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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Joe Biden and the Gibbon Paradox

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Strange Greatness

In early March 2018, evangelical leaders from around the world descended on Charlotte, North Carolina, for the funeral of the renowned preacher, Reverend Billy Graham. President Donald J. Trump joined the mourners. While there, Trump had a face-to-face conversation with Graham's grandson, Edward. Graham the younger was an Army Ranger and had served for sixteen years in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bitter about America's endless wars, he fumed about the futility of propping up weak regimes overseas with lukewarm support at home. Trump, following a long tradition of skepticism about foreign entanglements and always in search of evidence for his convictions, found a confirming mouthpiece.

When he got back to the White House, he ran into resistance from his national security staff. Pulling out of Syria, they believed, benefited Iran and Russia. It would leave Kurdish allies alone. Tensions rose between the West Wing and its national security team. On Thursday 19 December, Mattis put on his beloved navy-blue tie of the NATO alliance that Trump enjoyed denigrating and went to the Oval Office to plead once more for supporting Kurdish allies. This time, Trump refused to budge. Mattis reached into his breast pocket and handed over his resignation letter, a remarkable document that must have been months, if not years, in the drafting.¹ Then came resignations from General John F. Kelly (Trump's Chief of Staff), Dan Coats (the Director of National Intelligence), and Sue Gordon (a 32-veteran of the CIA). Trump tried to replace Coats with a mayor of a small town in Texas, John Ratcliffe, because he was loyal – even if he had few credentials. Even Republican Senators were aghast. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, not known for caring much about the rest of the world, openly worried about Mattis's letter: "I am particularly distressed that he is resigning due to sharp differences with the president on these and other key aspects of America's global leadership." Trump pulled back, then got his way.²

It is tempting to scan Trump's approach to the rest of the world, not to mention the revolving door of counsellors and the outsized role of his son-in-law, and see these four years as an outlier in statecraft. This is an emerging plotline. With Joe Biden's election as president, the United States can get back to normal. But in Trump's theatrical confusion there is a theme: when it came to military, commercial, and other entanglements, he wanted out. He saw them as costly invitations for free-riding by allies and traps by cunning rivals. What he spotlighted was a gap between the rhetoric of American 'greatness' and the realities of ensnaring limitations of American power. That he turned that gap into a chasm contributes to a view of Trump as a great disruptor, a rupture.

We have a problem. If Trump did not make America great again, removing him does not make America great again either. The electoral cycle of 2020 – indeed, the whole overheated Trump era – has left us in a narrative fog. Relief about the return of decency to public affairs can make the last four years seem like a strange, often cruel, blip on the larger screen of American global leadership. But the it's-finally-over reprieve can also obscure underlying dynamics about a changing world order and America's place in it. As America wavers over how to heal and rebuild domestically and how to reconnect externally, it will need a different set of coordinates for America's place on the

¹ Philip Ewing, "Defense Secretary Mattis Resigns Amid Syria And Afghanistan Tension," *NPR*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/20/623246756/defense-secretary-mattis-to-retain-in-february-trump-says>

² Nicholas Fandos, "Mattis's Resignation Creates New Cracks Between G.O.P. Lawmakers and Trump," *New York Times*, 20 December 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/congressional-republicans-trump-mattis.html>.

global stage. The old model, tethered to familiar narrative practices, was in trouble before Trump took over in 2016; his successor may be tempted to dust it off when what is needed is a new story about America in the world.

History Searching for a Story

We are faced with two intersecting processes. One concerns the agonies of a fractured nation that is turning inwards for repair, reconstruction, and healing that has been long coming. Many will conveniently and strategically place many of the ills at the feet of the outgoing regime. But the problems of inequality, uneven citizenship, and decaying physical and environmental infrastructure date back decades, though they have worsened in the past decade. The other is a shifting world order, with the rise of new geographic power centers (like China) and new vectors of power (like artificial intelligence and cybersecurity). America, it seems, finds itself in the agonizing junction of the downward sloping national curve and an upward sloping global one.

