

ZOOM PRESENTATION BY DAVID OWEN TO THE 15TH INTERNATIONAL SAKHAROV
CONFERENCE 'PULLING BACK FROM THE ABYSS..'
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I am particularly sorry not to be with you in Vilnius for such an interesting and timely conference. Yesterday the conference concentrated on geopolitical issues and in particular the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Today's proceedings under the umbrella of the conference title "Pulling back from the Abyss...." is devoted to the human factor and whether we are our own worst enemy. Within this context I will address the theme of hubris and what so often follows in its wake ...nemesis. Too often history shows through incompetence or inadvertence we are our own worst enemies. Certainly, at the moment two world leaders in particular – Putin and Trump – are taking us to the abyss. The two leaders' individual characteristics are playing havoc with what used to be, by and large, a rules-based world order. But whilst they share similarities there are also many differences.

Hubris is not a medical term. Its most basic meaning, developed in ancient Greece, was simply a description of an act – a hubristic act was one in which a powerful figure, puffed up with overweening pride and self-confidence, treated others with insolence and contempt. Look for 'contempt' as part of any hubristic intoxication of power. Power needs a certain measure of humility to be effective. Lord Acton's famous dictum also warned "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely."

In 2009 I co-authored an article in *Brain* studying US Presidents and UK Prime Ministers, entitled 'Hubris Syndrome: An Acquired Personality Disorder?' I have since advocated using the term 'Trait' rather than Disorder. We identified Hubris Syndrome in the *Brain* article as instances where leaders who have hitherto been regarded as normal but whose personality had changed as a consequence of being in power. Undoubtedly, some of the characteristics associated with hubris are beneficial and help make leaders more effective but problems come when self-belief and self-confidence become excessive to the serious detriment of good governance.

Typical behaviour in such individuals includes a disproportionate concern for their own image, a messianic manner, exaggerated self-confidence bordering on feeling omnipotent, contempt for the advice or criticism of others, impulsiveness and at times a loss of contact with reality. Decision making goes awry, and 'hubristic incompetence' results.

I will leave more details about the toxic nature of the behavioural symptoms of hubris syndrome to your next speaker, Eugene Sadler-Smith, with whom I have worked closely

over the years in our efforts to raise awareness of hubris syndrome in public and business life and to encourage interdisciplinary research. It is significant in recent years there have been calls for hubris syndrome to be included in the classification systems.

In 2018 I wrote *Hubris. The Road to Donald Trump. Power, populism, narcissism* with an updated paperback version in 2020. President Trump's first election in November 2016 had prompted me to review all that I had written about past Presidents and British Prime Ministers in relation to hubris. The book examined Trump's methods and argued that there were more disadvantages than advantages to his leadership style and content, some of them potentially very damaging. The beginning of Trump's second term which sees him "ignite a global trade war with the steepest tariffs in a century"¹ illustrates why I had reservations. Trump's second term win draws on the MAGA constituency – Make America Great Again - helped by the brave manner in which he survived an assassination attempt and his belief that he had been saved by God. His popularity comes from a much broader base than the rustbelt states and represents a mood against Washington and New York. This had many common features with Boris Johnson winning the UK referendum for Brexit when the London based elite's advice was spurned by the electorate outside London. Both Trump and Johnson are regarded as 'populist' leaders. What does 'populism' mean? Certainly, its definition includes an approach that strives to appeal to people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.

As a doctor of medicine and a neuroscientist I have always argued that Trump does not have the medical diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder which exists only in America. But he is a world class narcissist which is getting progressively worse with an over-weening ego and self confidence in all that he does. One of the symptoms of hubris syndrome is 'a narcissistic propensity to see their world primarily as an arena in which to exercise power and seek glory'.

Trump's schooling at a military academy was not without controversy and he showed early signs of playing by his own rules. His business career involved much stress with his bankruptcies and the search for new funds which at an early stage involved a long financial relationship with Russia. Some of its links were verified by the US special counsel, Robert Mueller, in a detailed report. One does not have to use words like blackmail or allege sexual impropriety to be concerned by this long financial relationship with Russia and that Trump came closer than he should to receiving Russian money without scheduled repayments.

¹ *Financial Times* headline, 9 April 2025.

I have always rejected using such words as “unhinged”, “crazy” or “mad” to describe Trump. Indeed the psychiatrist, Professor Allen Frances, writes “Trump’s boorish manners, vulgar speech, and abusive actions make him a national embarrassment and the worst of all possible role models. He diminishes America.....but none of this makes him mentally ill.” We have seen too only in the last few weeks a detailed report from his personal doctor confirming, despite Trump’s age, his physical and mental health backed up by medical tests.

He is “irretrievably Trump” and he has been little different throughout his adulthood. He acts like a stranger to the truth - a form of lying which I describe as “Hubristic Mendacity” because the existence of hubris makes the person lie not purely mendaciously but linked inextricably to an underlying wish, almost imperative, that it is true. It is interesting that where in my book I used the terms power, populism, narcissism, more recently the author, Moises Naim, in his book *Revenge of Power* uses the terms populism, polarisation and post-truth. In this modern technological age that probably has more resonance.

Old rules of diplomacy are being cast aside replaced by bullying, hectoring tactics laced with falsehoods by both Trump and Putin. Both use false propaganda; both have expansionist plans – Putin to return to the old Soviet Union boundaries and Trump to claim Greenland, the Panama Canal, change the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and not least has designs on Canada becoming the 51st State. Both Trump and Putin employ fear and threats as a tactic – ‘mob boss’ tactics as described by Gideon Rachman in the *Financial Times*.² Trump can be unpredictable, irritable and irrational. Roughing up the President of Ukraine in front of TV crews in the midst of his country’s courageous fight against Russia’s invasion is an example.

