



On The World Stage – ‘The Ugly American’



In 1958, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer wrote a book called ‘The Ugly American’. It was an instant bestseller in America, and has been in continuous print ever since. The book is considered to be one of the most politically influential books published in America, and is supposed to have impressed then Senator John F. Kennedy so much that he is reported to have purchased and distributed a copy to every one of his colleagues in the U.S. Senate. The book apparently influenced the conduct of American diplomacy for the better, for decades after, as well as having been the driver for the establishment of the American ‘do good’ Peace Corps by Kennedy, as President.

The ‘Ugly American’ was (*roughly*) about the failures of the American diplomatic and political Class stemming from a sense of ‘exceptionalism’, hubris, indifference and self absorption, to the point of being terribly ineffective, downright alienating, and abjectly failing to win over hearts and minds of the people of the Countries in which they were posted (*in the book’s case, South East Asia, the theater of the book’s narrative*). Both the authors were Americans, ex-Navy in Foreign Service in that part of the World, and had felt compelled to write about the gross ineptness of the Americans, as compared to the relative sophistication of their chief protagonists, the Russians.

Their assessment of American Foreign Service ineptitude, at that time, was considered accurate and important enough for their book to have become a must read for the diplomatic and political class and an instant bestseller, remaining on the best seller list for a year and a half, selling over 4 million copies.

(Note - The description of the book and all related subjects mentioned, including the authors, are very minimally and roughly described to serve only as a back drop to the commentary below).

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Now to the matter at hand.

As we observed Donald Trump’s first foray abroad as President of the United States, we could not help but recall the 1958 Classic ‘The Ugly American’. Quintessentially, Donald Trump personifies the essence of that book - an American that is brash, boorish, insensitive, ill-informed and generally ignorant of his shortcomings. And, in trying to win over and influence people of other races, languages and cultures, he is quite unfamiliar with any of their ways, and arrogant enough to think that those don’t really matter, as they don’t matter enough to him. And if they do, it’s only in the context of himself and the U.S.’s importance, not theirs. After almost 70 years since the publication of that insightful book, the U.S. has a President in Donald Trump that personifies ‘The Ugly American’.

Donald Trump’s current foreign trip has taken in some of the most conflicted and sensitive parts of the World, and just as in the late fifties, as indicated by the book, Donald Trump and his Administration are aggressively indifferent to the complexities of the region and the peoples they were meeting. The prevailing attitude of President Trump and his team of closest advisors during this trip reportedly were - ‘we got this, this is our stage, America first!’

Additionally, as one watched their first pit stop in Saudi Arabia, it was easy to see how the hosts (*the Saudis*) anticipated the nature and need of their guests and played them like a fiddle through what was dear to Donald Trump and his team’s heart, open flattery, images of grand receptions, ostentatious displays of wealth and power, accompanied by a gathering of some the most powerful leaders on the Islamic World stage, led by the Saudi Royal Family itself.

The home-battered Donald Trump and team lapped up the attention with no idea of the long term ramifications of their own lack of understanding of underlying currents of the age old conflicts that America itself had helped bring to the fore in the past decades. Trump went through the scripted motions of the visit reveling in the unexpected degree of attention and respect he was receiving, quite unaware of being manipulated through his well known weaknesses.

And just as in the late fifties the Americans in their foreign policy forays were being effortlessly outmaneuvered by the far more skilled Russians, so to even today, the Russians had skillfully positioned themselves through their victory in Syria and their partnership with Turkey and Iran, as the real power brokers in the Middle East. And it was that reality that was freaking out the Saudis enough to pamper Donald Trump, so he would side with them entirely.

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But this time, even in their greatly diminished state from their previous “Super” Power status as the former Soviet Union, the Russians, under the guidance of former KGB operative Vladimir Putin, and the willing if unwitting participation of Donald Trump and team, has managed to even flip America itself, leaving it deeply conflicted, confused and flailing like a turtle on its back, thus succeeding well beyond the premise of the book which had highlighted the failures of the Americans versus the successes of the Russians, but only in the International arena.

