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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Trump Presidency: Trump 1, IR Theory 0

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Four years ago I was asked to address whether IR theory might help us understand the coming Trump presidency. I answered “no” for several reasons. IR theory is better at explanation than prediction. Even if it was reasonably good at prediction, its theories were completely outmatched by Donald Trump. Most IR theories are premised on rationality assumptions, but Trump exhibited little rationality. There were those who thought that he would be tamed by “adults” in the room, but I dismissed this as wishful thinking. Trump had demonstrated the ability to escape almost every single constraint he ever met. Trump would be Trump.¹ All we could know is that he would act in ways that met his needs, however he defined them at the time.

My recommendation, therefore, was to put away our models and get out *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) to grapple with how the mind of Donald Trump would shape the next years of U.S. foreign policy. As I wrote, “Our theories were never meant to explain the Madness of King Donald. IR theories are of little use for understanding this White House. Instead, we are better off with a team of psychiatrists from Bellevue.” Many psychiatrists had already provided diagnoses from a distance, and for the remainder of the term analysts would reference a stream of disorders to try to explain Trump’s behavior. There was narcissistic personal disorder. He demanded not just loyalty but fealty and translated any difference of opinion as a call to arms. He also exhibited symptoms of sociopathy. During the campaign he infamously mocked a disabled reporter. As president he became the posterchild for anti-social personality disorder. Following DSM-V, the Mayo Clinic describes it in the following terms:

Antisocial personality disorder, sometimes called sociopathy, is a mental disorder in which a person consistently shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others. People with antisocial personality disorder tend to antagonize, manipulate or treat others harshly or with callous indifference. They show no guilt or remorse for their behavior.

Individuals with antisocial personality disorder often violate the law, becoming criminals. They may lie, behave violently or impulsively...Because of these characteristics, people with this disorder typically can't fulfill responsibilities related to family, work or school.²

Did he know the difference between right and wrong? Not according to those who worked for him. Did he demonstrate any regard for the feelings of others? Only if he could make them suffer. The second impeachment hearings revealed just how much he enjoyed seeing the violence and learning of Vice-President Pence trying to escape a lynching. He looked down on those who demonstrated self-sacrifice. Not pay his taxes? It just showed how smart he was. Senator John McCain a war hero? He preferred heroes that were “not prisoners-of-war.” American soldiers that had fallen in battle? “Losers.” Did he ever show remorse? The best he could do was say that he never said what everyone heard. Did he show an ability to fulfill responsibilities related to work? He spent nearly 300 days of his presidency at a golf

¹ Michael N. Barnett, “Trump and International Relations Theory: A Response to Robert Jervis’s “President Trump and IR Theory,” <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5L.pdf>; and Barnett, “What Is International Relations Theory Good For?” in Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 8-21.

² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/antisocial-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353928>.

course.³ I am a believer that breaks are important for those who do good work, and some even do their best work while fishing, golfing, running, or some other activity. But he did accuse President Barack Obama, who spent far fewer days golfing or vacationing, of not having a good work ethic. But it is clear that he was not thinking about what more he could do to limit the deaths from COVID-19. How many tens of thousands needlessly died from COVID-19 because of his ‘see no COVID-19, fear no COVID-19, speak no COVID-19’ policy? Which better explains Trump, DSM-V or the three images of international relations? Whose expertise provides more insight – a roomful of psychiatrists or the editorial board of a top-tier IR scholarly journal?

It is difficult to identify a single area where the United States’ global standing, position, and influence has not been more severely weakened as a consequence of the last four years. We should not be surprised. Trump simply did to the United States what he did to most everyone who has worked for him: lowered the world’s opinion of them. H.R. McMaster, John L. Kelly, James Mattis, Rex Tillerson, Jeff Sessions, William Barr, and a long list of others.⁴ Add the United States itself to that list. Trump hastened American decline, much to the amazement of American allies and eternal thanks from its rivals. However, Trump did not come close to destabilizing the international order as much as many feared he would (or might have). Here are some possible reasons why.

