Transcript of The Masthead's Conference Call with James Fallows, Sept. 11, 2017

Matt Peterson: Let's get started. I think everyone has got the gist by now, but just in case, I'm Matt Peterson, I'm the editor of the Masthead at The Atlantic. This is our first conference call with our new Masthead members; and of course we have James Fellows on the line there, who you heard briefly. The way that these calls are going to work is that I will ask Jim a few questions and then we'll take questions from you guys, the members of the audience. We won't be able to hear your voices on the call, so please submit those questions through our Google Chat, and you should have that link in the email that you got that dial-in number here.

So I'm assuming that Jim doesn't need a long preamble here for anybody on the call. He is our long-time national correspondent at the Atlantic, and he is heading off very shortly to London to be our new Europe editor to feed this big global expansion that we're doing.

So let's get into it here. We're going to... I'm going to ask a couple questions about the presidency, about Donald Trump and then we'll go over to China and then we'll go to your questions.

Jim, it is of course September 11 today. There are natural disasters unfolding in Texas and Florida. This is a time when I think a lot of people would reflexively look to the president. And even if you were not a member of the president's party, you expect him to play a certain role in society that presidents have traditionally done. I'm curious for you, as a long-time watcher of the presidency and as a member of an administration a while back, what is that role supposed to be? And what is the president's job description outside of the basic constitutional stuff?

James Fallows: Matt, thanks very much for asking and let me just say a word of thanks to everybody who is joining the Masthead program and joining this call. It's an honor for us to be in touch and connect with our Atlantic audience and support it in all the ways we can. Having worked for the magazine for almost 40 years now, I'm really appreciative of the support we get from our diaspora of people.

The role of the presidency, I guess the way I think of it is that there's certainly both moments of obligation and opportunity for a president to be the voice of the entire country. Moments of shock or surprise or uncertainty or woe, to be able to speak for all the different strands that tie the country together. I think we saw that from Barack Obama after the Charleston shootings, Ronald Reagan after the Challenger explosion. There's a long list of other opportunities.

I guess what's striking about Donald Trump is that he is exactly the person in office that he was on the campaign trail, which is that he... I think the idea that there are responsibilities of this job, that idea just does not mesh with any part of his personality or his mental or emotional makeup. And so it's very difficult for him to do the part of the job that I think has come naturally to most of its previous incumbents. All of them I can remember from my conscious life. And so you can see him doing this sort of under duress, when he's reading a script as he did at one point after the Charlottesville protests and violence, and as he did sort of on his return trip to Houston, where he went to the food kitchen and loaded up a pickup truck in his own distinctive way. But I think

that we see the difficulties he has making the imaginative leap to the responsibilities of office. He's aware of some of the opportunities it gives, but the responsibilities that carry with it, they are not natural parts of his makeup.

Peterson: Right, so you mentioned something that I'm interested in. He does go out and he reads these scripts. Folks in his office certainly understand that role that the presidency is supposed to play and they can occasionally persuade the president to go and do that. But you were a speechwriter and have a bit of, some experience with this. Do you... How much weight do you personally put on those scripted comments? I mean, is it all just the same president speaking? Do you just listen for the off-the-cuff comments that he makes to try to understand what he really thinks?

Fallows: As with almost everything else about Donald Trump in office, there's a discontinuity between the way he approaches this job and the way anybody else has before; and this was a point I tried to make in the six or eight months before the election in my Trump time capsule series, which got up to 152 entries by the end of things that he did that were... that had no obvious precedent. And the reason I say that is that I think in modern times, every previous holder of the office has recognized that the words... that the instant that he—or eventually she—is sworn in on January 20, there's a whole different incarnation that comes over that person. And every single thing that he says or does or signals, each way he spends 15 minutes of his time with people he sees or doesn't, the places he goes to or doesn't, that all has significance beyond his own personal whim. So you would have presidents recognizing including... I worked for Jimmy Carter, for the record, long ago, a Democrat. He would recognize that there was one register of formal speech that was meant to be read and studied and where you aspire to have something that people could remember. I think probably Jimmy Carter's best illustration of that was a speech he gave on human rights policy at Notre Dame University, which I think stands up 40+ years later.

