Mission Unaccomplished: (Background Thoughts for Session Two)

In our fifth and final look at presidential summits, we will briefly view selected experiences of three recent and one current president, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. As we explore the early twenty-first century and approach ever nearer the present, we realize that summits are not easy to define. Indeed, new forms of this diplomacy have evolved in the last half century. Tracing presidential summits during and even soon after World War II tended to be relatively easy. They were limited in number and usually in scope, and they were novel enough to command many resources and much attention.

To quote from a scholarly assessment of a half dozen twentieth century summits, David Reynolds’s *Summits: Six Meetings That Shaped the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2007): “Parleys at the summit between two or three political leaders no longer have the same global significance or resonance.” (403) What has partially replaced those encounters has been institutional summitry” Four examples are the European Council, which meets twice a year, and the G-8--now G-7--which convenes each summer. Then there is the annual NATO summit as well as the G-20. Each is a bit different in composition and purpose, but ordinarily involves attendance by the president.

Take one example, the European Council. It illustrates what happened in European diplomacy and how some of the later summit experiences, including today’s G-7, originated and evolved. In 1958 Charles de Gaulle, egotistical and nationalistic, came to power in France as the result of a military coup. De Gaulle, of course, had led the Free French during World War II when Paris itself was controlled by a pro-German Vichy government. At that time de Gaulle had led the free French in opposition, and although Churchill and Roosevelt had no patience with the Vichy regime, they viewed de Gaulle as vain, glory-seeking, and hard-to-get-along-with. As he aged, those tendencies only seemed to harden in the Frenchman.

Keep in mind, too, how long France and Germany had been in opposition to each other. Two world wars had seen them on opposite side of trenches, barbed wire, borders, and negotiating tables. De Gaulle himself certainly had no love of Germany, for he had spent two-and-a-half years in a German POW camp during the First World War, but as de Gaulle surveyed the European scene in the late 1950s, he viewed West Germany’s Konrad Adenauer as a strong leader who had staked his future on allying with the West. Thus, he invited Adenauer to visit France. Hesitant to appear the defeated supplicant now trotting off to the lair of one of the arrogant victors, Adenauer was unsure.

Here’s where de Gaulle was smart, insightful, and enormously human. He invited Adenauer not to his official residence in Paris or to a glittering remnant of the past like Versailles but to his country home at the remote village of Colombey-les-deux-Eglises, several hours east of Paris. No other foreign statesman had ever been extended such an invitation. There, in the cozy atmosphere of chez-de Gaulle, the two men quietly shared wine, food, memories and ideas. There was no staff, no elaborate position papers, no detailed agenda. Since de Gaulle spoke some German, even the official interpreter was often unneeded. The two-day visit led to a strong, personal relationship and eventually the Franco-German Treaty of January 1963. Part of that agreement involved twice-a-year meetings between the two leaders, with foreign and defense ministers meeting four times a year. Despite de Gaulle’s frequent efforts to develop his own nuclear capacity, which he did, and other French-first policies, that working relationship eventually evolved into the European Community. Today the European Union is an heir.

The de Gaulle example of how a thoughtful and seasoned leader with a long-range future in mind can make meaningful a quiet summit had nothing specifically to do with an American president at the summit, but it did illustrate how personal relations between two leaders can, under the right circumstances, make enormous differences. And yes, admittedly, just the right climate and moment is not a common occurrence, but this is a point to which we’ll return soon.

As summits have multiplied in numbers, however, they have tended to diminish in importance. No longer is each summit attendance so visible, dramatic, significant, or noteworthy. That is not to say that one of the institutional efforts may not produce results that turn out to have even greater significance than one of the more traditional summits of the past; but the odds are against it. Multinational summits tend to be short with little time, beyond photo ops and formalities, for serious attention to complex questions. It’s hard enough to get two leaders to agree to a treaty, convention, or set of principles, much less seven, twenty, or some combination of multiples.

Nor have these variations like the G-7 or G-20 completely replaced the more traditional summits. Meetings with Putin, Xi, Kim, or Netanyahu continue to demand attention and analysis. Even they have become different in tone and timing than many of the earlier examples, though.

We have in this extended, two semester OLLI view, taken a lengthy and sometimes superficial look at presidential summits over more than a century. For Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt or Harry Truman, the challenges of preventing, conducting, or ending a war proved great. For those early exponents of summits, there was a lack of examples or established guidelines. This meant being something of a pioneer. For Wilson, this entailed considerable controversy as no president had been away from Washington, D. C., indeed the continental US, for any prolonged period of time. How would the ordinary business of government be conducted without the chief executive in Washington? Was this irresponsible, a dereliction of duties? When congress passed bills, how would that legislation be placed in the president’s hands for a signature or veto in a timely manner? The president was severely criticized and challenged for acting in such a non-traditional manner.

By Roosevelt’s presidency, those questions were not asked. By then the US was either on the verge of or at war, one initiated by Japan’s attack at Pearl Harbor. Meetings of war leaders, and there were ten presidential summits during the conflict, seemed more heroic than suspect, and by the time Harry Truman occupied the White House, the notion of a summit was widely accepted.

