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The unpredictability factor: Nixon, Trump and the application of the Madman Theory in US grand strategy

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Abstract *Five decades before Donald Trump sought to make a virtue out of his unpredictable approach to policy, Richard Nixon adopted a similar stance in regard to foreign affairs that became known as The Madman Theory. The Nixon-Trump comparison in regard to foreign policy and their embrace of a high-risk approach to international negotiations once in office, follows striking parallels between the two men's campaign pledges in 1968 and 2016. This paper examines the Madman Theory to consider its implementation by the Nixon administration and its subsequent adoption by the Trump White House as both leaders sought to rationalize their unpredictable approach to international flashpoints. Through a consideration of speeches, statements, transcripts and tweets it is possible to discern the manner in which both presidents embraced this approach to international relations, and the extent to which it served their interests as President of the United States.*

As a candidate, and later as president, the unpredictable and apparently unique qualities of Donald Trump have been routinely addressed by journalists and academics (Drezner 2020; Goldsmith 2017; Mellman 2017; Pfiñner 2018; Engelhardt 2019; Black 2018). This is understandable considering Trump's lack of previous political or military experience, backgrounds that defined all former presidents. Trump's unpredictable nature was one that the candidate and his aides were happy to cultivate as they came to office determined to 'drain the swamp' and usher in a new political era following the departure of Barack Obama (Shear and Harris 2016; Trump 2015). Despite widespread acceptance of his unique outsider status, this paper argues that it is deeply flawed, since any attempt to consider Trump's approach to the presidency reveals striking similarities with Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign. Both men touted their credentials as outsiders and peacemakers on the campaign trail, had tempestuous relations with the media, confounded critics with their approach to foreign affairs, and were the subject of impeachment hearings.

Rather than addressing the qualities that appear to set Donald Trump apart as a president this paper will consider the extent to which his approach to the presidency and the execution of grand strategy more closely resembles that adopted by his Republican predecessor. It will do so by directly asking if there is, indeed, a method to what critics have identified as Donald Trump's madness in the sphere of foreign policy. Specifically, this paper will consider the extent to which both men sought to project an unorthodox, unpredictable approach to foreign policy in a deliberate attempt to un-settle allies and

adversaries alike. Separated by five decades, the administrations of Richard Nixon and Donald Trump sought to extol the virtue of unpredictability in international relations, embracing a concept known as The Madman Theory. The paper will compare and contrast their ideological embrace of the theory, its adoption by their key advisors, and their attempts to implement the strategy in Vietnam and North Korea respectively. How and why this strategy was initiated reveals much about the two men, the policies they sought to initiate, and the times through which they governed. In its consideration of the use of unpredictability in the formulation of US foreign policy during the campaigns and presidencies of Nixon and Trump, this paper finds similarities between the two men and their approach to adversaries, whilst revealing severe limitations with the execution of the Madman Theory in US grand strategy. These limitations hindered the policy aspirations of both administrations as they sought to make a virtue of unpredictability, but instead, merely exacerbated international tensions.

During the 2016 presidential campaign Donald Trump portrayed his prediction for un-predictability as a strategic benefit to the nation in contrast to the approach adopted by President Obama (O'Toole 2016). Trump vowed to keep the United States out of 'endless wars' (Steinhauer 2019), promised to get America's allies to pay more for their own defence, and attacked his opponent, Hillary Clinton, for being a warmonger whose advocacy of globalization and nation building had 'produced only turmoil and suffering and death' (Parker and Rosenberg 2016). Notwithstanding the fact that Barack Obama had spent the past eight years de-escalating US foreign interventions, urging allies to meet their defence expenditure requirements, and that globalisation and nation building and been pursued by Democrat and Republican presidents for the past two decades, Trump's incendiary campaign speeches offended senior members of the Republican Party's foreign policy elite who refused to endorse Trump even after he secured the nomination, declaring themselves to be members of a #NeverTrump community (Gold 2016; Burns et al 2016; Borchers 2016). Despite this, a consideration of candidate Trump's statements on foreign policy reveals that his approach was reminiscent of that adopted by Nixon in 1968 when he campaigned for the presidency against Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Both Nixon and Trump portrayed their Democratic rival as being in favour of continued armed conflict and lacking the necessary negotiating skills required to extricate the United States from prolonged military entanglements. Both men claimed that peace was dependent upon their election and at risk if they were defeated. Once elected, however, both men quickly embraced an approach to foreign policy that sought to utilize the threat of extreme military force against Americas' adversaries, a tactic known as The Madman Theory. This paper considers the extent to which this approach to grand strategy, embraced by Nixon and Trump, may accurately be viewed as a method in their apparent madness. It will do so by considering the rhetoric of both men, their policy pronouncements and outputs, as well as the views of their closest advisors. Did they truly implement the Madman Theory, were they dangerously out of control, or were both men un-necessarily advocating extreme policy options for personal and political reasons?

The development of US grand strategy during the 2016 election has gone under-examined to date, while broader studies of the Trump presidency have

overlooked the use of Nixon-era concepts to guide the development of policy once in office. Works that have addressed the campaign have largely addressed the chaos that surrounded the Trump campaign and apparent inevitability of Hillary Clinton's election (Allen and Parnes 2017; Alberta 2019; Green 2017; Lake 2016; Tur 2017). Studies that have emerged following the 2016 election have largely focused on the turmoil surrounding the Trump administration (Acosta 2019; Stewart 2019; Wolff 2018; Woodward 2019). The chaos at the Trump White House and ensuing departure of administration officials has afforded an early insight into its decision-making processes (Comey 2018; Newman 2018; Mattis and West 2019; Sims 2019). These memoirs provide insight into the nature of foreign and domestic policy development that supplements the work of journalists and academics alike (Hennessey and Wittes 2020; Rucker and Leonnig 2020; Brands 2018; Frum 2018; Laderman and Simms 2017).

