

Opinion

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BRET STEPHENS

THE TIME IS the early 1980s. The place is the South China Sea. A sailor aboard the USS Midway, an aircraft carrier, spots a leaky boat jammed with people fleeing tyranny in Indochina. As he helps bring the desperate refugees to safety, one of them calls out: "Hello, American sailor — Hello, Freedom Man."

It's the sort of story Americans used to like hearing about themselves. So much so, in fact, that Ronald Reagan told it in his 1989 farewell address, by way of underscoring how much went right for the United States when, as he put it, "We stood, again, for freedom."

Not anymore. When the world looks at the United States today, it sings a sorry song. Goodbye America. Goodbye, Freedom Man.

That's the global lesson from the regional catastrophe that is Donald Trump's retreat in Syria. The president made his case, as he usually does, in a series of tweets this week. Like their author, the tweets were, by turns, sophomoric and self-important, flippant and destructive.

He praised the Kurds as "special people and wonderful fighters" who "in no way have we Abandoned" — and yet he abandoned them.

He praised Turkey for being "good to deal with" and "an important member in good standing of NATO" — after warning that he would "totally destroy and obliterate" its economy if it did anything he didn't like.

He boasted that "The stupid endless wars, for us, are ending" — but took the one step most likely to speed their resumption and expansion.

And he congratulated himself for his "great and unmatched wisdom." Of course.

Closer to the mark in assessing the results of American withdrawal was Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, who said of the US that it was "futile to seek its permission or rely on it for security."

To survive the Turkish onslaught, the Kurdish forces we have cavalierly betrayed will now have little choice except to try to reach an accommodation with Bashar al-Assad. This will allow the Damascus dictator to consolidate his grip on the country he has brutalised for nearly 20 years — demonstrating to autocrats everywhere that using sarin gas, barrel bombs, hunger blockades, and every other barbaric method against defenceless civilians pays.

Trump's withdrawal will do worse than that.

It will put thousands of Kurdish lives in jeopardy. It will deepen Tehran's influence in Syria. It will increase the likelihood of all-out war between Israel and Iran. It will underscore the inefficacy of US sanctions to curb Tehran's ambitions. It will ratify the wisdom of Vladimir Putin's decision to intervene on Assad's behalf. It will strengthen Turkish strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan's hand, not only in northern Syria but also in Turkish politics, just as he was finally beginning to experience serious reversals after 16 years in power.

And it will fundamentally jeopardise the gains made against the Islamic State, around 10,000 of whose fighters are in the custody of the Kurdish forces now being attacked. As Mazloum Abdi, the commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic

Bye, America. Bye, freedom man

Under Trump, the US becomes the world's fair-weather friend



A crowd of over 500 people protest in front of the federal courthouse in Nashville, US, in support of Kurds after the Trump administration changed its policy in Syria

PHOTO: REUTERS

Forces, told *Bloomberg's* Eli Lake, "If we think the Turkish operation will not stop, we cannot fight ISIS anymore."

Trump thus repeats Barack Obama's mistake in Iraq of declaring success, pulling out, and creating the security and political vacuums which ISIS, Iran and other bad actors were quick to fill. That alone should have been enough to dissuade this president from pursuing his course.

Except that Trump's instinctive need to appease dictators appears to be even more powerful than his aversion to imitating his predecessor. Distracting attention from impeachment surely played a role, too, based on the view that ending

"stupid endless wars" is generally a political winner — at least until the consequences of our geopolitical fecklessness are again felt fatally at home.

All of which makes it noteworthy that Trump's Kurdish betrayal has elicited such a political backlash, including among some of his more reliable lackeys in the Republican caucus. People like Senator Lindsey Graham understand that what the US is now doing isn't simply foreign policy folly. It's a national disgrace.

It's a signal that Americans are the friends you never want: there for you when, and only when, it's convenient for them. It's evident that our moral values

are tissue paper around the glass fragments of our president's ego. It's proof that the idealism that stormed Normandy, fed Europe, democratised Japan, and kept West Berlin free belongs to an increasingly remote past.

It means that American sailor or soldier seen on the horizon is no longer "freedom man." He's fair-weather friend.

Even now, this is not how most Americans, including many of Trump's supporters, would wish to see themselves. People on their way to the bottom have their occasional moments of clarity, seldom seized. In the Syria debacle, Republicans have a chance to see, if not save, themselves. —NYT



INSIDE TRACK

COOMI KAPOOR

Discipline panel?