The result has been to challenge conventions of how Americans see themselves on the world stage. A beacon, a shining light, a model for the rest, these words were as important to the story of the nation as the declaration of independence because all declarations of independence are also declarations of interdependence. To secede from an empire or a tyrant requires the recognition of other nation states.³ The 1776 Project added a twist to the formula. Not only did it seek recognition on a larger stage; it came to imagine itself as morally – and later militarily – bound to shape that stage in its mind’s eye. This was the appeal of exceptionalism. It worked both ways, as a claim for insiders to feel blessed by their membership in the nation and as a promise to outsiders that they too could aspire – if they followed the script. It accounted for what was special and for what was universally possible at the same time.

This is familiar enough territory to students of American history. But what is remarkable about 2020 is not just that an incumbent president got defeated, but that the old narrative habits feel shopworn, tired. The comforting certainties that guided *pax americana* through the Cold War and global hegemony through the neoliberal era extended the shelf-life of exceptionalist claims. But now they feel drained.

A common response to such a zeitgeist is to embrace a story of decline. Faced with the sense of eclipse that America’s providential role in the world, so famously touted by President Woodrow Wilson, reset by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the global New Deal, and buoyed through decades of commitment to make the world safe for democracy and free markets, liberals have to contend with a chorus of critics and doomsayers. A habit shared by the Right and the Left is to point to American demise as an ineluctable fate of the Imperial Republic. For the Left, it’s a tale of imperial quagmire and the inevitable crash of capitalism. That it doesn’t turn out as predicted is immaterial. For Wolfgang Streeck, the German sociologist and prophet, the choice is stark: capitalism *or* democracy. Like many declinist postures, his presents us with one-or-the-other scenarios, purgatory or paradise. And like so many reactionaries and revolutionaries before him, Streeck insists that we have passed through the vestibule of the inferno. “Before capitalism will go to hell,” he claims, “it will for the foreseeable future hang in limbo, dead or about to die from an overdose of itself but still very much around, as nobody will have the power to move its decaying body out of the way.”⁴

For the Right, endist convictions have more to do with moral limitations and corruptions. Writers created “Western” civilization out of a looming sense that it was in peril because humans were bound to follow the natural laws of biological deterioration. This is as true today as it was a century ago. Oswald Spengler published the first volume of his influential *The Decline of the West* in 1918 believing that cultures were bound by predetermined lifespans – and predicted that eventually Western societies would succumb to charismatic strongmen who promised to save their people from the abyss – only to hasten the decline.⁵ The chest-thumpers of our times carried the Right to power in Washington, Rome, London, and beyond in order to rescue the West from a calamitous fate. It’s a paradox of current conservatism, however, that in its moment of political triumph it frets more than ever about the coming danger. One of the leaders of the Republican anti-Trump brigade, the Fox “analyst” and *National Review* editor Jonah Goldberg has argued that we are not just witnessing the decline

³ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁴ Aditya Chakraborty, “Interview: Wolfgang Streeck: the German economist calling time on capitalism,” 9 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/09/wolfgang-streeck-the-german-economist-calling-time-on-capitalism>.

⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (London: George Allen Unwin, 1918), <https://archive.org/details/declineofwest01spenuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>.

of the West (with America as its standard-bearer), but its suicide. He does not seem to be aware that his script is shop-worn. Like its Left-wing counterpart, it indulges in lurid prophecies.⁶

Declinisms share some traits. They have more purchase in times of turmoil and uncertainty, like ours. They are also prone to thinking that the circles of hell can only be avoided with a great catharsis or a great charismatic figure. But most of all, they ignore signs of improvement that point to less drastic ways out of trouble. Declinists have a big blind spot because they are attracted to daring, total, all-encompassing, alternatives to the hum-drum greyness of modest solutions. Why go for partial and piecemeal when you can overturn the whole system?

Nowadays, it looks like the prophecies have finally come true: Joe Biden has to govern America in a post-American world because it is decayed and decrepit.

