Twitter Thread by Zachary Fryer-Biggs



Zachary Fryer-Biggs
@ZachFB



So I was traveling with Mattis in 2017 when Trump made his infamous “fire and fury” comments amid escalation with North Korea over its nuclear program, and obviously talk of a preemptive strike. (Thread)

Mattis looked exhausted and was desperately avoiding engaging in discussion about what Trump had said. He kept insisting that he would “leave the rhetoric up to the President” but you could see that he was trying to hold back a hell of a lot of thoughts.

Staff told me at the time that he wasn’t getting a lot of sleep (he never really did anyway) but that despite his constant insistence that he kept other people up at night, he was having a difficult time sorting a way out of the situation.

Later that year, on another trip with Mattis this time to Asia, I asked him about what he thought of nuclear madman theory. It was my way of trying to get him to engage on what we were seeing from Trump, since he is a student of history, without making him utter Trump’s name.

For those unfamiliar, nuclear madman theory predates Nixon, but he’s closely associated with it as he was working with aids to suggest to the North Vietnamese that he might just be crazy enough to nuke them, and that they should therefore negotiate a settlement.

I wrote a piece (inaccessible but it’s behind the Jane’s paywall) about whether Trump might be messing about with similar theories shortly after he took office in 2017. Yes I know, assuming that level of thought about foreign policy from him looks really stupid in retrospect.

I can’t report on what Mattis said in our chat, but it clearly was something he had struggled with, as he was grappling with how to contain Trump’s bellicose talk and his seeming ignorance of decades of nuclear policy. I wrote a bit about that here https://t.co/OCmnXcBAJp

Mattis spoke publicly about his desire to make U.S. military policy more unpredictable to enemies, but he also emphasized America’s role as a reliable, steadying force on security issues. I’ve been thinking a lot about the worry I saw on Mattis’ face back then.

If anyone knew what Trump was capable of, it was him. And in a standoff that was escalating a man known for being steady in combat looked disturbed by what he knew.