



# Donald Trump: America's 'African Dictatorship' Moment

By Alex Roberts



Am I the only one who felt a growing sense of ugly familiarity while watching the 4<sup>th</sup> of July proceedings in Washington DC? It took me a few days to fully comprehend the oddity of the spectacle. It was atavistically American: a questionable real estate mogul; fighter jets roaring overhead; fireworks blowing off with abandon as vague tenants of “bravery” were touted. One only needed to add in grandiose Lynard Skynyrd music, a screw-on plastic bottle of Bud Light (for safety) and the tossing of an American flag football to make it the most US-driven spectacle ever put on display.

Apart from an eye-rolling display of questionable Americana, the whole display struck a deeper and more sinister chord. Stop me if you've seen this movie before: military equipment being trucked in from all over the country to be displayed as props; invites extended mainly to party loyalists; outlandish claims of nationalistic strength in the face of unknown “threats”; and an ever-ballooning budget taken seemingly from the most needy of social programmes.

Further, the entirety of the charade was put on by a leader of questionable (at best) morals, one who openly blasts the press as anti-democratic and who is known to engage in dubious electoral practices.

Many readers within East Africa may have looked at their TV screens and thought to themselves: "It's finally America's turn to see this ridiculousness." They wouldn't be wrong. In the United States right now, the term "unprecedented" is bandied about with ferocity amongst the media, with well-established media houses with sterling reputations formed through covering the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most brutal occurrences suddenly at a loss that anything so gauche could take shape in the form of an American leader.

When it comes down to it though, doesn't it all reside at the doorstep of personality type?

From where I sit, it most certainly does. All of these strongmen (and they are all male) - whether they're in power, in post-political ennui or dead - have done the exact same thing. It is different strokes painted with the same brush. Their canvas, on this occasion, is that of spectacle, of projecting something that is better, stronger (dare I say less impotent?) than themselves. It is a public display of strength, ill-needed by those who don't secretly know that they're inwardly weak.

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To start with, those who have systematically oppressed and plundered a country often rub it in to commemorate their "achievements". For example, there is still a nationally celebrated Moi Day annually in Kenya, despite the former president's record of extrajudicial measures, devaluing of the Kenyan shilling and rampant institutional corruption. Yoweri Museveni has been "democratically" elected five times, and makes sure to always inspect military guards dressed in full pomp at major Ugandan national days and events. Rwanda's Paul Kagame had an outright military parade during his latest inauguration in 2017. It is true, such days are often celebrated with a display of token military presence; at the inaugural "Trump Day" this past American Independence Day, an exception to the rule was not found.

A key tenet of such military-driven presidential events, at least within those run by would-be strongmen, is the heavy under-current of politicisation made more stark as the figurehead acts exceptionally stoic and well-behaved for the event. At the rally on the Fourth of July, chants of "lock her up" broke out among the crowd, and reports of minor clashes made the news. Therein, as they say, lies the key difference, the breaking point from a day of democratic celebration of national history into something more sinister. It is when the very essence of patriotism swings to identify with a single individual that the political climate can become potentially even more dangerous than it already is.

Within hours of the spectacle that put him at the centre, Trump made heavy-handed allegations of communism against his political "enemies"; within days he was saying that certain Congresswomen (all of colour) should go back to their countries of origin if they didn't "love" the US enough. The standard, it seems, is political allegiance.

Within weeks of the Fourth of July event, Donald Trump's supporters were chanting "send her back" at presidential rallies. These chants, while directed at all four Congresswomen, (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan), were particularly poignant in the context of Ms. Omar, who was born in Somalia before fleeing to the Daadab refugee camp in Kenya, and finally resettling as a refugee in the US, where she eventually found a permanent home in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This, when seen through the

lens of escalating nationalism, jingoistic tendencies towards refugees (including the abysmal treatment of migrants on the United States' southern border with Mexico in a series of "detention facilities"), and thrown as chum to stirring crowds at politically-driven rallies, is a dangerous recipe.

The message being espoused and defended at the present by both the Trump administration and right-wing politicians loyal to it has taken root at the very celebration of American democracy itself. It is, in fact, association by patriotism. It is becoming a deeper-seated sense of national identity and the mere act of seeing such policies associated with the nation's independence is, to put it mildly, a dangerous precedent. It is a continuation of a trend of both ramping up and normalising such attacks on what is deemed "un-American" by those currently in power. This designation, once considered "beyond the norm" within United States' politics, has rapidly shifted towards becoming the routine.

While the rally was taking place, Trump harangued the crowd with a 45-minute all-American masturbatory salute to military hardware. He read off assorted names of different combinations of letters and numbers, each signifying a different tool of top-grade, American-made weapon of death and destruction. Fighter jets, tanks, humvees, all were given their due with a salute through the rain-soaked vista of the National Mall of Washington DC. They were each named nearly laboriously, in exquisite reverence for their ability to unleash death on vague "enemies of the state" (typically seen in the guise of unspecified foreigners in Hollywood action blockbusters).

