

## **Will Trump join the strongman club?**

*di Paul Wood*

The world's most exclusive club, of presidents-for-life, is growing. It already includes Putin of Russia, Xi of China, Lukashenko of Belarus, Sisi of Egypt and Kim of North Korea. Then there are the other permanent rulers, MBS of Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf monarchies, not forgetting Khamenei of Iran, and half a dozen African leaders. Now Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is trying to join the club. He has engineered trumped-up charges of terrorism and corruption against the man who might beat him in forthcoming elections, Istanbul's mayor. More importantly, Donald J. Trump openly admires such autocrats and clearly wants to be one himself. This is the age of the strongman – and the world is far more dangerous because of it.

*Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, says his old boss will run and win in 2028*

Trump often muses that he might like a third term as president. This could be Trump's usual trolling, but he has returned to the subject again and again. He should get four more years 'based on the way we were treated', because his first campaign had been 'spied on'; he wasn't '100 per cent sure' he couldn't run again; he was 'so good' people might say he should make a comeback. Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon – the keeper of the MAGA flame – says his old boss will run and win in 2028. Bannon was asked about the small problem of the US Constitution and its 22nd Amendment, which says you get only two terms, eight years. He gave a knowing smile. 'We're working on it. I think we'll have a couple of alternatives.'

What on earth is Bannon talking about? He says he hopes for a once-in-a-generation realignment of US politics, as when FDR won in 1932. FDR had four terms – the only US president to have more than two – but that was because of the second world war and before the 22nd Amendment. Perhaps Bannon thinks it can be repealed if the

MAGA movement grows strong enough. Other Trump supporters seem to believe their leader could just refuse to leave office. Trump's old political fixer and confidant Roger Stone told me during the 2020 campaign that he might put troops on the streets in the event of a disputed election 'if there is chaos'. That could be the end of American democracy. A former chairman of the joint chiefs, General Mark Milley, says Trump is a 'fascist to the core... the most dangerous person to this country'.

A group called Keep Our Republic says Bannon's 'wild proposals' should be taken seriously. The name comes from Benjamin Franklin's remark that America would not be a monarchy but 'a republic, if you can keep it'. One of those behind the group, Mark Medish, told me the presidency had built up secret powers throughout the Cold War and after 9/11. A bad actor like Trump could use war or some other national emergency to declare martial law. This would not necessarily be stopped by the Supreme Court, which had recently extended almost unlimited presidential immunity for crimes in office.

Taboo-breaking was a deliberate part of Bannon's strategy, Medish went on. 'Their method is to break things first and then normalise the rule-breaking... changing our political culture. This is how authoritarianism starts.'

Vladimir Putin is a model of how to break the rules and change the rules to hang on to power. As president, he simply swapped jobs with his prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, but continued to run things from the supposedly more junior position. Russian commentators called it the Tandem-ocracy, though no one doubted that Putin was in charge. A few years later, he swapped back. Trump might think he could pull the same trick. He could get elected vice-president, run things from there for a while as unchallenged leader of MAGA, then take the presidency again. The Constitution is a little vague on whether you can do that, but perhaps moving from vice-president to the top job wouldn't count as a full term. As Bannon said, enigmatically: 'We'll see what the definition of term limit is.'

Trump admires Putin above all because he's rich, possibly the world's richest man. Michael Cohen, Trump's former 'personal attorney', says in his memoirs that Trump spoke in awed tones about this. 'Imagine controlling 25 per cent of the wealth of a country. Wouldn't that be fucking amazing?' I once interviewed the Italian architect of

Putin's Palace, as the Russian opposition calls the lavish private retreat built for the Russian leader and which they say cost a billion dollars that were stolen from state coffers. The palace is a neoclassical pile of marble in 20,000 acres on the Black Sea. It's said to have an underground ice hockey rink, three helipads, a pole-dancing stage and a gold toilet with a gold toilet brush. Erdogan, too, has built himself a palace, with a thousand rooms, though it cost just \$600 million and he sued over claims it had a gold toilet.

The autocrats are united by more than a liking for gold leaf. Despite the bombast, they are often troubled characters, even surprisingly weak at their core. After he had been shot and hung by his heels alongside his mistress, Mussolini's long-suffering wife, Rachele, said: 'My husband appeared to be a lion, but instead he was a rather sad and small man.' President Trump's mental pathologies are well known, his character shaped by his bullying, 'high-functioning sociopath' father, according to a book by Trump's niece, Mary. After Trump won the election last year, his insecurities rampant even in his moment of triumph, he posted on his Truth Social: 'EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE MY FRIEND!!!'

