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Trump's Policies Are a Result of On-the-Job Training



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The media and critics on the Left are having a field day attacking President Trump's rather numerous and often dramatic changes of heart on policy—whether China manipulates its currency, the necessity of the U.S. Export-Import Bank and NATO, and the U.S.'s strategic posture in Syria. And then there is the question of whether health care reform is really easy or really hard.

The New York Times on Sunday ran an interesting graphic of Trump's past and current statements on various issues. On NATO, the evolution started on March 23, 2016, when he told Bloomberg Politics, "I think NATO may be obsolete." He reiterated the claim on April 4, 2016 to CNN's Wolf Blitzer, again on ABC's This Week on July 31, and to The Times of London on Jan. 16 of this year. But at a news conference last week, he took a very different tack. "I said it was obsolete," he said. "It's no longer obsolete."

Trump repeated the same pattern on China's currency. "They're devaluing their currency to a level that you wouldn't believe," he said in his campaign announcement speech on June 16, 2015. "It's impossible for our companies to compete." In a campaign speech on Aug. 24, 2016, he said, "I am going to instruct my Treasury secretary to label China a currency manipulator, the greatest in the world." Less than a month ago, he proclaimed, "When you talk about currency manipulation, when you talk about devaluations, they are world champions." But 10 days later, on April 12, he told The Wall Street Journal, "They're not currency manipulators." But maybe things are more complicated. This past weekend, he tweeted: "Why would I call China a currency manipulator when they are working with us on the North Korean problem?"

On the Export-Import Bank, he was against it before he was for it, telling Bloomberg Politics last August: "I don't like it. I think it's a lot of excess baggage. I think it is unnecessary." But by April 12 of this year, he proclaimed to The Wall Street Journal that the bank is "a very good thing. And it actually makes money; it could make a lot of money."

Critical of the Obama administration's policies on Syria, on May 29, 2013, Trump tweeted, "Syria is NOT our problem." Another tweet on Sept. 5, 2013: "Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A." On Oct. 26, 2016, he told Reuters: "What we should do is focus on ISIS. We should not be focusing on Syria." But earlier this month, after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's military's used sarin gas on its own civilians, Trump said, "Tonight I ordered a targeted military strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched. ... I call on all civilized nations to join us in seeking to end the slaughter and bloodshed in Syria."

After months of saying that the U.S. should pressure the Chinese to get North Korea in line, he then met with President Xi Jinping and heard the Chinese perspective. "After listening for 10 minutes, I realized it's not so easy," said

Trump. “It’s not what you think.”

Then there was his education on health care. At an October campaign rally in Florida, candidate Trump said, “Together we’re going to deliver real change that once again puts Americans first. That begins with immediately repealing and replacing the disaster known as Obamacare. ... You’re going to have such great health care, at a tiny fraction of the cost—and it’s going to be so easy.”

But by Feb. 27, President Trump was telling the nation’s governors, “Now, I have to tell you, it’s an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew health care could be so complicated.”

But think about where Donald Trump was coming from. This is not a guy who ever spent days attending symposia or reading white papers from the American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, or, for that matter, the conservative Heritage Foundation or the libertarian Cato Institute. This is not someone who over the years spent hours perusing *Foreign Affairs* magazine or *The Economist*. Even *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* appear to have gotten cursory reads at best.

Prior to his election, it would seem Trump’s main source of information was television, specifically cable news. While there are some very talented journalists who have shows on cable, too many cable news shows have heavy ideological leanings to the right or left and serve only to entertain and to persuade. You will rarely hear any of these hosts use the phrase “on the other hand” to make a point that doesn’t support their general worldview.

Every 30 days or so since his election, Trump has more or less doubled or tripled his knowledge and understanding of public policy, economics, and the way the world works. This policy stuff is a lot more complicated than it looked sitting on a Barcalounger with a TV remote in hand. In baseball, it’s long been said that things look a lot easier from the cheap seats in the upper deck. Being the manager is hard. So is dealing with public policy.

Not on every issue, but on many, we are gradually seeing President Trump revert to the mean, moving from wild and simplistic positions to ones that fit within the confines of mainstream American politics. Americans voted for an outsider, someone who would approach the presidency with new eyes. On many issues, those eyes are growing more informed, as policies gradually move more toward the norm. But that’s what happens.