On this first foreign trip abroad as President, while Donald Trump as the President had for the most part stuck to being ‘Presidential’, yet his visit to Saudi Arabia was mechanical in every way. He had no real insight into the Arab and Islamic culture, and in reality he couldn’t care less. After repeatedly and loudly denigrating Islam and Muslims throughout his campaign, the obviously awed and much subdued Trump mouthed scripted banalities to a host of Muslim leaders in the Palace of Saudi King Salman. Most Muslim leaders in attendance sat rather stone-faced as they tolerated his politically correct but shallow speech of solidarity with the Sunni dominated gathering, asking for the active destruction of the most prominent terrorist organizations, Al Qaeda and ISIS, both of which are Sunni.

The fact that U.S. has chosen to side with and fully-back the Saudi-led Sunni sect of Islam, which is approximately 80% of all Muslims in the World, in spite of the fact that the terrorist groups that the gathering of Arab leaders was asked to eliminate, namely Islamic State and Al Qaeda, are both Sunni with their origins in Saudi Wahhabism, would be too much information for Donald Trump, whose lack of interest in details is legendary. And even if he did take interest in such details, his seduction by the Saudis with personal flattery, over-the-top reception and affection, topped with orders for big American Arms sales, totaling Hundreds of Billions over the next few years, would overrule all concerns for Donald Trump of the direct links to terrorist attacks on the United States by primarily Saudi actors such as Osama Bin-Laden, Al Qaeda, majority of the 9/11 terrorists, and now the brutal Islamic State, as it seems of little concern to his closest advisors, military or political.

So while he implored for action from the 50-odd Sunni State leaders attendant in the Saudi Palace hall, he would not be aware that most (*led by Saudi Arabia itself*) would only make half hearted efforts (*if any at all*) to curb extremist Islamic terrorism, out of fear and deference to their own radical religious clergy that largely applauds the extremists. Hence most of their efforts would be focused in fighting their ancient religious rivals, the Iran back Shia minority.

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In wanting to sell significant amount of heavy arms to Saudi and other Islamic countries represented there, the Donald Trump Administration was arming the Sunnis in their fight with the minority Shia sect. This open bias of the U.S. that the far more knowledgeable and nuanced Obama had tried to correct by stalling the arms sales to Saudi, and by negotiating a nuclear agreement with the much mal-aligned Iran, along with U.S. allies, which were all signatories to the Nuclear Agreement, Great Britain, France, Germany and the other Security Council members Russia and China.

In trying to balance the American position between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims, Obama had become ‘persona non grata’ in Saudi, and hence his ultra cool reception upon his visit which bordered on being insulting, by the Saudis. As compared to the open arms, return of the prodigal son type of reception of Donald Trump, who had no interest in righting wrongs or balancing relationships but was happy to cater to old partnerships and imbalances and back the Saudis over Iran, gaining much favor from the Royal Family, and, as a bonus, also with the Netanyahu and the radical Right Wing Israelis, thus garnering two birds with one stone so to speak.

A decade and a half later, after George W. Bush declared the “War on Terror”, terror seems to be very much alive and active across the globe in spite of America’s and the West’s best military efforts and Trillions of dollars having been spent. Yet, no questions are being asked as to the lack of success in containing terrorism as it proliferates from ‘over there’ to everywhere. Certainly Donald Trump is not the man to question the status quo, and in fact on this trip he blithely doubled down on the costly, tried and tested old alliances and strategies that haven’t worked very well.

Russia on the other hand, has gone from practically no influence in the Middle East a few years ago, to wielding very significant influence globally. It also, with minimum effort and cost, defeated the coalition might of the U.S. led West and the Saudi led Arab participation, to reinstate Bashar Al-Assad of Syria, after he was for all intent and purposes defeated and practically ready to give up. It is this ability in winning in difficult and complicated circumstances, in the international arena, with much less to work with than the Americans, that hearkens us back to the comparison of Russia’s success vis-a-vis the bungling of the Americans in the above mentioned book.

As Donald Trump went through the rest of his trip he did not disappoint in his lack of understanding of the complexities of the Israeli, Palestinian conflict, the European Union’s concerns regarding his and America’s commitment to NATO, or their very grave concerns regarding climate change, or the Pope’s commitment to peace and the environment, or the threats of trade protectionism. Shoving other World leaders aside, physically and figuratively, Donald Trump bulled his way through to the front for the photo-shoot, shockingly uninformed, crassly insensitive, embarrassingly full of himself, and thereby brought back to life in himself the living embodiment of the World’s hereunto faded image of ‘The Ugly American’.