He caused mischief and mayhem because it was part of his DNA, his political strategy, and brought him the attention he craved. But like many bullies, he often retreated when he met resistance. Also, Trump’s foreign policy was not a great departure from that of his predecessors. His America-first mantra did reverse almost 75-years of American support for building its power and influence through international institutions, norms, and law, but in many critical areas he simply amplified what previous presidents had done. His “deal of the century” in the Middle East was a gift to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the idea of a Greater Israel, but in reality he only finalized a half-century of American indulgence of Israeli policies in the territories. Anyone who cared to look could see a one-state reality evolving in Israel/Palestine before Trump came along. In other words, Trump just cut the ribbon on a project that past American presidents had (unintentionally) enabled. His global war on terror and targeting killings were more continuity of, than change from, Obama. His immigration policies were extreme, but remember that Obama’s critics nicknamed him the “deporter-in-chief.” Trump respected those who violated human rights, shut down the media, and tortured their political opponents, which set him apart from past presidents. But few American presidents have exhibited much backbone on human rights, especially when it interferes with American interests. Yes, Trump was a departure from previous presidents in many ways, but not as radical as is often portrayed.

Furthermore, Trump’s foreign policies harmed American interests far more than they hurt those of other countries. His idea of making America great again meant untying the United States from the very institutions that had served its interests; many of its rivals filled the vacuum left behind by the United States’ departure. China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and others on the enemies list of the U.S. have done well by Trump, and the reason has little to do with bad strategy. It has to do with Trump’s emotional and political needs. U.S. policies were whipsawed by another disorder – impulse control disorder – with the only constant being that Trump did what made him feel good at the moment. His bromance with Russian President Vladimir Putin still requires an explanation that goes beyond Trump’s fawning over authoritarian leaders. According to many investigative reports, Trump is somewhere between useful idiot and KGB agent.⁵ I am only half-joking when I say that I thought that Trump and Putin’s private conversation at Helsinki in July 2018 went over the extraction plans. Given what we have collectively seen, who would be completely surprised if the Trump family (minus Melania and Baron) ended up in Russia and put into temporary housing next to Edward Snowden as Trump built a Trump Tower on the Red Square? Trump’s initial encounter with the “rocket man,” North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, was filled with name-calling and bombast, but then quickly blossomed into a mutual admiration society that put the nuclear weapons program of the DPRK into overdrive. As for China, while relations were certainly tense, with testy exchanges, a trade war, and insults, in other critical areas Trump gave China a free hand. He never pushed China to explain its shocking internment and destruction of the Uyghurs. And he did nothing when China stamped out the pro-democracy protests in, and placed its boot across the neck of, Hong Kong.

Finally, many foreign leaders were able to avoid possible conflict by simply playing him and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. They stayed at his properties, flattered and humored him, told him how great he was and how he was a misunderstood genius. Israel named a new town after him. Leaks and open mics revealed how little foreign leaders thought of him as they flattered him to his face and then called him a

³ <https://trumpgolfcount.com/>. Estimated cost: \$144,000,000.

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration/>.

⁵ Craig Unger, *American Kompromat* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

buffoon and idiot behind his back. They learned quickly that it was better to suffer the fool than foolishly attempt to engage him in a rational conversation.

Does Joe Biden's defeat of Trump mean a return to "normal?" To answer that question we need to know what normal means and whether Trump changed our understanding of "normal" in America. It would be comforting to say that Trump's defeat ends a scary period in American history because it would leave the U.S. off the hook. In this case, America is not to be blamed for what happened, Trump is. But Trump is not an alien -- he is a creature of America. Trump might have been produced by a unique conjunction of forces, but he also represents an America that had always been there. Many of his critics quickly connected him to a readily identifiable type in American culture and politics.⁶ For many, his creation of a safe space for racism, chauvinism, and sexism was a shock, but his attitudes have a long history in the United States. He never received a majority of the popular vote, but he did very well -- winning office the first time and coming shockingly close the second, despite four years of mayhem, racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, corruption, and chauvinism. And he did well not *despite* these characteristics but rather *because* of them. The Republican Party and politicians were not forced into submission or walking examples of Stockholm Syndrome. Instead, they were accomplices who were quite willing to sell the country for gold pieces and praise from Caesar. From the very beginning of his candidacy, Democrats wondered when Republicans would say that if Trump had gone too far. Never, it turns out. Praise white supremacists? Not a problem. Blackmail a foreign government to manufacture dirt on his political opponent, betray the national interest, and help Russia in its war against a U.S. ally? Minor stuff. Call on his faithful to overthrow the government, put out a hit on his Vice-President, and cause elected officials to run for their lives from his noose-waving, cross-carrying mob? No laws were broken. He left office with 34% approval rating and 79% among Republicans.⁷ If given the choice, they would do it all over again. Think about that.

