

The ‘Global Order’ Myth

Teary-eyed nostalgia as cover for U.S. hegemony

By ANDREW J. BACEVICH • June 15, 2017



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During the Age of Trump, Year One, a single word has emerged to capture the essence of the prevailing cultural mood: *resistance*. Words matter, and the prominence of this particular term illuminates the moment in which we find ourselves.

All presidents, regardless of party or program, face *criticism* and *opposition*. Citizens disinclined to support that program *protest*. Marching, chanting, waving placards, and generally raising a ruckus in front of any available camera, they express *dissent*. In normal times, such activism testifies to the health of democracy.

Yet these are not normal times. In the eyes of Trump’s opponents, his elevation to the pinnacle of American politics constitutes a frontal assault on values that until quite recently appeared fixed and unassailable. In such distressing circumstances, mere criticism, opposition, protest, and dissent will not suffice. By their own lights, anti-Trump forces are fending off the apocalypse. As in November 1860 so too in November 2016, the outcome of a presidential election has placed at risk a way of life.

The very word resistance conjures up memories of the brave souls who during World War II opposed the Nazi occupation of their homelands, with the French *maquis* the best known example. It carries with it an unmistakable whiff of gunpowder. After resistance comes revolution.

Simply put, Trump’s most ardent opponents see him as an existential threat, with the clock ticking. Thus the stakes could hardly be higher. Richard Parker of Harvard has conjured what he calls Resistance School, which in three months has signed up some 30,000 anti-Trump resisters from 49 states and 33 countries. “It is our attempt to begin the long slow process of recovering and rebuilding our democracy,” says Parker. Another group styling itself the DJT Resistance declares that Trump represents “Hatred, Bigotry, Xenophobia, Sexism, Racism, and Greed.”

This is not language suggesting the possibility of dialogue or compromise. Indeed, in such quarters references to incipient fascism have become commonplace. Comparisons between Trump and Hitler abound. “It takes willful blindness,” writes Paul Krugman in the *New York Times*, “not to see the parallels between the rise of fascism and our current political nightmare.” And time is running short. Journalist Chris Hedges says “a last chance for resistance” is already at hand.

In the meantime, in foreign-policy circles at least, a second, less explosive term vies with resistance for Trump-era signature status. This development deserves more attention than it has attracted, especially among those who believe that alongside the question that riles up the resistance—namely, what values define us?—sits another question of comparable importance: “What principles define America’s role in the world?”

That second term, now creeping into the vocabulary of foreign-policy specialists, is *liberal*, often used interchangeably with the phrase *rules-based* and accompanied by additional modifiers such as *open*, *international*, and *normative*. All of these serve as synonyms for *enlightened* and *good*.

So Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution, describing what he refers to as the “twilight of the liberal world order,” worries about the passing of “the open international economic system the United States created and helped sustain.” Donald Trump’s misguided emphasis on “America First,” Kagan writes, suggests that he has no interest in “attempting to uphold liberal norms in the international system” or in “preserving an open economic order.”

Commenting on Trump’s Inaugural Address, Nicole Gaouette, CNN national-security reporter, expresses her dismay that it contained “no reference to America’s traditional role as a global leader and shaper of international norms.” Similarly, a report in the *Financial Times* bemoans what it sees as “a clear signal about Mr. Trump’s disregard for many of the international norms that have governed America as the pillar of the liberal economic order.” The historian Jeremi Suri, barely a week into Trump’s presidency, charges Trump with “launching a direct attack on the liberal international order that really made America great after the depths of the Great Depression.” At the Council on Foreign Relations, Stewart Patrick concurs: Trump’s election, he writes, “imperils the liberal international order that America has championed since World War II.” Thomas Wright, another Brookings scholar, piles on: Trump “wants to undo the liberal international order the United States built and replace it with a 19th-century model of nationalism and mercantilism.”

In *Foreign Policy*, Colin Kahl and Hal Brands embellish the point: Trump’s strategic vision “diverges significantly from—and intentionally subverts—the bipartisan consensus underpinning U.S. foreign policy since World War II.” Failing to “subscribe to the long-held belief that ‘American exceptionalism’ and U.S. leadership are intertwined,” Trump is hostile to the “open, rule-based international economy” that his predecessors nurtured and sustained.