There's another register that's meant to be a very precise description of a plan or a policy, again for Carter's case it would be his energy policy speeches early in his administration, or when he was his most successful time as president, the Camp David negotiations, talking about the way he imagined Israel and Egypt working out their differences in the long run.

Then there are impromptu comments, where you mean to say the way a president's mind works in the way that he can respond to the unpredictable and all of this.

In Donald Trump's case, there's been almost nothing he said that to me fits into the canon of presidential rhetoric, that you're aiming for something special. Probably the closest approach would be his inaugural speech, which I think was on this theme of American carnage. To me that was not like any inaugural speech we've heard before. It was sort of a Steve Bannon production, I would imagine, and Stephen Miller of the dystopian view that has fueled a lot of Trump's rhetoric. That's one category. He's given almost no policy speeches that I can think of right now. It's been, "This is gonna be great. It's gonna be tremendous," will go in his view and then his impromptu comments are the person that we've seen on TV for the past two years, where we're just... the rock-em, sock-em Donald Trump showing his TV personality, which has made him both

popular for good and bad. And so it's very, very difficult to apply any of the lenses you would use for past presidential rhetoric to what Donald Trump has, either formally or informally. And I think that the fact...

One other point I'll make, not to filibuster here, is that the scale of giving a prepared speech is harder than you would think. Ronald Reagan was good at it because he was not an actor but an announcer. George W. Bush actually became pretty good at reading prepared speeches. Jimmy Carter never really mastered that skill. Bill Clinton was always better riffing than he was giving a teleprompter speech, though it's a particular skill and it's one that Donald Trump has not shown much interest in mastering; because the sour joke is they sound like hostage statements, but they just don't sound as if his heart really in them when he's having to read these texts. And sometimes, he'll say, he'll kind of improvise off the text and say, "Well, that's interesting; I didn't know that." It's a way he can try to liven up the prepared speeches he's giving.

Peterson: Yeah. I want to go outside the borders of this country, but let's take a stop on the way with a list of questions. So Laura is asking in your travels, has your reception as an American journalist changed based on who's in the White House?

Fallows: That's an interesting question and yes, there's one answer you wouldn't expect and I'll give it a serious answer. When I was living in China during the late part of George W. Bush's administration and the first couple years of Obama, many people in China did not draw some sort of fine appearance distinctions, so many of them thought I actually was George W. Bush when I was traveling around. I'm a guy a few years younger than George W. Bush. If you, if there were, if you hadn't seen many middle-aged white guys, you might think I was George W. Bush. So that changed my perception. I could joke with taxi drivers about, "Oh, yeah, that Dick Cheney, he's really a card," etc.

But it's—yes, I think Americans and probably other nationalities have lived overseas know that you do, for better or worse, you become a walking symbol of your country's foreign policy when you're out there. And so when I was in the Philippines in the 80's and 90's during the time of a lot of Filipino–U.S. tension, there was, "Well, why are you Americans doing X and Y and Z?" Yes, it is part of the baggage that goes along with it.

I think there was... I was in China when Obama was elected, and there was a sense of incredulity in China in a good way, that the United States could actually do this. There had been, in the previous six months, had been the world financial collapsed, triggered by the U.S., and there was a lot of disdain for the U.S.; and then since the U.S. has had a kind of rebound power.

I was in China shortly after Trump's election and there was a lot of eye-rolling from my Chinese counterparts of, "Oh, you're now going to give us more lectures on the virtues of democracy. We at least have, we have a more competent set of people, say what you will about their views of liberal discourse." So yes, this sort of goes with the territory.

Peterson: Right, right. So let's stay with China then. A lot of folks have been asking me to relate questions to you about China. You wrote a cover story for the magazine, I think it was

your most recent one, about a possible turn in China to something of more than antagonists to the United States than it has been in the past. This was, you know, just before Trump took office that you wrote this piece. A reader, Robert asked, has your view of China changed since then? Do you think that our relationship with them is becoming more dangerous and more threatening under President Trump?

