



ANALYSIS

“Americanism, not globalism”: President Trump and the American mission

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the end of the Second World War, the dominant current of American exceptionalism in the rhetoric and outlook of US presidents has been the belief that the United States has a special mission to redeem the world by extending liberty and democracy to all peoples. However, President Donald Trump is an exception. He believes that in the post-Cold War era successive administrations in Washington have pursued reckless visions of regional or global hegemony — especially in the Middle East — leaving the home front to languish and the nation open to ridicule. For Trump, the government must first protect its citizens and promote their prosperity. Despite eschewing this stream of American altruism, Trump wants to “make America great again” by rebuilding its economy and projecting military strength. In his first 18 months in office few policy decisions have exhibited either isolationism or a willingness to countenance American retreat from the world. Still, Trump is no internationalist, and has never expressed support for the institutions of global governance that emerged after 1945. Moreover, his long-standing impatience with alliances and hostility towards free trade and other multilateral approaches to international affairs have now found concrete, if inconsistent, expression in his presidency. Trump’s America First impulses are hardening as he gains greater confidence on the world stage and reshapes his national security team. His stoking of the politics of grievance and resentment will, however, continue to corrode domestic support for a more ambitious US foreign policy, and in future allies will have to think about the nature of American power differently.

Since Donald Trump's election in November 2016 the most common critique of his foreign policy is that it undermines the liberal international order which has been the basis for prosperity and stability across much of the Western world for the past 70 years. Whether it be his scepticism towards the US alliance system in Europe and Asia, his withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris climate change accords or his attacks on the United Nations and other multilateral institutions, President Trump is perceived by many as posing a direct threat to the system of global governance established by the United States in the wake of the Second World War.

This criticism of Trump often conceals a more serious charge: that by undermining the liberal international order he is actually diluting the power of the American idea itself, the core set of beliefs surrounding its self-image and role in the world. Even worse is the suggestion that he is hastening the relative decline of the United States as a global power. Trump does not use the language of *Pax Americana*, the long-held idea that the United States is the keeper of global peace. This adds to the prevailing sense of unease among many in America and abroad. In his acceptance speech as the Republican nominee, Trump proclaimed that "Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo".¹ In the second year of his presidency, that sentiment is hardening. That he regularly attacks the institutions and traditions of American democracy also challenges the very idea that the United States is a model for other societies to follow.

The perception that something is amiss at the heart of the American national psyche and that the United States "has lost faith in its own superiority" has prompted an outpouring of attempts to diagnose and remedy this malaise.² Some of the nation's leading foreign policy thinkers lament the loss of US credibility and prestige. The "great global story of our age", writes foreign affairs columnist Fareed Zakaria, is the "decline of American influence ... a decline of its desire and capacity to use [its] power to shape the world".³

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This state of affairs is generally ascribed to Donald Trump's election. However, this ignores other factors such as the damage done to the liberal international order by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. As Harvard scholar Joseph Nye has observed, "even when its power was greatest, Washington could not prevent the 'loss' of China, the partition of Germany and Berlin, a draw in Korea, Soviet suppression of insurrections within its own bloc, the creation and survival of a communist regime in Cuba, and failure in Vietnam".⁴

Clearly the questioning of American power and purpose predates President Trump. Even before Trump's election, Americans were undergoing a profound reappraisal of their world role.⁵ Speaking in late 2016, former

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Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said that while the notion of American exceptionalism still exists, "Cold War American exceptionalism is gone" and the idea of the country as the shining city on the hill was weakening. He argued that "an appropriate adaptation is a principal task of the new administration".⁶ In Kissinger's view, the American public could still be convinced of this higher calling for the US role in the world, but they would require a different explanation from the one that was valid in the 1950s.⁷ Many of the leading foreign policy thinkers interviewed by the author agreed: if only the right message — and messenger — could be found, Americans might rally once more to the cause of an activist foreign policy.

To date, Trump appears to reject the notion of a higher calling for the United States in international affairs. His administration's 2017 National Security Strategy states that "the American way of life cannot be imposed upon others, nor is it the inevitable culmination of progress".⁸ This America First approach has provoked alarm in some quarters. The slogan has been derided as "opting for insularity and smallness" instead of global leadership, and dismissed as "profoundly depressing and vulgar".⁹

For others, the America First approach strikes at the core of the American idea. Forces once seen as mutually reinforcing are portrayed by Trump to be inherently antagonistic. Robert Zoellick, a former deputy secretary of state and later World Bank president, has argued that in foreign policy Trump's "pitting of American nationalism against the country's internationalism" is driving a stake through the country's very essence. "Most often", Zoellick added, "US nationalism and internationalism have been in synchrony ... and the mixture created America's unique global leadership".¹⁰ Former senior foreign policy adviser to Hillary Clinton, Jake Sullivan, sees the task now as figuring out "how to convince people that principled nationalism and internationalism are not incompatible".¹¹ This perceived fracturing of the American ethos is disturbing to an elite nurtured by long-held beliefs in US primacy.

