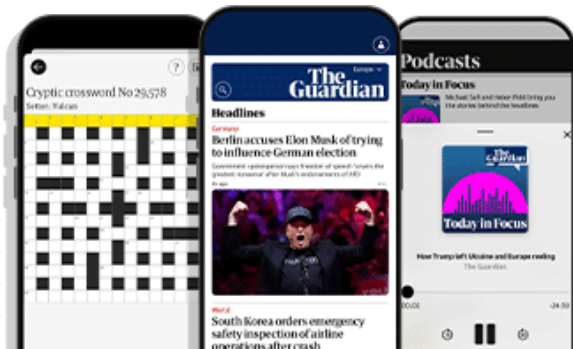


The Observer

The honeymoon is over for Trump, whose every unwitting misstep brings chaos and strife

Simon Tisdall



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If Robert K Merton, the founding father of American sociology, were alive today, he'd be fascinated by the [Donald Trump](#) phenomenon. Scarcely more than 50 days into his second presidential term, hapless Trump provides daily proofs of Merton's universal "law of unintended consequences".

Rooted in ignorance, error, wilful blindness and self-defeating prediction, Trump's rash actions produce contradictory, harmful and often opposite results to those he says he wants. The ensuing chaos characterises what may become the briefest honeymoon in White House history.

Boomeranging US tariffs - which are to American prosperity what the Titanic was to ocean travel - are the tip of the unintended consequences iceberg. Defiant foreign retaliation has brought [stock market crashes and inflation fears](#) - the exact opposite of what Trump promised voters.

Trump won a mandate to make America great again, not greater - at least, not territorially. After his threats to invade Canada, loyal subjects of King Charles III are up in arms, booing the Stars and Stripes, boycotting US goods and retaliating with their own tariffs. Single-handedly, Trump has revived the fortunes of Justin Trudeau's Liberal party. Under the new "elbows up" leadership of the former Bank of England chief [Mark Carney](#), it has a good chance of winning this year's election on an anti-Trump platform. That was not the plan.

Likewise, Greenland's voters, stung by a proposed Putin-style imperialist annexation, [told Trump to take a hike](#) last week. They are undecided about independence but definitely reject US (or Danish) domination. Had there been any tea to spare in Nuuk, they would surely have tossed Trump and it into the harbour.

Trump's Ukraine surrender policy is another calamity. Russia is the aggressor, yet he punishes the victim. US pressure for a ceasefire is all one way - on Kyiv. This is emboldening Vladimir Putin to intensify attacks, notably in Kursk, while [stringing muggins Trump along](#).

The prospective, unintended, consequences of an unjust peace are the undeserved rehabilitation of Russia, de facto amnesty for Putin's war crimes, a precedent-setting ceding of sovereign territory seized by force, and a deep US-Europe split. So the question arises again: is this really unintended? Whether Trump is a stooge, KGB asset or plain stupid was [discussed here last week](#). Most probably, he has no real idea what he's doing - or just doesn't care. How else to explain his belief that proving himself right about tariffs is worth starting a [global recession](#)? Or that the ethnic cleansing of two million Palestinians in Gaza can bring peace?

The explanation that Trump's main concern is China, that he is trying to prise Moscow away from Beijing, is more upside-down thinking. These two authoritarian,

anti-democratic states share a pernicious agenda: weakening and usurping the western-led, rules-based global order. Deliberately or not, Trump is [assisting their ambitions](#).

Surely even Trump and the underqualified toadies who advise him (no adults in the room in this White House) must realise that handing a humiliating victory to Russia does not bring closer lasting peace but future conflict with Nato neighbours and the US itself - while encouraging lawless behaviour all around. Perhaps they don't realise. For unintended consequences, count on clueless dunces.

■ *Perhaps the scariest unlooked-for consequence of Trump's serial blunders is accelerating nuclear weapons proliferation*

“Until him, no US president had been so ignorant of the lessons of history. Until him, no US president had been so incompetent in putting his own ideas into practice,” [snarled the conservative commentator Bret Stephens](#). “Democracy may die in darkness. It may die in despotism. Under Trump, it's just as liable to die in dumbness.”

Merton described a foolish insistence on being right, despite all contrary evidence, as the “imperious immediacy of interest”. As the writer Rob Norton explains, “an individual wants the intended consequence of an action so much that he purposefully chooses to [ignore any unintended effects](#)”. This is not true ignorance. It's wilful ignorance.

Perhaps the scariest unlooked-for consequence of Trump's serial blunders is accelerating nuclear weapons proliferation. Alarmed by his threats to withdraw US protection, and shocked at the betrayal of [Ukraine](#), Germany, Poland and South Korea are all urgently talking about obtaining an atomic bomb. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt have similar thoughts, for different reasons.

Trump claims to want a nuclear-free world. “His policies are having the opposite effect,” [wrote the analyst WJ Hennigan](#). “Thanks to Mr Trump... the perceived value of acquiring nuclear weapons among allies appears to have quickly gone up, while confidence in extended deterrence has gone down.”

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Iran strikingly illustrates Trump's ability to shoot himself in the foot, [bone spurs or not](#). In his self-appointed role as godlike peace-giver, Trump told Tehran to restart nuclear talks - or else. His "bullying" has [enraged Iran's leaders](#). An Iranian nuke, and military confrontation with the US and Israel, is now more, not less likely.

Acolytes and hangers-on take their cue from the boss in his looking-glass land of self-inflicted cock-ups and risible own goals. Vice-president JD Vance and technobrat Elon Musk gave European "liberals" [a dressing-down](#) last month and endorsed Germany's far-right AfD party. The results are the reverse of what they expected.

German voters rejected the new fascists, [Musk's businesses are boycotted](#), and the EU is forging a united front against Trump and Putin both. Ironically, the Vance-Musk standup act's repellent backing for Russia has wrongfooted "fawning" European rightwing populists, including [Britain's Nigel Farage](#). Centrists like Keir Starmer are enjoying a "Trump bump".

As Trump careers uncontrollably towards the 100-day mark, his approval ratings slide. He is already [less popular than Joe Biden](#) was at a similar stage. His honeymoon is history. Before November's election, he claimed, falsely, that America was in an unprecedented mess. Such exaggeration is what Merton, who coined the phrase, called a "self-fulfilling prophecy". Now, unintentionally, it's coming true.

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