Fallows: My short answer to the last question is no, and let me circle back just to give a somewhat longer answer, including a special Masthead exclusive inside tip on this. My cover story for last year, which was for the December issue of the magazine, which comes out in early November and the problem with the quadrennial December issue for us is that it goes to press before we know who's going to win the presidential election, and it comes out just after that. So we have to do something that can stand that uncertainty period and so we thought it would be whoever won the presidency, which we assumed like most people, was going to be Hillary Clinton and that whatever happened dealing with China, it was going to be important foreign policy construct.

So Jeff Goldberg had an interview with Henry Kissinger. I had this long reported piece on how to think about a more, a China that was turning inward in a way that we hadn't seen for the previous 30 or 40 years. And the whole concept of my piece was the idea that there would be a concerted, planned chess-game-like approach on the U.S. side of how do we balance these variables of wanting to recognize the things that work and don't work in dealing with China, recognizing whether its long course until the 1970's was changing in a darker direction and all that.

With Donald Trump in office, with no evidenced experience in China on his part, apart from making deals with his man, Peter Navarro, as his main most visible China advisor; a guy who wrote "Death by China." That's a film that had that as its tone. We have a much different perspective and I think the main thing that has changed here is an assessment on the Chinese side, that they could play Donald Trump. That recognizing as Chuck Schumer has done most recently, and Putin before him and other people, that the game of flattering Donald Trump, whether it's in an attractive commercial deals or just calling him brilliant, that that can change his approach. We saw in the early meeting of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump at Mar-a-Lago that Trump seemed to switch from China as the menace to China as a friend and Xi Jinping doing his best.

I think the fundamentals of the long drama of U.S.–Chinese interaction have not fundamentally changed with Donald Trump in office. They're still are very deeply connected economies, with points both of... that they are so connected they can't be separated and yet there are points of tension between them, most recently intellectual property, with a change in China's internal management that in most ways is against U.S. interests as it becomes more repressive internally, with imponderables about China's approach to the South China Sea and East China Sea, and what it's going to do where now North Korea and how it's managing its relationships with Japan. It is still a complex bargain from which the U.S. cannot extricate itself; but you have the sense of almost nobody at home on the U.S. side to manage this.

So it hasn't... I think it is fortunate that it hasn't gotten any worse than it has. I don't feel it's dramatically more dangerous than it was a year ago, but I feel as if it's less managed

on the U.S. side; and so I hope that the... whatever goes wrong over the next year or two on the U.S. side can be buoyed up after that.

Peterson: Yeah, given that there is this absence of strategy and that other leaders out there see it—I'm paraphrasing a question from Gill here—do you think that serious foreign policy agreements can be reached under this president, whether it's on North Korea or with Russia or with Israel/Palestine? Do other countries still seriously negotiate with the United States or has the presidency sort of undermined that?

Fallows: I think that the evidence so far—and we now are nearing, it's not a full year, but we're more than half a year into Donald Trump's time—is that neither he nor Rex Tillerson seems to have the interest or the knowledge or the experience or the contacts to make these sorts of deals; so that would be point one.

Point two is the normal cast of supporting actors is not there. Assistant secretaries of state, ambassadors through most of this region, the kind of envoys; for example, the Afghanistan-Pakistan envoy that Richard Holbrook held that job and now I think that is now vacant. So No. 2, the supporting cast is not there. So No. 3.

The two sort of filling the vacuum players that remain are No. 1, the U.S. military, where James Mattis, who is a very experienced and well-connected person and who has been able to fill in almost all of his Pentagon supporting cast, not the civilian-appointed offices, but a lot of their military counterparts. So Mattis has been a default leader of diplomatic enterprises and I think in many ways that's good. I respect Mattis. I've known him for a long time, but you don't really want the Defense Department in general leading U.S. foreign policy. The other is that China has, in many ways, expanded to fill the vacuum after Donald Trump unwisely, in my view, took the U.S. out of the Paris Accords. China said, along with most cities in the U.S. said, "We're going to still pitch in here."

