

Trump and Dictators

NR nationalreview.com/2020/10/trump-and-dictators

October 20, 2020

A review

Donald Trump's first presidential trip abroad was to Saudi Arabia. On landing, he said, "We are not here to lecture. We are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship."

That was undoubtedly music to dictators' ears. It's *their* job, as they see it, to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, and how to worship.

The Saudi government does this job every day. So do other dictatorships, all around the world.

In the past, American presidents have spoken for people under dictatorship: people who can't speak for themselves. President Trump signaled that those days were over, and that dictators would not have to worry overmuch about criticism, or "lecturing," from Washington.

Saudi Arabia has many political prisoners. The best known, probably, is Raif Badawi, a former blogger who has been in prison since 2012. (He was flogged, too.) His crime was to ask for basic human rights: freedom of speech and the other freedoms that many of us take for granted, lucky us.

Saudi Arabia has female political prisoners, too. They are not spared the torture meted out to male prisoners, and they are probably raped more, in the bargain. One of the prisoners is Loujain al-Hathloul (whose brother Walid I once interviewed). (I also interviewed Badawi's wife, Ensaf Haidar.)

I mention these prisoners, by name, because to speak of prisoners generally, or human rights generally, is to be a little gauzy. Better to remember individuals, specifically. Andrei Sakharov made a point of this. He always wanted to talk about specific cases, not "human rights."

Yet I will speak in general terms through most of this piece, I suspect. In my defense, let me say: I have gone into specific cases — brutal detail by brutal detail — elsewhere.

In October 2018, the Saudi government murdered one of its most prominent critics: the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Talk about brutal details. They brought a bone saw with them. They chopped him into little pieces.

Asked who should be held accountable for this atrocity, President Trump responded,

“Maybe the world should be held accountable, because the world is a vicious place.”

Repeatedly, Trump has covered for Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince who runs the Saudi government. “He’s very angry about it,” said Trump. (He was talking about MBS and the murder.) “He’s very unhappy about it.” Over and over, Trump has called MBS “my friend.”

Trump is one of those who hail the crown prince as a reformer. In June 2019, he said to MBS, directly, “I want to just thank you, on behalf of a lot of people, and I want to congratulate you. You’ve done, really, a spectacular job.”

“I saved his ass,” Trump said to Bob Woodward. He was talking about Mohammed bin Salman. “I was able to get Congress to leave him alone,” after the Khashoggi murder.

Lindsey Graham, the Republican senator from South Carolina, has bouts of honesty. At the end of 2018, he commented on Trump-administration officials, saying, “If they were in a Democratic administration, I would be all over them for being in the pocket of Saudi Arabia.”

Obviously, the United States must deal with the Saudi government, as Saudi Arabia is a U.S. ally (and for good reasons). But there is no cause to cover for Saudi brutality. You have to deal with all sorts of bad actors in the world — allied with you and not. But there is no cause to act as their public-relations agent. Or to add insult to the injuries suffered by people under their rule.

Americans have values to uphold, including this chestnut: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

No country, including the United States, can be responsible for the fall of every sparrow. Or the torturing of every democracy advocate. But we have leverage.

Every time President Reagan met with Mikhail Gorbachev, he handed Gorbachev a list — a list of political prisoners in whom the U.S. was particularly interested. “Too many lists,” Gorbachev once complained.

Vladimir Bukovsky, the famed Soviet dissident, once said something like this: “Free World governments should do what they have to do, as they look after their national interests. But, every now and then, they should pause to consider: ‘How will it look to the boys in the camps?’”

To Bob Woodward, President Trump said, “It’s funny. The relationships I have — the tougher and meaner they are, the better I get along with them. You know? Explain that to me someday, okay?”

On that initial trip to Saudi Arabia, Trump met with the Egyptian strongman, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. (We are talking about another American ally, of course.) Sisi has been brutal even by Middle Eastern standards: routinely imprisoning, torturing, and killing his critics. We could speak of Giulio Regeni, the Italian Ph.D. student, or Shady Habash, the (Egyptian) filmmaker.

Or how about a U.S. citizen, Mustafa Kassem? He, too, was tortured to death.

