

The Trump Scenarios

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America was deeply divided before Donald Trump ran for president, but now it is even more so. A chronically lying, nasty, and narcissistic egomaniac in the White House is a “black swan” wild card that very few imagined. But it happened here, and Trump now occupies the most powerful political position in the world. Whatever our views, we can all agree that polarization is widening, and that intense controversies, many dangers to many people, and huge uncertainties lie ahead.

Where there is great uncertainty, considering a range of scenarios can illuminate some plausible futures, both good and bad, and help to plan strategies. For starters, consider these six generic scenarios, aligned along an axis of how long Trump stays in office, how long Trumpism persists in Washington, and how deeply Trump and his appointees influence global and domestic affairs for better or worse.

- 1) **Real Greatness.** It is possible that America can really be made “Great Again,” by improving infrastructure that is needed (in contrast to building “a great, great wall” on the Mexican border), tax reform without favoring the already-favored rich, affordable health care for all, better education, more decent jobs and job training, win-win trade deals, a carbon tax, reduced use of drugs, penal reform, etc. Trump has defied expectations in recent years, and may do so again with his cabinet of billionaire “achievers” (to use Newt Gingrich’s spin). Many Trump supporters fervently believe that he will make positive changes. If most Americans agree that Trump is doing far more good for America than bad, he is likely to win a second term and be in office for eight years. But given Trump’s limited grasp of reality, simplistic understanding of many issues while ignoring many others, largely inexperienced appointees, numerous gaffes, and penchant for playing only to his core supporters for their applause, this outcome seems very unlikely. Based on his first six weeks in office, there is little to suggest that Trump and associates will make America Strong Again, Wealthy Again, Proud Again, or Safe Again, or that “American Carnage” will be stopped “right now,” let alone reversed.
- 2) **Faux Greatness.** No matter what policies are pursued, it is certain that Trump will claim to be making America great again by doing what he promised (even if superficially), shaking things up (presumably for the better), creating jobs (no matter how few or how decent), and draining swamps (by downsizing agencies and regulations). Credible indicators may point strongly to the weakening of America, with the new ethical and plutocratic swamps far larger, unnecessary military build-ups, imaginary trickle-down to the poor and economically stressed, and harsh treatment of immigrants and the LGBT communities. We have already seen where Trump angrily disavows or ignores inconvenient truths and replaces them with his own alternative facts and half-truths to fit his alternative reality, while projecting his defects onto others (i.e. “Crooked Hillary,” the “very dishonest media,” etc.). If Trump and associates successfully continue their Orwellian inversion of reality (“war is peace,” “ignorance is strength”), and a sufficient portion of American voters fail to see the many cracks in Trump’s “big con” and remain convinced or at least hopeful that greatness is under way, Trumpism will still be with us for four years, possibly more.

A sobering CBS/YouGov poll in February divided the electorate into four categories regarding Trump: “Believers” who strongly support him (22%), “Conditionals” who support him if he delivers (22%), “The Curious” who might reconsider if he does a good job (21%), and “Resisters” who are strongly against him (35%). To deliver even faux progress, Trump would have to convince most of the Conditionals and convert some of the Curious. His “unity and strength” address to Congress on February 28 showed that he could stay on script and act presidential to the gullible. The instant CNN/ORC reactions poll registered 57% very positive and 21% somewhat positive, despite “numerous inaccuracies” according to The Washington Post Fact Checker and grandiose claims such as “every problem can be solved.”

To many others, however, Trump seems to be the presidential equivalent of Billy Bob Thornton’s two “Bad Santa” movies, and his February 28 address does not signify a change of behavior. Moreover, Trump has developed a strong base of disrespect: a recent round-up of February polls finds that 63% of the public thinks he is not level-headed, 60% say he does not share their values, 58% feel embarrassed by Trump, 55% see him as not honest, and 55% find him lacking in good leadership skills. This base of negativity will be tough to erode.

- 3) ***Gridlock Extended.*** More likely than either of the above scenarios, there could be a mix of successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, smart decisions and stupid ones, but none that are clearly ruinous, and no huge scandals or disasters. The battle lines will stay roughly the same between Trump supporters and opponents. With support for Trump hovering around a record-low 40% at the outset of his presidency (a bit more in some polls, and less in others), Republican gains in the 2018 mid-term election are unlikely, but losses in Congress would not be significant because many congressional districts have been gerrymandered in favor of Republicans, and the GOP-dominated Federal Election Commission regularly ignores violations and infusions of dark money. This gridlock assumes that “The Resistance” in general continues, launched by the 673 spirited Women’s Marches worldwide on January 21, but the movement does not grow much larger.
- 4) ***Gone by 2020.*** The widespread assumption that America and the world will have four years of President Trump overlooks the many possibilities that he will not be in office by 2020. He could resign in the face of determined opposition by an increasingly angered and anxious public, resistant cities and bureaucrats, and/or the courts. Or some huge and clearly evident scandal, especially involving Russia, could do him in. Hatred of Trump is such that he could be assassinated (unlikely). Or the military could stage a coup if he gets overly unhinged (very unlikely).

Much more likely, perhaps even probable, Trump could blow a fuse and be toppled by a heart attack, stroke, or other major health issue. At 70 years of age when inaugurated, he is the oldest president in US history. Moreover, he seems to have a poor diet (favoring cheeseburgers and steaks), doesn’t exercise other than walking to his golf cart, and gets insufficient sleep before and after his 3 AM tweets.

