

Donald Trump Performance Signals Decline of US Power, Australian Perspective

Australian Journalist Chris Uhlmann's Trump Problem

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Featured image: Australian Journalist Chris Uhlmann (Source: The Sydney Morning Herald)

It's all well and good to huff at the current President of the United States, who has managed to get under more irritated skin than an army of dedicated leaches. The immersion of the White House into the reality television show of Trumpland has set people on edge, lighting volatile fires and driving some commentators, quite literally, around the bend.

There is much to set the traditional group of political vultures on edge. It could be Donald Trump's stance on climate change, his indifference to Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential elections or, for that matter, Russia at all. He cares little for institutions – the only one that ever mattered was his family as a brand name.

For Australian journalist Chris Uhlmann, a veteran of the national broadcaster, the G20 summit in Hamburg proved to be the last straw, perpetuating his blast that reflects the Weltanschauung of a wounded traditionalist long accustomed to a conventional spectrum of political reporting.

His piece on the *Insiders* program on July 9 was termed a “two-minute takedown” of the US president. For Uhlmann, Trump had shown “no desire and no capacity to lead the world”. (Because, naturally, states in an environment of sovereign equals must be *led*).

When the analyst fails, enter the opprobrium of the ad hominem attack. “Donald Trump has a particular, and limited, skill set.... He is a character drawn from America's wild west, a travelling medicine showman selling moonshine remedies that will kill the patient.”[1]

For Uhlmann, the Trump performance signalled the decline of US power, and one could almost sense the tear ducts watering. Where was the G20 statement on North Korea, one that would have “put pressure on China and Russia?” Trump was, essentially, in “a unique position” to defend “the values of the West”. And there, you have it.

Some of these views can be attributed to Uhlmann's background: a former trainee priest deemed by his wife (who else?) a moral figure and senior advisor for the conservative Christian independent Paul Osborne, one with whom he ran on the ACT Legislative Assembly ticket in 1998.

What duly unfolded was a phenomenon that itself characterises the state of a moribund fourth estate: the journalist as instantly minted celebrity, the hot streak of social media that is measured in “hits” and “likes” rather than reflective reading and sober digestion.

The engine room of celebrity, was, as ever, taken as the United States. If you have not made it there, you have not made it at all. Megan Doherty exemplifies the point:

“On Facebook, the original post reached almost 2 million people, most from California and New York. Insiders also scored 4,500 Twitter followers out of the sensation.”[2]

He was tapped by MSNBC for his views, which focused on “what his [Trump’s] priorities are”. If Trump had time to take “issue with a couple of reporters” with a barrage of abusive tweets, perhaps they were elsewhere.

The sense of Uhlmann’s criticism, however, suggests a considerable weakness: the sentiment of the imperial groupie, and a disappointed one at that. For decades, the United States has been the feted guardian of Australian interests (cheaply titled those of the free world), the guarding hegemon ever watchful of interests in the Asia-Pacific.

Since the Second World War, Australian governments have been willing vassals for Washington, for the projection of American power, supplying foreign targeting options from bombers to drones, being a forward supply and training line for war.

This trend was only questioned during the Whitlam years in the first part of the 1970s, when concerns arose about the role played by Australian operatives in the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile, and the possibility that the Pine Gap base was being used to target North Vietnam.

Foolishly, Australian policy makers have tended to think of their own interests as seamless and synonymous with those of their fraternal bully, the nuclear umbrella throwing its reassuring, if sinister shadow across the island continent. (In actual fact, Canberra’s ignorance of its strategic environment, not to mention its neighbours, has been institutionally profound.)

It is only in recent years that the prospect of a military confrontation between Washington and Beijing has thrown some of the security fraternity off guard. China supplies the cash for a commodity-reliant economy; the US supplies the defence for a vast continent that can never be conventionally defended.

Uhlmann’s point returns to a lamentably traditional one that needs no encouraging: there are great powers, and there are small powers who need to find suitable boots to lick, or beds to warm. Better that of a historical “friend” (the term sits artificially in the canon of international relations) rather than traditional foes (Russia and China).

“I guess it struck a chord with fears about Trump that are shared by many. Perhaps for the Americans the added interest was it was an observation from a friendly nation that Trump risks ceding US power to others.”[3]

Trump will hardly care about the sorrowful reflections of an Australian political anchor aggrieved that the empire is misbehaving. Nor will his supporters. As Alice Butler-Short, founder of Virginia Women for Trump explained,

“If America’s strong, if America’s prosperous, if America’s safe then that helps

us to help the rest of the world.”[4]

Forcibly, or otherwise.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-09/did-trumps-g20-performance-indicate-us-decline-as-world-power/8691538>

[2] <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/chris-uhlmann-on-being-an-internet-sensation-and-what-hes-got-planned-next-20170713-gxaz8s>

[3] <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/chris-uhlmann-on-being-an-internet-sensation-and-what-hes-got-planned-next-20170713-gxaz8s>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-11/donald-trump-chris-uhlmann-americans-defend-president/8696438>

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