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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Denouement: Revisiting Trump as History

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“*Denouement*” comes from the French, who use the word to describe the act of untying a knot, and it refers to the unraveling of a confusing or mysterious story . . . [it] is the moment when all of the knots of a story are untied, and all the threads are unraveled, and everything is laid out clearly for the world to see.

- Lemony Snicket¹

Over breakfast recently, my daughter asked whether things would ever go back to normal. She dropped the question a few days after Donald Trump incited the mob that attacked the U.S. Capitol. President-elect Joe Biden’s inauguration was still a week or two away. I like to tell myself I’m good in these moments, and I started a story about the star-spangled-banner, thinking she would be comforted by the knowledge that the country’s national anthem was penned after the original Capitol’s destruction. Rough patches come and go, I explained. She stared silently into her cereal as I talked. The pandemic lost its novelty a long time ago, Mom has cancer, and I was obviously missing the point of the question. A few days earlier, somebody tore down the “We Believe” sign in our front lawn. My daughter was asking about normalcy because she feared that some of the people she had seen on television might live in our neighborhood. We pumped the breaks on Francis Scott Key. Instead, we talked about heroes in the books she likes to read. I gave her a hug eventually and then I lied, promising that everything would go back to normal soon.

I’m exhausted. Four years ago, Trump’s ascendancy was a jolt to the system and his presidency invited new questions about important things. His departure is different. The denouement of January 6 feels inevitable now—one final act of carnage that washed away the illusion that the United States is a stable, settled democracy. The entitled rage he weaponized so purposefully finally burst through the walls protecting this country’s self-satisfied adages about democracy. Now what? Does anyone really know what will happen next? When I was my daughter’s age, people tore down the Berlin Wall and historians are only beginning to explain how that event shaped the world I grew up in. I suspect the riot on January 6 will shape her future in a comparable way. I want to believe—I want her to believe—that the United States is at an inflection point, and that its citizens can do things right now that will determine what comes next. But I sometimes wonder whether we have passed that point already. Lost in all the lies about voter fraud and the drama surrounding the second impeachment trial is the sobering fact that 74 million people voted for Trump in 2020. That is such an enormous number.

What did my original essay say? It argued that future historians will disagree about why Trump beat Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton in 2016. Scholars who study politics will probably start Trump’s story in President Barack Obama’s first term. Obama equated success with unity, and the GOP’s response—total resistance—was an extension of lessons that that party learned during Bill Clinton’s presidency. GOP leaders created the conditions for Trump’s rise by stoking a backlash against his predecessor. The essay’s second section resituated this claim in the context of conservative populism, and considered how Trump’s election might look to social historians. Putting aside the role of right-wing media and gerrymandering, the country was (and is) growing less religious and more diverse. Some Americans felt (and feel) genuinely threatened by this fact. Trump capitalized on their discontent. The essay embedded this observation in a third section about the United States and the world. For those who study intellectual history, Trump’s ascendancy might be placed in a *longue durée* about American world-making. If Vietnam uprooted aspects of mid-century liberalism, Iraq did something similar to

¹ Daniel Handler, *A Penultimate Peril: A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), chapter 8.

neoliberalism, unsettling previously sacrosanct claims about democracy, trade, and exceptionalism. These intellectual shifts created an opportunity for someone like Trump to beat someone like Hillary Clinton.

At first glance, these premises merely put emphasis in different places. The events of January 6 certainly demonstrated the interdependence of points one and two. Were elected Republicans spurring the mob or responding to its whims? Every day I read something in the newspaper that shifts my opinion just a little, but the logic of polarization is much more apparent now than it was in 2017. Republicans require fewer votes than Democrats to hold onto the White House, the Senate, the House, and state legislatures. Polarization keeps conservatives in power, and because so many of the GOP's policy objectives can be advanced through courts, the Republican Party does not need bipartisan legislation to advance many of its goals. Democrats, in contrast, require new laws to achieve the changes they say they support, and they operate in an environment where they have to win the popular vote by three or four percentage points in order to capture the electoral college, hence that party's obsession with "electability" and suburban women.² The pandemic accentuated this tension. "Democrats are trying to make it easier for Americans to cast ballots," *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt summarized in October 2020, "and Republicans are trying to make it harder."³ A few weeks later, *Vox* editor Ezra Klein offered the prescient observation that a "party that adapts to anti-democratic rules will quickly become a party that fears democracy."⁴ The fact that sixty-six percent of the House GOP caucus—and eight Republican senators—voted to reject the outcome of the 2020 election *after* the U.S. military removed insurrectionists from the Capitol affirms that total resistance has evolved from a measure to thwart an earlier president into an all-consuming political ideology.