Need more? Let Gen. David Petraeus have the last word: “To keep the peace,” the soldier-turned-investment-banker writes in an essay entitled “America Must Stand Tall,” the United States has established “a system of global alliances and security commitments,” thereby nurturing “an open, free and rules-based international economic order.” To discard this legacy, he suggests, would be catastrophic.

You get the drift. Liberalism, along with norms, rules, openness, and internationalism: these ostensibly define the postwar and post-Cold War tradition of American statecraft. Allow Trump to scrap that tradition and you can say farewell to what Stewart Patrick refers to as “the global community under the rule of law” that the United States has upheld for decades.

But what does this heartwarming perspective exclude? We can answer that question with a single word: history.

Or, somewhat more expansively, among the items failing to qualify for mention in the liberal internationalist, rules-based version of past U.S. policy are the following: meddling in foreign elections; coups and assassination plots in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, South Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua, and elsewhere; indiscriminate aerial bombing campaigns in North Korea and throughout Southeast Asia; a nuclear arms race bringing the world to the brink of Armageddon; support for corrupt, authoritarian regimes in Iran, Turkey, Greece, South Korea, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Brazil, Egypt, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and elsewhere—many of them abandoned when deemed inconvenient; the shielding of illegal activities through the use of the Security Council veto; unlawful wars launched under false pretenses; “extraordinary rendition,” torture, and the indefinite imprisonment of persons without any semblance of due process.

Granted, for each of these, there was a rationale, rooted in a set of identifiable assumptions, ambitions, and fears. The CIA did not conspire with Britain's MI6 in 1953 to overthrow Iran's democratically elected president just for the hell of it. It did so because shelving Mohammad Mosaddegh seemingly offered the prospect of eliminating an annoying problem. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson did not commit U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam because he was keen to fight a major ground war in Asia but because the consequences of simply allowing events to take their course looked to be even worse. After 9/11, when George W. Bush and his associates authorized the "enhanced interrogation" of those held in secret prisons, panic rather than sadism prompted their actions. Even for the most egregious folly, in other words, there is always some explanation, however inadequate.

Yet collectively, the actions and episodes enumerated above do not suggest a nation committed to liberalism, openness, or the rule of law. What they reveal instead is a pattern of behavior common to all great powers in just about any era: following the rules when it serves their interest to do so; disregarding the rules whenever they become an impediment. Some regimes are nastier than others, but all are law-abiding when the law works to their benefit and not one day longer. Even Hitler's Third Reich and Stalin's USSR punctiliously observed the terms of their non-aggression pact as long as it suited both parties to do so.

My point is not to charge à la Noam Chomsky that every action undertaken by the United States government is inherently nefarious. Rather, I am suggesting that to depict postwar U.S. policy in terms employed by the pundits quoted above is to whitewash the past. Whether their motive is to deceive or merely to evade discomfiting facts is beside the point. What they are peddling belongs to the universe of alt facts. To characterize American statecraft as "liberal internationalism" is akin to describing the business of Hollywood as "artistic excellence."

"Invocations of the 'rules-based international order,'" *Politico's* Susan Glasser rightly observes, "had never before caused such teary-eyed nostalgia." Whence comes this sudden nostalgia for something that never actually existed? The answer is self-evident: it's a response to Donald Trump.

Prior to Trump's arrival on the scene, few members of the foreign-policy elite, now apparently smitten with norms, fancied that the United States was engaged in creating any such order. America's purpose was not to promulgate rules but to police an informal empire that during the Cold War encompassed the "Free World" and became more expansive still once the Cold War ended. The pre-Trump Kagan, writing in 2012, neatly summarizes that view:

The existence of the American hegemon has forced all other powers to exercise unusual restraint, curb normal ambitions, and avoid actions that might lead to the formation of a U.S.-led coalition of the kind that defeated Germany twice, Japan once, and the Soviet Union, more peacefully, in the Cold War.

