

Trump at West Point: Un-Policing the US World

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Donald Trump claims to be the law-and-order president of the United States. There does not seem much sign of this as the stitching of the Republic gets undone. Protestors have been given a considerable roughing up across several states; police forces are in retreat before proposals of defunding while protocols for arrests are being changed. Police chiefs are resigning and, in the rarest of cases, officers are being charged for police brutality.

What, then, of the empire's own policing capabilities overseas? Here, the Trump message is a treat of confusion. He wishes to be armed for unilateralism. No more needless policing endeavours in the international arena. No unnecessary use of US armed forces to intervene in the murky, squalid affairs of international relations.

The interventionist, policing streak in foreign policy reached its height with the 2005 declaration by President George W. Bush in [his second inaugural address](#) that it was "the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." This was ambitiously dangerous, foolhardy and a promise of a global US chokehold to be applied to any regime suspect of not sighing to the sirens of liberty. (Well, at least the US variant of it.) "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."

President Barack Obama was not much of an improvement on this doctrine of permanent revolution: the US had to continue remaining the sheriff of exceptionalism, a protector of "dignity". In [a speech to West Pointers](#) at a military academy commencement ceremony in May 2014 he acknowledged the old warning of George Washington "against foreign entanglements that do not touch directly on our security or economic wellbeing" and the interventionists' assertion "that we ignore these conflicts at our own peril". He preferred a middle way hardly different from his predecessors. The US could not be isolationist; history had imposed upon the Republic solemn burdens. There was "a real stake, an abiding self-interest, in making sure our children and our grandchildren grow up in a world where schoolgirls are not kidnapped and where individuals are not slaughtered because of tribe or faith or political belief."

Trump's language, at least on the subject of meddling in the name of liberty, or policing a form of international morality, seem unsentimental and alien to this strand of thought. On June 13, [in an address](#) to the US Military Academy at a West Point graduation ceremony, he proclaimed, or more appropriately reiterated, his task of "ending the era of endless wars." He preferred "a renewed, clear-eyed focus on defending America's vital interests." The ears of traditional isolationists would have pricked up in interest: "It is not the duty of US troops to solve ancient conflicts in faraway lands that many people have never heard of. We are not the policemen of the world."

The address was filled with the usual fripperies. “To the 1,107 who today become the newest officers in the most exceptional Army ever to take the field of battle, I am here to offer America’s salute. Thank you for answering your nation’s call.” But the reining in of US military forces has not fallen well on an obese establishment with a permanent eye to larger budgets and deeper troughs. Despite that, Trump did still throw them a vast bone, speaking of “a colossal rebuilding of the American Armed Forces, a record like no other.” Over \$2 trillion had been put into a program of “new ships, bombers, jet fighters, and helicopters by the hundreds; new tanks, military satellites, rockets, and missiles”. And that fabulous hypersonic missile.

Of interest is how such a speech stirs the critics of Trump. Peter Bergen, using his CNN pulpit as national security analyst, [spent little to no time examining](#) the contents of what was said. He preferred to focus on the shallow optics of it all, “the growing disconnect between [Trump] and the US military.” The clumsy exercise of involving the military, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, in a photo op after walking from the Rose Garden at the White House to St. John’s Church, seemed to be of more interest. Protestors had been violently dispersed for a caricatured still of power: the commander-in-chief, clumsily sporting a Bible, military officialdom nearby. Defense Secretary Mike Esper’s reluctance to share in the show was also noted. Suddenly, the military had hopped on the “peace is our business” train, including four former chairmen of the joint chiefs stretching back to the administration of President George H. W. Bush.

Bergen’s refusal to engage the content of the speech conforms to a syndrome across a press corps and commentariat fixated by form and pantomime. This is one of Trump’s remarkable, though not commendable achievements: to convert his critics into one vast persona of his own shallowness, a projection of vulgarity taken with baubles and the show. The result of this transformation is one of Twitter-sized relevance. Best focus on the distracting asides: the way, for instance, [the president walked down the stairs after his address](#).

The president’s bodily movement transfixed Yale University psychiatrist Bandy X. Lee, [who claims](#) to be uninvolved in politics until it “invades my area of expertise”. That, evidently, did not involve scouring the contents of a speech suggesting the sparing of lives US or otherwise in futile and dangerous adventurism. Far better to focus on Trump’s neurological disposition. “The uneven gait is something I have remarked at least since his fall visit to Walter Reed, and a forward-leaning posture is associated with the difficulty holding a cup. Note that there has not been an annual report on his health this year.”

There was even room for Lee [to bellyache](#) about treatment (or lack of) from the [New York Times](#) “citing only the reporter’s own speculations, and quoting just the president and his former doctor – for a field that arguably needs the MOST expertise”.

The military and Trump might not see eye-to-eye on points, but this is a needlessly flogged horse. When it comes to matters of shredding international security pillars as the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, he has had support. At its core, the imperium breeds consensus. “Treaties stand in the way of freedom of action,” [noted](#) Michael Krepon. It is exactly that sort of freedom the US military chiefs, and the commander-in-chief, crave.

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