

## Confusion as National Policy

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My father was a tough guy. When I was in college, it was much cooler to be a liberal arts major than to be in the school of commerce. Nevertheless, Dad insisted that I take not only a couple of accounting courses in the school of commerce, but also a class in business management.

Business management was one of the best classes I took in all of my education. Not only was the professor great, but he had a philosophy of teaching based upon examples of successful versus unsuccessful companies. The class was really a series of in-depth case studies.

Peter Drucker was my professor's guru. Drucker was not risk adverse, but rather taught that risk was part of success. Risk strategy was a prerequisite for an organization not only to survive, but also to prosper.

The current administration in Washington has articulated its goals well enough: secure national borders; fair trade; a strong military presence; economic success.

It is not the goal which is undermining the Trump administration but rather the means of achieving that goal. The question is whether inconsistency and confusion are good national policy? President Trump was not the first to invent the "good guy/bad guy" approach; police investigators have been using it for millennia. "Keep your enemies guessing; don't let your competitors know whether you are friend or foe." All of these are well-worn strategies that no doubt Mr. Trump learned at the Wharton School.

Running a nation, however, is a little bit different from dealing with competitors in the closed environment of the business world where public opinion and public perception have little or no input. In devising national strategy, is it a good idea to send confusing and inconsistent messages? One day, the entire Trump entourage stands up on the podium and decries Russian interference in American elections. The next day, the President says that allegations of Russian interference in American elections is a "hoax." An honest critic will ask the simple question as to what strategy does such an approach represent and how likely is it to be successful?

Perhaps the President's idea is to personally sidle up to Vladimir Putin, knowing that Putin is an old-fashioned European dictator, while having his administration kick butt. Neville Chamberlain tried to play nice guy with Adolf Hitler, while the West griped about the growing German military threat. The policy of inconsistency turned out to be no strategy at all and was a factor in emboldening Germany's attack on both Europe and Russia.

Many Presidents have used their administration to send one message while keeping the door ajar for another. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan all talked tough while negotiating with their enemies behind the scenes.

We do not about President Trump's strategy is, how being nice to Vladimir Putin on a personal level, while trashing Russia's interference in American elections through surrogates promotes a strategy of keeping American elections honest. The core fundamental value of our democracy is to keep money and foreign influences out of our electoral processes. We have failed miserably on the money side. Money flows from foreign countries and domestic sources directly to politicians, lobbyists and by virtue foreign agents. So awash are politicians and money, that the majority of time an elected official spends from the congressional level up is to raise money for the next election. It is no wonder that we are gridlocked in terms of national as well as domestic policy. The Founders were so against political parties and financial influences that they would not view our current system as a Republican form of government at all. They would see this country as a form of Roman decline where powerful interests control the political elite.

In terms of nations and their foreign agents attempting to influence American politics, this is also nothing new. In the Citizen Genêt Affair, a French foreign official, who later defected to the United States, did everything he could to undermine the Neutrality Proclamation of the Washington-Adams administration. There were those who felt this was a bold attempt by the French to introduce its revolution in the United States and to destroy our infant government in the process. There were allegations aplenty that Thomas Jefferson was behind this effort, as a committed Francophile himself who thought that a French Revolution in the United States might serve his own political purposes.

Today, the means of disrupting the political systems of other countries have evolved. The United States has done it, and now we are getting a taste of our own medicine. We overthrew a democratically elected government in Iran. So hated was our puppet, the Shah of Iran, that the Khomeini Revolution followed. That is only one of the more noteworthy examples of American interference in the elections of others.

Based upon our own history in interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, we should know as well as anyone the importance of securing our own electoral-run governmental system. We have simply set a standard that the rest of the world is now following. That does not make it right, but it should make us nervous.

When a national policy is based upon inconsistency and confusion, what do our friends and enemies do to secure their own interests? Do we play nice with Korea and Iran, or do we hold their feet to the fire until they behave in a way that creates a safe world? The only answer that serves American interests is to assure that those countries cannot do harm to others. On the other hand, why not get along with NATO, the European Union, England and Israel? These are our friends who share many of the same values we do, notwithstanding that the winds of change may bring a conservative or a liberal

government to one or another of these countries. We still share core values with many nations who need to understand what it means to be a friend of America. A policy based upon confusion is not a strategy leading to success.

Tariffs and borders? Undoubtedly, President Trump is correct that we need to secure our borders, to provide a path to citizenship for many illegals currently in the country and to have a rational immigration admission policy for the future. On tariffs, free trade has to be the goal; but in the meantime, we cannot forget about the fairness component. When Presidents Clinton and Bush traveled around the country selling the American people on free trade agreements, even they acknowledged the necessity to “fix up those deals” so as to make them more fair to Americans. The deals got passed, American industry boomed along with foreign employment, while American workers struggled. We still have not solved that problem and the current American policy of confusion is not working very well.

Hard work at diplomacy, along with a reasonable carrot and stick approach may not be exciting to read about on Twitter but it has a better chance at long-term success.

President Trump has lots of good ideas and doubtless he is trying some new approaches to grab attention. This particular approach, however, has created so much confusion among his supporters, friends and enemies that a clear path to success is obstructed with the rubble of ill-will. My college business management professor would not be happy.

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