The U.S. withdrawal from the TPP, I think, has again made an opening for China. Its obscure-sounding but ambitious One Belt, One Road plan is filling some of this vacuum. So I think in the absence of U.S. presidential leadership and U.S. State Department leadership, you have the weird equilibrium of the U.S. Defense Department and China being the two sources of some activism in making deals in Asia.

I think in other parts of the world, it is unlikely that Jared Kushner is going to be able to put together some Middle East deal. I don't know what's happening with U.S. negotiations in Europe, where I'm heading next... headed next week, and the whole anomaly of how Trump deals with Russia [inaudible] all this as well.

Peterson: Right. Well let's talk about Europe then, because a couple of readers here have asked. Why are you moving to London, Jim?

Fallows: Well, I figure the life of the policy guideline here is when in doubt, choose the more adventuresome option. That has sometimes led my wife, Deb, and me to distress and heartbreak, like when we had our honeymoon in a work camp in Ghana. But often it's

paid off and so we... I was on leave from the magazine for the first six months of this year when Deb and I were in Southern California finishing a book about our travels round the country for the past four years. That book will be out next spring. As we were nearing the end of that time, Jeff Goldberg, our editor-in-chief, and Bob Cohn, our President, said, "We're planning to open this operation in Europe. Would you be interested in doing it?" And so in about three minutes I said "Yes," and Deb as well, so next week we'll be starting things in London.

The company rationale for this is that, in time, The Atlantic has, in its whole 160-year-old history, it's always had a lot of international reportage from its very first issues and all the way along. But it has not had a business and physical presence other than reporters like me before now. And it's part of expanding our international coverage, our international audience, our international events presence and just trying to, as the technical term goes, dignify ourselves for more of a... to be more present as a global journalism enterprise. We're going to have an office in London, we're going to have correspondents across Europe, we're going to try to have special coverage of extended Europe.

The journalistic and political argument here is that everything important that's happening in the world is happening in some form or another in Europe right now, from economic polarization, economic dislocation and recovery, issues of strains democracy, refugee questions. The analogs to what we're seeing in politics in North America we're seeing very clearly among the U.K. and the European Union and Scotland and Ireland and all the rest and their relationships with their hinterland in the Middle East and Northern Africa. So there are a million things that I'm interested to learn about and cover there, too; so that's the next chapter.

Peterson: Yeah, when you think out at the things that are unfolding in Europe, what do you... what are you trying to pay attention to as you go over there? Are you closely following the German elections, the Norwegian elections, which are taking place today, I think? What are you paying attention to as you get ready for this move?

Fallows: I'll answer this for myself personally and then for The Atlantic. I... Deb and I actually got married in England long ago in the early 1970's when I was in graduate school in Oxford; and from that time to this, my main intellectual and journalistic interests has been essentially what works and what doesn't for polities, for economic systems, for companies, for families. I've just been interested in how organizations rise and fall.

One of the first long stories I did for The Atlantic was I actually did... spent a couple of weeks in rust-belt Detroit, then to then-nascent Silicon Valley back in 1980, seeing how the economies of those two places were changing. So I am interested to go back to a place where I spent a lot of time over the last 40+ years to see what parts of the European model and ideal seemed to be gaining strength, which of them are seeming to be under strain from the economic and technological tensions of this moment and the ethnic changes that have been so important in American history and have a very different impact in Europe because of its different... It's not... European countries are generally not imagined nations that the United States was from its beginning.

So the combination, the interaction of economic pressures, technological disruptions, movements of people, the roles in which religion is a source of both unity and division, and the ways in which societies adapt themselves to the multi-ethnicity that is just a reality of modern life; that is the big picture that is interesting to me, and you can think of an analogies in every single European country.