While this challenge to the tradition of American exceptionalism predates Donald Trump, he is giving it a new impetus. This Analysis examines briefly the tradition of American exceptionalism since Woodrow Wilson enunciated the country's special calling during the First World War. Understanding the power of this ideology helps explain the unique nature of President Trump's outlook, and what it means for US foreign policy.¹²

The Analysis then explores how, since assuming the presidency, Trump and his close advisers have sought to bring an understanding of America's historical international role to his speeches and policies. America First has been anchored in a particular view of the American Revolution and an argument about why (to use the phrase of one of Trump's most influential advisers) the liberal international order need not be "preserved in amber".¹³ It looks at how the Iraq war has changed the interplay between domestic and foreign policy. Finally, it asks whether

the American dream can be revived, especially for the country's working and middle class, and with it the nation's exceptionalism. Many believe the United States will, as it has in the past, renew and replenish its national purpose. However, that assumption in itself says much about the deep roots of America's national identity and self-belief.

THE TWO TRUMPS

How does Trump's America First platform square with his stated desire to "make America great again"? At no stage — either as a candidate or as president — has Trump expressed any kind of support for the institutions that emerged from the rubble of the Second World War. He is not on record, for example, as praising the rebuilding of Germany and Japan or indeed the strategy of containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Yet throughout his first year in the White House some of his foreign policy stances were surprisingly conventional. In his speeches and statements the president often channels Ronald Reagan's mantra of 'peace through strength'. Launching the 2017 National Security Strategy — which appears to be an attempt to reconcile the views Trump espoused as candidate with those he has adopted in the Oval Office — the president affirmed that "America is in the game and America is going to win", adding that "America will lead again".¹⁴ Pentagon spending remains lavish, and in late 2017 Trump approved a "persistent campaign of direct action" against countries where Islamic militants are operating, thus dispensing with the stricter vetting processes in place under President Obama.¹⁵ He has also armed Ukrainian rebels and tweeted in support of young Iranians protesting against the regime in Tehran. These are not the policies of a president setting a course of global retreat.

Other steps Trump has taken as president are also at odds with an isolationist stance, although they by no means prove he is an internationalist. Early in his term and again in April 2018 Trump ordered limited, precision air strikes on Syria and then reversed his original intention to withdraw from Afghanistan, committing more US troops there — with "no artificial timelines".¹⁶ NATO, regularly derided by Trump, not only survives, but grows: he has supported the addition of Montenegro to its ranks. In Seoul and Tokyo, allies remain troubled by Trump but they have been surprised by his talk of solidarity and shared sacrifice. Where China was once the economic bogeyman "raping" America,¹⁷ Trump hails his relationship with Xi Jinping even as he sets about trying to correct the massive trade imbalance between the two countries by increasing tariffs on Chinese imports into the United States. And his threats to "totally destroy North Korea" and unleash "fire and fury" on Pyongyang have now been credited with helping to bring Kim Jong-un to the negotiating table at a historic summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018.¹⁸

Still, the domestic grievances that brought Trump to power do suggest a longer-term shift in how America views and performs in the world.¹⁹ These forces — antagonism towards globalisation, antipathy to

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Congress, and resentment at the blood and treasure expended on attempts at democratic transformations in Iraq and Afghanistan — have tarnished that tradition of exceptionalism which embodies a more ambitious US global posture.

As a candidate for president, Trump magnified the feelings of failure arising from the recent experience of America's global engagement. For many analysts interviewed by the author, the course of US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is a significant factor in the popular loss of faith in America's global role. The George W Bush presidency "poisoned the wellsprings of debate over US foreign policy, with Bush continuing to be derided as a conqueror", making "the arguments for being more interventionist in the world harder to sell".²⁰ The outcome was the shattering of a fragile consensus about the ability of the United States to continue to play its traditional post-war role as the guarantor of global peace and stability in Europe and Asia. Indeed, a widespread view among foreign policy commentators in the United States is that the American political elite has lost the ability to sell a global foreign policy to the average voter.²¹ All of this points to something of a crisis in American self-belief, a questioning of the very essence of how the country understands and approaches its role overseas. Close allies such as Australia should place a much higher priority on understanding the nature of this ideological crisis.

SPECIAL MISSION: AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The rhetoric of American exceptionalism has been a staple of US presidential speeches, with some rare exceptions, since the late nineteenth century. This approach to international affairs derives from Americans' unique belief about themselves, that the United States is 'exceptional'. In Western Europe in the nineteenth century where nationalism as an idea defining a people first arose, the British, French, Germans and other peoples created myths based on the notion that the members of each particular people or race had from times immemorial shared a common blood and culture. Furthermore, this nationalist story told of their struggle against alien rulers so that they could be united in one state of their own and thus fulfil their destiny.