In Egypt, General Sisi has effectively abolished civil society, an extraordinary feat. Egypt has long been the most important — some would argue the most civilized — country in the Arab world.

“Where’s my favorite dictator?” said President Trump, as he was looking for Sisi on the sidelines of a G-7 conference. This was in Biarritz, in August 2019. The next month, he sat with Sisi at the U.N.

“It’s an honor to be with my friend,” said Trump. “And he is a real leader.” A reporter asked Trump, “Are you worried about demonstrators in Egypt who have been calling for President Sisi to go?” Trump answered, “No. I guess everybody has demonstrations. Even your best friend in the whole world, President Obama: He had a lot of demonstrations. No, I’m not concerned with it. Egypt has a great leader.”

A *great* leader, mind you.

When Trump was running for president in 2016, he was asked about civil liberties in Turkey. The strongman, Erdogan, had cracked down on the country viciously. “I think right now, when it comes to civil liberties,” said Trump, “our country has a lot of problems, and I think it’s very hard for us to get involved in other countries when we don’t know what we are doing and we can’t see straight in our own country.”

Trump continued, “When the world looks at how bad the United States is, and then we go and talk about civil liberties, I don’t think we’re a very good messenger.”

In pre-Trump days, conservative Republicans referred to this as “moral equivalence” (and didn’t like it at all).

“I’m a big fan of the president,” said Trump in November 2019. He was talking about Erdogan. And he said to Erdogan, directly, “You’re doing a fantastic job for the people of Turkey.”

One of Turkey’s distinctions is to be the biggest jailer of journalists in all the world. Turkey jails more journalists than China, Iran, and so on. Of course, the Erdogan regime jails a great many others, too.

Would you like to hear a Turkish joke? Okay. A prisoner goes to the prison library and asks for a certain book. “We don’t have the book,” says the librarian. “But we do have the author.”

In 2020, President Trump has performed a pivot, with regard to his rhetoric about China. This follows the arrival of COVID-19, of course — or as Trump calls it, “the Chinese virus,” or “the kung flu” (get it?). As John Bolton writes, “Trump has made a sharp turn to anti-China rhetoric.” Bolton is one of the president’s former national security advisers, and I have quoted from his recent memoir, *The Room Where It Happened*.

For three years, however, Trump was gushy about Xi Jinping, the boss of the Chinese Communist Party, which rules China.

It started early, in May 2017: “You know, when I’m with him, because he’s great, when I’m with him, he’s a great guy.” Some more: “I think I like him a lot. I think he likes me a lot.” Again, “he’s a great guy.”

Liu Xiaobo was the foremost democracy leader in China. He was also a political prisoner. He received the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, in absentia. On July 13, 2017, he died as he had so long lived: surrounded by police agents.

As luck would have it — bad luck — Trump was questioned about Xi Jinping that very day. “Well, he’s a friend of mine,” our president said. “I have great respect for him. We’ve gotten to know each other very well. A great leader. He’s a very talented man. I think he’s a very good man. He loves China, I can tell you. He loves China. He wants to do what’s right for China.”

A bit more: “President Xi is a terrific guy. I like being with him a lot, and he’s a very special person.”

As Jerome A. Cohen, the dean of American China scholars, has said, Xi Jinping is responsible for the most oppressive period in China since the Cultural Revolution (which began in 1966 and ended with Mao Zedong’s death in 1976). He has built a vast gulag in Xinjiang Province, or East Turkestan, as the Uighurs call it. More than a million Uighur men and women have been thrown into this gulag. Xi Jinping has asserted absolute, totalitarian control over all of China.

And in early 2018, the Party made him president for life. Said Trump: “I think it’s great.”

In the summer of 2019, Hong Kong people were massing in the streets, protesting for their rights. A reporter asked Trump, “Are you concerned by reports that the Chinese army may be preparing to intervene in Hong Kong against the demonstrators?” Trump answered,

“Well, something is probably happening with Hong Kong, because, when you look at, you know, what’s going on, they’ve had riots for a long period of time. And I don’t know what China’s attitude is. Somebody said that at some point they’re going to want to stop that. But that’s between Hong Kong and that’s between China, because Hong Kong is a part of China. They’ll have to deal with that themselves. They don’t need advice.”