In terms of just practical day-to-day coverage, we will be tying these to elections in all the countries as they ripple across the... Probably business is going to play a significant part in our coverage as well. In the times I've been to Europe over recent years, I've been struck by the interest in all those countries there and essentially North American-based technology companies, whether it's Google or Facebook or Twitter or all the rest, or Amazon, that are so familiar for their effect around the world because, as in the case in North America, they are changing everything about life in Europe, but from the European perspective they are doing that also being from some other political system in a different part of the world, a different set of values. And so it's a yet more complex situation there, so politics and technology and business and issues of faith and issues of human movement. I think those are the main categories of what we initially have sketched out. The way that Europe is making itself a... Whether it's becoming as a new mission to become a more distinct model of a societal future, given the changes in the U.S. right now.

Peterson: Yeah. That seems like it is plenty to keep you busy.

Fallows: Yeah [inaudible]

Peterson: Could we go back to... No, go ahead. What's that?

Fallows: Just before I went to China 11 years ago, I had a list of 100 things I wanted to cover; and as it ended up about 30 of those were things I ended up writing about, but then there were a different 100 that I discovered once I was one the scene. So I imagine that's same pace here. I have... still have a list of 100 things. 30 of them will turn out to be yes, those are rich veins, but then in exploring the other 70, I'll discover the whole different dark universe of things I wasn't aware of until I got there.

Peterson: Ah. I look forward to finding out what's in this dark universe. So let me ask—we have time for maybe two more questions here. I want to give one here to Brian, who's asking about the airline industry. Brian is in St. Louis. He's lived there for the last 30 years, he says. During that time, he's become part of, he puts it in quotes, "Flyover Country", which I take it he doesn't like. He says we've gone from being a swing state to a red state and he doesn't think those two things are unrelated. He, and St. Louis, feels overlooked and ignored because they can't connect as easily and they can't travel as easily. They don't have corporate headquarters there anymore, or media centers.

What can be done about that? Can anything be done about this change in flyover country.

Transcript of The Masthead's Conference Call with James Fallows, Sept. 11, 2017

Fallows: Just to talk for 10 seconds on the airline aspect of this. When I worked in the Carter administration, one of the things I was involved with and skeptical at the time was full airline deregulation, because airline deregulation has given us the good and the bad of a purely economic system. It's a lot cheaper than it was 30 or 35 year ago, but we all know about the dis-economies in the modern airline system now, including the fact that lots of the country... parts of the country are underserved.

The real answer to... so I take it very seriously this issue of how to retain the vitality of non-coastal America, and that's actually what our forthcoming book is about. I think there is... One of the patterns that Deb and I discovered in traveling around the country for most of the past four years is that just as there is a concentrating movement in the big coastal metropolises in Seattle and New York and San Francisco and all the rest, for a variety of reasons, there is developing a reverse blow too, driven by difference in real estate costs. The dis-economies at working at some of the big centers, that it's becoming an opportunity for, you know, Pittsburgh is certainly taking a lot of advantage of that. I think St. Louis has been... It's in that next tier of places that have so far mainly suffered, but have the opportunity to now come back, and I'll give a longer answer in my actual book, which is coming out next year.

Peterson: All right. Let's see, let's just wrap up with one more personal question for you. Will the, Barbara asks, will the American Futures series be continuing now that you're moving to London?

Fallows: That's... Thanks for asking. That's what our book is about and I think in the long run, we are... Deb and I have a deep interest in connecting the various strands and movements we saw around the country: the downtown movement and the tech, the small tech startup movement and the career technical education movement, which is changing education, and this movement to re-bring vitality back to places like Fresno and Rochester and Greenville and Duluth and Sioux Falls, and the other places that made such an impression on us. So we will not be traveling in the U.S. as much, probably in the next two years, but I hope to remain active beyond that and to be, in the long run, continuing these connections and this narrative and this sort of, this sort of discussion.

Peterson: All right. Well, we will be there with you as you do it, Jim. We'll wrap it up here. Thank you, everybody, for joining us. You can come back next week when we'll be talking to Uri Friedman here from The Atlantic about his story about German migrants, another good preview for our European expansion. We'll post details about that in the usual places.

Tim, thank you very much for joining us.

Fallows: Thank you, Matt, and thanks to all the members of our team. We really, really appreciate your support. So thanks for joining our membership project.

Peterson: Absolutely. All right. Take care, everybody, bye-bye.