In contrast to that of Europeans, however, the American people's nationalism was not based on ideas of race or culture. Rather it was ideological. Their political leaders, historians, and culture makers spoke of a world drama that centred on a people who had fled the corruption and tyranny of the old world and who, from the founding of the first colonies, had set out to create a new order based on natural rights, in particular liberty and democracy.²² These ideas had informed the revolution against an oppressive King George III and his corrupt government and were the guiding spirit behind the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the Constitution of the United States.

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The new world, freed from the chains of European imperialism, was at last able to pursue its destiny to create a new order.

Set apart from the contamination of the old world, from its wars and autocratic rulers, the Americans would build a model society and become a beacon for all other peoples. When in the twentieth century the United States was drawn into European and then global conflicts, Americans could only justify their military intervention as a crusade to bring democracy and liberty to these lands. Given this view of their moral purpose they saw these wars in quasi-religious terms. These were struggles between liberty and tyranny, darkness and light, good and evil. Thus the United States went to war against Spain in 1898 to fight imperialism, to free the Cubans from the tyranny of their European masters. Likewise, they entered the First World War famously to make the world "safe for democracy".²³ No other country proclaimed such a motive. American leaders framed the Second World War as a crusade against Fascism, the Cold War against Communism, and the war against Afghanistan and Iraq a crusade against terrorism.²⁴

US presidents have often drawn on this idea of American exceptionalism to illuminate their times and to justify the US role in the world. In his so-called 'Peace without Victory' speech to the Senate in January 1917, which set out the terms for brokering an end to the war and a lasting peace, President Woodrow Wilson fused American nationalism with liberal internationalism. What he proposed was based on "American principles", which had given birth to the nation. However, they were also, Wilson added, "the principles and policies of forward-looking men and women everywhere, of every modern nation, of every enlightened community".²⁵ Wilson's ambition was to end the evils of power politics.

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At a high point in the Cold War, President John F Kennedy spoke of America's confrontation of the Soviet Union in similar terms. In his inaugural address in January 1961 he reminded Americans that as "heirs of that first revolution", its ideals were at risk, and that the United States was prepared "to pay any price, bear any burden ... to assure the survival and success of liberty".²⁶

Despite failure in Vietnam, this idea was given renewed life in the 1980s under the leadership of Ronald Reagan. In his first Fourth of July message, Reagan hailed the American Revolution as "the only true philosophical revolution in all history". He dismissed earlier revolutions because they had "simply exchanged one set of rulers for another". In Reagan's eyes, what happened in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration of Independence was unique: it was the first revolution to change the "very concept of government" and to establish government on the basis of human rights.²⁷ These principles gave Americans a moral position in the world that set them apart from and above all other peoples.

At the end of the Cold War, President George HW Bush announced that "by the grace of God" America had emerged victorious from the struggle

against Communism. Its providential mission had been vindicated. A world "once divided into two armed camps", he said, "now recognises one sole and pre-eminent power". Bush reminded his fellow Americans that they were not only the freest and kindest nation on earth but now also the strongest. They would continue to be "a rising nation, the once and future miracle that is still ... the hope of the world".²⁸

The sentiments that characterised the 'American century' were carried over into the new one. In his inaugural address in January 2001, George W Bush recounted the familiar tale of America as a "new world" that had regenerated and liberated the old world. American faith in liberty and democracy had stood up and survived many great trials. Its mission continued because "America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations."²⁹

Even when trying to justify America's role in Iraq after two years of war, Bush refused to be downhearted and invoked the ideal that freedom would eventually prevail. He reminded Americans that when their "founders declared a new order of the ages, when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty, when citizens marched under the banner 'Freedom Now', they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled". Bush pronounced that, like the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, America "proclaims liberty throughout the world and to all the inhabitants thereof".³⁰

DOUBT AND DISILLUSION IN THE AMERICAN MISSION

Trump is not the first president in the past half century to raise doubts about America's historic mission, nor the first to preside over a period of doubt and disillusion about the nation's role in the world. That debate has been surfacing periodically since at least the time of the Vietnam War. The answer of the Nixon administration at that time was to abandon the worldwide struggle against Communism, reach an accommodation with Communist China, and pursue détente with the Soviet Union. "When we see the world in which we are about to move", said Nixon in a speech delivered in mid-1971, "the United States no longer is in the position of complete pre-eminence or predominance. That is not a bad thing."³¹ Two years earlier, Nixon had set out what would come to be called the Nixon doctrine: in essence, calling for US allies in the region to provide more for their own self defence, and signalling that Washington would not again involve itself in another land war in Asia.