This paper utilizes discourse analysis to analyse statements issued by Nixon and Trump as they sought to utilize the Madman Theory in their approach to international adversaries. Doing so affords an opportunity to compare and contrast the rhetoric and policies of the 2016 campaign with those from 1968, providing a context within which to analyse tone, content, and intent. Discourse analysis allows for an appreciation of how unpredictable language was utilized on the campaign trail before being implemented in office by Nixon and Trump as they sought to apply the Madman Theory to further their global ambitions.

Discourse analysis is an appropriate methodology to adopt in this instance since, as Weldes (1998, 217) observed, studying political language is vital since it 'actively produces the issues with which policy makers deal and the specific problems that they confront'. The paper's use of discourse analysis helps address the vital question regarding the extent to which Nixon and Trump's embrace of the Madman Theory was one they actively utilized in office or has been applied retrospectively to explain initiatives that may otherwise appear to be lacking in judgement. The methodology allows us to examine the exact phrasings used by both men, and to compare this with their implemented policies.

As Doty (1993, 302) observed, discourse analysis is a 'system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense'. This paper considers the statements issued by Nixon and Trump to discern the extent to which their embrace of the Madman Theory makes sense in its specific implementation. This enables an appreciation of what George (1994, 191) noted, when he explained that studies of discourse analysis were united by a commitment to understand how 'textual and social processes are intrinsically connected and to describe, in specific contexts, the implications of this connection for the way we think and act in the contemporary world'. The utilization of discourse analysis contributes not only to our comprehension of Nixon's strategic approach towards Vietnam, but also enables a greater appreciation of Trump's approach to North Korea.

Any methodological approach has its limitations and discourse analysis is no exception. While language is crucial to the notion of discourse, politics and international relations are not reducible to language or linguistic analysis alone, ensuring that problems exist with this analytical approach. Particular

challenges present themselves in regard to under-analysis; fixating on an isolated quote, over-quoting, or by poorly summarizing a statement rather than quoting directly from the individuals in question. Selection bias is also a challenge in any use of discourse analysis, for as van Dijk (1990, 14) recognized this methodology requires 'explicit and systematic analysis' for an accurate and fair rendering of the sourced material. To address these challenges, this paper draws directly from statements, documents, and transcripts of conversations by Nixon and Trump as they address their embrace of the Madman Theory and its potential application. While material from the Nixon administration is available in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, the contemporary nature of the Trump administration ensures that sources have been derived from newspapers, journals, and memoirs. In all cases, the exact phrasing expressed by Nixon and Trump is considered, allowing an insight into their stylistic and political choices.

The theoretical conception of the Madman Theory

This paper will compare and contrast Nixon and Trump's ideological embrace of the Madman Theory, its adoption by their key advisors, and their attempts to implement the strategy in Vietnam and North Korea respectively. Before attempting to discern the adoption of the Madman Theory by Richard Nixon and Donald Trump, however, it is essential to define the concept and appreciate its origins. While several authors have addressed Nixon's embrace of the Madman Theory, few have traced its origins. Some (Van Kleef and Côté 2007; Sinaceur et al 2013; Sinaceur and Tiedens 2006) have adopted a psychological approach to address the concept through the prism of definitions of madness itself, but this is an altogether different proposition. The Madman Theory does not suppose that a leader is actually mad. Instead, it creates an impression of unpredictability to convince an adversary that all options are possible, including the threat of excessive force.

The concept of simulating unpredictability in international relations is not new. In his text, *Discourses on Livy*, Niccolò Machiavelli (1517) observed 'at times it is a very wise thing to simulate madness', as he addressed the advantages that could be derived from such an approach. Wong (2019) notes that flashes of anger by leaders who have traditionally been viewed as rational may also be advantageous. Generally, however, the application of unorthodox principles has been misconstrued by analysts and populations alike, for as Hobbes (1968) noted, 'all passions that produce strange and unusual behaviour are called by the general name of madness'. Burr and Kimball define the Madman Theory as a means to threaten a foe with 'the use of extreme or excessive force—force that normal people would consider disproportionate to the issues in dispute'. At issue, therefore, is the issue of proportionality. The proposed course of action may lead an adversary to 'assume that the threatener was genuinely crazy—even though he was not—and therefore capable of irrational, imprudent, unpredictable acts' (Burr and Kimball 2015, 52). The capacity to convince an opponent of an apparent mad intent is a necessary component in the utilization of a Madman Theory, a shortcoming Sechser and Fuhrmann (2017) find in the approach adopted by Khrushchev during the

Cuban Missile Crisis, when his rationality was counted on by decision makers at the Kennedy White House.

The intellectual basis for the Madman Theory is associated with the work of three Harvard University scholars: Thomas Schelling, Daniel Ellsberg, and Henry Kissinger. Schelling observed that, 'it is not a universal advantage in situations of conflict to be inalienably and manifestly rational in decision and motivations'. Indeed, several of the qualities attributed to concepts of rationality are 'strategic disabilities in certain conflict situations', ensuring that it may be advantageous for a negotiator to 'suspend or destroy his 'rationality' at least to a limited extent' (Schelling 1960, 18). As the Vietnam War escalated, Schelling (1966, 37) observed that in contrast to public expectations of calm and considered leadership, a 'paradox of deterrence' existed, which ensured that 'it does not always help to be, or to be believed to be, fully rational, cool-headed, and in control of oneself'.

Schelling's colleague, Daniel Ellsberg, explored the Madman Theory during a series of papers presented during the Lowell Institute Lectures at Boston Public Library in March 1959. Ellsberg's talks on 'The Art of Coercion: A Study of Threats in Economic Conflicts and War' included a lecture entitled 'The Political Uses of Madness'. Speaking on the threat of nuclear blackmail, Ellsberg noted that the blackmailer 'can go through various manoeuvres designed to make the victim uncertain of his behaviour, and let the victim weigh the risks'. Ellsberg insisted that the blackmailer 'need not be reckless or mad,' but in those circumstances where he is 'convincingly mad, the risks of commitment may be particularly small'. This was a vital component in the Madman Theory, since 'against rational opponents, the madman in this world can win; more than that, he can win safely. This puts an unprecedented premium on madness' (Ellsberg 1959). Few at the time could have imagined that the Madman Theory would soon be adopted by an American President. Indeed, Ellsberg (2017, 311) stressed that he 'never thought' the Madman Theory 'would appeal to an American leader, nor be remotely advisable under any circumstances'. Ellsberg (2002, 344) was insistent that this was an approach that could only 'cultivate madness and court disaster'. What Ellsberg could not have forecast is how his material would be interpreted and implemented by future leaders, which included his academic contemporaries.