Speaking out of turn in the Congress has become the norm and party discipline appears ready to implode. Among those candidly airing their views or acting against the party's interests are seasoned hands such as Salman Khurshid, Shashi Tharoor, Jairam Ramesh, Ashok Tanwar, Sanjay Nirupam, Bhupinder Hooda, Milind Deora, Navjot Singh Sidhu, Digvijaya Singh, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Umang Singhar. In most cases, those defying party discipline get away unscathed. The question is what exactly is the role of the Congress Disciplinary Committee. The average age of the committee, chaired by A K Antony is 82. The three-member panel consists of Antony, 78, Motilal Vora, 90, and Sushil Kumar Shinde, 78. According to party insiders, the committee sometimes meets, but normally Antony defers any controversial issue for discussion to another session. The last time the Disciplinary Committee took any meaningful action was the revocation of the suspension against Mani Shankar Aiyar over a year ago.

Renewing old links

The picturesque ancient port and temple town of Mahabalipuram turned out to be an ideal setting for the informal summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, even though it was not the original venue proposed for the meeting. Discussions on the place where the two heads of government could hold the summit have been on for over six months. The initial suggestion was Varanasi, Modi's constituency. Varanasi fitted the bill since like Wuhan in China, the venue of last year's summit between the two leaders, it offered both history and a secluded environment. The Chinese vetoed Varanasi on the ground that the plane carrying Xi and his entourage would be too large for the small Varanasi airport. The fact that Japanese PM Shinzo Abe had already visited Varanasi might have been an additional negative factor. Goa was ruled out because Xi had seen the coastal resort at the BRICS Summit in 2016. Finally the consensus was on Mahabalipuram with its rich archeological heritage and ancient trade links with China and association with Chinese Buddhist monk Hiuen Tsang, even though Tamil Nadu is not a BJP-ruled state.

Swamy vs Dhavan

The chief justices' court is so overcrowded during the Ram Janmabhoomi hearings that some 30 lawyers have per force to stand. Senior counsel Rajeev Dhavan, who represents the Sunni Waqf Board, usually has the last word during arguments. (When opposition lawyers pointed out that there was

no reference to the Babri Masjid in travellers' account before Aurangzeb's time, he retorted that Marco Polo had forgotten to mention the Great Wall while writing about China.) But Dhavan has met his match in Subramanian Swamy. Annoyed at discovering Swamy sitting composedly in the front row of the court, Dhavan demanded the judges make the MP get up since he did not represent any of the original appellants and was not even a lawyer. Dhavan protested indignantly that when he went to Parliament, he was sent to the visitors' gallery. (Swamy succeeded in getting his writ petition admitted and clubbed with the original cases, unlike other latecomers, since he put a petition before a separate Bench claiming that his argument was based on the different plea of fundamental rights.) Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi's advice to Dhavan was that he should stand for Parliament if he wanted to sit in the Rajya Sabha.

Out, but in

The news that Shakti Sinha was stepping down as director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library came from the former IAS officer himself, who tweeted that his term was over. The NMML is presently being handled by a joint secretary in the culture ministry. Many speculated on why Sinha had fallen out of favour. In fact, Sinha is likely to return as director since the selection authority, the NMML executive council headed by Lokesh Chandra, has forwarded his name. The delay is simply because the Cabinet Committee on Appointments has yet to ratify the choice. A normal bureaucratic delay.

Political wisdom

A political observer points out that family-controlled political parties which have not followed the law of primogeniture as laid down in Hindu epics have come to grief. He cites two examples. Recently, there was mayhem in Lalu Prasad's family. Daughter-in-law Aishwarya Rai stormed out of her in-law's house in tears, claiming she was ill-treated, not allowed to cook in the kitchen and that her smartphone had been snatched from her. Aishwarya blamed her sister-in-law Misa Bharti and mother-in-law Rabri Devi and exonerated her estranged husband Tej Pratap and her brother-in-law Tejashwi. Misa, who is the eldest of Lalu's children, grew up advising her father on political issues. She was furious when Lalu appointed Tejashwi as his political heir. She reportedly encouraged Tej Pratap the elder brother to revolt. In the INLD, Om Prakash Chautala picked his younger son Abhay as his political heir, rather than his elder offspring Ajay. The result: Ajay's two sons Dushyant and Digvijay split the INLD.

