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Whitewashing George W. Bush

By Walter Clemens
September 28, 2017



The New York Times editorial “Mr. Trump Squanders the World’s Trust” (Sept. 24, 2017) rightly underscores the reckless approach of President Donald Trump to world order. However the editorial errs in stating that President George W. Bush did not act capriciously in abrogating the 1972 antiballistic missile (ABM) treaty with the Kremlin. Bush, the editorial asserts, “relied upon the treaty’s agreed-upon withdrawal clause and had a strategy for improving relations with Russia going forward.” Neither of these claims is accurate. Article XV of the treaty permitted either party to withdraw “if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests. It shall give notice of its decision...six months prior to withdrawal....Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events the

notifying Party regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests.” The Bush administration never stated what extraordinary events related to the treaty jeopardized U.S. supreme interests.

Not only did the Bush administration violate the ABM treaty’s withdrawal clause, but the president’s unilateral action probably violated U.S. law. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) and thirty-two other members of the House of Representatives filed suit against Bush, saying his action was unconstitutional. Citing Thomas Jefferson and over fifty precedents, the plaintiffs argued that since a treaty is part of the “supreme law of the land,” and must be made with the approval of Congress, the president alone cannot unmake a treaty. A U.S. District Court upheld the executive branch and the six-month withdrawal period closed before Kucinich et al could take the matter to a higher court.

Though Bush perceived something positive in President Vladimir Putin’s eyes, U.S. policy tended to treat Russia like a weak and cornered bear, helping to bring on today’s animus. Subsequent U.S. efforts to erect antimissile defenses in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and South Korea have aggravated U.S. relations with Beijing as well as Moscow. Republicans in Congress, still dreaming of Ronald Reagan’s astrodome ABM defense, have usually supported not just research and development but also deployment of ABM defenses, regardless their cost, their unreliable performance, and the near impossibility of differentiating incoming warheads from decoys.

Bush, like Trump, seemed to relish withdrawing from international agreements (International Criminal Court, Kyoto Protocol, the Agreed Framework with North Korea). In most of these cases, “America First” harmed vital U.S. interests as well as international cooperation.

The effect of the *Times* editorial is to whitewash an important feature of the George W. Bush approach to world affairs and to miss an opportunity to place the Trump presidency in historical perspective. The reality is that Bush and Trump belong to a Republican leadership tradition of amoral and myopic politics that extends from Richard Nixon (sabotaging peace negotiations and extending the Indochina War) and Ronald Reagan (the Iran-Contra affair) to the present day. George H. W. Bush stood apart from this tradition, but his support for M. S. Gorbachev’s Soviet *Union* over the drive of Ukrainians, Estonians, and other Soviet minorities for national self-determination also belonged to a spirit of coldblooded Realpolitik. The tradition was rationalized, as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has put it, as a priority for U.S. “interests” over “values.”