Impressed with the Lowell Lecture papers, Henry Kissinger invited Ellsberg to present his findings on irrationality and unpredictability to his Harvard class in two lectures on 'The Political Uses of Madness'. Two years earlier, Kissinger (1957, 13) called for the potential use of America's nuclear forces in a limited war to 'affect the opponent's will, not to crush it, to make the conditions to be imposed seem more attractive than continued resistance, to strive for specific goals and not for complete annihilation'. A decade later Kissinger was named as Nixon's national security advisor, bringing the Madman Theory to heart of the US national security architecture at the height of the Vietnam War. In August 1970, Kissinger met with Ellsberg and recalled the Lowell Lectures, noting 'I have learned more from Dan Ellsberg than from any other person...about bargaining' (Ellsberg 2002, 343–346). During 1958–1959 Schelling, Ellsberg, and Kissinger worked independently on the Madman Theory at Harvard, the campus, inadvertently formulating the intellectual basis for President Nixon's most contentious foreign policy strategy,

while creating personal and professional resentments that contributed to Nixon's removal from office. As a result, Ellsberg, observed Richard Holbrooke, was 'the triggering mechanism for events which would link Vietnam and Watergate in one continuous ... story' (Willenson 1987, 275).

Nixon and Trump's ideological embrace of the Madman Theory

Any attempt to address the deployment of the Madman Theory by Presidents Nixon and Trump must begin with an account of their respective understandings and embraces of the concept. Their differing intellectual approaches to the concept reveals much about their appreciation of its potential as well as its short comings as they prepared to assume office in 1969 and 2017.

Nixon's experience as vice president during the 1950s was a vital component in his appreciation of the Madman Theory. As will be addressed in the following section, this was compounded by the work that Henry Kissinger conducted on the concept at Harvard. Both sources, however, have their challenges in terms of accounting for the Nixon administration's embrace of the Madman Theory and its efforts to implement this academic model of unpredictability in a real-world setting. President Nixon's embrace of the Madman Theory remains the 'least understood and most contentious of [Nixon's] negative incentives' (Kimball 2004, 15). During the summer of 1968, Nixon revealed his strategy for ending the Vietnam War to his aide, Bob Haldeman: 'I call it the Madman Theory, Bob, I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that "for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button" – and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace' (Haldeman and DiMiona 1978, 83). Nixon's embrace of the concept, therefore, pre-dated his 1968 election and in his mind was derived from his time as vice president during the Eisenhower administration.

Nixon recalled that Eisenhower 'secretly got word to the Chinese that he would drop nuclear bombs on North Korea unless a truce was signed immediately. In a few weeks, the Chinese called for a truce and the Korean War ended' (Haldeman and DiMiona 1978, 82). Nixon intended to apply the threat of excessive force, updating the Eisenhower principle for the Vietnam era. Debate has raged over the extent to which Eisenhower seriously considered the use of atomic weapons in Korea or whether he was merely bluffing (Jackson 2005). The historical record reveals that the viability of a nuclear strike on North Korea was indeed considered in a series of National Security Council meetings that Nixon attended as vice president during 1953. On 11 February President Eisenhower suggested that the United States 'should consider the use of tactical atomic weapons' on the Kaesong area of Korea ('Memorandum' 11 February 1953, 770). Eisenhower addressed the use of atomic weapons in Korea again on 31 March, noting it would be 'worth the cost' if the use of atomic weapons could 'achieve a substantial victory over the Communist forces' ('Memorandum', 31 March 1953, 272).

Eisenhower continued to raise the potential for a nuclear strike on North Korea, speculating as to whether four airfields 'might not prove a target which would test the effectiveness of an atomic bomb', since he had 'reached the point

of being convinced that [the United States had] to consider the atomic bomb as simply another weapon in [its] arsenal' ('Memorandum', 6 May 1953, 977). Eisenhower later voiced the opinion that 'it might be cheaper, dollar-wise, to use atomic weapons in Korea than to continue to use conventional weapons against the dugouts which honeycombed the hills along which the enemy forces were presently deployed' ('Memorandum', 13 May 1953, 1014). Clearly, 'US patience was wearing thin, which increased the possibility of the use of atomic bombs,' a situation that was exacerbated by 'rumours about Eisenhower's threat to raise the ante unless a ceasefire was negotiated' (Crane 2000, 164). Despite the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement on 27 July, discussions regarding a potential atomic attack on North Korea continued unabated, as Eisenhower briefed Churchill that if fighting flared up again 'the United States would feel free to use the atomic bomb' (Eisenhower 1963, 180, 248).

President Nixon admitted to Henry Brandon that he had been 'a strong supporter' of Eisenhower's policy whereby the United States 'could say to the world, "If in any place in the world, one of our allies, or countries whose interest is similar to ours, is attacked, we ... might very well use our nuclear superiority to deter the attack or to answer it"' ('Oval Office Conversation' 1971, 51). As president, Nixon sought 'to convey his supposed madness as irrationality, unpredictability, unorthodoxy, reckless risk-taking, obsession, and fury' (Kimble 2004, 15) in a bid to end the Vietnam War and establish a new global order. The Madman Theory is predicated on the threat of irrational behaviour by an individual that an opponent fears may be dangerously unpredictable. Eisenhower, however, was neither irrational or unpredictable, or sought to project this impression. He had been Supreme Allied Commander of European Forces during the Second World War and was regarded as a stable, level-headed leader. His threat to North Korea was not based on madness or unpredictability, but on the precedent of the US atomic attack on Japan. His deliberations regarding their potential use in North Korea were conducted in a calm and considered manner at the national security council, raising doubts as to the extent to which Eisenhower's practices from the early 1950s were a role model for Nixon's embrace of the Madman Theory almost two decades later.