Stats don't lie

Ashwin probably experiments a little too much, but he has had a career to be proud of

RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty



FAKHAR ZAMAN DID a serious damage to Ravi Ashwin's white-ball career. His mauling of the Indian spinners—Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja—at the 2017 Champions Trophy final forced the Indian team management and selectors to think differently. Ashwin had conceded 70 runs in his 10 overs without a wicket in that game. Jadeja gave away 67 runs in his eight overs. That was the beginning of the end for Ashwin in terms of limited-overs cricket. He played only three more ODIs after the Champions Trophy final, the last being at North Sound on June 30, 2017.

India turned to wrist-spin after the Champions Trophy final two years ago. And although Jadeja, being a better batsman and a far better fielder than Ashwin, eventually returned to the ODI fold, the off-spinner from Tamil Nadu was confined to Test cricket only.

Despite Kuldeep Yadav's emergence, Ashwin remained India's No. 1 spinner in

the longer format. Then, Southampton happened in August-September last year. On a wearing Rose Bowl pitch, he failed to make an impact, as England stretched their lead in the second innings. Ashwin had only one wicket to show for in the 37.1 overs he had bowled in that innings. India lost the Test by 60 runs, a match they should have won.

England off-spinner Moeen Ali bagging the Man of the Match award for his nine-wicket game haul had made Ashwin's failure even more glaring. Some argued that the Indian offie was not fully fit to play the match. It was a lame excuse, given that Ashwin did not fail the fitness test. Also, he could have easily pulled out if he weren't 100%.

Ashwin gradually started to slip down in the pecking order. He played just one Test in Australia last winter. He lost the Test spot to Jadeja in the two-Test series in the West Indies in August-September this year, as India decided to pick one specialist spinner in overseas conditions. The fastest man to take 300 Test wickets probably became a victim of perception that he is a home dust-bowl bully.

Before the commencement of the second Test between India and South



Ravi Ashwin, the fastest man to take 300 Test wickets, probably became a victim of perception that he is a home dust-bowl bully

Africa in Pune, Ashwin had 350 scalps from 66 matches. A whopping 242 of those 350 wickets came in India. His bowling average away from home is 31.39, considerably higher than his career average of 25.39. But we should put things in perspective.

Indian spinners always thrived on home conditions. Even the spin Beatles of the 1970s—Bishan Bedi, Bhagwat Chandrasekhar, Erapalli Prasanna and S Venkataraghavan were no different. Chandrasekhar's 6/38 at the Oval in 1971 helped India win their first-ever Test series in England. Prasanna's six-for against New Zealand at Dunedin in 1968 had set up India's five-wicket victory. But they were far more effective, at times almost unplayable, in home conditions.

Anil Kumble, who finished with 619 Test wickets, had a far better success rate at home. In 69 overseas Tests, he had 269 scalps at 35.85. Compare this with his home Tests record: 63 matches, 350 wickets at 24.88.

During an interview in Colombo two years ago, the Indian team head coach Ravi Shastri told this correspondent: "We are a little too enamoured with the word, overseas". He wasn't way off the mark. Dennis Lillee never toured India. He went to Pakistan once and returned with three wickets at 101.00 from three Tests. It didn't prevent the Australian cricket press and pundits to call him the 'greatest of 'em all', fast-bowling wise.

Richard Hadlee's only visit to India as

a cricketer was in 1988, to claim the Test wicket world record. The New Zealand all-rounder had skipped the World Cup a year previously, a tournament that was co-hosted by India and Pakistan.

Conditions matter a lot in cricket. In England, the Dukes ball retains its shine and moves all day. The cold weather at times becomes an impediment to the spinners, as they can't grip the ball properly. In Australia, the machine-made Kookaburra ball's single-stitched seam deteriorates quickly, causing problems for finger spinners. Also, pitches in England and Australia usually don't help finger spinners. Ashwin's less impressive record away from home is not a case in isolation.

Ashwin is not an off-spin artist like Prasanna. He doesn't have Venkataraghavan's floater—the former India captain lost it towards the back-end of his career and replaced it with a leg-cutter. Ashwin doesn't turn the ball like Muttiah Muralitharan. Unlike Bedi or Kumble, he doesn't revel under pressure. In fact, when batters go on the offensive against him, Ashwin probably experiments a little too much, rather than keeping things simple.

But statistics don't lie and Ashwin has had a career to be proud of. He showed character during his seven-wicket haul in the first innings against South Africa at Vizag. It was his first Test since December last year. The milestone of 350 wickets is richly deserved.