

Opinion | Trump's Norway Letter Proves This Isn't Sustainable

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In days and weeks before he resigned as president, Richard Nixon came unglued.

“The president had always despised small talk, but lately he would interrupt the conversation and ramble, usually about his past triumphs,” Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein wrote in their account of the [final days](#) of the Nixon administration. “Then suddenly, he would seem to be jolted to the present and would offer preposterous alternatives, make ridiculous suggestions.” As the walls closed around him and the pressure from allies and enemies alike became unbearable, Nixon grew “increasingly unstable, obsessed, exhausted.”

He didn't sleep. He drank. He acted irrationally. His son-in-law and adviser Ed Cox said that Nixon was

wandering the halls of the White House, “talking to pictures of former presidents — giving speeches and talking to the pictures on the wall.” Woodward and Bernstein report that on one of his last days in the Oval Office, Nixon dropped to his knees in prayer, wailing in self-pity to Henry Kissinger:

Kissinger thought he had finished. But the president did not rise. He was weeping. And then, still sobbing, Nixon leaned over and struck his fist on the carpet, crying, “What have I done? What has happened?”

If Nixon had refused to leave office — if he had barricaded himself in the White House — there was a real chance he would use his power as president to do something rash, calamitous and irreversible. In fact, according to [contemporaneous reporting](#) in The New York Times, the secretary of defense, James R. Schlesinger, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff “kept unusually close control over lines of command, in the last days of the Nixon administration to insure that no unauthorized orders were given to military units by the White House.”

Nixon spiraled into self-destructive mania at the end of his term. President Trump has reached those depths with three years left on the clock. For weeks, the president has been threatening the military takeover of Greenland, an autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark. His reasons amount to little more than greed and vanity; he wants to be known to posterity for the territorial expansion of the United States.

But Denmark is a NATO ally, which means that *this* idée fixe would, if carried out, destroy the largest and most successful alliance of nations in Western history, split the United States from Europe, drive a wedge between us and our neighbors in Canada — who have also been the subject of the president’s threats of conquest — and spark a wave of nuclear proliferation, as every nation that can develop a nuclear program does so to secure itself against American aggression (or against the countries United States was supposed to protect it from). This attempt to seize territory would also, in its long-term consequences, be a form of national suicide, as U.S. national defense, intelligence and force projection depends on cooperation with our European allies, to say nothing of our deep economic relationships with our peers across the Atlantic.

And while it’s not the most important aspect of this harebrained scheme, it almost goes without saying that a U.S. attack on Greenland is ruinously unpopular with the American public. [Eighty-six percent of voters](#) opposed the use of military force to take Greenland, according to a recent poll by Quinnipiac University. When Reuters asked if it would be a “good idea” to use force to acquire the territory, just [4 percent](#) of Americans agreed.

The whole thing is nothing less than madness. On Sunday night, we learned that it stemmed from delusion as well. In a message to Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store of Norway, the president [explained](#) that he wanted Greenland because Norway would not give him the Nobel Peace Prize.

“Dear Jonas,” Trump wrote, “Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace, although it will always be predominant, but can now think about what is good and proper for the United States of America.”

It is hard to know where to begin with this letter, delivered by text, which reads like the product of a disordered mind. To start, the Norwegian government does not choose the winner of the prize directly, leaving the decision to an independent committee. And the president, his claims notwithstanding, has not ended “8 Wars PLUS,” or anything close to it. He hasn’t even ended the one he pledged to resolve upon taking office — Russia’s war on Ukraine. “They’re dying, Russians and Ukrainians,” Trump said in 2023. “I want them to stop dying. And I’ll have that done — I’ll have that done in 24 hours.”

We’re still waiting.

His claims to peacemaking are also belied by his indiscriminate strikes in the Caribbean, his illegal attack on Venezuela and his strikes in Iran and Nigeria, along with [his apparent indifference](#) to civilian

casualties.

There is simply nothing for the Nobel Committee to award or recognize. For Trump, this is unacceptable. His response, as befitting his thuggish and gangster-like sensibilities, is to try to extort the government of Norway, and by extension Denmark, Europe and the rest of the world, into giving him what he wants. "I have done more for NATO than any other person since its founding, and now, NATO should do something for the United States," Trump writes in his letter. "The World is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland. Thank you! President DJT."

At least he said "thank you."

I am reminded here of Abraham Lincoln's [mocking response](#) to slaveholders who threatened to destroy the Union if a Republican were elected to stop the spread of their infernal institution:

In that supposed event, you say, you will destroy the Union; and then, you say, the great crime of having destroyed it will be upon us! That is cool. A highwayman holds a pistol to my ear, and mutters through his teeth, "Stand and deliver, or I shall kill you, and then you will be a murderer!"

There is no need to go on about the lunacy of this letter. Not even the president's most eager apologists could spin this as anything other than what it is: a disgrace. The letter is an astonishing glimpse into the mind of a man who rejects the core duty of his office, faithful representation of the American people. The only thing he cares about — the only thing that motivates him — is the immediate satisfaction of his every impulse.

The job of the chief executive is to manage a ferociously complex bureaucracy and deal with a cascade of crises, minor and major, foreign and domestic. To be even minimally competent, a president must be able to separate his narrow and partisan interests from that of the nation. He must also have the capacity to sacrifice those interests if and when they interfere with his responsibilities to the American people.

There has been much written about Trump's rejection of the symbolic elements of the presidency. He treats his political opponents as mortal enemies and appears to see large parts of the country as occupied territory. He makes no effort to unite the American people and takes every chance he can to divide them along lines of race, religion, ethnicity and ideology. He sees himself less as president of *the* United States and more as president of *his* United States.

Still, most coverage of Trump treats him as president in a functional way, even if he doesn't perform the civic duties of the office. His letter to the prime minister of Norway suggests that this is a mistake. It shows that he is essentially unable to serve as president of the United States, that he is as temperamentally and psychologically unable to engage with the practical as he is the symbolic, and that he has totally collapsed the distinction between his interests and those of the country, if he even recognized them in the first place.

The uncomfortable truth is that the president of the United States is a man with the mind of a spoiled child. His debilitating solipsism is a threat to the stability of the entire world. A functional Congress would impeach and remove him. But the Republican majority is in a codependent relationship with the president, unable to separate his identity from that of their party. And the president's advisers are either cowed supplicants desperate to please or scheming viziers eager to use his power for their own ends. There is no one, then, to pressure Trump to resign like there was for Nixon.

In John McTiernan's 1990 film adaptation of "The Hunt for Red October," Fred Thompson, in the years before he was elected as a Republican senator from Tennessee, delivers a haunting warning as he and Alec Baldwin's Jack Ryan observe a deadly naval disaster. "This business will get out of control. It will get out of control and we'll be lucky to live through it."

We have three years left with a mad king. It does not feel sustainable.

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