

## Trump and North Korea

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Is Trump as irrational as many brand him? Is he a fascist as other affirm? The evidence to date, as an excellent article by John Cassidy\* suggests, is that he is a highly ignorant actor but, at the same time extraordinarily shrewd in the management of public opinion and the media. Reading about the recent explosion of a nuclear bomb in North Korea, it appears to me that Trump is a great poker player, which implies a great capacity of control and calculation. Perhaps a pertinent question is whether we Mexicans will be equally shrewd as players.

George Friedman writes thus: “Poker is a game in which fear and greed compete... Part of poker is the player’s self-control, but the most important thing is the manipulation of fear, avarice and the reason of the other players, obliging them to fall into foolishness... The objective of the player is to create a sensation in others that you are an unpredictable soul, not given to calculation but the product of nonsense and carelessness”. According to Friedman, the North Koreans have become masters in the art of irrationality, utilizing it as an instrument of manipulation and blackmail of the orbit’s main powers.

Clearly, Trump is neither in the same league nor of the same rationale as the leader of North Korea, but his skill is nonetheless impacting in terms of exploiting the media and capturing the imagination of a not-at-all irrelevant portion of the American electorate. Trump responds to an electorate that is especially irritated with respect to its present and the future: “The angriest and most pessimistic people in North America are the people we used to call Middle Americans; middle-class and middle-aged; not rich and not poor; people who are irked when asked to press 1 for English, and who do not understand why ‘white male’ became an accusation instead of a description... White Middle Americans express heavy mistrust of every institution in American society: not only the government, but corporations, unions, even the political party they typically vote for—The Republican Party of Romney, Ryan and McConnell, which they despise as a sad crew of weaklings and sellouts. They are *pissed off*. And when Donald Trump came along, they were the people who told the pollsters, ‘that’s my guy’”.\*\*

Trump does not adhere to any rule, but he is very sure about the priorities of the supporter base that he has been able to woo. The use of Mexico, the Mexicans and the border is, in his logic, absolutely rational. Says Cassidy: “Trump has sought to fan the fear that America is losing its heritage, and that the political establishment is complicit in a betrayal. The image of a big wall at the southern border is central to Trump’s campaign—not just in policy terms but also psychologically. It represents a physical manifestation of the desire to place a large stop sign before the onward march of history”.

Paul Berman wrote a book fifteen years ago\*\*\* in which he describes the inability of the political establishment to understand the role of the irrational in human affairs, above all its failure in accepting the possibility that big groups of persons act in a pathological manner. Although he refers to Islamic radicalism, the proposal of Berman is particularly relevant in this era of political polarization where the extremes come together. In fact, there are analysts who argue that it is not inconceivable that many who historically vote for the Democratic Party might feel equally attracted by the bid to recreating North American grandeur. The extremes feed on each other and unite in their extremism.

How to deal with the resentment and sensation of indignity paining many of the potential voters for Trump? That, of course, is the challenge for the Republican establishment as well as for the people of the U.S. in general; but the challenge is not a lesser one for Mexico and Mexicans. Berman notes that there is a tendency to think that it is possible to persuade the extremists with rational argumentation and correct actions. However, if the motivation of the prospective voters for Trump is emotional or “irrational” in the Friedman sense, rational positions are irrelevant.

Trump is neither a crazy person nor an irrational actor, but he has exhibited enormous adroitness in taking an irate electorate captive. In any case, his irrationality is, as in the example of North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un, the fruit of calculation. Trump is a successful businessman who not only knows how to handle suppliers, employees, politicians, bureaucrats and union leaders, but who also understands how the world works in general. In contrast with professional politicians -his rivals for the presidential nomination and for the Presidency-, he surely is very ignorant about public policy issues, as tends to occur with businesspeople who venture into politics, but that does not make him irrational nor particularly ideological.

The challenge for the Mexican Government lies in which approach to employ to establish a bridge of communication without adding additional fuel to the fire. Up to now, the Mexican Government has weathered the Trump storm well, not granting space for confrontation. The government’s risk is to be trapped in its own discourse and anti-U.S. attitude. The logic of an approach would be very simple: it is not to convince him and dissuade him, because that is impossible and unacceptable to him; but as with all candidates of countries that are key for Mexico, the bridges are of the essence.

\*New Yorker, December 28, 2015

\*\*David Frum: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/the-great-republican-revolt/419118/>

\*\*\*Terror and Liberalism

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