Calm and considered were not adjectives that were used to describe Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency in 2016. In fact, Trump promoted his unpredictable reputation as a potential asset for the United States. Having used chaos as a tool on the campaign, President Trump sought to use 'his reputation for unpredictability and lack of respect for long-standing international norms to unnerve and then intimidate America's adversaries into making concessions that they would not otherwise make' (Hohmann 2016). His utilization of unpredictable and confrontational language ensured that parallels were quickly made with Nixon's Madman Theory (Krauthammer 2017; Walt 2017; Coll 2017; Bew 2018). Attempts to address the Madman Theory in regard to the Trump presidency, however, must proceed on the recognition that differences exist between its implementation and focus under Trump from that under Nixon, although the fundamental question regarding its viability remains.

Just as Nixon had done in 1968, Donald Trump premised his candidacy in contrast to the preceding administration. As Nixon sought to distinguish his presidency from that of Kennedy and Johnson, so Trump framed his language and policies in response to that of Barack Obama. Where Obama had been

calm and clinical, Trump was unpredictable and fiery; where Obama had been inclusive, Trump was divisive. Trump pledged to end the rational approach of President Obama and introduce an unpredictable component to US foreign policy, insisting, 'We must as a nation be more unpredictable' (Hohmann 2019). Implicit was Trump's belief that President Obama's style of governance had been a hindrance to US global strategy as he had forewarned America's adversaries of impending policy changes. 'Tipping your hand,' Trump insisted, 'is one of the dumbest mistakes you can make in a military confrontation'. Obama's reputation for rationality ensured that his opponents never feared him, Trump argued, since he refused to abandon a bad negotiating position. The unpredictable approach that Trump adopted in office was evident on the campaign when he noted, 'The element of surprise wins battles ... I don't want people to know exactly what I'm doing – or thinking. I like being unpredictable' (Trump 2015, 46).

The unpredictable aspect that Trump wished to highlight was evident on the first day of his presidential campaign as he insisted that Mexican immigrants were a threat to national security, declaring 'They're not sending their best ... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists' (Green 2017, 161). Trump repeatedly echoed ideas from his 2015 publication, *Crippled America*, which detailed his plans for addressing what he saw as the challenges facing America following eight years of the Obama presidency. Trump was happy to reiterate the most contentious element of his announcement speech, repeating his desire to, 'build a great wall on our Southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall' (Trump 2015, 20). As he secured victories in the primary season, Trump's language became increasingly unpredictable, pledging to 'bring back a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding' to interrogate suspected terrorists (Swan 2016); proposing to kill the families of terrorists, insisting, 'you have to take out their families ... When they say they don't care about their lives, you have to take out their families' (LoBianco 2015); promising to 'quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS' (Johnson 2015); and calling for 'a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States' (Alberta 2019, 262). The backlash was profound; former President George W. Bush called Trump 'unhinged' (Siddiqui and Jacobs 2015), and his future running mate, Indiana Governor Mike Pence, called the proposed ban, 'offensive and unconstitutional' (Selk 2017).

Despite the pushback against his policy statements, it is important to note that Donald Trump's world view did not form overnight. Neither were his policies driven by partisanship, as he routinely attacked decisions made by both Democrat and Republican administrations. Trump's refusal to telegraph negotiating positions can be tracked back at least as far as 1984 when he attempted to negotiate the future direction of the Cold War between the United States and the USSR: 'I wouldn't want to make my opinion public,' he told Romano (1984). 'I'd rather keep those thoughts to myself ... It's something that someone should do that knows how to negotiate and not the kind of representation that I have seen in the past'. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, his offer was not taken seriously in either Washington, or Moscow. Three years later, Trump (1987) paid almost \$95,000 to print an open letter in leading newspapers across the United States, in which he declared 'the world is laughing at American politicians'. He reinforced this on the same day in interview with Larry King (1987) in which he declared that

foreign nations 'laugh at us behind our backs, they laugh at us because of our stupidity'.

A consideration of Trump's public statements and published materials reveals a long-standing commitment to a set of core ideas that have been adhered to as president; increasing US defence capacity, securing US foreign trade, restricting immigration and imports, reducing overseas aid, and increasing infrastructure spending at home. In short, Trump sought to put 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again'. His opposition to the international liberal order may contradict the stance adopted by all US presidents since World War Two, but his unorthodox approach to the presidency is reminiscent of President Andrew Jackson, whose portrait Trump has hung in the Oval Office (Mead 2017; Clarke and Ricketts 2017). During the campaign, Trump sought to extend the unpredictable practices he utilized in the world of New York real estate to the world of politics and international relations. As the word was to discover, however, the congressional safeguards included in the American Constitution ensured that 'the rest of the world [was] more exposed to a Trump presidency than Americans themselves' (Laderman and Simms 2017, 10).

The Madman Theory and presidential advisors

Having considered the ideological embrace of the Madman Theory by both Nixon and Trump, it is important to address the appreciation for the concept by their key advisors. The American Presidency is a very personal office that permits the office holder to appoint a range of key advisors, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. These advisors have the potential to guide presidential thinking as well as to reinforce existing predilections. They may serve as sycophants or sophisticated intellectuals, but all, ultimately, serve at the pleasure of the president they are hired to advise. The approach adopted to the Madman Theory by those closest to Nixon and Trump again reveals much about the two presidents and their approach to the world they sought to shape.

A vital source of the Madman Theory as utilized by the Nixon administration was the academic career of national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. As Isaacson (1992, 164) noted, 'Fundamental to Kissinger's philosophy – and to the realist political tradition – was that diplomacy must be backed by the threat of force'. Along with Nixon, Kissinger believed that this approach was vital at a time when the continued viability of the United States on the world stage was in doubt and it sought to disengage from the war in Vietnam. Ellsberg believed that Nixon and Kissinger shared 'a very strong ideological belief in the efficacy and legitimacy of the threat of violence as a tool of power and as a way of "establishing world order"' (Wenner 1973). To consolidate American dominance, Kissinger was content to espouse the utilization of unpredictability in foreign affairs; the use of The Madman Theory. Having been aware of the concept a decade earlier at Harvard, and having espoused a provocative use of the US atomic arsenal in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger brought an intellectual interpretation of the subject that compounded the real-time experience that Nixon claimed to have gleaned from his time as vice president.