In a more current context, this is still a practice around the region. Military honour guards are inspected in ceremony by the head of state. In fairness, despite the US press's fervent response, America has an awkward relationship with the fetishisation of the military on every official and unofficial national occasion. Fighter jets zoom over the heads of Americans. Since the 9/11 terror attacks, we have seen the rampant rise of forced acts of patriotism, many of which later turned out to be directly sponsored by the Pentagon to the tune of millions of US dollars (furnished by the US taxpayer). This continued to deepen the divide among the American public along the lines of military interventionism and military prioritisation. It is an underlying sentiment of "tanks are now alongside White House officials, and who are you to disagree with their patriotism?" The association, as it were, is the issue.

It is a slippery slope when the military is viewed as an extension of the leadership, rather than one that protects the national interest. All too often within strongman-type of leadership structures, the military (and their goals) become an arm of the central governmental figure, with such events as seen on the Fourth of July being a means to "stroke the ego" of the leadership.

An adept dictator always knows where their bread is buttered: the more that one inflates the importance of the military and raises its stature, the more likely the military is going to be loyal to you. In a sense, the Fourth of July parade was a natural extension of Trump's extensive rallies in support of "the troops", "the cops" and "the brave people guarding our border from the invasion from the South". Daniel arap Moi is a good example of this behaviour; in the post-1982 coup period, he closed ranks, gave the military more emphasis, and rewarded loyalty.

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In turn, this behaviour can drive the chosen narrative of the state - that the military is way too

powerful to be challenged. The story is told, played out on screen, marched in front of the masses, splashed across newspaper front pages. It helps to reinforce an idea, one of division, that of being on an opposing side from the government if you dare disagree.

Make no mistake, however ridiculous the Fourth of July show was, it was most definitely intended to be a show of strength. How could one feasibly dare to challenge the seat of power when the very entirety of military might is on public display, with guns pointed squarely into the crowd from the very basis of the Lincoln Memorial? This is not unlike the grandiose trains of government vehicles that accompany Museveni as he zips around Kampala or Uhuru Kenyatta as he delays traffic whilst travelling out to play golf on the outskirts of Nairobi. (The number of cars isn't the point; it's that they would crush you if you were to stand in their path.) Think what you want of Kagame's policies and the issues surrounding democratic practices in Rwanda; only a fool would doubt his closeness to the top military brass. What Trump is engaging in now is the classic appearance of alliances - the same outer projection that any opposition' would be met with those same large caliber guns that faced outward to the crowd. Only the obtuse would see that positioning as merely coincidental.

It isn't a coincidence that those in the Trump administration's camp were given prime seats at the base of the Lincoln Memorial. Those "in the know" are given strength by a sort of transitive property of influence. The man on the stage is in charge of those with the guns, and he approves of you enough to let you into the inner sanctum.

It is further not a coincidence that the "vicious, mean, hateful, disgusting democrats" weren't even invited within shouting distance of the "in club". They haven't shown enough Trumpian loyalty to be positioned near the military hardware. Instead members of the Democratic Party were told to "sort themselves" and largely stayed away from the proceedings of the event at the National Mall in Washington DC that rainy evening.

The end consequences of these deepening of divisions could be seen during the event and in the immediate hours afterwards. Squabbles broke out, flag-burning protesters were angrily confronted, reports of arrests were made.

From the White House (or possibly from a late night flight down to a golf course) Trump began to launch public attacks against those who would have stood against his event, his party and his party's party. The tirade began in public, with attacks that were based on race, classism and politics. The "haters" and "losers" were blamed, and the appearance of strength steadily deepened the already existing party line divisions.

It was in the hours after that that the evidence was most apparent that Trump had used the Fourth of July "Salute to America" as a means for further political grandstanding. The traditional 4th of July political "ceasefire" was sounded with the firing off of verbal and political shots. It was in the insults that the intended circling of the wagons became further crystallised. It was classic Trump and classic strongman - to put on the best of appearances only to sink several notches lower as soon as the cameras officially turned off.

Let's finish with the gold standard of ridiculous self-congratulatory events - Idi Amin. Am I saying that the crimes of Idi Amin are equal to those of Trump? Obviously not, but am I comparing their gauche public tendencies and sub-par intellects? Absolutely. Amin was famous for his parades during times of extreme national duress. He continued on, medals ablaze with the military's full might on display. Add to this his self-congratulatory nature, his vindictive political favouritism and his toxic displays of might. (Amin, it has been noted, was jealous of the then Central African Republic president, Jean-Bedel Bakassa, who visited him adorned with medals more extravagant than his own.)

As for Trump, he is not one to shy away from self-aggrandisement and self-promotion. His very own Boeing 737 is famously decked with solid gold interiors. His ego can even be described as all-consuming; it eats whatever stands in its path. It is a self-sustaining entity, a black hole from which there can be no escape. The same could be said about Amin - power went to his head, and quickly. Once it did, enemies were dispatched and invented to be dispatched.

Trump's paranoia could be viewed as becoming extreme. There is an endless need for loyalty and deference to Trump, especially amongst his most loyal followers; the Fourth of July parade was simply the latest manifestation of it. With such parades, limits and moderation don't typically follow suit.

There will be more events, bigger showmanship and more association with himself as the idyllic vision of America. He is filling out his strongman shows nicely now, and starting to walk around in them. He now needs feats of false strength in order to back himself up.

The key difference between Trump and Amin, of course, is that the US military is a global monolith, one that can destroy the world with the push of a red button by an orange finger.

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