As the Cold War ended, new questions were raised about America's identity and role in the world. Historian Michael Vlahos observed in 1990 — in words that could easily apply now — that "our foreign policy musings today are shot through with domestic melancholy", adding that those debating inside the Beltway were "out of touch with the people

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they serve". Vlahos believed the American idea to be "at risk, and continuing an empty world crusade could kill it".³² One study on the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy in 1994 found that "the dwindling of consensus about America's international role follows from the waning of agreement on what it means to be an American", citing a fraying of the domestic underpinnings for the cosmopolitan liberalism and internationalism that had defined the post-World War II era.³³ The period from the end of the Cold War to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 was defined by a constant search for a coherent foreign policy doctrine. Many elites feared that in the absence of the Soviet threat it would be harder to rouse Americans to the call of global leadership.³⁴ However, US foreign policy oscillates from underinvestment to hyperextension, from insulating the United States from the world to a quest to transform it.

The search for meaning also coloured the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W Bush, and Barack Obama. For advocates of the *Pax Americana*, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's 1998 description of the United States as the "indispensable nation" seemed fitting in terms of defining the nation's post-Cold War global role, and became intertwined with NATO enlargement and the rationale for intervention in the Balkans.³⁵ The term also blended with the outlook and intent of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century — both were aimed at "pushing back against the impulse ... to turn away from the world's problems or to decline responsibility".³⁶ George W Bush commenced his presidency by arguing that the United States could not continue to play the role of world's policeman, but in the wake of the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York gave full voice to the policy and practice of aggressive and unilateral democracy promotion. American values were expressed primarily through military power.

Obama's much maligned strategy of 'leading from behind', along with his belief that the United States cannot fix every problem in the world, was an argument for retrenchment in an attempt to fashion a more sustainable American foreign policy. In the wake of the failed attempt to remake the Middle East, this was a tactical retreat from what he saw as the overextension of his neoconservative predecessor.³⁷ Obama also began his presidency by questioning the exceptionalist tradition. When asked by a journalist in early 2009 about America's special standing in the world, he replied: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism."³⁸ To critics, Obama had done the unthinkable. He had put American exceptionalism on a par with that of other countries, not above them. This unleashed a torrent of criticism. Former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee argued that "to deny American exceptionalism is, in essence, to deny the heart and soul of this nation".³⁹ Obama then spent much of the remainder of his presidency using the rhetoric of exceptionalism — trying, in effect, to be more exceptional than the exceptionalists.

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If few presidents have challenged the exceptionalist orthodoxy, fewer still have done so in an inaugural address. When Donald Trump, on the steps of the Capitol in January 2017, spoke of a "glorious destiny" for his country, he was not talking about America as a chosen nation about to set forth on another worldwide crusade, but about his desire to revitalise the domestic economy, to deliver for the "forgotten men and women" who swept him to power. Similarly, his idea of an America "winning again" was a clarion call to bring back jobs and growth, not the spoils of war, and it was most certainly not a cry for the export of American liberty and democracy. Trump did pronounce a vision of an America that would "shine as an example ... for everyone to follow".⁴⁰ However, this was pitched primarily at the home front.

"AS LONG WE KNOW OUR HISTORY"⁴¹

The conventional view of Trump is that he is ignorant of the past — particularly that of his own country. It is certainly true that he has shown little interest in or appreciation for history. As the Republican presidential nominee, Trump was quick to disassociate his America First slogan from the isolationist movement of the same name headed by Charles Lindbergh in the 1930s. Rather, he projected it as a "brand-new, modern term", adding that he "never related it to the past".⁴²

Nevertheless, the slogan does have a history. It was used by supporters of President Woodrow Wilson during the 1916 election to defend his decision at that time to keep America out of the First World War; by Republican President Warren Harding in the 1920s to reject Wilson's call for the United States to join the League of Nations; and by the America First Committee in September 1940 opposing President Franklin Roosevelt's assistance to Britain in the face of Hitler's aggression. Most recently it was used by presidential candidate and former Nixon aide Pat Buchanan in 1992, opposing George HW Bush's decision to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and further calling for a withdrawal of all US troops from Europe.⁴³ Buchanan's catchcry was "America First — and Second, and Third", and he urged "uprooting the global network of 'trip wires' planted on foreign soil to ensnare the United States in the wars of other nations".⁴⁴

In expressing hostility towards foreign entanglements and antagonism towards illegal immigration, Trump's message is therefore consistent with some aspects of 1930s isolationism. The difference is that Trump's version of America First is driven not so much by a conviction in America's divine providence, but primarily by grievance, the perception that his country is being exploited by others. This is not the proud isolationism of the 1930s, the idea of the United States as a blessed haven far removed from corrupt and war-prone Europe: it is a non-interventionist stance fuelled by resentment.

