

Everyone but Trump Understands What He's Done

di Anne Applebaum

Donald Trump does not think strategically. Nor does he think historically, geographically, or even rationally. He does not connect actions he takes on one day to events that occur weeks later. He does not think about how his behavior in one place will change the behavior of other people in other places.

He does not consider the wider implications of his decisions. He does not take responsibility when these decisions go wrong. Instead, he acts on whim and impulse, and when he changes his mind—when he feels new whims and new impulses—he simply lies about whatever he said or did before.

For the past 14 months, few foreign leaders have been able to acknowledge that someone without any strategy can actually be president of the United States. Surely, the foreign-policy analysts murmured, Trump thinks beyond the current moment. Surely, foreign statesmen whispered, he adheres to some ideology, some pattern, some plan. Words were thrown around—*isolationism*, *imperialism*—in an attempt to place Trump's actions into a historical context. Solemn articles were written about the supposed significance of Greenland, for example, as if Trump's interest in the Arctic island were not entirely derived from the fact that it looks very large on a Mercator projection.

This week, something broke. Maybe Trump does not understand the link between the past and the present, but other people do. They can see that, as a result of decisions that Trump made but cannot explain, the Strait of Hormuz is blocked by Iranian mines and drones. They can see oil prices rising around the world and they understand that it is difficult and dangerous for the U.S. Navy to solve this problem. They can also hear the president lashing out, as he has done so many times before, trying to get other people to take responsibility, threatening them if they don't.

NATO faces a “very bad” future if it doesn’t help clear the strait, Trump told the *Financial Times*, apparently forgetting that the United States founded the organization and has led it since its creation in 1949. He has also said he is not asking but ordering seven countries to help. He did not specify which ones. “I’m demanding that these countries come in and protect their own territory, because it is their territory,” Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One on the way from Florida to Washington. “It’s the place from which they get their energy.” Actually it isn’t their territory, and it’s his fault that their energy is blocked.

But in Trump’s mind, these threats are justified: He has a problem right now, so he wants other countries to solve it. He doesn’t seem to remember or care what he said to their leaders last month or last year, nor does he know how his previous decisions shaped public opinion in their countries or harmed their interests. But they remember, they care, and they know.

Specifically, they remember that for 14 months, the American president has tariffed them, mocked their security concerns, and repeatedly insulted them. As long ago as January 2020, Trump [told](#) several European officials that “if Europe is under attack, we will never come to help you and to support you.” In February 2025, he [told](#) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that he had no right to expect support either, because “you don’t have any cards.” Trump ridiculed Canada as the “51st state” and referred to both the present and previous Canadian prime ministers as “governor.” He claimed, incorrectly, that allied troops in Afghanistan “stayed a little back, a little off the front lines,” causing huge offense to the families of soldiers who died fighting after NATO invoked Article 5 of the organization’s treaty, on behalf of the United States, the only time it has done so. He called the British “our once-great ally,” after they refused to participate in the initial assault on Iran; when they discussed sending some aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf conflict earlier this month, he [ridiculed](#) the idea on social media: “We don’t need people that join Wars after we’ve already won!” At times, the ugly talk changed into something worse. Before his second inauguration, Trump began [hinting](#) that he wouldn’t rule out using force to annex Greenland, a territory of Denmark, a close NATO ally. At first this seemed like a troll or a joke; by January 2026, his public and private comments persuaded the Danes to prepare for an

American invasion. Danish leaders had to think about whether their military would shoot down American planes, kill American soldiers, and be killed by them, an exercise so wrenching that some still haven't recovered. In Copenhagen a few weeks ago, I was shown a Danish app that tells users which products are American, so that they know not to buy them. At the time it was the most popular app in the country.

The economic damage is no troll either. Over the course of 2025, Trump placed tariffs on Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan, and South Korea, often randomly—or again, whimsically—and with no thought to the impact. He [raised tariffs](#) on Switzerland because he didn't like the Swiss president, then lowered them after a Swiss business delegation [brought him presents](#), including a gold bar and a Rolex watch. He [threatened](#) to place 100 percent tariffs on Canada should Canada dare to make a trading agreement with China. Unbothered by possible conflicts of interest, he conducted trade negotiations with Vietnam, even as his son Eric Trump was breaking ground on a \$1.5 billion [golf-course deal](#) in that country.

Europeans might have tolerated the invective and even the trade damage had it not been for the real threat that Trump now poses to their security. Over the course of 14 months, he has, despite talking of peace, encouraged Russian aggression. He stopped sending military and financial aid to Ukraine, thereby giving Vladimir Putin renewed hope of victory. His envoy, Steve Witkoff, began [openly negotiating business deals](#) between the United States and Russia, although the war has not ended and the Russians have never agreed to a cease-fire. Witkoff presents himself to European leaders as a neutral figure, somewhere between NATO and Russia—as if, again, the United States were not the founder and leader of NATO, and as if European security were of no special concern to Americans. Trump himself continues to lash out at Zelensky and to lie about American support for Ukraine, which he repeatedly describes as worth \$300 billion or more. The [real number](#) is closer to \$50 billion, over three years. At current rates, Trump will spend that much in three months in the Middle East, in the course of starting a war rather than trying to stop one.

The result: Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has declared that Canada will not participate in the “offensive operations of Israel and the U.S., and it never will.” German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius says, “This is not our war, and we didn't start

it.” The Spanish prime minister refused to let the United States use bases for the beginning of the war. The U.K. and France might send some ships to protect their own bases or allies in the Gulf, but neither will send their soldiers or sailors into offensive operations started without their assent.

This isn’t cowardice. It’s a calculation: If allied leaders thought that their sacrifice might count for something in Washington, they might choose differently. But most of them have stopped trying to find the hidden logic behind Trump’s actions, and they understand that any contribution they make will count for nothing. A few days or weeks later, Trump will not even remember that it happened.