The implementation of the Madman Theory demonstrated what Aitken (1993, 379) referred to as Nixon and Kissinger's 'child-like enthusiasm for springing surprises, a conspirator's love of secrecy, a guerrilla's contempt for

the regular force of the bureaucracy, and a manipulator's enjoyment of power politics'. Their strategy threatened the application of destructive power coupled with an attempt to convince nations that Nixon was willing to deliver upon threats in an irrational and unpredictable manner. Ambrose (1989, 270) suggested that Kissinger encouraged Nixon since he knew the president 'liked to hear tough talk, liked to indulge in mad-bomber fantasies'. Implementing a 'good-cop, bad-cop routine' allowed Kissinger to come across as 'reasonable, but he would let it be known that he was having a difficult time controlling his president's warlike instincts' (Isaacson 1992, 164).

Nixon and Kissinger forged a unique partnership as they moved to implement a new grand strategy to address the post-Vietnam War era. The concept of a president and national security adviser working in such a manner was new in the American experience (Glad and Link 1996), and enabled Kissinger to circumvent Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird, and deal directly with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in implementing bombing raids in Cambodia and North Vietnam (Colodny and Gettlin 1991, 96). This unpredictable approach, however, not only risked international conflict, but also heightened internal divisions as those who voiced opposition, including Secretary of State Rogers, found themselves frozen out of the administration's foreign policy initiatives altogether (Dallek 2007, 116–117, 222; Haig and McCarry 1992, 256–7; Kissinger 1982, 196; Ehrlichman 1982, 297).

Neither Nixon nor Kissinger made direct public reference to the Madman Theory, causing some researchers (Hoff 1994; Immerman 1990) to question their embrace of the concept. To have done so would have undermined whatever benefit was derived from the approach and revealed it have been a sham designed to provoke a response from America's adversaries. The two men did, however, discuss the threat of overwhelming force and of embracing an unpredictable approach to international relations (Nixon 1978, 384; Kissinger 1979, 304–305; Garment 1997, 174–177). On 23 April 1971, Kissinger recommended that in forthcoming negotiations with the North Vietnamese Nixon could 'imply that [he] might use nuclear weapons' ('Conversation' 1971, 581). Despite doubts, therefore, the Madman Theory was openly debated at the highest levels of government during the Nixon presidency.

Debate surrounding the Nixon administration's utilization of the Madman Theory has failed to satisfactorily identify a definitive point of origin. The claim by Haldeman and DiMiona (1978, 98) that Nixon 'conceived the Madman Theory', which Kissinger 'perfected' must be questioned since Kissinger was clearly aware of the Madman Theory while at Harvard. Likewise, the assertion by Hersch (1983, 53n) that it was 'highly likely' that Kissinger was responsible for Nixon's adoption of the Madman Theory must be questioned since Nixon discussed the concept with Haldeman in the summer of 1968, demonstrating his grasp of the concept prior to Kissinger's influence over administration policy. What is apparent is that Kissinger, 'courtier-like, helped make himself the indispensable adviser by supporting Nixon in this stratagem when other advisers opposed it' (Kimball 2004, 19). Nixon, the political practitioner, and Kissinger, the political intellectual, therefore, had their own individual paths to their mutual embrace of this contentious use of unpredictability in US grand strategy.

One of the biggest challenges to President Trump's effort to implement a Madman Theory approach to US grand strategy has been his apparent isolation within the administration. Despite having appointed his hand-picked

cabinet, Trump appears unwilling or unable to rely upon them for guidance, ensuring that his policy announcements lack the strategic nuance or conceptual framework that Nixon operated within. Although often alone in the White House, Nixon appeared to have a key intellectual advantage over Trump in so much as whilst Nixon 'had an unstable personality...his risk-taking in Vietnam, however ill-founded, was at least plotted with Henry Kissinger' (Naftali 2017). Trump, equally distrustful of the political elite, has exacerbated his alienation from the Republican Party grand strategists by firing those experts who initially agreed to serve in his administration, including General Mattis, Ambassador Bolton, General Kelly, and Rex Tillerson, to name but a few. The sole constant appears to be Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and fellow real estate developer, who has been routinely tasked with developing strategies including a Middle East peace plan, despite having no experience in this area. The unpredictable nature of Donald Trump's foreign policy, therefore, has influenced not only policy, but also personnel.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump insisted that 'he developed his views about world affairs from listening to experts on television' (Rappeport 2016). As late as March 2016 the Trump campaign only had five foreign policy advisers; Joseph E. Schmitz, Gen. Keith Kellogg, Carter Page, George Papadopoulos, and Walid Phares. This group was supplemented by the arrival of retired Rear Admiral Chuck Kubic, reserve Major General Bert Mizusaw, and retired Major General Gary Harrell in April 2016 (DeYoung 2016). None, however, were considered members of the Republican Party foreign policy elite and were viewed, collectively as 'the weakest and most obscure (foreign policy advisory board) that anybody had ever seen' (Laderman and Simms 2017, 105). Trump's unpredictable statements and policy procurements ensured that 122 members of the Republican national security establishment published an open letter announcing their objection to a potential Trump presidency, identifying themselves as #NeverTrumpers. This ensured that Trump's administration began to form 'with few of the transition team's members [having] any political or foreign policy experience at all' (Jackson 2019, 91).

The missing link between Trump, the Madman Theory, and the Nixon administration is Henry Kissinger, who continues to exert influence over the direction of US grand strategy. He was instrumental in the nomination of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, and his advice has been sought throughout the president's term, including a meeting with Trump on 8 February 2018 to discuss North Korea, China, and the Middle East. (Lake 2017). When he met Mike Pence on 19 December 2016, the vice president-elect 'studiously took notes and then tweeted a picture from their meeting' (Hohmann 2016). Kissinger's influence on the National Security Council was evidenced by the appointment of his protégé, Kathleen McFarland, as deputy national security advisor, and of Nixon's former research assistant, Monica Crowley, as senior director of strategic communications.

