

European interview

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Whatever the outcome of the election, there may remain a mistrust on the part of the United States' allies and questions about the sustainability of their international commitments.

- **After 4 years in the White House, beyond the style, can we speak of an enduring Trump doctrine, regardless of the outcome of the November 3 elections?**

It is difficult to talk about concepts or doctrines regarding Donald Trump. His undulating political career and the liberties taken with certain pillars of Republican conservatism bear witness to this. Donald Trump functions mainly on instinct, according to a transactional vision of politics and international power relations. Nothing is forbidden, everything is possible according to the interpretation of the national interest, or the interest of the president. Its style, on the other hand, can be considered as a doctrine in that it reveals that there is nothing anecdotal or entertaining (in the sense of diversion). Contempt for elites, counter-powers, legal norms, tacit or written, concern for permanent division in order to keep the country under tension, this is what defines Trumpism.

- **Has Donald Trump irreversibly changed the Republican Party? What has his presidency irreversibly changed for the United States?**

Re-election would be the validation of Trumpism and its break with Republican dogmas. Under cover of his attachment to the battles in the cultural war (firearms, abortion, religious freedom), this would mark the end of Reaganism in terms of the role lent to the federal state, as shown by the swelling deficit during

the first three years of his term of office, in a period of rapid growth, and its explosion with the Covid-19 epidemic. Defeat would constitute a sanction, although some of Trump's bases would remain unshaken, starting with the electoral bloc of evangelical Christians, which accounts for about a third of the vote of the Grand Old Party. To speak of irreversibility seems a little excessive to me. American parties are much more plastic, undefined, inclusive, than their European counterparts, which allows for a form of resilience. One can imagine, in the case of defeat, a repudiation of certain aspects of Trumpism, particularly in international relations. Donald Trump regularly has isolated himself, including within his own party on Russia, Saudi Arabia and, more generally, because of his tolerance of illiberalism. On the other hand, what is likely to remain, whatever the outcome of 3 November, is a mistrust of the United States' allies and questions about the durability of their international commitments.

- **During this election campaign, the American President has been the vector of certain conspiracy theories, which have spread on social networks. Is this a simple political calculation? Is this a sign of an extreme polarisation of American society?**

The use of the conspiracy theory is constitutive of Trumpism. It preceded his entry into politics with birtherism<sup>[1]</sup> and it has been one of the cornerstones of his method of acquiring and exercising power. In this sense, Donald Trump has accentuated a polarisation

[1] Theory whereby Barack Obama was not born on American soil and is therefore not eligible to be president of the country due to *jus soli*.

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which came before his arrival in office, dating back to the events of Newt Gingrich's Contract for America. This was subsequently relayed by the quasi-insurrectional movement of the Tea Party, which was first directed towards the Republican «traitors», who were considered too complacent with the Democrats and adepts of trans-partisan compromises. The concept of «alternative facts» introduced by Kellyanne Conway as soon as Donald Trump took office provided a framework for Donald Trump's instinctive strategy to escape media control and to keep his base mobilized. But this strategy has proven deadly because it has locked the president into a bubble, into a comfort zone. The health crisis was, in this respect, a terrible reminder of reality. It showed that Trumpism is not a method of government. It cannot be that, precisely because of what it is.

• **In this context, how has the Fox News channel established itself in American society and what is its real political weight?**

It has played a central role in maintaining this comfort zone, as shown by the staggering number of interviews given by Donald Trump or the active presence of one of the most dedicated facilitators, Sean Hannity, at a campaign meeting in 2018. Again, Fox did not wait for Trump to become a continuous news behemoth. In the past, Barack Obama was able to forge almost inbred relationships with some media outlets, but none of them were responsible for the federal government's policy planning that Fox seems to have assumed over emblematic issues and conspiracy theories. The electoral component of Fox's audience will live on beyond the Trump presidency and Trumpism, and the president's political successors will be able to use them for a long time to come. With one reservation. Defeat on November 3 would nevertheless weigh heavily on the channel, especially if Joe Biden continues to maintain a critical mass of the Democratic Party in a pragmatic centre. Especially since the reconstruction of the GOP would be based on the «autopsy» of the defeat of Mitt Romney in 2013 - the GOP report, which concluded the need to open up to young people, women, minorities, but which was swept away by Donald Trump's entry on the scene.