Putin grew up the lonely child of parents traumatised by war, with few toys, chasing rats to kill them for fun. He survived in the dangerous world of the Leningrad *gopniki*-street hooligans – despite being physically small and weak. He became a modern tsar, photographed bare-chested in the Russian wilderness, though wearing lifts in his heels to make him look taller. Erdogan, meanwhile, tells a story of how his 'authoritarian' father once punished him for swearing by hanging him from the ceiling by his wrists. It was 15 to 20 minutes before an uncle cut him down. As a small boy, it's said he would calm his father's rages by kissing his shoes. He spent his teenage years in Istanbul's Kasimpasa slum, which was run by gangs who had an honour code of humiliating their enemies. He took that code with him into politics.

President Xi of China fits the pattern. There was plenty of misery and humiliation in his childhood. As the son of a senior party official arrested in the Cultural Revolution, he was called the 'child of a black gang'. Bookish and shy, he was paraded on stage at a struggle session, wearing a metal dunce's cap. His own mother was forced to raise her fist and chant 'Down with Xi Jinping!' along with everyone else. Then he was sent

to do hard labour at a school for delinquents. Now he is the man who says he feels called by destiny to reunite China. A war over Taiwan could blow up any moment. Trump certainly believes that: it is one reason he is rushing to dump Ukraine and make friends with Russia.

The venue for the first US-Russia talks in three years was Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, hosted by Trump's good friend Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). The Saudi royals are everything that Trump admires: rich and ruthless, there for life, unchallenged and untouchable. MBS wasn't brought up in poverty, but he is a product of the school of hard knocks, scrambling to the top despite being only the seventh son of his father, King Salman. It must have stung MBS when western politicians and businesspeople boycotted him for having one of his critics, the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, cut up with a bone saw. But the Jeddah talks allowed MBS to play host once again, and to play at geopolitics, the autocrats' favourite game.

As a group, the autocrats – and Trump, the wannabe – are thin-skinned, bitter, holding grudges that go back years, given to chest-beating, megalomaniacal, both sentimental and cruel. The US national security 'principals' who texted each other childish emojis to celebrate the bombing of Yemen this week – which killed some 53 people – were just following Trump's lead. This is a man who cut off the trust fund being used to pay for treating his nephew's seriously ill son, allegedly saying 'Let him die'.

*These leaders are thin-skinned, bitter, holding grudges, megalomaniacal, both sentimental and cruel*

But the greatest danger lies in the strongmen's grandiose plans, their wish to secure their place in history by redrawing the map. Putin has Ukraine; Xi, Taiwan; and Trump...Greenland. The Danes are taking Trump's threat to annex Greenland both literally and seriously. Rasmus Jarlov, the Danish Conservative party's spokesman on Greenland, told me they would never give in. He didn't think the US would invade, but would just pile on the pressure. 'We know that they're not shy of harassing allies.' The whole country was furious, he said. 'It's incredibly disrespectful and immoral, given the friendship and alliance we've had with the Americans for as long as anyone can remember.'

Jarlov is also chairman of the Danish parliament's defence committee. He believes the new American F-35 fighter planes that Denmark is buying have a kill switch and he doesn't trust the Trump administration not to use it. The Pentagon has denied there is such a kill switch, but the US could achieve the same effect by refusing to send spare parts, or just software updates. Jarlov fears something like that will happen in the campaign to seize Greenland, and he wants Denmark not to buy the F-35s. This wasn't retaliation: they could no longer depend on the US. 'Buying American weapons is a security risk that we cannot run.'

Is this the end of the rules-based international order? Trump's generals tried to explain the concept to him at a meeting in a bunker in the Pentagon early in his first term. He called them dopes, babies and losers, adding. 'I wouldn't go to war with you people.' Trump believes in America First, and so we must assume he doesn't want to start another big war with a costly occupation to follow, no new Iraq or Afghanistan. But his menacing of Denmark, Canada and Panama strengthens the real predators: Putin and (despite talk of a US alliance with Russia) Xi. Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times* has invented a term for this moment: neo-imperialism, the new age of empire. Small states must now fear a world without rules where, as Thucydides put it: 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'