The American president used the word “riots,” about the Hong Kong demonstrations. This was a blow to the demonstrators, in that “riots” is exactly the word that the Communist Party uses, and rioting is a very serious charge in Hong Kong: carrying a sentence of up to ten years.

Questioned again on Hong Kong at a later date, Trump said, “Look, we have to stand with Hong Kong, but I’m also standing with President Xi. He’s a friend of mine. He’s an incredible guy.”

In his memoir, John Bolton reports that Trump said the following about Hong Kong: “I don’t want to get involved,” and, “We have human-rights problems too.”

Bolton also writes this:

Trump asked me at the 2018 White House Christmas dinner why we were considering sanctioning China over its treatment of the Uighurs . . .

At the opening dinner of the Osaka G-20 meeting in June 2019, with only interpreters present, Xi had explained to Trump why he was basically building concentration camps in Xinjiang. According to our interpreter, Trump said that Xi should go ahead with building the camps, which Trump thought was exactly the right thing to do. The National Security Council’s top Asia staffer, Matthew Pottinger, told me that Trump said something very similar during his November 2017 trip to China.

This portion of the book received a lot of attention in the press. Even a few Republicans criticized Trump for what seemed his callousness toward the Uighur people, and his reflexive siding with Xi. Bolton’s words had an immediate effect — a positive one: Trump signed the Uighur Human Rights Policy Act, which Congress had sent him, and which he had left unsigned.

During his 2016 campaign, Trump communicated great enthusiasm and admiration for Vladimir Putin, the strongman of Russia. He had done the same before, in private life.

In December 2015, shortly before the Republican primaries and caucuses began, Joe Scarborough talked with Trump about Putin, in a TV interview. Scarborough pointed out that Putin is the type to bump off his critics and invade foreign countries. “Obviously, that would be a concern, would it not?” asked Scarborough. Trump answered, “He’s running his country, and at least he’s a leader, you know, unlike what we have in this country.”

Keeping at it, Scarborough said, “But again, he kills journalists that don’t agree with him.” Trump answered, “Well, I think our country does plenty of killing also, Joe.”

Further on in the discussion, Trump said of Putin, “I think that he is a strong leader, he’s a powerful leader, he’s represented his country — that’s the way the country is being represented.”

About two weeks after he was sworn in as president, Trump sat down for an interview with Bill O’Reilly — who said, “Putin is a killer.” The president answered, “There are a lot of killers. We’ve got a lot of killers. What, you think our country’s so innocent?”

In July 2017, Trump and Putin were sitting next to each other, and American reporters tried to ask questions. Pointing at them, Putin said to Trump, “Are these the ones who insulted you?” Then the two laughed together.

You can well imagine laughing with a fellow head of state, or a fellow politician, about the press. But with a dictator who has journalists killed? When you’re the American president?

Trump had a similar incident with Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, also in 2017. Duterte is another killer of journalists. He once said, “Just because you’re a journalist, you are not exempted from assassination, if you’re a son of a bitch.” As Duterte and Trump sat together, reporters tried to ask Duterte about human rights. Duterte called the reporters “spies.” Trump laughed.

In March 2018, Putin staged another “election,” “winning” 77 percent of the vote. In his briefing papers, Trump’s advisers urged, “DO NOT CONGRATULATE.” Trump congratulated Putin.

Asked about Russia’s sham election, the president’s press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, “We don’t get to dictate how other countries operate. What we do know is that Putin has been elected in their country and that’s not something that we can dictate to them, how they operate.”

It is Putin and his gang who do the dictating.

That same month — March 2018 — General Sisi, too, staged an election. He did 20 points better than Putin, “winning” 97 percent of the vote. His nominal opponent was a supporter of his, simply playing along. As with Putin, Trump congratulated Sisi.

Four months later, Trump met with Putin in Helsinki. The American intelligence community says that the Kremlin interfered in the American elections of 2016. Putin denies this. In Helsinki, Trump adopted a neutral stance. “I have confidence in both parties,” he said, meaning U.S. intelligence and Putin.

The next summer — June 2019 — Trump effused about Putin: “a great guy,” “a good person,” “a terrific person.”