**[2]** An idea introduced by political expert John Mueller, which explains the rise in the short-term popularity of a political leader of a country in a period of international crisis.

• **What is specific to America in the development of public debate and what should Europe learn from it?**

The companies are very different. However, we see that the neurosis created around the debate, facilitated by social networks, leads to a symptomatic moment in which the virtuality of pseudonyms and anonymity takes control of the political narrative, weighs on the media that participate in structuring it and, in the end, transforms what is real. The cost in terms of national cohesion then becomes exorbitant.

• **The Trump presidency has been marked by growing tensions with the European Union, how would you describe its vision of Europe and transatlantic relations?**

The European Union embodies everything that Donald Trump detests: multilateralism, collegiality, solidarity between nations, and the concern or claim to defend non-negotiable values. The transatlantic relationship is seen as a brake, a burden, since Donald Trump can only see his relationship with the world from a cost/benefit perspective. An aggravating factor is that Trumpism means short-termism, which makes it impervious to the long European time, whether in terms of trajectory or *modus operandi* (if one wants to be kind to the European institutions).

• **Does President Trump's foreign policy record weigh in the voters' choice? Has his policy towards China, and the rhetoric used in particular regarding the origin of the pandemic, produced a «rally 'round the flag» effect»[2] in society?**

Foreign Affairs carry little weight. Donald Trump promotes postures, notably regarding China, but even after the pandemic, it will not be an American concern. The Chinese map, and its repulsive effect that was supposed to weaken the Democrats long attached to the hope of convergence with Beijing, have been diluted by the erratic management of Covid-19, and the "rally around the flag" only lasted two weeks, at the end of March.

• **Would the election of Joe Biden systematically lead to a return to multilateralism, to the so-called «liberal international order»?**

This is Joe Biden's wish, as he clearly states in the paper published by Foreign Affairs in March, "Why America must lead again because it is in the interests of Americans". The crisis of confidence, like China's new power, could disrupt the American «comeback», in the event of the election of the Democratic candidate.

• **What should Europeans expect, if Joe Biden is elected, in terms of trade relations? Would the threat of additional tariffs be removed? Would Biden be open to a trade agreement with the European Union?**

The election of Joe Biden would mean a return to the traditional trade tensions along the lines of the [Boeing/Airbus](#) model. These tensions are more legible, more predictable and more manageable, and both sides are used to dealing with them to a certain degree.

• **Does Joe Biden see the European Union as a partner, an ally, an economic competitor, even a rival, or is he just not interested?**

Joe Biden sees the European Union as a strategic ally rather than an economic competitor. His *Weltanschauung*[3] is, however, based on a prerequisite that could be a source

of tension. He does not believe that the European Union can stand equidistant between Washington and Beijing. He will endeavour to turn it into a loyal partner in a bloc of democracies under the aegis of the United States. Are Europeans ready for this? Would they find it to their advantage, as they would in a possible economic decoupling between Beijing and Washington, however far-fetched that might seem?

• **Would Joe Biden continue, in a more polite form, the US request to "share the burden" within NATO? What is his position on European defence projects? Conversely, if Donald Trump were re-elected, would there be any fears for NATO's stability and sustainability?**

«Burden sharing» is an American constant, just like the concern to encourage, as far as possible, American defence industries. This is another reason for tension, especially if Europeans are divided on this issue. With a second Trump presidency, a NATO crisis would not be automatic if the results of «burden-sharing» were to show their significance. In the case of a test, not to mention Article 5, (especially in the case of Turkey), we undoubtedly would have to tighten our belts.

[3] In English « world view »

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**Gilles Paris**

Correspondent for Le Monde in Washington, has just published « [Amérique années Trump](#) » with Jérôme Cartillier

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External resources in English:

- To follow the campaign and the election results, *Real Clear Politics* [summarises all the polls](#).
- *The Council on Foreign Relations* has published [an analysis](#) of the foreign policy positions of the two candidates. More generally, a set of resources for understanding the positioning of each candidate [is available here](#).
- *The Pew Research Center* has published [data](#) to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformations of

the American society and the issues at stake in this year's election.

- More than 20 books have already been published on Donald Trump's presidency, including *Trade and American Leadership: The Paradoxes of Power and Wealth from Alexander Hamilton to Donald Trump*, by Craig Vangrasstek, which is particularly interesting for understanding the Trump administration's economic record and the effectiveness of its measures.

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