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Trump comes up short - for better and for worse

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Only a relatively few sprinkles fell on US President Donald Trump's inauguration parade. By contrast absolute doubt and worry descended in greater force, starting with the cloudy and overcast American capital city of

Washington, then across the vast expanse of the North American continent, to all the way to San Francisco. [Protests were held](#). Mostly untouched by the foul political weather was America's mid-sector, often termed Middle America. People there were reportedly mainly happy with what it saw and heard. In fact, the new president gave a clear, focused and blessedly short [inauguration address](#) that worked for them, but had the notable deficiency of not adequately addressing the other half of the nation.

This will surely prove the crux of the governance problem for the incoming Trump. He may well produce a good 50 per cent presidency – perhaps even quite a good one. Such a halfway achievement seems well within his capacity, as his campaign demonstrated: to be able to appeal to his base, even by repeatedly recycling baseless appeals to outmoded economics and international relations notions.



His emphasis on nationalism will warm the hearts of many who feel left out, but leave cold those Americans who are convinced that in a globalised world a

simplistic psychology of “America First” will wind up leaving America Second. Already the president of the People’s Republic of China has announced, [at the recent Davos Forum](#), the birth of an emerging new Chinese national mentality that is as proud of its history as America is of its; but will not foolishly seek to chart a path forward in the 21st century by proposing to return it to the 20th.

The average American may well have a thirst to see America first, but it is hardly the vision of the preschooler who must be the only one to play with all the Legos. Honestly: Trump’s anti-establishment pose is as old as the hills; the protectionist position reminds us mainly of another great Depression; and his rank nationalism sounds as if America can do no wrong – which feels like a formula that could push America every which way wrong.

[Trump trade strategy starts with quitting TPP - and a warning to nations that ‘violate trade agreements’](#)

Much of what Trump said in Washington, mirroring with good proportionality what he has been telling his base for months, makes less sense than the new president may sincerely believe. Half his Republican Party doesn’t agree with him, and little of the opposing Democratic Party does.

So here’s his problem: the American Republic is not structured to accommodate the worldview of one man or woman – say, a dictator. Its governing system is a freeway always at rush hour with more than enough traffic jams and construction slowdowns to try Miss Daisy’s patience, not to mention a hell-bent Nascar driver. Trump, to the extent we understand him, is built for speed, head-on; never for the lowly second gear. What he will face may thus prove a torture for him.



Unless he somehow changes or allows the bumps and grinds, not to mention stops and starts, of feral Washington to alter his straight-ahead course, he will find himself continually on his own – and this may plunge him into a personal self-isolationism deeper and perhaps even more troubling than any new national isolationism. This will be dangerous for him and for the nation, as well as the world. So it is important for Americans who can bear the burden of a measure of personal insincerity to emphasise as much a possible respect for views with which it (half the nation) otherwise might quickly dismiss. As even Barack Obama will readily attest, no president is perfect; every one makes mistakes.

But, as much as anyone, the American news media will find this a hard act to follow, much less honour. Trump is right when he claims ‘the media’ is biased against him, in the sense that it is by nature inclined to jump on the negative, the un-genuine or the transparently ridiculous, precisely because it has experienced so much of it in American politics and knows it when it sees it – and so loves to report it.



His inauguration speech was in this sense prehistoric – to employ the title of a famous American movie – *Back to the Future*. It looked back in anger, as if America was nothing more than one huge downside and the only way to go now was up – and only Trump knew how to access the elevators. It is perhaps a mistake to seek to wax overly profound over a speech that was designedly simplistic, and blessedly short. If the worried and watching world wishes to come away from this inauguration drama in non-panic mode, and go back quietly to its own national-interest business, it can do so most easily by recognising that the new president's priority is to focus first on US domestic foremost in order to achieve his utopian vision of always "America First".

This is not to say that complicated international issues such as North Korea and Iran nukes (top of the list?), Russia, trade-relations, Nato's future, coordinated international climate control and – last but not least- One or Two Chinas ... that these monster items will mysteriously vanish from the president's desk in the Oval Office. But President Trump will not be looking for new trouble abroad, though he is of the instinctive mentality to push back as

hard as it comes in if others come in looking for trouble. Perhaps the rest of the world might go about its own business and raise tough issues or challenges at a later date.



Trump now starts year one of what could prove a run as lengthy as eight years. Before long he will figure out, probably, that internationally problem-one is forging a coherent policy between America and Asia. At Davos last week, the great thinker Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, noted that "... all responsible leaders need to have today a deep understanding of the key global trends driving change.... (and) the first is a return of Asia and the end of Western domination of history.... It is not enough to watch personalities like Xi Jinping and Donald Trump.

We also need to understand the deeper forces driving their behaviour. Any leader who fails to understand this unique complexity of our time is ill-equipped to provide leadership to their society."

Sorry to end on a profound note. But, for better or for worse, there are many more Trump speeches to come. Patience may be more prudent than snap judgement.

Columnist Tom Plate is an American university professor, vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute and the author of the 'Giants of Asia' series.