Leave aside the dubious assertions and half-truths contained within that sentence and focus on its central claim: the United States as a hegemon that forces other nations to bend to its will. Strip away the blather about rules and norms and here you come to the essence of what troubles Kagan and others who purport to worry about the passing of "liberal internationalism." Their concern is not that Trump won't show adequate respect for rules and norms. What has them all in a lather is that he appears disinclined to perpetuate American hegemony.

More fundamentally, Trump's conception of a usable past differs radically from that favored in establishment quarters. Put simply, the 45th president does not subscribe to the imperative of sustaining American hegemony because he does not subscribe to the establishment's narrative of 20th-century history. According to that canonical narrative, exertions by the United States in a sequence of conflicts dating from 1914 and ending in 1989 enabled good to triumph over evil. Absent these American efforts, evil would have prevailed. Contained within that parable-like story, members of the establishment believe, are the lessons that should guide U.S. policy in the 21st century.

Trump doesn't see it that way, as his appropriation of the historically loaded phrase "America First" attests. In his view, what *might* have occurred had the United States not waged war against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan and had it not subsequently confronted the Soviet Union matters less than what *did* occur when the assertion of hegemonic prerogatives found the United States invading Iraq in 2003 with disastrous results.

In effect, Trump dismisses the lessons of the 20th century as irrelevant to the 21st. Crucially, he goes a step further by questioning the moral basis for past U.S. actions. Thus, his extraordinary response to a TV host's charge that Russian President Vladimir Putin is a killer. "There are a lot of killers," Trump retorted. "We've got a lot of killers. What, you think our country is so innocent?" In offering this one brief remark, Trump thereby committed the ultimate heresy. Of course, no serious person believes that the United States is literally innocent. What members of the foreign-policy establishment—including past commanders-in-chief—have insisted is that the United States *act* as if it were innocent, with prior sins expunged and America's slate wiped clean. This describes the ultimate U.S. perquisite and explains why, in the eyes of Robert Kagan et al., Russian actions in Crimea, Ukraine, or Syria count for so much while American actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya count for so little.

The desperate exercise in historical revisionism that now credits the United States with having sought all along to create a global community under the rule of law represents that establishment's response to the heresies Trump has been spouting (and tweeting) since his famous ride down the escalator at Trump Tower.

Yet in reclassifying yesterday's hegemon as today's promulgator and respecter of norms, members of that establishment perpetrate a fraud. Whether Americans, notably gullible when it comes to history, will fall for this charade remains to be seen. Thus far at least, Trump himself, who probably knows a thing or two about snake-oil salesmen, shows little inclination to take the bait.

Say this for the anti-Trump resistance: while the fascism-just-around-the-corner rhetoric may be overheated and a touch overwrought, it qualifies as forthright and heartfelt. While not sharing the view that Trump will rob Americans of their freedoms, I neither question the sincerity nor doubt the passion of those who believe otherwise. Indeed, I am grateful to them for acting so forcefully on their convictions. They are inspiring.

Not so with those who now wring their hands about the passing of the fictive liberal international order credited to enlightened American statecraft. They are engaged in a great scam, working assiduously to sustain the pretense that the world of 2017 remains essentially what it was in 1937 or 1947 or 1957 when it is not.

Today's Russia is not a reincarnation of the Soviet Union; the People's Republic of China is not Imperial Japan; and the Islamic State in no way compares to Nazi Germany. Most of all, United States in the era of Donald Trump is not the nation that elected Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower, not least of all in the greatly reduced willingness of Americans to serve as instruments of state power, as the failed post-9/11 assertions of hegemony have demonstrated.

The world has changed in fundamental ways. So too has the United States. Those changes require that the principles guiding U.S. policy also change accordingly.

However ill-suited by intellect, temperament, and character for the office he holds, Trump has seemingly intuited the need for such change. In this regard, if in none other, I'm with the Donald

But note the irony. Trump may come closer to full-fledged historical illiteracy than any president since Warren G. Harding. Small wonder then that his rejection of the mythic past long employed to preempt serious debate regarding U.S. policy gives fits to the perpetrators of those myths.

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