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However, since becoming president there has been a concerted attempt by his speechwriters, most notably Stephen Miller and Michael Anton,⁴⁵ to bring a certain historical ballast to some of Trump's major speeches. In his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, for example, Trump talked of "nations that are rooted in their histories"⁴⁶ and he has repeatedly made the connection between culture, sovereignty, nationhood, sacrifice, and respect for the past. In New York he publicly praised Poland, France, and Britain for their struggles in the Second World War and the national self-belief those nations drew from that conflict. His question at the General Assembly, "Are we still patriots?", is a clear challenge to the prevailing winds of globalisation, which since the 1990s has been heralding the redundancy of nationalism and national borders. His call for a "great reawakening of nations, for the revival of their spirit, their pride ... and their patriotism" similarly bolsters his hostility towards multilateralism and liberal internationalism.⁴⁷ The Trump world view pits nationalism against America's international responsibilities. As the former Washington bureau chief for *The Economist* David Rennie observes, "the one big thing Trump's view validates is white working-class rage: countries are made unhappy by idiotic liberal internationalists ... countries are like families and they are happiest when they look after their own".⁴⁸

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This historical understanding of America that Trump has come to espouse as president is fixed to the country's founding moment: the revolution of 1776. For him, America's uniqueness lies in its origins — not in a spread-eagled mission to save humanity. He sees the revolution as the fount of American patriotism — an event not signifying the country's destiny to preach democracy to others but providing a shining example of the "people [taking] ownership of the future".⁴⁹ From time to time, Trump elevates the founding documents, especially the US Constitution with its invocation of "We the People", as "America's source of strength". Such sentiments are repeated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, which likewise invokes the intellectual heroes of the revolution: Thomas Jefferson's writing of the Declaration of Independence and Alexander Hamilton's observation from New York in April 1784 that the "influence of our example has penetrated the gloomy regions of despotism".⁵⁰ For Trump these statements show that America leads by example. As the introduction to the Strategy affirms:

"Our founding principles have made the United States of America among the greatest forces for good in history. But we are also aware that we must protect and build upon our accomplishments, always conscious of the fact that the interests of the American people constitute our true North Star."⁵¹

The conclusion to the National Security Strategy claims that "America's renewed strategic confidence is anchored in [its] recommitment to the principles inscribed in [its] founding documents".⁵² In this way, the

Strategy provides Trump's campaign utterances with some kind of coherent historical foundation.

Whether or not Trump himself is personally requesting the inclusion of language about the founding of America is irrelevant: its very use in his major speeches and key White House documents reveals a commitment by key figures around him to the classical ideal of a republic held by the founders, in which the origin and authority of government should come from the people. It also reflects the dominance of a key group of pro-Trump conservative intellectuals attached to the Claremont Institute, a right-wing think tank in California. Guided by their reading of the Federalist papers and inspired by the political philosopher Leo Strauss, 'Claremonters' have long pressed for politicians in Washington to "return the country to its founding principles". Their agenda revolves around an aggressive foreign policy, a reduction in immigration and an end to political correctness, but "above all, [that] an appreciation of the titans who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution [is] essential to a fresh era of national greatness".⁵³ As the Claremont chairman observed in February 2017, many Claremonters "have the ear of this administration and may help Trump take what he feels in his gut and migrate it to his head".⁵⁴

A key figure in this regard has been Michael Anton, formerly the deputy assistant to the president for strategic communications at the National Security Council.⁵⁵ Anton played a major role in Trump's 2016 campaign and authored a widely read essay on the Claremont Institute website that equated the presidential election to United Airlines Flight 93, which was hijacked as part of the September 11 attacks and crashed during an attempt by the passengers and crew to regain control of the aircraft. Simply put, he was asking Americans to "charge the cockpit or ... die" by voting for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. He defined "Trumpism" as "secure borders, economic nationalism and America-first foreign policy".⁵⁶

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Trump's argument, then, is that Americans have been betrayed by the conduct of US foreign policy since the Second World War, and particularly after the end of the Cold War. Returning to the nation's founding ideals and traditional values, he believes, is the means by which the country can be cleansed of the foreign policy failure of recent decades.

Trump's interpretation of the history of US foreign policy, however, remains somewhat elusive. His use of history, not unlike many political leaders, can be whistled in for the purposes of a major speech then quickly jettisoned when the circumstances change. Indeed, Trump has had to be prompted by journalists to express a view on the periods when America had the appropriate balance in its foreign policy.⁵⁷ In an interview with *The New York Times* during the 2016 presidential campaign, he identified two eras in particular, although without fully explaining why.

The first is the period at the end of the nineteenth century when the country was “really starting to go robust” and “building that machine that was really based on entrepreneurship”: a reference more to the country’s growing economic clout in that period than to the Spanish–American war in Cuba and the Philippines. The second is the late 1940s and 1950s when, as Trump put it, the United States was “pretty much doing what we had to do”.⁵⁸ Trump also mentioned specifically his respect for Generals George Patton and Douglas MacArthur, but only when asked agreed that the national security reviews of that period were significant. For him, this was a “different country” — a nation “not pushed around ... [but] respected by everybody” because it had “just won a war”.⁵⁹ However, these views need to be balanced against his more forceful dismissal of the principle of free trade and the conduct of American trade policy, as well as his persistent criticism of the principles underpinning US alliances. For the Trump White House, the United States went on to shoulder a unique and disproportionate burden of global security during the Cold War. America now, he says bluntly, does not have the “luxury of doing what we used to do”.⁶⁰

For the Trump White House, the United States went on to shoulder a unique and disproportionate burden of global security during the Cold War.