During those early years, though, travel frequently posed challenges, especially during wartime when the dangers of an air attack or a torpedo hit were great. In fact, half the British delegation to the Yalta Conference in 1945 died in a plane crash, an accident and not the result of enemy fire. Still, Roosevelt and Truman both journeyed overseas at times of maximum danger, which meant careful and often time-consuming navigation. Aircraft during World War II, for example, were seldom pressurized, and, at times, little more than converted military vehicles hastily retrofitted for a president and his advisors.

As time went by, of course, improvements in transportation and communication began changing the summit scene greatly. Whereas Churchill and Roosevelt traveled to summits in crudely converted military aircraft, presidents after the war journeyed comfortably, if not luxuriously, aboard Air Force One. Now air travel was not only safe but equipped for study and sleep. Planes also gave presidents opportunities for intense last-minute preparations, and chief executives could schedule themselves to arrive a day or two early to minimize jet lag. They also traveled with dozens, if not hundreds, of assistants and aides. How many of these individuals could reasonably be involved in the event was one question, but being able to take many, including reporters, was not an unalloyed blessing. The more on board, and Clinton once took more than a thousand, the greater the difficulties of arranging hotel accommodations and collateral meeting times and spaces—and coordinating everything.

But as travel became easier, it also became less important. Telephone, cable and internet connections multiplied and accelerated communications between heads of state. They might still want the pageantry of an official summit, but much of the vital preparation could be handled expeditiously from afar. To do so, however, still involved layers of procedures: timing for phone calls (since time zone differences might mean calls at inconvenient parts of the day), agendas and talking points, ideas from agencies involved, and monitoring for contemporary and historical purposes. Those were only a few considerations involved.

Moreover, changes in the type of summits and in the ease of instant communication did not end the possibility of the more traditional, one-on-one experience. From Clinton through Trump, this practice has continued. In last week’s backgrounder, I talked briefly of a handful of Clinton’s summits, mostly with Boris Yeltsin of Russia. Key among the results was the expansion of NATO into a number of nations that either had been satellites of the Soviet Union and therefore members of the old Warsaw Pact or areas thoroughly under the thumb of Moscow. The decision, beginning in 1999 with the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, to invite more than a dozen such entities into NATO both expanded and transformed a defensive alliance that had once consisted of a dozen mostly Western European nations. It also had a major impact on Russian diplomatic thinking.

Another difference in the evolving summit scene is that, unlike the earlier presidents we have discussed, many of the most recent have come to office with state, not national, government backgrounds, lacking the rich resumes of a Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson, Nixon or Ford. George W. Bush, like Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton, came from the ranks of governors and lacked any substantial background in international affairs. (Even so, they are in contrast to our current president who lacked governmental experience at any level.) Like them, Bush (though he did have a father with such a background) leaned to some degree on diplomatic and national security experts, although in Bush’s case the most dominant voice was not Secretary of State Colin Powell or National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice but Vice President Dick Cheney.

In his roles in the Ford and Reagan administrations, Cheney had not displayed the fiercely conservative and interventionist tendencies he did when he became arguably the most powerful vice president ever to serve. When the United States responded to the 9/11 tragedy by intervening in Iraq against Saddam Hussein, summit experiences with Tony Blair of Great Britain became particularly frequent and important. Moreover, Bush sought to establish better relations with Vladimir Putin, who had emerged as Russia’s leader in 1999. After his first encounter with Putin, Bush famously stated: “I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. . . . I was able to get a sense of his soul.” Condi Rice was alarmed at those words, and Bush later regretted that he had uttered them.

Just as Lyndon Johnson had seen Vietnam dominating the tenor and timing of summits in the 1960s, so fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan dictated much of what happened for the younger Bush. As noted, he did work especially closely with Britain’s Blair, with whom there were frequent summits, largely oriented to what was happening in the Middle East.

With Barack Obama we encounter a figure, again one with no broad background in international affairs, who diligently attended almost every summit. Well-informed and intelligent, he did make a difference in some of the outcomes, but the list of his summits is too lengthy for close inspection at this time. Doubtless the best, most insightful book yet published on Obama’s foreign policy is by Ben Rhodes, Obama’s longtime speech writer and deputy national security advisor. It’s *The World as It Is* (New York, 2018*)*. Unfortunately, however, it lacks a good index and does not treat summits in any sustained way.

As for an assessment of the summit concept, there are lengthy lists of defenders and critics. We began last spring with John Kennedy’s observation that it is better to meet at the summit than at the brink. Certainly, he knew better than any other modern president the difficulties and dangers of operating on the edges of war, and nuclear war at that. On the reverse side, Dean Rusk, secretary of state for both Kennedy and Johnson, provided a contrary view. “Summit diplomacy,” he wrote, “is to be approached with the wariness with which a prudent physician prescribes a habit-forming drug—a technique to be employed rarely and under the most exceptional circumstances with rigorous safeguards against its becoming a debilitating or dangerous habit.”