Despite this, key differences with the Nixon administration are apparent. The rapid turnover within Trump's national security team, including the departure of three national security advisers, three deputy national security advisers, a secretary of state, a secretary of defence, a director of national intelligence, a UN ambassador, and a secretary of homeland security has prevented the emergence of a coherent philosophical basis for US grand strategy. The

only foundation for such an ideology is the president's own gut reaction to individuals, events and institutions. In the Nixon White House, the president and his national security adviser conspired to devise an unpredictable approach to US grand strategy, which depended on the president's closest advisor confiding in adversaries that an un-balanced president might instigate irrational policies. During the Trump administration, however, this has not occurred. Instead, Trump has announced his unpredictable and at times irrational policies directly to the world at press conferences and on Twitter; he has abandoned long-standing treaties, including those signed with Russia governing the development and deployment of nuclear weapons. It has been left to his aides, the 'axis of adults' (Heer 2017), to scramble an explanation and prevent an escalation following the president's outbursts. Under Nixon, the Madman Theory appeared to be a ruse, designed to advance US national interests. Under Trump, the supposed application of the Madman Theory appears to be an effort to project cohesion to a series of administration policies, driven in part by concepts Trump espoused long before his election, but which otherwise seem to be driven by bluster, ego, and the president's attempt to apply lessons learned in real estate to international relations.

Implementing the Madman Theory

A final consideration in an appreciation of the Madman Theory as adopted by Nixon and Trump is the manner in which both men sought to implement the strategy. Presiding during very differing geo-political circumstances, both Nixon and Trump attempted to implement the Madman Theory as a way to further personal and national goals. The extent to which they did so, again, demonstrates much in regard to their own shortcomings, as well as those of the strategy itself. Nixon's adoption of the Madman Theory was in stark contrast to the Flexible Response Strategy that had prevailed under Kennedy and Johnson, which supposed that incremental escalation would lead to a desire to negotiate on the part of the North Vietnamese government. Kissinger referred to this as the 'McNamara Syndrome', believing it lacked sufficient 'ferociousness' ('Memorandum' 1975). The new approach, of threatening an unpredictable response in contrast to expected norms of international behaviour, had severe implications not only in Vietnam, but also in Cambodia, and more broadly for US-Soviet relations. It also influenced Nixon's political legacy, as its implementation was linked directly to one of the articles of impeachment designed to remove him from office.

The Madman Theory, and the seeds of Nixon's eventual downfall, were instigated within weeks of taking office in January 1969. The immediate focus was Indochina, including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, however, the Kremlin was the strategic focus of the initiative as the administration sought to reposition the United States for the era. As Engelhardt (2007, 203) notes, Kissinger was 'fascinated with the possible bargaining advantage of having the enemy imagine the president was an evil, potentially world-obliterating madman' and introduced an unpredictable dimension to US grand strategy. In a series of top-secret bombing raids, Operation Breakfast was launched in March 1969 as a clear manifestation of the Madman Theory, designed to convince the USSR, as well as the North Vietnamese, that far from ending the war, Nixon was

prepared to expand operations in Southeast Asia. B-52 bombing raids were followed by a land incursion into Cambodia, designed, Ellsberg (2002, 344–345) believed, to convince America's foes that its decision making was 'unpredictable' and that 'reasonableness or prudence in a crisis' could no longer be guaranteed. America's enemies were not the only ones who saw a lack of discretion in these actions. By 1974 the House of Representatives moved to impeach Nixon, with the Cambodian operations being among the high crimes and misdemeanours levelled against the president.

In addition to the military intervention in Cambodia, the Nixon administration advanced a policy of unpredictability in regard to Laos. Speaking with Secretary of Defense Elliot Richardson, Kissinger conceded that the President's Laotian strategy 'may look irrational,' but insisted that 'we must do something out of proportion to punch them. It may be wrong, but the record proves it's in the best interest' ('Memorandum', 16 April 1973). By the time of this conversation, the adoption of the Madman Theory was designed to convince the governments in Hanoi and Moscow that Nixon was capable of anything, including actions that would be viewed as war crimes if they had been implemented. These included but were not limited to a land invasion of North Vietnam, the bombing of the northern district of North Vietnam, the mining of North Vietnamese ports, and the threat of a nuclear attack on Hanoi.

Although the focus of the Madman Theory was Indochina, much of this remained, in the words of Shawcross (1979) a 'sideshow' for the grand strategy initiative that Nixon and Kissinger devised in their attempt to position the United States. As such, the use of an unpredictable approach to international relations had profound implications for US-Soviet relations. Having been a virulent anti-Communist throughout his career, Nixon believed he could use his past political positions to leverage a far greater deal with the Soviet Union in regard to the end of the war in Vietnam, nuclear arms agreements, and the evolving role of China on the world stage. Even before he had secured the presidency, Nixon was looking to manipulate Soviet fears of his impending administration in an effort to strengthen the US position in forthcoming negotiations. As revealed by Haldeman and DiMiona (1978, 82), Nixon 'intended to manipulate that fear to bring an end to the war. The Communists regarded him as an uncompromising enemy whose hatred for their philosophy had been spelled out over and over again in two decades of public life. Nixon saw his advantage in that fact. "They'll believe any threat of force that Nixon makes because it's Nixon," he said'.

As the 1972 campaign for re-election began, and with the need to end the conflict to stay true to his 1968 campaign pledge, Nixon sought to convince the Kremlin that he was capable of drastic actions to avoid an American defeat in Southeast Asia, including the use of the US nuclear arsenal. On 19 April Nixon directed Kissinger to utilize the Madman Theory in his dealings with the Soviet leadership and reveal his darkest intentions in Vietnam: 'I'm going to destroy the goddamn country, believe me, I mean destroy it if necessary. And let me say, even [use] the nuclear weapon if necessary'. Nixon wanted to ensure that Kissinger conveyed 'the extent to which I'm willing to go'. Nixon underscored the fact that 'By a nuclear weapon, I mean that we will bomb the living bejeezus out of North Vietnam and then if anybody interferes, we will threaten the nuclear weapon' ('Conversation' 1972, 433). While the direct

military focus was on Vietnam, the real audience was in the Kremlin, as the White House sought to convey a message of international unpredictability as an inducement to favourable negotiations in a post-Vietnam era.

