

HUBERT VEDRINE

Former French Minister of Foreign Affairs

Richard BURT

Finally, we are going to move to Europe, where it is fair to say that there is a different view on the Trump Presidency. We are going to explore the Trump phenomenon with representatives of two countries that are moving in very different directions as far as Europe itself is concerned. First, I want to recognise Hubert Védrine, who, when I was working in government, was known in Washington as a very smart and very creative problem-solver. He then went on to serve as a distinguished French foreign minister. Of course, we have been watching in Europe and France itself, the emergence of what might be called the populous threat. As far as France is concerned that has apparently been contained with the election of President Macron. My question to Minister Védrine is: how does a Europe that is changing deal with a populist America under Donald Trump?

Hubert VEDRINE

During the two years before France's presidential election, all the polls suggested that Marine Le Pen, and therefore the Front national, would make it to the second round. The same polls showed that she would be defeated by whoever the other candidate was. So the election's outcome would already be known after the first round: whoever was in the run-off against her would win. Fortunately for France, it was Emmanuel Macron. We did not have to make the impossible choice between Mrs. Le Pen and Mr. Mélenchon. What's more, Emmanuel Macron's personality caused a positive shock. There is a Macron "effect". But that is not the main topic today.

Trump's election in the United States continues to baffle the Democrats, the left and progressive forces in general. They are still aghast. Many had reached the conclusion that the working and middle classes, suspicious of or hostile to globalisation (and European integration), could not be swayed and, therefore, the race and gender card had to be played *instead*. The Democrats played the ethnic card, the gender card, etc. That strategy failed. It was a shock, causing a deep intellectual jolt still rocking the Democrats and all the progressive currents.

Second, a few leaders are very happy with Trump, starting with Netanyahu and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Iran's Pasdaran hope he will tear up the agreement on Iran's nuclear programme. They hated Obama's strategy, which marginalised them. So there are a few countries that are glad to see Trump in the White House. Then there are those that indirectly benefit from his election, starting with China. That is not as odd as it seems: China is taking advantage of Trump's blunders in Asia and trying to capitalise on them. Next, there are the countries directly threatened by Trump's policy: Mexico, Canada (he wants to rip up NAFTA), President Rohani, the Palestinians obviously, and others, including all those committed to the WTO framework. Then, all the countries that have been under the United States' protection since the end of the war, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia of course Europe, are wondering, worried about Trump's casual attitude towards article 5 of the NATO treaty, which is vital for them. This has not caused an organised reaction from the Europeans so far, but there is diffuse anxiety. All the other countries, especially Russia, are waiting. They do not know how things will turn out. They are trying to accommodate themselves with the phenomenon in various ways. In Europe for example, there is a difference in attitude, which is undoubtedly tactical, between Emmanuel Macron, who tried to create a sort of odd personal rapport with Trump, perhaps to cushion the shock, and Mrs. Merkel, who is annoyed by him.

This leads me to the possible scenarios of how Trump's future will play out. 1) First, implosion. The system is so preposterous and absurd that it explodes in mid-flight. Do not bet on it. (I am leaving aside the question of Trump's sanity.) 2) Then there is impeachment. This is unlikely because, even if valid grounds exist, Trump's voters and the Republicans in Congress would have to drop the President, but the latter will not do that as long as the former still



support him. His electoral base is delighted by his provocative statements and, for the moment, not expecting any particular results, other than kicking sand in the world's face. I would not say impeachment is out of the question, but to me it seems highly unlikely. 3) Another scenario, which seems equally improbable to me, is that the President becomes more "professional". Everything we know about him makes that extremely unlikely. Anyway, it is not his goal. He was honest about one thing during his campaign. He said, "I'll be unpredictable." He has kept his word except for on one point: satisfying his base. 4) The situation continues as it is: confused, chaotic but with no acute crisis. 5) Lastly, if the Democrats are unable to overcome the minority-majority quandary and find a candidate able to unite the party early enough before the election, I do not rule out re-election.

None of these scenarios is reassuring for those who had been accustomed — perhaps too accustomed — to seeing the United States as a point of reference, even when there were disagreements or controversies. It is destabilising. What can be done? I am not referring to enemy countries. I am talking about friends, allies, partners, etc. What can be done? In my opinion, Mrs. Merkel made the strongest statement. After meeting Trump in July, Mrs. Merkel said, "He, they, can no longer really be relied upon, so we must take our destiny into our own hands." "We" means Europeans, although the Japanese may have the same line of thought. Richard Burt, who was ambassador to Germany, knows all that very well.

Not too long from now there will be a test: the Iran deal. The entire planet reacted very well to Trump's decision on climate change, saying, "Whatever he does, we will continue honouring the agreement." This time, "we" is the whole world, including, and especially, American companies and finance. The Iran agreement is thornier. Will the other co-signatories — Great Britain, Germany, France, China and Russia — continue implementing the agreement despite the United States' wanting to tear it up (as long as the Iranians comply, of course)? Will they be able to afford it while protecting themselves from American reprisals (unilateral and outrageous, but that is another story)? That is a key point for the rest of Trump's presidency and its relationships with the rest of the world, and a test of truth for the other co-signatories.

My last point is that I do not think Trump is just a blip on the screen. I do not believe that his successor will be a rational, "normal" President and relations between the United States and the rest of the world will resume where they left off as though nothing had happened. Under Obama, the United States had already taken a step back, relatively speaking, from its missionary role in the world. It is very disconcerting to compare them, because Obama is smart, appealing, sophisticated, etc. and Trump is boorish, brutal and vulgar, but there is a thread of continuity that confirms the United States is stepping back from its leadership or limiting it to direct American interests. Everybody who has closely worked with or depended on the United States for over half a century must neither wistfully look back to the past nor hope for a return to "normal" after the next election or the one after that.

About Korea, I will just quote Madeleine Albright, whom I saw again recently; we are still on friendly terms. She told me, "As an American democrat, I am extremely dismayed because for the first time in my life, I want the generals to be as strong as possible."

Richard BURT

I found that presentation particularly interesting in two respects. I agree very much with the Minister in his discussion of the Iranian element and I must just comment on that. The way that President Trump has decided to deal with the Iranian nuclear agreement by essentially handing it off to the US Congress and not destroying an agreement that he says is the worst ever negotiated — maybe it is NAFTA, maybe Iran depending on the day —, tells me that with Donald Trump his bark is worse than his bite. Number two: what the Minister said in his last remarks on the future of American politics, is very important. I would not be surprised if Barack Obama was the last professional politician we have seen in recent American history. Both parties at our next Presidential election will either get a charismatic businessman or woman to run, against a Hollywood actor. If you want to watch who is beginning to emerge in American politics, keep your eye on those two categories of personalities. We may have seen the end of professional politicians as we know them in American life.