Trump’s National Security Strategy also refers to the post-Cold War period as an era of “drift” and “complacency”, in which the country was beset by a “crisis of confidence”.⁶¹ He has no truck with the idea of the United States as an “indispensable nation”. These views were given more pungent representation in an important but barely noticed article by Michael Anton that appeared in a new journal, *American Affairs*, around the time of Trump’s inauguration. Anton argued that “sometime around the end of the Cold War, the [liberal international order] acquired a logic of its own that demands the preservation of its every aspect without reference to America’s basic interests”. From 1991 to 1992, the US attempt to “extend that order over the whole world was a case of American eyes being much bigger than our stomachs ... such expansion was never necessary to core American interests — peace, prosperity, prestige”.⁶²

Of particular concern were the blows to American credibility in the Middle East in the aftermath of September 11. Anton noted the “contempt engendered by fighting two of the world’s weakest and poorest countries for a decade and not being able to win — and, worse, winning then casually throwing the victory away”. That military and strategic failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, was dwarfed by the “general sense of decline” pervading the United States, for “nations palpably on the way down tend to earn the contempt of other nations in spades”. Such blows to American prestige had “effects on the soul of patriotism and national pride”. As Anton concluded, “the soul suffers when one feels that one is part of a declining or benighted nation”.⁶³

Trump’s mockery of the “idiocy” in Iraq where anything the United States built was “blown up” is in stark contrast to his respect for America’s rebuilding of war-torn Europe: but it does not mean that he pours scorn

on the military or those who served in the wake of September 11.⁶⁴ On the contrary, the failures in the Middle East were those of the elites who sent in troops to die in over-ambitious attempts to democratise Iraq and Afghanistan, when they should have focused simply on killing terrorists and winning the war.⁶⁵

BITTERNESS IN THE HEARTLAND

Trump is igniting politics that make it harder to justify a more expansive vision of America's role in the world. The anxiety, stress, and bitterness that roils the American heartland has clear implications for the conduct of US foreign policy. The question is whether these grievances, which Trump rode to power and which he continues to fuel, are signs of an irreversible decline in the country's fortunes and a permanent shift in its political culture, or merely a passing phase as Washington looks to reshape the liberal international order for the twenty-first century.

The nexus between domestic and foreign policy is therefore more significant than ever. A Pew Research report in 2015 found that the American middle class is no longer the nation's economic majority, and that it is falling further behind financially.⁶⁶ This is as much a socio-cultural factor as it is an economic one. By 2044 the United States will become a 'minority majority country', with whites dropping to below half the population. Non-college-educated whites will still comprise the country's largest voting bloc. A poll conducted by Quinnipac University in April 2016 found that 85 per cent of Trump supporters agreed with the proposition that "America has lost its identity", many believing that the government had gone "too far in assisting minority groups".⁶⁷ The electoral impact from those who feel alienated by an establishment that has ignored their economic plight is likely to continue.⁶⁸

...85 per cent of Trump supporters agreed with the proposition that "America has lost its identity"....

That sense of dislocation among working-class Americans arises in part from their grievance at carrying the heaviest load and sacrifice from Washington's decade and a half of wars overseas. Research into the inequality of military sacrifice shows that unlike the Second World War, the Americans who have died or been wounded in the wars of this century have disproportionately come from poorer parts of the country.⁶⁹ Military service offered an escape from life in the rust-belt states, yet exacted a heavy toll on those communities.⁷⁰ A recent 'autopsy' of the Democratic Party by a group of party stalwarts found that:

"the Clinton campaign's hawkish stance was a political detriment in working-class communities hard hit by American casualties from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan ... while public support for ongoing war on many fronts has ebbed, the Democratic Party's top leadership has continued to avidly back it."⁷¹

The Trump campaign played to this weakness, focusing efforts on states such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin in what appeared to be

a conscious appeal to communities "fed up with fifteen years of costly and inconclusive war".⁷²

"A GOOD COUNTRY FOR THE LITTLE GUY"

The domestic roots of American exceptionalism — the American dream — are once more under strain. According to foreign policy scholar Walter Russell Mead, "the average American thinks of exceptionalism in domestic terms: namely that America is a good country for the little guy".⁷³ Over time, this has evolved from the nineteenth century ideal of the self-sufficient yeoman farmer to the twentieth century American dream of having a lifelong job, good housing, and consumer comforts. Political leaders from both parties portrayed the fight against Communism "as the defence of all that Americans had achieved materially, socially, and politically".⁷⁴ Trump is giving voice to the very demographic that once sustained America's Cold War role but which is now turning back on it with a vengeance:

