

Trump Has Failed as Commander in Chief

di Thomas L. Friedman

With each passing month of his presidency, Donald Trump behaves more like America's commander in thief than its commander in chief.

How so? Let me count the ways. We are a nation at war today, with tens of thousands of troops deployed near Iran. Generally, when our nation has been at war, the commander in chief's top domestic priority is to keep the country united. Because there is nothing more demoralizing for U.S. troops fighting abroad than to look back and see our country ripping itself apart at home. And there is nothing that encourages an enemy to hold out for better terms for ending a war with America than seeing America at war with itself.

And how has Trump risen to that commander-in-chief unifying duty? He has not lifted a finger to bring Democrats behind the war. Instead, he's prioritized acting like a commander in thief. At the same moment Trump was asking our men and women in uniform to make the ultimate sacrifice, he engaged in a brazen, in-your-face attempted heist of the U.S. Treasury to benefit himself, his family and his political allies, which could include those who attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. It was so outrageous that even some of his most reliable Republican Party sycophants couldn't accept it.

Trump conspired with his own Justice Department, headed by his former personal lawyer, to use taxpayer money to create a \$1.776 billion political slush fund, supposedly to compensate those Trump supporters who "[suffered weaponization and lawfare](#)" at the hands of his predecessor. In fact, [as this paper's editorial board noted](#), it would "reward loyalists willing to defy the law and commit violence on behalf of the president."

Fortunately, a federal judge put a temporary hold on the scheme that no one described better than the Republican former Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell: “So the nation’s top law enforcement official is asking for a slush fund to pay people who assault cops? Utterly stupid, morally wrong — take your pick.” In the face of all that opposition, Trump’s acting attorney general, Todd Blanche, [said on Tuesday](#) he was withdrawing this terrible plan.

If Trump had an ounce of integrity, instead of scheming to set aside \$1.776 billion to potentially pay off these phony defenders of freedom’s frontier — loyalists who ransacked the halls of Congress — he would direct Congress to spend that exact amount to support today’s real defenders of freedom’s frontier: the Ukrainian Army. It is both resisting Vladimir Putin’s attempt to crush Ukraine’s democracy and sapping Russia’s ability to threaten the other free countries of Europe. God bless Ukraine’s fighters.

Alas, though, Trump apparently wants money only for people who tried to overthrow our Constitution at home, not for those who want to emulate our constitutional democracy abroad.

In addition, the Trump-directed Justice Department quietly inserted, as a supplement to that slush fund deal, a [one-page document](#) signed by Blanche stating that the government would be “FOREVER BARRED and PRECLUDED from prosecuting or pursuing” pending tax claims against Trump, his family members or his businesses. That measure remains in force, Blanche said on Tuesday.

President Trump has another moniker suggesting his ethical challenges: “trader in chief,” as The Associated Press [recently](#) proposed. Why? Because “recent presidents have stayed away from trading stocks in companies whose fortunes they could lift or scuttle with the stroke of a pen, but Donald Trump smashed that precedent in the first quarter of this year with more than 3,600 buy and sell orders,” The A.P. wrote, “many of them involving companies whose profits [have been directly impacted by his decisions](#) as head of the government.”

That was an average of 50 trades a day in stocks that included U.S. military suppliers affected by the Iran war. “If he were defense secretary, he would be committing a

crime,” Richard Painter, the chief White House ethics adviser in the George W. Bush administration, told The A.P. “Technically he can do this, but it is a fundamental breach of trust.”

Not only has Trump choked off [virtually all](#) U.S. financial aid to Ukraine, but he is also reducing U.S. troops on the ground in NATO countries right when Putin, sensing he is losing the war, is increasingly threatening them.

Just as Americans are starting to realize that Trump is becoming a predator on our system — trying to manipulate the justice system to generate cash available to his Jan. 6 pirates and immunity from ongoing inquiries into taxes for himself and his family — our allies are concluding that Trump’s America is becoming a dangerous predator on them.

Indeed, something is happening with America’s traditional allies that I never thought I would see in this lifetime or the next. In the post-World War II era, we and our allies together embraced the doctrine of “deterrence” against the Soviet Union, and later Russia, to prevent any attempt by the Kremlin to forcibly expand its influence into the free world or put neighbors under its thumb.

Not any longer.

Our allies have watched Trump threaten to make Canada the 51st state and to seize Greenland from Denmark. They have watched him start a war with Iran without consulting NATO and then demand that NATO help rescue us from what has turned into a mess. They have watched him slash U.S. financial assistance to Ukraine, put the Russian aggressor on the same moral footing as that country and then top it all off with reckless, ill-conceived tariffs on all our allies.

As a result of all that, something unprecedented is happening: “Deterring Trump’s America is now becoming a strategic priority of our allies as much as deterring Russia was,” Nader Mousavizadeh, the chief executive of Macro Advisory Partners, a geopolitical consulting firm, and a former senior adviser to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, told me.

And how could it not? When you look at how Trump has hammered Canada with tariffs, it is hard not to conclude that the worst position for a country to be in during

the second Trump administration “is to be America’s closest ally and have integrated your economy, energy systems and military with that of the United States,” Mousavizadeh said. Everyone can now see, he added, that Trump will “weaponize any country’s dependence on America and use it to extract whatever he can in the narrowest and most tactical and transactional definition of American power.”

No wonder that after Trump stepped up his rhetoric about taking over Greenland, European NATO members — Germany, Sweden, France, Norway, the Netherlands, Finland and the United Kingdom — all [announced](#) plans to send small military contingents to Greenland to bolster the Danes.

Daniel Fried, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland, noted in [an essay](#) for the Atlantic Council that though these NATO allies tried to frame their move as necessary to bolster Arctic security, they also “have used the word ‘deterrence.’ For Europeans to speak in such terms about the United States, even implicitly, is a low point, but it is needed.”

Let’s not forget that early on Trump forced Ukraine to give the [United States access to critical minerals](#) in return for U.S. help against a Russian Army trying to overrun it. This is the real “Trump Doctrine”: Oppose America, and I will tariff you; depend on America, and I will extort you.

The only rational response for our allies is to try to “deter and diversify,” Mousavizadeh concluded. And if Trump keeps this up for his full four years, he added, “no NATO leader can ever again responsibly agree to the degree of dependence on U.S. technology, U.S. defense systems or financial systems” that NATO countries long took for granted.

I have been in Portugal this week and I have been shocked by the degree to which European business executives speak of having lost faith in American institutions and in America as the guarantor of global legal norms — something they have always taken for granted. It is literally disorienting for them, like hikers who have lost their compass.

In short, having a president who behaves like a commander in thief — not a commander in chief — is costing us dearly at home and abroad. This perversion of the

American presidency is undermining the very alliance structure that won two world wars and the Cold War and generated one of history's longest ages of peace and prosperity. Every day we tolerate such behavior we endanger our children's future.