And there is a fair chance that he could be impeached for any one of many transgressions construed as High Crimes and Misdemeanors, or his numerous conflicts of interest that already violate the Emoluments clause of the Constitution. Many lawsuits against Trump are already under way or contemplated, and many pitfalls in foreign policy could make Trump far more unpopular. Once a sufficient number of Republicans in Congress sense that their reelection in 2018 is endangered, impeachment proceedings could begin. As of late February, the petition at www.impeachDonaldTrumpnow.org already had nearly a million

signees, but this is far from sufficient, yet, to cause worry in the White House.

If impeachment is successful (or the threat of probable impeachment leads to Trump's resignation so as to save face), the former Vice President and new conservative president will not be a great improvement. Mike Pence, at least, is predictable, non-inflammatory, and less authoritarian. It is problematic, though, as to whether he will be tainted and weakened by association with Trump, or whether Trump's departure opens the door to more easily enacting the hard-right agenda that Pence and the Republican majority in Congress favor.

5) **Disaster.** Many liberal critics fear the worst, especially with hot-tempered and ill-informed Trump as Commander-in-Chief, but not the tacit "Learner-in-Chief" heretofore assumed for White House occupants. Consider some possibilities:

- A further build-up of nuclear weapons and/or ballistic missiles by North Korea's Kim Jong-Un provokes Trump into a preemptive attack;
- Trump tries to "get tough" with China over trade or the South China Sea;
- To clearly stay "on top," Trump expands America's nuclear arsenal, provoking an expensive and dangerous global arms race;
- Stock markets collapse, partly due to looser regulation, and the US and global economy go into a deep dive as severe as the Great Recession of 2008—or worse;
- Trump tax cuts and unwise spending programs and public investments drive US deficits much higher, raising interest rates and aggravating income inequality;
- Trump's bellicose zero-sum "America First" positions lead to ruinous trade wars and a marked decline in foreign tourists visiting the US;
- Global warming passes a tipping point and clearly accelerates, with rising sea levels and even more droughts, floods, heat waves, severe storms and tornados making America much less safe, but Trumpies still failing to see climate change as a "threat multiplier" to national security;
- Trump awkwardly tries to wipe "out 'radical Islamic terrorism' " (both real and imagined), which attracts many more ISIS supporters, and leads to terrorists using nuclear or biological weapons;
- Terrorists or criminal groups take down the internet for an extensive period;
- Right-wing nationalist Marine Le Pen, inspired and encouraged by Trump, becomes president of France in 2017, leading to collapse of the European Union;
- Left-wing nationalist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador or "AMLO," riding on widespread dislike of Trump, becomes president of Mexico in 2018, and, at the least, an ongoing tweeting war ensues between the two leaders.

Trump will be blamed for any palpable disaster or disasters, and there are many possibilities and potential combinations. The outcome could range from human extinction or near-extinction due to nuclear winter, to deep economic depression for many years, to recoverable but very expensive calamities.

6) **One Step Backward, Two Steps Forward.** The most positive scenario for Trump critics is that the follies of Trumpism become widespread and apparent, "buyer's remorse" sets in among many "Conditional" Trump supporters and some disillusioned Believers, and the damage to America and its standing in the world is short of catastrophic, but sufficient to take many votes away from Republicans. House and perhaps the Senate would be recaptured by Democrats in 2018, and a 2020 landslide of Johnson-Goldwater or Roosevelt-Hoover proportions in 2020 leads to a Democratic president and Congress, and Democrats retaking many statehouses and governorships, thus enabling a genuine and necessary progressive era of sustainable green growth, accelerated and necessary transition to a low-

carbon economy, respect for science and evidence-based policy-making, a focus on human security and accepting climate change as a catalyst for instability, lessened inequality, humane immigration reform, and many new and decent jobs.

Appropriate new economic thought and economic renewal in the 21st century is critical, both in the US and worldwide. For example, *Better Business, Better World: Report of the Business and Sustainable Development Commission* (Jan 2017, 121 pages) asserts that achieving the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals would create nearly 400 million new jobs by 2030, by opening up at least \$12 trillion of 60 market opportunities in food and agriculture, sustainable and resilient cities, energy and materials, and health care. This "all-win" path, ignored by the media preoccupied with reporting on Trump, could not have been pursued under a President Hillary Clinton, who would have faced a hostile Republican Congress, even more so than Barack Obama did.

It is the path that the world is—and should be—taking, and the US can choose to be a leader or laggard, to regain global respect as a beacon of reason and constructive innovation, or continue to be seen as a contentious and costly retro outlier.

In addition to a compelling, detailed, and widely distributed vision of progress for all, so as to make this scenario more likely, progressives must assiduously question the core beliefs of Trump supporters. Is America becoming greater or weaker? Is the Washington swamp being "drained" or greatly expanded by plutocrats against the public interest? Is Trump's business acumen evident in any of his policies or is this largely a hoax? Is helping business in the short term by slashing regulations more than offset by harm to consumers, the environment, and public health? And what is Trump hiding in his tax returns, which aren't released because of the phony excuse that they are under audit and the outright lie that most Americans don't care? Ongoing and updated "Top 20" lists of Trump's lies, gross exaggerations, hypocritical positions, conflicts of interest, and unmet promises should be widely distributed in multiple formats. They won't dissuade all Trump supporters, or even most. But some Conditionals can be converted, if the correct persuasions are found, or at least lose their ardor for Trumpism so as to stay away from the polls.

These provisional scenarios, and their roughly estimated probabilities, based on the contentious first weeks of President Trump, could well deserve modification very soon. Such is the pervasive reality of uncertainty and danger that lies ahead—along with plausible opportunities for genuine progress, if we are lucky, smart, and reasonably united in opposition.

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