifestyle it symbolises – a good use of a President's down-time, when so much needs to be fixed for so many?

Unlike his immediate predecessor, Obama is a great public speaker. His most renowned speeches on international affairs included his Prague address in April 2009, his Cairo speech in July 2009, and his address at the Hiroshima Memorial in May 2016. The Cairo speech struck several serious false notes, but perhaps most upsetting to his supporters has been the abyss between his 'beautiful' words against nuclear weapons, which raised hopes of radical disarmament, and the fact that Obama has reduced US nuclear weapons less than any President since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, his presidency has overseen plans for a one trillion dollar long-term expansion of US nuclear weapons capabilities.

We loved Obama because he wasn't George W. Bush, because he spoke peace, and because he projected a more hopeful image of the United States. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet Obama as Commander-in-Chief has ordered ten times more drone strikes for targeted (and not so targeted) killing than his predecessor, and these have caused many more military and civilian casualties than was the case during Bush's administration. We forgive Obama, of course, more than we would have President Bush, because we see him as a very intelligent guy in a tough position, facing Congressional obstacles, making great speeches, trying to hold the ring, and

⁵ This argument is made on several websites critical of President Obama: see for example obamagolfcounter.com

with a lovely family personifying the hopes of those Americans and others elsewhere desperate for a world free of racial discrimination.

Set against the individuals who have occupied the White House since 1980 – and remembering Tricky Dicky Nixon among others – the question needs to be asked: apart from the manner in which he disgracefully lowered the tone of public discourse during the campaign, is Exhibit Trump at this stage outside the spectrum of attitudes and behaviour of White House incumbents and would-be incumbents when it comes to such qualifications for office as knowledge of how the world works, respectability, or failure to appreciate the gap between self and public image?

Give or take some appalling disasters and near misses on the way, the United States more or less survived the White House incumbents just identified – individuals with complex and often troubling relationships with reality. When we contemplate the next Presidency, whether it lasts two years or eight, does this record offer any reasons for being cheerful?

Absolutely not.

History may come to recall the Obama presidency as America's Weimar, a period of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the portentous. Analogies can be dangerous, of course, but they can also stimulate thought and highlight warnings. Weimar Germany offers an abundance of the latter, and above all the warning of the potential foolishness of assuming that a politician who is loud-mouthed/ populist/ nationalistic/ racist/misogynistic/and a demeaner of the disabled – in short a fascist⁶ - will be tamed by power and reality. If If

⁶ I am not using the word lightly, as a mere term of abuse. In a book I wrote during 2005-06 I speculated about the dangers of the rise of a new fascism as a result of the concatenation of circumstances developing in world affairs (Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* [2007] pp.419-26). Accepting that different times produce different styles and manifestations of fascism, I identified its enduring characteristics in a check-list that included the idea of a charismatic leader, ideas about the power of the state and the mystique of the nation, the desire to rejuvenate society, social conservatism, patriarchal values, racist attitudes, anti-

Trump's politics conform with the key characteristics of a latter-day fascist mindset, why should anyone assume he will be tamed? His chanting followers want him to march onwards, and fascist mindsets want power not constraints.

That said, politics are full of surprises, and Trump may indeed become tamed by role and responsibility. Who knows? Who is the 'real' Trump anyway? We might all be surprised and witness Trump the President revoking many or all of the main positions he advocated so bluntly during his campaign. There has already been some of this. If it were to occur wholesale, it would be a surprise, but should not be a shock for it is hardly unusual for politicians to slide away from policies and promises they advocated when touting for votes. Trump may even come to surprise himself, for does he know what he will do once he assumes his new role? Though he has surely thought about what he may do in certain scenarios, he is not now able to predict how he will *feel* when push comes to shove. This is the meaning of my earlier point about the Donald Pimple *festering*. Nobody knows how or when or what will break out – including Trump.