Other US Presidents have displayed aggression and anger. Lyndon Johnson’s reached a high point with the Prime Minister of Canada, Lester B. Pearson, a holder of the Nobel Peace Prize. Pearson had called for a suspension of the bombing in Vietnam. Next day he visited Johnson at Camp David and according to Professor Robert Bothwell of the University of Toronto, the President was so enraged he lifted Pearson up by the lapels of his coat and bellowed in his face, “You pissed on my rug.”

Putin, on the other hand, shows absolute self-control, and a ruthless, calculating mind – not the hallmarks of hubris. Both Putin and Trump are revengeful, show contempt for others and do not like to be challenged. A good example is how Putin played the long game in dealing with the Wagner Group coup lead by Prigozhin who had become increasingly openly critical of President Putin and the war in Ukraine. Some sort of

² ‘Trump and the mob boss approach to global markets’, Gideon Rachman, *The Financial Times*, 7 April 2025.

interim settlement was reached with the Belarus President Lukashenko mediating and the charges of treason were dropped and he was allowed to continue with his mercenary activities in Africa. Two months later Prigozhin's plane flying from Moscow to St Petersburg crashed most likely as a result of a bomb exploding on board. Putin broke his silence 24 hrs later to briefly say Prigozhin was a "talented person" who "made serious mistakes in life".

Some psychologists use the term 'sadist' or 'psychopath' when describing Putin. Others reflect that he fits the personality of a 'hostile enforcer', a non-pathological type characterised by compulsive and sadistic traits.³ The panel's discussions that follow will, I am sure, analyse such traits.

How does the world react to these two leaders who deploy 'tear-up' policies. It is hard to see where the internal checks and balances will come in respect of the autocratic rule of Putin. But even in the US it appears the checks and balances in the US Constitution are insufficient to curb the worst of Trump's increasing rule by executive order. As Max Hastings wrote in *The Times* last month, "Trump confronts America's super rich with the same proposition that Putin offers Russia's oligarchs: make as much money as you like, but if you mess with my policies, I will break you." He goes on to say, "Fear and hatred are the tyre levers in Trump's toolkit". The same could be said of Putin.

How do other countries respond to what is increasingly being seen as an existential crisis – whether it is war in Europe or a world trade war. Are we being taken to the abyss by two leaders too arrogant to listen to any what I call 'toe-holders' in their inner circle? Perhaps not in Trump's case where we have seen him having to bend to the reaction in the American bond markets in his tit-for-tat tariff war and on the advice of his Treasury Secretary rein back on his threats. But his 'economic' war with China has yet to play out and we have yet to encounter what Trump intends to do after the 90-day pause. He is putting on a show of bravado and is unlikely to abandon his methods. The nearest parallel was the 'Nixon Shock' in 1971 when the President took the dollar off the gold standard accompanied by a 10% import tariff and introduced temporary price controls. Nixon's Treasury Secretary, John Connally, had bluntly said to him. My philosophy is "all foreigners are out to screw us and it's our job to screw them first."

For democratic Europe, the only alternative that will return Europe to the post Second World War peace is, with America's help, to help sustain Ukraine's fight with arms supplies, intelligence and financial backing. It was a path pursued by President Biden and it was holding until the arrival of President Trump. In the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 we pledged support for Ukraine when they voluntarily gave up their nuclear

³ Sandalic 2022.

weapons. Russia, a fellow signatory has, under Putin, reneged on that agreement but we should not get sucked into war with Russia. Now to restore a wary peace depends on NATO, preferably with America in it, but with the European democracies themselves acting with courage and more military spending and bearing greater responsibility into the future for sustaining Ukraine. This means levels of defence spending in Europe that we last saw in the middle 1950s. But it must start now.

Eisenhower in 1951 said "If in 10 years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project will have failed." The fault has lain in Europe's political class – left, right and centre – who did not listen when American politicians - Democrat and Republican - repeatedly warned in Berlin, Paris and London that they will have to spend more money on defence against more sophisticated Russian weaponry and in many cases that means buying American technology. That realisation is finally being put into effect, hopefully not too little, too late.

Europe is beginning to re-arm and Poland and Germany have made a bilateral agreement on security. Also, one of the unpredicted indirect consequences of Putin's invasion of Ukraine has been Finland and Sweden joining NATO.

Henry Kissinger perceptively analysed the first Trump presidency by saying:

I think Trump may be one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretences. It does not necessarily mean that he knows this, or that he is considering any great alternative. It could just be an accident.

The end of an era could well involve Trump abandoning the US role within NATO practiced by all US Presidents since 1949 that under Article 5 the US military would respond to any aggressive military acts on any NATO member state. Trump has every right to rethink the US role but it has to be done at the right time. Let us hope that those Americans who literally were 'great' in rescuing Europe on D-day and helped for years after their successors will have the wisdom to give Europe time to prepare for that eventuality.

Finally, now that my medical and political career is drawing to an end can I urge all those interested in politics to never forget that the causal link between holding power and aberrant behaviour is proven. Power is a heady drug, which not every leader has the necessary rooted character to counteract. To do so requires a combination of common sense, humour, decency, scepticism and even cynicism that treats power for what it is – a privileged opportunity to influence, and sometimes to determine, with skill and patience, the turn of events.

