

STATES OF MATTER

Rants don't alter reality



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In the Trumpian narrative of victimhood, pulling out of the Paris accord was the way to get back at a wicked world intent on exploiting American goodness for selfish ends



Truthteller A protestor in Washington opposing the US withdrawal from the Paris accord AFP/PAUL J RICHARDS

It is par that every public statement from US President Donald Trump should be a wild mixture of half-truths and outright falsehoods. What remains is a reckoning of the damage he will inflict before time is called on his rampage.

From his first overseas trip to Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Vatican, Trump segued across to Europe for discussions with allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Despite knowing what to expect, his counterparts were seemingly overwhelmed by his crudity and colossal ignorance.

It is impossible to say minus some revelations from his inner circle, but the bemused smiles and suppressed laughter he elicited may have stirred Trump's pique. Days later, when he announced from the rose garden of the White House, that the US was pulling out of the Paris accord on climate change, he seemed to have sublimated personal rancour in larger outrage at the supposed indignities inflicted upon his nation.

The Paris accord came in that uniquely Trumpian locution, to exemplify all that was wrong with the wicked world, intent on exploiting American goodness for its selfish ends. "The same nations asking us to stay in the agreement are the countries that have collectively cost America trillions of dollars through tough trade practices and, in many cases, lax contributions to our critical military alliance," Trump declared: "At what point does America get demeaned? At what point do they start laughing at us as a country?"

Here were the unique personality traits of a disordered character, melding into the political apparatus to create a new dimension of menace. In a clinical sense, Trump meets the

traits of individuals identified by the Harvard-trained psychologist Aaron James with a body part that cannot be named in polite conversation: "He allows himself special advantages in social relationships and does so systematically; he is motivated by an entrenched (and mistaken) sense of entitlement; he is immunised against the complaints of other people."

These traits have in varying measure, though never with quite the same menace, been inscribed in US foreign policy in the doctrine of exceptionalism, an article of faith especially with Republican administrations. A departure from the norm in the tortuous history of global climate negotiations, may have been the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change adopted in 1992 during the tenure of a Republican president. The US then stood alone on the world stage as a conquering power without the hint of challenge. The small-minded insularity of the right-wing was submerged in the larger impulse of seeking rewards from global leadership.

The consequence was the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities." All countries would participate with a common sense of responsibility but contribute according to their capabilities determined by "social and economic conditions."

That was the easy part. As the 1990s wore on, the global climate consensus shifted towards a recognition that industrialised countries, which had as first occupiers claimed more than a fair share in the global commons,

needed to vacate some space to allow developing countries fair chance to meet their aspirations. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was about making this principle operational, committing what were called Annex I member-states – already at the higher end of the scale of wealth – to binding reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Then under Democratic leadership, the US went along with the final agreement that came from a tortuous process of bargaining, but the Republican-controlled Senate balked. In later years, as Republicans leveraged global outrage over terrorism to grab untrammelled power, they claimed an unquestioned title to leadership, while doing nothing to earn it. As the chief negotiator at the Bali climate dialogue in 2007 put it: "The US will lead, and will continue to lead, but leadership also requires others to fall in line and follow." The US, in other words, would command obedience even when leading the world down the road to perdition.

The Barack Obama administration brought a different spirit of reasoned dialogue, but cutting through the massed ranks of special interests took years. In December 2015, two weeks of arduous negotiations in Paris ended with a global agreement on shared responsibilities for reducing GHG emissions. Calculations were not exact, but there was a reasonable expectation that the non-binding commitments of Paris would keep global temperatures at roughly 2.7 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

This was not entirely the outcome wished for, though the two mitigating circumstances were a commitment from all sides to not retreat, and in principle agreement to create a fund of US \$100 billion to assist developing nations onto a low-carbon growth trajectory.

In the Trumpian world view this gesture towards the spirit of cooperation, involving no concrete financial commitment, became an onerous burden the US alone had to bear. India and China, in the top league of GHG generators but far behind the US in per capita terms, became freeloaders who would continue their profligate use of coal, while condemning hard-working miners in the US outback to redundancy and penury.

Trump's narrative of victimhood has bemused all and pleased only a narrow cabal of special interests that have generously funded his Republican cohorts. By a preliminary and very modest count, there were at least 15 untruths uttered in Trump's speech announcing the US withdrawal. The US President has responded to a moment of powerlessness by claiming the ultimate power of creating alternative facts. But a mad king's rants do not alter the reality of a world hurtling towards climate chaos.

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