But is it so simple? American national decline versus the global rest's rise? Tragic for one and triumphal for another? Is it that hydraulic? Part of what makes finding a post-America (First) storyline so vexing is that it can't be national or global. All one has to do is look at the crossed paths of the two men who pulled us through the latest electoral cycle. It seems fitting that both the outgoing and incoming presidents have been scarred by modern America's two most unheroic wars, Vietnam and Iraq. Often seen as turning points in the declinist slide, they might be seen as moments that realigned the national and global narratives.

These two wars battered the myths of American exceptionalism and eventually forced a reckoning. Indeed, in the November 7th, 2020 victory speech that Biden gave in Wilmington Delaware to his supporters, the exceptionalist imaginary got invoked once more: America had a unique place on the global stage. But it is worth pausing over Biden's subtle recognition of the nation's re-dimensioned imaginary. He claimed that America would lead through the power of its example, not by the example of power. For a victory speech, it was a concession, a concession to a downsized view of America on the global stage. This did not mean that the U.S. was no longer an example: after all, the whole world watched the spectacle of American democracy at work in fascination and dread. It simply could no longer wield the same power. In past conjunctures where American grandeur was on the line, the reflex was to return to power. Fear of the nuclear gap in 1960 spurred the arms race and broke the fiscal back of the Soviet Union; fear of Third World radicalism in 1980 turned swaths of Latin America, Africa and Asia into battlegrounds to roll back revolution; fear of terrorism after 2001 once again bulked up the security state.

The power reflex has been a through line for both Trump and Biden. Trump's personal bio is one of characteristic ambivalence fueled, one suspects, by a missing ethical core. Caught between a myth of soldierly gallantry and joining the crowd of nay-sayers when the wars turned into fiascos, he flipped and flopped and rewrote History to serve the thing that mattered most: himself, celebrating American muscularity in the abstract while keeping it under wraps in practice. Trump was more salesman than statesman. Obsessed with trade deficits, which he imagined was the index and source of America's problems with the world, he went on the hustings to promote exports of America's latest bauble: liquefied natural gas. When the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, visited Washington in May, 2017, to discuss the North Korean threat, he knew enough to preempt Trump's whining about how US-Korean trade was "a rough deal for the United States."⁷ Five days before going to the White House, he inked a 20-year contract to buy a half a billion dollars of American gas per year gas year. This pulled the rug out of Trump's threat to withdraw troops and leave the peninsula prey to missile launchers of the North. It was also consistent with the way in which Trump was weaponizing the declinist narrative for a retail brand of statecraft which relied entirely on threats and exits to make America great again. Biden's trajectory also zig-zags from Vietnam to Iraq. Like Trump, but in a far less superficial and feckless way, Biden has agonized over America's place on the world stage. In a way, he was also in the sales business. The son of a used car dealer who is less known for his ideological convictions, Biden was a man of the political center – of a center that moved around with the times, from the Cold War concern with power balance to the post-Cold War bravura, and to the ongoing uncertainty since 2008. He opposed the first Gulf War in 1991 but supported the second in 2003; he supported the intervention in Kosovo but resisted involvement in Libya. In between, Biden reached his summit as a foreign policy voice at a time in which American power seemed to have no paralleled since that of Imperial Rome. Indeed, there was a lot of analogizing to the way the Roman empire anticipated a form of hegemony that rolls around once a millennium. Some left-wing critics evoked the post-Cold War order as "Empire,"

⁶ Jonah Goldberg, *The Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Nationalism, Populism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy* (New York: Crown, 2018),

⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and the Clash of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2020), 39

a regime that transcended any single state but bore the genetic traits of its biggest backer: the United States.⁸ For others, global rules required enforcers, which dragged the US into the role of emperor to make globalization possible. This was “the Roman paradox.”⁹ I will get back to the American-Roman parallel shortly. But this had the effect of placing Biden at the interventionist end of a spectrum cleared by the collapse of the Soviet Union but before the rise of China. Even as late as 2007, Biden advocated a federalist solution to Iraq’s meltdown, with autonomous regions for Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia peoples, a new version of the Iraqi state as kind of ward of American largesse; Biden also favored boots on the ground in Sudan’s Darfur region. But ever since, Biden’s appetite mirrored America’s: he grew ever more reluctant to intervene or meddle; he was growing more cautious about the example of power.