All this injects dangerous uncertainty into the international system, for Trump is on the cusp of becoming the world's most powerful politician. What makes it worse are reports that he is notoriously thin-skinned. These uncertainties will test everybody's nerves as we contemplate the various scenarios envisaged by anxious White House watchers: How will Trump react if woken in the middle of the night and told there has been a terrorist outrage? Or if he is confronted by the threat of a beheading of a US pilot captured on ISIS territory? Or if Putin turns out not to be somebody with whom he can do business, but rather somebody who patronises him? We

elite postures, a commitment to change, a tendency to honour physical prowess over intellectual pursuits, a fascination with flags and other trappings of identity, the redemptive power of violence, a belief in the centrality of power in foreign affairs, the merging of state and industrial enterprises and involvement in big business, a world view attracted to romantic micro-narratives, the cult of individualism, and idealising 'thinking with the blood' over 'reason'. On the evidence from the campaign trail, Trump's politics are sufficiently congruous to these characteristics of right-wing authoritarian extremism to justify the label 'fascist' in my opinion.

could speculate endlessly, and with increasing anxiety, about Trump's possible behaviour through all the 'Events, my dear boy, events' that are the stuff of the games of nations.

In the short term, Trump's rise and rise has strengthened the march of the xenophobes. As the numbers stacked up for a Trump election victory over Hillary Clinton, *Front National* leader Marine Le Pen's right-hand man tweeted 'Their world collapses. Ours is being built'. When I heard this, my mind jumped to the scene in the restaurant garden in the musical *Cabaret*, when a young Nazi starts singing 'Tomorrow belongs to me'. Powerfully, and chillingly, the song's nationalistic emotions draw in the crowd. The triumph of Trump is drawing in nationalists elsewhere, and threatening to fuse them together a new internationalism of the right.⁷

What *The Economist* (19 November 2016) has called 'The New Nationalism' is manifest in the United States by Trump's commitment to 'Make America Great Again!' and put 'America First'. It is politics based on anger rather than ideals. The Trumpian version of Stars-and-Stripes nationalism threatens to be very bad news at home (it is not a coincidence that a spike of hate crimes has occurred); and it is bad news internationally when the most powerful state in the international system threatens to be an underminer rather than underwriter of international agreements - whether it is NATO, the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal, or various trade agreements. Trump is even opposed to international agreements in which the United States is not a member; he is no fan of the EU, for example, which for all its problems represents in my mind the high water mark of institution-building towards a post-national post-statist and progressive international politics. When Reagan became President I was scared because of the global existential threats immanent in his views on the superpower nuclear confrontation; today, with Trump about to become President, I am

⁷ This is why the largely empty word 'internationalism' (or 'internationalist')- invariably used to suggest progressivism in international politics - should be deleted from respectable conversation.

scared because of the global emancipatory threats immanent in his regressive political views.

The biggest short-term losers of the Trump presidency, if we simply extrapolate his ‘American psycho’ image, will be significant portions of the population of the United States in the face of the further possible rise of ‘white nationalism’. The biggest long-term gainers, externally, will be assorted tyrants if the United States goes missing in inaction on vital world order issues such as the environment, nuclear proliferation, human security and so on – the elements of a more harmonious and just world order . Such an outcome is all the more disappointing because, despite everything said earlier, the United States still remains one of humanity’s great hopes for a better world.

We live in an era when the ideas that made world politics what they have become do not work in the interests of humanity or of the natural world on which we ultimately depend. These ideas include patriarchy (and especially violent masculinity), evangelising religions, racial discrimination, predatory capitalism, consumerist democracy, nationalistic my-country-firstism (whatever country that is), and statist ideology committed to the idea of the so-called nation-state as the highest focus of loyalty and decision. The structures of thought and behaviour incubated over the centuries by such defining world political ideas, and their replication through powerful institutions, have created a dysfunctional world order in relation to spreading ideas of cosmopolitan hospitality in a shrinking planet, and to improving the prospects for more effective collective action in the face of global threats that are beyond the capacities of individual states.

What I have called the Donald Pimple is therefore a symptom - a particularly powerful one - of such a dysfunctional world order. What Gramsci would have called ‘morbid symptoms’ are all around: and that includes ourselves – academics and students in the rich world – who by definition are part of the global elite. I am referring to those of us who, as lazy liberals in what John

K Galbraith aptly described as *The Culture of Contentment* (1992), are cut off from those people at home and abroad who feel ‘the left behind’; and those of us who as naive nationalists shrug off the thought that ‘extreme’ nationalists are somehow a radically different breed, and overlook the fact that all forms of nationalism help nurture extremism by perpetuating the myths and conflicts caused by nationalistic narcissism; and those of us who, as complacent conservatives, believe that responsibility is bound to bring constraints and commonsense to an anti-politician politician who wants to do things his way. We too are part of the problem, and get the pimples we deserve.