"The culture of this average American is Elvis and Snoop Dog. Trump represents a revindication of this culture, reasserting the average American's control over the country and the dream ... the NASCAR voters have simply said to the elites 'screw you'. And yet these were the people who formed the backbone of the country in the Cold War. They're not isolationists and they supported the war in Vietnam, but now they've withdrawn their consent from the establishment's foreign policy because, quite simply, that policy is not working as well as the establishment thinks ... Having been told they were at the 'end of history' at the end of the Cold War, suddenly things got hard and illusions were dashed: in Iraq in 2003 and also in the argument that China would ultimately embrace democracy ... so trust is shattered."⁷⁵

The question then is how to reinvigorate the American dream in the twenty-first century suburbs and engineer the next stage of economic prosperity. The United States still has in abundance what Europe and Japan do not: space, low-cost energy, and a youthful population. However, this reinvigoration would require a major policy effort that connects tax reform, infrastructure renewal, and the provision of more low-cost housing. Such suburban revival would give the middle class a new stake in the country and, as Walter Russell Mead notes, "would be the way to exceptionalise the average voter. Americans going abroad in their foreign policy is the halo that comes when the domestic sphere is working. Fix the home front and in large part you make the case easier" for a more vigorous international stance.⁷⁶ The less optimistic view is that the social and economic deterioration that delivered Trump the presidency is likely to continue.⁷⁷

... "the average American thinks of exceptionalism in domestic terms: namely that America is a good country for the little guy".

Irrespective of whether the American heartland can be revitalised and therefore roused again to support a greater degree of US ambition overseas, the nativist and exclusivist sentiments to which Trump gives voice damage the foreign policy debate in the United States. The Democratic Party is clearly not immune to these currents roiling US politics. Criticism of Trump for withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership often fails to concede that Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren did not support it either. Leading Democrats on Capitol Hill are now putting their fingers to the populist winds. The Senate's top Democrat, Chuck Schumer, for instance, attempted to outflank the president on the US's trading relationship with China in October 2017, when he labelled Trump a "paper tiger" for "foot dragging" on the investigation of China's trade practices involving the US aluminium and steel industries.⁷⁸ A populist Democrat candidate for the 2020 presidential election would likely go head to head with the party's foreign policy establishment. So the Trump effect may also tarnish the internationalist strand within the Democratic Party.

RETREAT OR RESILIENCE?

The Trump presidency has generated yet another wave of gloomy prognostications about American decline. A *New York Times* editorial in October 2017 concluded that the damage Trump had inflicted on the liberal international order was tantamount to surrendering US leadership to Russia and China, countries from which he had promised to protect Americans.⁷⁹ The comparison between the chaos and dysfunction of Trump's White House and the tightening power grip of Chinese President Xi Jinping provokes claims that China will soon remove the United States from its hegemonic perch. Trump's antics at the recent G7 meeting, including his calls for Russia to be readmitted to the grouping, only intensify the deep concern among allies that he is determined to shake up and unsettle the existing order.

It is possible...that Trump is nothing more than an interloper in the saga of American progress, albeit a highly disruptive one.

It is possible, however, that Trump is nothing more than an interloper in the saga of American progress, albeit a highly disruptive one. On this interpretation, once Trump has left the scene normal programming will resume, and the United States will once more assume its leadership mantle. Those who believe this console themselves that the naysayers have been proved wrong before — most particularly in the 1980s following the Vietnam War and Watergate — and so will be again. America will renew and replenish, just as it has in the past.

This may, of course, be right: the US economy recorded a 2.9 per cent growth rate in the last three months of 2017, and with a bullish stock market, rising business confidence, low-cost energy in abundance and a new wave of digital innovation rising, the American dream could well be rebuilt. This theme of American resilience is a refuge from the Trumpian storm for the foreign policy elites rusted on to their interpretation of

American exceptionalism. However, it is also predicated on the assumption that the United States does not have to relinquish its hegemonic hubris.

EXCEPTIONAL NORMALISATION

The United States has paid high economic and human costs for the commitment to its national ideals in the past. This underscores the significance of the lack of idealism in Trump's own vision. For a quarter of a century after the Communists came to power in China, Washington refused to recognise the regime, regarding its rise as a betrayal of the Chinese people who had thereby become enslaved to Moscow. The Americans treated the People's Republic of China as a pariah nation and banned Americans from any contact or connection with the country, including economic ties such as trade and investment. Since their allies, including Australia, would not agree to such extreme measures and continued to trade profitably with Beijing, the United States paid a high price for being true to what its national ideals dictated. Likewise, the United States suffered great loss of lives and money in the Vietnam War, which it fought in the name of freedom to keep the Communist bloc at bay. There was no material interest that could have justified paying such a price.

The United States now has a president, however, who is not given to proselytising that version of the American mission. For all of Trump's clarion calls about American "greatness", the United States will have to accept the disconnect between its exceptionalist mythology and the limits of its capacity to effect transformational change abroad. This period, then, may well come to be seen as the first step in preparing Americans for the end of global hegemony. Walter Russell Mead contends that Trump's coming may not be as "ill-suited to the country's needs as his most fervid detractors believe", primarily because he is bringing to the fore the harsh reality that the country's post-Cold War national security strategy has "run out of gas".⁸⁰ Seen in this light, Trump is the president America had to have: a leader immune to the siren song of grandiose globalism, a commander-in-chief who appears to grasp that the United States can no longer succumb to the dangers of imperial arrogance.