As Kimball (2004, 18) notes, the Madman Theory was not designed to inflict immediate military damage on an opponent, but was primarily about 'the instilling of fear in the enemy about the likely possibility of suffering excessive destruction in the future – 'excessive' in the sense of exceeding what most others would consider normal, usual, appropriate, or 'rational'. As Nixon eventually discovered, however, it was not only America's enemies who came to fear his policies were beyond the pale. The longer the war went on the more members of Nixon's own administration came to fear that the Madman Theory might not be as removed from reality as had been supposed. As Engelhardt (2007, 204) notes, the deployment of the Madman Theory by the Nixon White House was compounded by growing concerns 'held by White House aides and advisers that Nixon might sometimes be impaired or nearing the edge of derangement,' ensuring that the United States 'was prepared to confront its enemies with a carefully crafted vision of a mad president, while members of his own staff wondered if he wasn't, indeed, unhinged'.

Nixon's use of the Madman Theory evolved as events occurred to necessitate changes to its application. Despite his best efforts, however, Nixon's deployment of the Madman Theory failed to convince the communist forces that his unpredictable language and implementation of seemingly irrational actions would ultimately result in a resort to the American nuclear arsenal, ensuring that Nixon, 'not the enemy, made the crucial negotiating concession in May 1971 by implicitly accepting the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South after any cease-fire' (Betts 1983, 102). This was also recognized by Kissinger (1979, 66–67) who concluded that 'the capacity to destroy proved difficult to translate into a plausible threat even against countries with no capacity for retaliation'. Despite this, the Madman Theory remained one in a series of tactics, including the development of *détente*, triangular diplomacy, and linkage, deployed by Nixon and Kissinger in an attempt to confuse and confound America's opponents and to instigate a new US grand strategy in the region. The decision to utilize a Madman Theory approach to US grand strategy, in an attempt to introduce unpredictability to international affairs and in particular in regard to America's most strident foes, was not lost on everyone, as it was mirrored forty-eight years later by the most unlikely individual.

The unpredictable approach that defined Trump's candidacy has continued to manifest itself as president in his dealings with foreign nations. Despite having insisted, 'When your allies don't trust you and your enemies don't fear you, you have zero credibility in the world' (Trump 2015, 137), the president has snubbed traditional allies, including the United Kingdom and Germany, while feting long-standing international foes such as Russia. This unpredictable approach has raised questions regarding the direction of US grand strategy and the administration's commitment to international organizations and multi-lateral agreements that had helped secure the peace for decades (O'Toole and De Luce 2016). This approach has invited direct comparison with Nixon's use of the Madman Theory. Whilst the Trump administration has adopted this approach in its dealings with other nations, including Iran, nowhere has it been more evident than in regard to North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong Un.

Despite bellicose language aimed at China, Iran, Mexico, and Obama's foreign policy stance in general, North Korea failed to draw the ire of the Republican candidate during the 2016 campaign. As noted by Shabad (2017), Trump had previously offered his views on the Hermit Kingdom, telling *Meet the Press* in October 1999 that he would 'negotiate like crazy' with North Korea, assuring *Reuters* in May 2016 that he would have 'no problem' speaking to Kim Jong Un, and lamenting that President Obama 'watches helplessly as North Korea increases its aggression and expands even further with its nuclear reach'. Trump also noted on *CBS This Morning* on 10 February 2016 that he would get China to make Kim 'disappear in one form or another very quickly,' calling Kim Jong Un 'a bad dude' (Stevens 2018).

Trump was briefed on the threat posed by North Korea during his transition meeting with President Obama on November 10, 2016, which caused the president-elect to 'sit up and take notice' (Nakamura and Gearan 2017). By August 2017, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the United States was within range of North Korea's nuclear armed ballistic missiles. The DIA report prompted a stern warning from President Trump, who insisted that North Korea 'best not make any more threats to the United States' or it would be 'met with fire and fury like the world has never seen' (Wagner and Johnson 2017). Trump continued his use of unpredictable language in his UN General Assembly address, referring to the North Korean leader as 'Rocket Man', adding that the United States may 'have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea' (Woodward 2019, 280–281). The statement was a continuation of a line of questioning that Trump began in August 2016, when he asked why the United States had a nuclear arsenal if it had no intention of using it? (Belvedere 2016).

Only eight months into his presidency Trump was causing consternation with his use of unpredictable and undiplomatic rhetoric. Republican Senator Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, feared that Trump failed to realize the United States 'could be headed toward World War III with the kind of comments he's making' (Martin and Landler 2017). Even the White House Staff Secretary, Rob Porter, expressed concern at what Trump hoped to gain from the showdown with Kim. 'You've got to project strength,' Trump replied. 'Kim and others need to be convinced that I'm prepared to do anything to back up our interests'. Echoing Nixon's 1968 conversation with Haldeman, Trump insisted this was a battle of wills: 'This is all about leader versus leader ... Me versus Kim' (Woodward 2019, 281). On 1 October, after Rex Tillerson reached out diplomatically to North Korea, Trump tweeted: 'I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man. Save your energy Rex, we'll do what has to be done' (Alberta 2019, 487). Diplomatic negotiations ended as unpredictably as they had begun.

The new year began with similarly undiplomatic language, as Kim demonstrated his own use of the Madman Theory by reminding the world that as a result of recent missile tests, 'all of the mainland United States is within range of our nuclear strike' (Baker and Tackett 2018). Trump was unphased, insisting, 'The way to deal with these people is by being tough. And I'm going to intimidate him and I'm going to outfox him' (Woodward 2019, 300). Highlighting a lack of reliability in North Korean missile technology that had

seen 18 out of 86 missile tests fail in the past 6 years, Trump tweeted, ‘Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works’ (Hohmann 2018). Within six months of this exchange, in a move that mirrored Nixon’s meeting with Mao, Trump and Kim met on 12 June 2018, in the first summit between a North Korean leader and an American President.