Nowadays, the idea of manning-up with more bombs, Green Berets, and tough love in far-away places is so inconceivable that retreat may be the one thing upon which polarized America actually agrees. That is why Trump’s America-First was, in the end, mainly bombast; to the extent that the White House did much it was to withdraw or do nothing. Now that it is (presumably) behind us, America First seems small, unambitious, and a reflection of the pessimistic narrative that infused the whole Trumpian style. Biden’s predicament is that he cannot go back to the old providential mainstays while repudiating his predecessor. But rather than settle for a lesser story, why not explore a different one altogether?

The Gibbon Paradox

There is alternative framing available to the history – and future – of America in the world, one that relies less on myths of providential leadership and more on the realities of interdependence and power. American grandeur functioned best when the story of the world reflected back the kind of power that Americans felt most comfortable wielding: exporting movies and Coca Cola, its universities and its science, its ideas about markets and civil society, and if necessary ‘interventions’ or ‘liberations’ (“war” had a different taint to it). In so doing, and with its share of cruelty and carnage, it shaped the world in a way that few powers have in global history.

The architecture of world order since 1945 was above all American, though many others would play crucial parts. *Pax americana* got its last jolt in the arm with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet empire. Globalization, the Washington Consensus, and the flat-earth consensus carried the idea of American supremacy all the way into the double calamity of the Iraq War in 2003 and the financial crack in 2008. In the meantime, the United States built a world order, and, as Ludovic Tournès has shown in a wonderful book, this order rested on a complex process of Americanization. This does not mean simple emulation or replication, but adapting, translating, and reinterpreting to create something new in order to make *americana* global.¹⁰

While America shaped the world, the world also changed America; *americana* was also global. The world order and the American order, like the Roman imperium, were sutured together; Americanization of the world came with the globalization of America, including being as vulnerable to a disease that started in Wuhan, China, as another other place that is integrated into the world’s Boeing-dominated flight patterns. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the American narrative and the world narrative are at impasses together. This helps explain why Argentines, Canadians, and Germans were as fixed to CNN during election week as many Americans were. In fact, we will see restoration of the internationalism that Trump trammed precisely because those earlier deals and institutions harkened back to a memory of America at its zenith since so many people beyond America would rather have America included. This extends, one hopes, to the Open Skies Treaty, a fascinating, if unacknowledged, experiment in mutual observation and military transparency that cleared room for innovative thinking about shared security in the global age.¹¹

⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁹ Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Ludovic Tournès, *Américanisation: Une histoire mondiale XVIIe-XXIe siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 2020).

¹¹ Bonnie Jenkins, “A farewell to the Open Skies Treaty, and an era of imaginative thinking,” *Brookings Order From Chaos* (blog), 16 June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/16/a-farewell-to-the-open-skies-treaty-and-an-era-of-imaginative-thinking/>.

If the idea of the American century has finally run its course, and Trump simply accelerated the clock, how do we think about the entanglement of the nation and the world, with the first gripped by patriotic crisis and the second facing monumental challenges of climate change and the global migrant crisis?

One way starts with an acknowledgement that these two processes, one a national story and the other a global one, need to be framed together and *not* as the eclipse of one reflecting the rise of the other. Instead of “decline,” why not consider ours a moment of growing pains, possibly profound ones, in the arrangement of global interdependence, one that includes the United States as a part, not apart. In fact, going back to Rome, and the epic tradition of that empire’s decline, can be fruitful. As it turns out, one of the greatest of Roman historians, Edward Gibbon, left us with a paradox that might help us think about national power on the world stage and the ways in which world processes affect – and infect – the nation. We tend to read Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776)¹² as a chronicle of inevitable cycles of expansion, overstretch, sclerosis, and decline, charted almost in biological terms that were beginning to inform narrative practice during the Enlightenment. We might also read it for what it has to say about greatness and the global condition. The Roman Empire sutured the world together and gave it its strength, resilience and a system of Roman globalization that sprawled beyond the Mediterranean. The Empire stabilized, exported, and enforced the rules. In the emperor Justinian’s day, “no restraints were imposed on the free and frequent intercourse,” Gibbon noted. Rome, like America, made integration possible.