However, a quick reality check is needed here. America will not become a 'normal nation'. It will not lose entirely that sense of special mission, simply because that part of its national creed runs so deep and because those in the foreign policy elite are creatures of their culture: the America in which they came to maturity and in which their world view was formed was the America of Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton. The Washington elite will not easily lose their taste for being a superpower. They will cling tightly to the vision and vigour inherent in the description of the United States as the "indispensable nation".⁸¹ Any major breakthrough on the question of North Korean denuclearisation, for example, would likely be framed by some in the administration in such

... [Trump] is bringing to the fore the harsh reality that the country's post-Cold War national security strategy has "run out of gas"

terms, even though Trump himself argues that progress on negotiations with Pyongyang emanates from his special deal-making skills rather than any innate sense of American benevolence or leadership. Talk by national security adviser John Bolton of regime change in Iran also shows the resilience of these ideas. And in a recent 'pep talk' to US diplomats, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke of his desire to help the State Department regain its "swagger", a term he went on to say was based on "America's essential rightness ... [an] aggressiveness born of the righteous knowledge that our cause is just, special, and built upon America's core principles".⁸²

Middle America, however, has lost faith in the US global mission, and the country may very well be at the beginning of a long period of "exceptional normalisation".⁸³ If this is right, the ungluing of this core national belief will be a painful process. Those who argue for American renewal typically, notes Neville Meaney, "find it hard to contemplate decline" since "to accept such a future would mean a rejection of all that lies at the heart of their ... national identity". At the core of this problem is what happens when "a national mythology loses its virtue".⁸⁴ That question is as relevant today as it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s as America debated its emergence from the Cold War.

...China's rise...presents the idea of American exceptionalism with an altogether different challenge.

Compounding the problem is China's rise, which presents the idea of American exceptionalism with an altogether different challenge.⁸⁵ It is difficult to see a US president or national security adviser developing a strategy to accommodate Chinese power — even though the United States may ultimately have to do so, if grudgingly. Still, those who predicted US decline in the 1970s witnessed the rebirth of American purpose under Reagan and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. While communist China is not about to collapse, it does face substantial demographic, environmental, and social challenges in the years ahead, challenges that might work to America's long-term advantage.

CONCLUSION

In 2016, Trump gave expression to some of his long-held beliefs about America and its role in the world. The American people were ready to listen. He had struck a chord with many voters who were tired of endless US military commitments abroad, worn down by sacrifice, and sceptical of grand rhetoric about democracy promotion. However, if Trump's elevation to the presidency and the forces that propelled him there constitute some kind of shock to the American political system and its national self-image, there is an important difference. Previous shocks to the United States and its prestige in the twentieth century — Pearl Harbour, Sputnik, Japan's economic challenge in the 1980s — all acted as a catalyst for unity. Today the crises are more subtle and multifaceted, paralysing the political system rather than revitalising it.

Since 1945 a key assumption about America's foreign policy is that it is inherently internationalist. This has certainly been the case for much of the past 70 years. However, there is another tradition of American international behaviour that is selfish, inward-looking, and nationalistic. It was that tradition which emerged predominant in 2016. Trump rode those sentiments, injected them with a new intensity and became their ultimate beneficiary. While his knowledge of American history may be thin, his views can be found in it, going right back to the founding of the nation. Trumpism, therefore, is no fleeting phenomenon — the current president has tapped into real and visceral feelings about the United States and its historic mission.

Absent a war, or a major terrorist attack on US soil, which would rouse the deep exceptionalist impulse in America's view of itself and the world, some concede that there is likely to be more damage to US prestige and credibility under Trump, making recovery much harder and more prolonged.⁸⁶ Trump "has complicated significantly the job of the next president in restoring and updating the liberal international order", contends one foreign policy expert interviewed by the author, and "that job will be harder because many abroad, especially US allies, will be wondering if the US is even committed to it".⁸⁷

Trump "has complicated significantly the job of the next president in restoring and updating the liberal international order"

The challenge for American society is to stay balanced amid such turmoil. Despite the rancour and the open feuding between the White House and Congress, the courts and the media, the United States is steering a relatively steady course through this particular period of political turbulence. Trump will face spirited resistance, but without a serious catalyst for impeachment, he will serve a full term and perhaps, should his base keep the faith, be re-elected.

However, Trump's style, erratic behaviour, and impulsiveness ensure that doubts about the United States will persist. As a result, close allies will need to think much differently about American staying power. Allies will need to be more finely attuned to the anger and frustration pouring out of Middle America, along with the repercussions they have on Washington's self-confidence and capacity. Right now, the United States has a president who brandishes the country's fatigue with both mythological and military overstretch.

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