The meeting epitomizing what Rucker and Leonnig (2020, 262) identified as the president’s ‘reality-show diplomacy... short on substance but heavy on superlatives’. The men shook hands, shared a meal, and signed a vaguely worded document in which Trump offered unspecific ‘security guarantees’ and North Korea committed to the similarly unspecific ‘complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula,’ using even vaguer language than in its past nuclear agreements with the United States (Jackson 2019, 2). The summit achieved ‘nothing much’ (Bolton 2020, 119). There was ‘no concrete agreement or concessions, no accounting of North Korean weapons, no road map to peace’ (Sciutto 2020, 168). The lack of any discernible progress, or of improvement to US national security, was of little apparent interest to President Trump. Although North Korea made no alterations to its nuclear program or its missile delivery capabilities, Trump claimed, ‘There is No Longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea’ (Jackson 2019, 2), and boasted that the meeting might earn him the Nobel Peace Prize (Rucker and Leonnig 2020, 260). Trump clearly believed his adoption of the Madman Theory had succeeded, if only in presenting himself as an international deal-maker who had made progress in a policy area that had stymied all previous presidents.

The extent to which the Madman Theory was a viable option in regard to North Korea was exposed by President Trump’s former adviser, Steve Bannon, who told Kuttner (2017) that Trump’s belligerent language was a bluff. ‘There’s no military solution here,’ Bannon said. ‘They’ve got us. Until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that 10 million people in Seoul don’t die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons, I don’t know what you’re talking about’. As noted by Naftali (2017), whilst it was ‘not surprising’ that Trump would ‘latch on to this theory of applied bullying,’ it was remarkable ‘that no one seems to have successfully gotten through to him that it is unlikely to work’. It appears, therefore, that while Kissinger was content to advise the new Trump administration, his guidance did not extend towards warnings as to the potential pitfalls of policy. If the Madman Theory was ineffective in the Nixon-era, why would it be any more viable in the 2020s?

Conclusion

With their mutual loathing of the media, use of inflammatory language to discredit their opponents, and shared experience of impeachment, it is not surprising that Donald Trump’s presidency has drawn comparisons with that of Richard Nixon. Some have sought to further this comparison by raising their mutual embrace of the Madman Theory as a component of US grand strategy. As this paper has argued, however, this parallel is flawed and based on a misperception regarding the intellectual grasp of the concept as advanced by President Trump and his foreign policy advisers. President Nixon and his

national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, sought to leverage an advantage in international negotiations with the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam by applying an approach that Nixon claimed to have witnessed first-hand as vice president under Eisenhower in the 1950s, and which Kissinger encountered at Harvard during the same time period. This ensured that its use between 1969 and 1972 was grounded in political and intellectual experience. Both Nixon and Kissinger were fully aware of what they were doing, what their ambitions were, and how the process was likely to play out in an international setting, with Nixon having lived through similar exchanges a decade earlier, coupled with Kissinger's application of game theory and the various likely outcomes associated with the approach.

Despite the tempting comparisons with Nixon's presidency, Trump's embrace of the Madman Theory lacks both the realpolitik and intellectual sophistication that characterised its deployment forty-eight years previously. Neither Trump nor his advisors have the experience of working through the application of the concept in a previous admiration to appreciate its subtleties. None of his advisers are game theorists from leading universities, appreciative of the intellectual ramifications involved in its application to real-world scenarios involving nuclear weapons. The presence of Henry Kissinger as an ad-hoc adviser to the Trump presidency may give reason to pause and consider his potential input, but when one considers the members of Trump's national security team, the high turn-over of the staff, and the apparent randomness of Trump's remarks in regard to North Korea, the argument that this is all part of a coherent strategy appears to flounder. The historic shortcomings of the strategy are also all-too-apparent: As Naftali (2017) notes, in advising Trump, Kissinger would be 'more useful to this president as an eyewitness to how Nixon ultimately got ensnared in his own madman delusion'. Trump certainly appears to be a supporter of the Nixon Doctrine, which, among other things, sought to ensure that foreign nations assumed greater responsibility for their own security. This has manifested itself in demands for NATO members to pay 2% of their GDP to cover their own security costs, and thereby reduce the burden on the United States. While Trump's language is more direct than his predecessors, however, his administration's policy in this area reveals a continuity with those dating back to the 1970s, including his immediate predecessor, Barack Obama. Such an approach does not constitute a Nixonian adherence to the Madman Theory, ensuring that despite superficial similarities between the Nixon and Trump approach, their use of the unpredictability in US grand strategy is clearly driven by differing factors.

A major aspect to consider is the extent to which the Madman Theory can be utilized before adversaries stop paying attention to an all-too-obvious bluff. The concept, therefore, is inextricably linked to credibility. As a senior official stated, 'If you make a threat and don't carry it out — such as Obama's "line in the sand" in Syria — your credibility is shot' (Swan 2017). The practical applicability of the Madman Theory, therefore, is debatable. While Krauthammer (2017) argued that such an approach could be a strategic benefit to the United States as it sought to position itself on the world stage, others, including Walt (2017), have noted that it is extremely difficult to find examples of its successful implementation. Instead, Trumps' most apparent legacy to date may well be his deliberate undermining of the liberal international order, weakening of

essential multilateral bodies (including NATO), and erosion of American international credibility, all of which would have been anathema to Richard Nixon.

By understanding President Trump's embrace of the Nixonian Madman Theory as commander-in-chief, it is possible to better explain his seemingly unpredictable statements, even if they appear to be lacking the intellectual basis that were in place in during the Nixon presidency. This paper may well instigate a greater effort to appreciate the Trump administration's utilization of the Madman Theory as a method to reframe US influence on the Korean Peninsula.

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