With Trump, Inc. on my mind, I re-read Gibbon to think about caesars, venality and decline. But I was struck by his observations about empire and disease. For Gibbon, disease was the last straw of empire, but it was only made into a plague thanks to empire. The First Plague (or Justinian Plague), of the sixth century may have killed up to 100 million people. According to Gibbon, it culminated centuries of Roman sprawl that he felt brought grandeur and risk at the same time. “The nations were mingled and infected by wars and emigrations,” Gibbon wrote, “and the pestilential odour which lurks for years in a bale of cotton, was imported by the abuse of trade into the most distant regions.”¹³

Gibbon spelled out a paradox. Going global opened the Empire up to the world it had created and made both splendid. But open systems thereby also became vulnerable to outside threats, seen and unseen. Gibbon turned his narrative gaze to the stranger from Africa, and the breakout from the Upper Nile – redoubling the mythology about the dangers of trade and migration from lands beyond the Sahara. For Gibbon (as for Thucydides, whom he was reading), the tropics had always been the origin points of the plague; it was Roman hubris and avarice that drove traders into these fringes of the Empire in search of people and goods who brought the bacillus back with them. From the Serbonian bog and the east channel of the Nile, this fatal disease moved downstream into the capillaries of Roman globalization. “In a damp, hot, stagnating air, this African fever is generated from the putrefaction of animal substances, and especially from the swarm of locusts, not less destructive to mankind in their death than in their lives.”¹⁴ Back then, it was the Nile. Now, it is Wuhan.

The racialized tropes about the dangers of global spread into the tropics are hard to miss. They have had a long run, from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to *Black Hawk Down*.¹⁵ And the portrait of open systems as risky, threatening, and dangerous to the nation even if they are tempting and alluring, circulates now just as it did in previous moments of imperial anxiety. Gibbon’s paradox helps us understand the American – and Biden’s – predicament about being open yet threatened, as the drama around the mishandling of COVID-19 reminds us relentlessly.

One takeaway from Gibbon for Biden is this: globalization, whether Roman or American, means that the fate of the nation and the fate of the globe cannot be so easily separated, that the temptation to think about the greatness of one is separate from the greatness of all. That is what was so utterly self-defeating about American-Firstism: in a desperate and unseemly effort to get back to first place in line, the departing regime created so many hostilities and exhausted so many allies that it became even more vulnerable *and* it made the world order more precarious.

¹² Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 2000)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 581.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 580.

¹⁵ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York, Modern Library, 1999); Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Grove, 2010).

Gibbon should not be pressed too far. Americanization may have served post-1945 globalization, but America is not an empire. It often behaved imperially, at times brutally. But beyond continental North America it was imperial without being an empire. Trump may have strutted like a Caligula, but he was no Caesar.

We should still think of America and of a world of which it is a part as open systems in which each has shaped the other. It was easier for Americans to appreciate this when there was a perceived existential threat in the form of Communism; it was key to the heady universalisms that came in the wake of 1989. During these decades, it was easy to combine the national and world narratives under an exceptionalist spell. For the defenders of the creed, the mix was self-congratulatory; for the critics, it was self-lacerating. They bickered, but both sides agreed that America and the world were tangled up.

Now the challenge is that America and the world remain entangled but the exceptionalist appeal has faded. This can be seen as a crisis, a dangerous confusion as the world's parts grow more competitive and bristling, as interdependence becomes more weaponized. It can also be seen as an opportunity to explore alternative storytelling habits of the nation in the world, one that sheds appeals to greatness in favor of something more complex, more humble, more humane.

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