My point is more than Trump simply had active support by Republicans -- it is that he represents an illiberal America that has always been there. This has important consequences for those IR scholars among us who continue to write about American identity -- and quite severe consequences for liberal international relations theory because it calls into question America's liberal identity and the very idea of a liberal international order. I want to make three points.

First, IR scholars have a long history of dividing the international order between civilized and uncivilized states, advanced and backward states, and liberal and illiberal states. In this tradition the U.S. has always been coded as civilized, advanced, and liberal. Does the U.S. qualify as a liberal state? Liberal states are an ideal type that are defined by the holy trinity of competitive markets, the rule of law with a full complement of (civil and political) rights, and democratic institutions.⁸ These institutions are valued because they safeguard individual liberty and constrain the abuse of power by the state, and produce various individual, societal, and global dividends such as individual freedom and domestic and global peace and prosperity. Ideal types are precisely that: they are used for comparative analysis and without any expectation that these types exist in their purest form in reality. But is the U.S. more proximate to, say, a liberal or illiberal state?

Few doubt the United States' commitment to market principles, but it has not been a faithful practitioner of the rule of law or democracy. The rule of law in liberalism means equal rights, the equality of all before the law, and that law protects individuals from abuse by the state. The conjunction of America's slow reckoning with its racist history and the Black Lives Matter protests of the last year have exposed how racism and other forms of discrimination have imprinted the rule of law.⁹ The U.S. is credited with not one but two genocides -- against African-Americans and Native Americans -- and it has used legal means to continue their oppression. There are other countries who have

⁶ Fintan O'Toole, "The Trump Inheritance," *New York Review of Books*, 25 February 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/contributors/fintan-otoole/>.

⁷ <https://morningconsult.com/2021/01/19/trump-approval-senate-impeachment-conviction-polling/>.

⁸ G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018): 7-23; Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne, "After Liberal World Order," *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018): 25-42; Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal World: The Resilient Order," *Foreign Affairs* 97 (2018); Riccardo Alcaro, "The Liberal Order and its Contestations: A Conceptual Framework," *The International Spectator* 53:1 (2018): 1-10.

⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origin of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020); Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Claudio Sant, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020).

looked to the U.S. as a role model not of the rule of law but how to make discrimination lawful. The United States' racial policies were a template for the Nazis in the 1930s.¹⁰ The United States' Jim Crow laws helped to inspire South Africa's system of Apartheid.

And what about democratic rule? The recent Trump-led insurrection ends the United States' long streak of peaceful transition of power. It was not until 1965 and the Voting Rights Act that the United States finally put law behind the idea of democratic rule, but the right to vote remains something of a privilege that can be easily taken away from too many people through registration laws that have a clear discriminatory intent. Gerrymandering and the lack of campaign finance laws further stack the deck against free-and-fair elections. Certainly, all countries have their imperfections – but those who want to code the U.S. as liberal might have to either relax their definition of liberal (perhaps to the point that some states now defined as illiberal become redefined as liberal) or whitewash American history. Trump did more to expose the distance between America the myth and America the reality than could a crash course in critical race theory.

Second, if the U.S. is cashiered of its liberal rank, then what becomes of the liberal international order? Theories are not rejected on the basis of a bad apple. But what if the apple is not just any apple but rather the mother of all apples? So much of liberal international theory is built around the United States that it is difficult to imagine the former's existence without the existence of this critical case. Would they also need to delist the many other liberal states with histories of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and systematic discrimination? How many liberal states are required before it is worthwhile building a liberal international relations theory?