Now, the two views are not necessarily incompatible, but they do point in different directions. For those supporting summits whenever and wherever possible, there are arguments that familiarity breeds understanding and empathy, that if ultimately the leaders on the top will make the decisive decisions, why not short-circuit the lower bureaucratic echelons, that concentrating decisions into the hands of those leaders elected by their people or selected through the processes of their nation is a more responsive and responsible route to take.

As for the impact of first-hand attendance and the force of personality, Roosevelt expressed to Churchill in 1942 the thinking of virtually all national leaders tempted to the summit. It is the belief that the force of personality and the allure of personal charm will override differences on national issues. Said FDR to his British counterpart: “I know you will not mind my being brutally frank when I tell you I think I can personally handle Stalin better than your Foreign Office or my State Department. Stalin hates the guts of all your top people. He thinks he likes me better, and I hope he will continue to. . . .”

Of course, we have only touched the surface of presidential summit history, but by now it seems clear that certain elements have enhanced the most successful examples. First, realistic and attainable goals. Second, thoughtful, meticulous and careful preparation. Third, the involvement of knowledgeable professionals. Fourth, preliminary agreements on most, crucial points. Fifth, mutual trust between the parties. Sixth, a president well-schooled on key issues and ready to put the finishing touches on an agreement.

The need for all, or at least virtually all, of the above—and perhaps even more—is an indication of why summits take time, thought, planning, and luck along with the right set of circumstances on both—or all—sides of the table. Success does not come quickly or easily. Nor should we overlook the many pitfalls to the summit approach. Presidents, like all national leaders, tend to exaggerate their competence and impact. Seldom are they as well-informed on the nuances or even the essences of issues as are career professionals. Studies have indicated that agreements shaped at the top are seldom superior to those that inch their ways through slower, more bureaucratic processes. Then, too, summits may be ill-timed, chosen for their impact on domestic politics more than on international problem-solving. Related to this perspective may be a president being so hopeful of enhancing his reputation that he hurries to an unwise and ill-considered agreement.

Certainly the record shows that presidents have usually taken summits seriously. After all, the press has put them under an international microscope whenever they’ve attended one, and most have prepared diligently. Good staff work has helped enormously, of course, and chiefs of staff have provided materials, experts, and plenty of time in order to get up to speed. Some presidents have been more dutiful than others, and some have done better preparing for a traditional encounter than for the newer, multi-national events. Ronald Reagan is a case in point. For his first encounter with Gorbachev, he participated in interviews with experts and study sessions of all kinds, yet his chief of staff, Jim Baker, found his briefing book for the 1983 Williamsburg G-7 summit, which he was to chair, untouched after Baker had spent a great amount of time assembling it. When he confronted Reagan the morning the G-7 was to open, the president blandly confessed: “Well, Jim, The Sound of Music was on television last night.”

Nor should we forget that success in the past doesn’t guarantee success in the future. Drawing superficial lessons from one summit may lead to ill-considered efforts by others. Richard Nixon’s China summit in 1972 was by most measures a block-buster success, and it may have inspired Donald Trump to hope for an equal result with Kim Jong-un. But the circumstances were quite different. Nixon had years of personal diplomatic contacts and political experiences and was approaching China at just the right moment: when Beijing and Moscow were clearly at odds. This gave leverage to him with either government, because both were uneasy about American inroads with the other. Then, too, the goals were modest and attainable: basically in the Shanghai Communique the two agreed on important areas in which they disagreed (e.g. the status of Taiwan), and did so in a spirit of hopefulness for the future.

In the 2018 and 2019 summits between Trump and Kim, it was the Koreans who appear to have had the attainable and achievable goals: foremost was North Korea’s being recognized as of equal importance to the number one power in the world and having praise lavished on its vain leader. Moreover, the US agreed to suspend joint military training exercises with South Korea with no equivalent concession from Pyongyang. The major US goal was for the North to give up its nuclear weapons program. Other than Kim’s vague statements, they got nothing. In fact, when examined with care, the North’s statements about denuclearizing the Korean peninsula had important applications for the US, not just North Korea (removing US troops from the South, signing a peace treaty, etc.).

Yes, summit diplomacy, as with any other process, can with proper handling yield positive results. There is little evidence in the three years of the current presidency, however, that the approach has been given the strategic thought or thorough preparation—much less careful attention by the president himself--to yield anything but pleasant Kodak (or smart phone digital) moments and perhaps a string of emotional midnight tweets.

Jack Hammersmith (Mission Unaccomplished: session two) October 9, 2019

PS One excellent article on Trump and Kim at the Hanoi summit is Jessica T. Mathews, “What Happened in Hanoi?” *The New York Review of Books* (April 18, 2019), 14-17. Some of you will recall Matthews’ mother, Barbara Tuchman, whose most famous work, *The Guns of August*, was one of John Kennedy’s favorites. Tuchman twice won the Pulitzer prize for her histories.