At the G-7 meeting later in the summer, Trump had one outstanding concern. He kept urging that Putin’s Russia be readmitted to the group. The other members suspended Russia in 2014, when Putin launched a war in Ukraine and annexed Crimea. Nothing has changed on the ground. Yet Trump continually urges the readmission of Putin.

This is a curious thing.

In the summer of 2020, Trump was asked about reports saying that Russia was supplying weapons to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Trump’s response was a classic in moral equivalence: “Well, we supplied weapons when they were fighting Russia, too.” (Trump was apparently referring to the Soviet war in Afghanistan.)

He has refused to accept that Russian authorities poisoned Alexei Navalny, the main opposition leader in Russia. He has refused to accept that Russian authorities poisoned the Skripals in Great Britain.

Last month, on the campaign trail, Trump said, “I like Putin, he likes me.” This seems an honest statement.

‘We were going back and forth, and then we fell in love, okay? No, really. He wrote me beautiful letters, and they’re great letters. We fell in love.’ Trump was speaking to a rally in Wheeling, W.V., in September 2018. He was talking about his relationship with Kim Jong-un, the dictator of North Korea.

About that relationship, Trump said the following, to Bob Woodward: “You meet a woman. In one second, you know whether or not it’s going to happen. It doesn’t take you ten minutes, and it doesn’t take you six weeks. It’s like, ‘Whoa. Okay.’ You know? It takes somewhat less than a second.”

Trump first met with Kim in Singapore, on June 12, 2018. Immediately afterward, Trump gave an interview to Greta Van Susteren, reporting for the Voice of America. She asked him, “What surprised you about Kim Jong-un?” Trump answered, “Really, he’s got a great personality. He’s a funny guy, he’s very smart, he’s a great negotiator. He loves his people, not that I’m surprised by that, but he loves his people.”

North Koreans would be surprised by that.

Van Susteren asked Trump, “What do you think he thought of you after he left?” Trump said, “I think he liked me and I like him.”

Then, Van Susteren gave Trump a significant opportunity, saying, “Because this is Voice of America, it will be heard in North Korea by the citizens of North Korea. What do you want to say directly to the citizens of North Korea?”

Trump used his opportunity this way: “Well, I think you have somebody that has a great feeling for them. He wants to do right by them, and we got along really well.”

North Korea is the most hellish, least free, most oppressive place on earth. The testimony of North Korean escapees is horrifying — barely imaginable to most people in free countries. One of the escapees I have interviewed is Jung Gwang-il. He had been in the North Korean gulag, like so many of his countrymen. Here is just one paragraph from the piece I wrote about him:

In the winter, the prisoners were made to get wood from the mountain. Many were injured or killed, as the trees fell or the logs rolled down the mountain. Other prisoners would not pause to bury the dead. It would have taken too much energy in the frozen ground. They carried the bodies back to a shed next to a latrine. At night, when you went to the latrine, you could hear moaning from the shed — some weren’t dead yet. By the spring, they were all dead, of course. The bodies had formed a great gelatinous mass. And Jung and the others would have to break it apart, with shovels, and bury it.

Trump has said many things about Kim Jong-un, in many appearances. I will do some further quoting.

“He’s the head of a country, and I mean, he’s the strong head, don’t let anyone think anything different.” No one would think anything different. “He speaks, and his people sit up at attention.” They no doubt do.

“His country does love him. His people, you see the fervor. They have a great fervor.”

“He is very talented. Anybody who takes over a situation like he did at 26 years of age and is able to run it, and run it tough. I don’t say he was nice or say anything about it. He ran it, few people at that age — you could take one out of 10,000, could not do it.”

Let me interject: It’s unclear how old Kim is. Probably, he was 28 when he inherited the dictatorship. But that is a triviality. He has certainly “run it tough,” if by “tough” you mean with crushing, murderous cruelty.

“A great leader,” Trump said of Kim. “Very honorable.”

Enough, for now.

In June 2019, Trump admired the border between North Korea and South Korea (slave Korea and free Korea): “By the way, when you talk about a wall, when you talk about a border, that’s what you call a border. Nobody goes through that border. Just about nobody. That’s called a real border.”