In addition to replication with a more valid data set, we should also consider whether race and other practices of exclusion have shaped the international order. President Woodrow Wilson might have been the patron saint of international liberalism, but he also was a racist at home and abroad -- and not the sort of racist who was unaware of his prejudices because of the times in which he lived, but rather one who opposed integration measures and fought to turn the clock back.¹¹ Thanks to Wilson and South Africa's Jan Smuts, the League of Nations continued to operate with a civilizational view that divided the world into whites and nonwhites.¹² The global color line continued after World War Two with the help of many leading liberal states. U.S. foreign policy after World War Two continued to oppose various aspects of international human rights because it did not want the world to judge its racial policies. President Harry Truman signed the Genocide Convention, but the Senate refused to ratify because it worried that international bodies might use the Convention to indict American policies toward Native Americans and African Americans. American immigration policies were unapologetically race-based until the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Trump's statement that Haiti and Africa states are "shithole countries" is certainly crass, but probably not that removed from what Wilson might have thought. Decolonization did not end the role of race in international order but instead submerged its presence.¹³ Over the last several months I have reflected on the work that Emanuel Adler and I did on security communities and wondered to what extent we missed the importance of race, especially when considering the bonds that bind and the boundaries that are erected.¹⁴ We would include race if we were to do it all over.

Third, disqualifying the U.S. from the liberal international order and considering how race and other practices of discrimination constitute liberal societies and their international orders potentially moves liberal internationalism from the realm of theory into ideology. Ideology can be briskly defined as a system of integrated beliefs and ideas that serve an existing order.¹⁵ Or, following on the claim of

¹⁰ James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹² Lake and Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line*; W.E.B. Dubois, "World of Color." *Foreign Affairs* (April 1925). Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹³ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁴ Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ This is only one definition, as Terry Eagleton's classic review on the concept concludes. Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, updated edition (New York: Verso Press, 2007).

Robert Cox, theory is always for something and for someone, and ideology is a theory that serves the existing order.¹⁶ And what order does this ideology serve? Realists have asserted that liberalism is a Trojan Horse for American power.¹⁷ However, the significance of Trump and the U.S.'s illiberalism goes beyond the old saw of ideology masquerading for national power to demand a consideration of its entanglement with race.

This reconsideration of race in the nation and the international order forces the beginning of a reckoning with history. Citing Ernest Renan, Eric Hobsbawm observed that all nations get their history wrong.¹⁸ The U.S. has a willfully selective memory. Typically, American leaders simply ignore the uncomfortable truths as they retell the story of America, or they point toward an America that is moving toward a more perfect union. But Trump found these truths not uncomfortable but rather prideful. In response, many Americans were forced to confront these uncomfortable truths, become “woke,” and find a way to integrate these truths into a new narrative.

Can this new narrative continue to sustain the idea of progress? Progress and liberalism are tightly bound. Progress means that civilization is moving in a “desirable direction,” and that societies are enjoying “irreversible ameliorative change,” moving from one superior stage to the next, and toward an “outcome that would have been chosen had it been foreseen.”¹⁹ And what is that outcome? A world with liberal values. Liberalism ties together the means and ends and makes liberalism the center of progress.

The idea of progress in the West has not been so much a “theory to be defended as a fact to be observed.”²⁰ It might unfold in fits-and-starts, through zigs-and-zags, and with occasional reversals, but it was as certain as the sun rising in the morning. Progress for liberals and many in the West is a “species of religion” and a “civil religion.”²¹ And like all religions, it is sustained by faith and a combination of willful belief and disbelief. But by embracing a past that many Americans either preferred to forget or not recognize, Trump forced many Americans to remove their rose-colored glasses. This process of removal had the immediate impact of shaking their faith in the mythological and Whiggish version of America. For those IR scholars that continue categorize the United States in the way it prefers to be seen rather than the way it is, it is time to remove those blinders, relax the faith in progress, and allow the darkness to enter.

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¹⁶ Robert Cox, *Social Forces, States, and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 128.

¹⁷ John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43 (Spring 2019): 7–50; Charles Glaser, “A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided,” *International Security* 43:4 (2019): 51–87.

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.

¹⁹ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its History and Growth* (New York: MacMillan) 1932, 2; Charles van Doren, *The Idea of Progress* (New York: Praeger Press, 1967), 7; and Nannerl Keohane, “The Enlightenment Idea of Progress Revisited” in G. Almond, M. Chodorow, and R.H. Pearce, *Progress and its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 22.

²⁰ Carl Becker, *Power and Progress* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), 5.

²¹ The first quote is from Becker, *Power and Progress*, 7; the second from John Michael Greer, *After Progress: Reason and Religion at the End of the Industrial Age* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2015), 10.