It is one hell of a border, true. And Trump was right: “Just about nobody” can get through it. But, in November 2017, someone, amazingly, did. His name was Oh Chong-song, and he was a 25-year-old North Korean soldier. He made what the press called a “dash for freedom.” Amid a hail of bullets — he was shot by his comrades five times — he dashed to freedom.

Recovering from his wounds, he gave the usual, horrifying testimony about life in North Korea.

Joe Biden, campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination, called Kim Jong-un a “dictator” and a “tyrant.” In retaliation, Kim called Biden a “fool of low IQ” and an “imbecile bereft of elementary quality as a human being.”

President Trump then issued a tweet:

North Korea fired off some small weapons, which disturbed some of my people, and others, but not me. I have confidence that Chairman Kim will keep his promise to me, & also smiled when he called Swampman Joe Bidan a low IQ individual, & worse. Perhaps that’s sending me a signal?

Set aside North Korea’s launch of its “small weapons” (which is not something to be set aside, to be sure): It’s not every day that an American president and a foreign dictator chortle together over the IQ of an American former vice president.

In 2006, the Venezuelan strongman, Hugo Chávez, issued a fierce denunciation of President George W. Bush at the United Nations. Charles Rangel was a left-wing congressman from New York, and despised Bush. But he did release a statement: “George Bush is the President of the United States and represents the entire country. Any demeaning public attack against him is viewed by Republicans and Democrats, and all Americans, as an attack on all of us.”

That seems a thousand years ago.

Trump’s press secretary, Sanders, was asked about Trump and Kim, and their chortling about Biden. She said, simply, “I think they agree in their assessment of former vice president Joe Biden.”

Trump himself, after one of his meetings with Kim, said, “You have a man that was so happy to see me. You have a man that doesn’t smile a lot, but when he saw me, he smiled, he was happy.” Later, Trump said, “People say he only smiles when he sees me.”

That should make the blood of any foreign-policy “realist” run cold.

One of Trump’s tweets read,

In a letter to me sent by Kim Jong Un, he stated, very nicely, that he would like to meet and start negotiations as soon as the joint U.S./South Korea joint exercise are over. It was a long letter, much of it complaining about the ridiculous and expensive exercises.

“Ridiculous and expensive exercises.” (“Very nicely”!) You can understand why Kim would be pleased to see Donald Trump.

About these dictators, dotting the globe, Trump says “great guy,” “terrific guy,” “incredible guy,” “very good man,” “very special person,” “real leader,” “great leader,” etc. He says they are doing a “fantastic job,” a “spectacular job,” etc.

You might say that Trump is simply a gusher. And yet he seldom, if ever, uses this language about democratic leaders. It is reserved mainly for the dictators.

And what does he get in exchange? Flying home from North Korea, Trump tweeted, “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea.” Is it true? In another tweet, minutes later, Trump said that we could “sleep well tonight!”

Some of us could not help thinking of Chamberlain, who, on his return from Munich, said, “I believe it is peace for our time,” and, “Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.”

Trump often brags of his “chemistry” with dictators. Tweeting about Putin, Trump said, “Bush tried to get along, but didn’t have the ‘smarts.’ Obama and Clinton tried, but didn’t have the energy or chemistry.” Trump says he has “great chemistry” with Xi Jinping. And “great chemistry” with Kim Jong-un.

I will cite, once more, a statement that Trump made to Bob Woodward: “It’s funny. The relationships I have — the tougher and meaner they are, the better I get along with them. You know? Explain that to me someday, okay?”

The Trump administration has democrats in it, and some sterling ones. Various officials have spoken up for freedom, democracy, and human rights, in three countries, particularly: Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran. There have also been commendable (i.e., true) statements about China. But the tone of any administration is set at the top.

It goes without saying — but I will say it again — that foreign policy requires a lot of nose-holding. You have to make many compromises to maintain stability — if stability is desired, as it usually is — in this wicked, nasty world. Americans locked arms with Stalin once. But we should remain unillusioned about dictators, and we should spare a thought for the people under their lash. They often look to us for hope, in that we claim ideals — or many of us do — that we hold to be universal.

Trump's performance vis-à-vis dictators has been totally unnecessary. It has also been outrageous, tragic, as many of us see it. Also unworthy: of the office and of America.