Did the mob act on Trump's command? Blaming Trump is easier than empathizing with his most vocal supporters. "If you watch Fox News," Obama opined last autumn, "you perceive a different reality than if you read *The New York Times* and that didn't use to be as stark because you had local newspapers and you had people overlapping in terms of where they got information."⁵ Everybody would settle down, in other words, if Fox News stopped manipulating its viewers. Others pin blame on Facebook and Twitter. The mob "was a mix of everyday Americans: small business owners, suburb dwellers, rural militia types," *New York Times*' reporters intoned in January, and the one thing they all shared was a social media addiction.⁶ Others affix responsibility on Russian President Vladimir Putin, the author of all of Establishment America's pain. Admittedly, there is something comforting in the idea that someone else did this to Americans—in the premise that a new policy or a clever speech will fix things. In the real world, "an army has been marshaled and barbed wire installed, and the FBI is on guard against an inside job," author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote recently. "Whatever this is—whatever we decide to call this—it is not peaceful, and it is not, in many ways, a transition. It is something darker."⁷ According to Coates, this is what happens when a country like the United States elects a black president. White people lose their minds.

When will things go back to normal? In some respects, the essay's third section is the most relevant to my daughter's question. Here is where the essay's cracks show. Pushed to critique my 2017 self, I would observe that while the first section of that essay flowed into the second, and the second into the third, the first and third sections advance arguments that are not entirely compatible. If the third part is correct, and Iraq reflected and uprooted a family of assumptions about neoliberal internationalism, then the first section, which treats Trump's rise as Senator Mitch McConnell's error, is irrelevant. In other words, the first and third parts of the essay evoke different kinds of causal mechanisms—McConnell and Iraq, respectively—to answer that paper's question, "How did this happen?" As such, they point the reader toward different kinds of futures. While the first part chalks up polarization to Republican malfeasance, and implies that the

² Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

³ Spencer Bokart-Lindell, "The Voting Suppression Tipping Point," *New York Times*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/opinion/voter-suppression-election.html>.

⁴ Klein, "The Crisis Isn't Too Much Polarization," *Vox*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21561011/2020-election-joe-biden-donald-trump-electoral-college-vote-senate-democracy>.

⁵ Quoted in Michel Martin, "NPR's Full Interview with Former President Barack Obama," *NPR*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/16/934584373/transcript-nprs-full-interview-with-former-president-barack-obama>

⁶ Stuart Thompson and Charlie Warzel, "The Used to Post Selfies Now They're Trying to Reverse the Election," *New York Times*, 14 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/opinion/facebook-far-right.html>.

⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Donald Trump Is Out Are We Ready to Talk About How He Got In," *The Atlantic*, 19 January 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/ta-nehisi-coates-revisits-trump-first-white-president/617731/>

United States' dysfunction will end if McConnell loses power, the third part says the opposite. Every claim, once universalized, has an expiration date, and Trump's ascendance merely confirmed the death of certain assumptions about democracy, trade, and U.S. hegemony. Blaming McConnell for Trump is beside the point if we're living through an epistemological reckoning about neoliberal internationalism.

I'm not sure how to fix this tension, but it invites a clearer definition of neoliberal internationalism. On one end of a spectrum are people who think like Biden. These people would probably repudiate the "neo" part of my phrase, since they believe the United States has followed a single coherent foreign policy since about 1942. This single coherent policy has cultivated democracy while confronting authoritarianism, and it has left the world more peaceful, prosperous, and interdependent.⁸ There is no "bright line between foreign and domestic policy," Biden told the U.S. State Department in February 2021.⁹ The international system that the United States "carefully constructed" after World War II frayed because Trump and his ilk unleashed an ideology that was at odds with the American experience.¹⁰ Like most establishment types, Biden has consistently defined neoliberal internationalism as inclusive, collective leadership. On the other end of the spectrum are writers like Stephen Wertheim, an exemplar of a counter-view that defines U.S. foreign policy as forever war.¹¹ This viewpoint agrees that the United States has adhered to a coherent project since the 1940s, but insists that that project has turned most of the planet into America's personal killing field.¹² "[I]t looks like [Biden] will not only prolong the endless wars," Wertheim retorted during the 2020 presidential campaign, "but also restore and revive the ideas that generated them in the first place." Biden's ascendancy is appalling because American liberals already have so much blood on their hands.¹³

Between these two extremes is the idea that the liberal world order has meant different things to different people at different times, which is the premise that organized my 2017 paper. Until the 1970s, I argued, the United States projected its influence by making united states abroad. These united states were bound together by collective security pacts and an ideology we now call development, the underlying hope being that institutions and experts might create a free world where people thought similarly and lived peacefully. When decolonization exposed this project's contradictions, American liberals adjusted their creed. As their past assumptions crumbled, they doubled-down on the premise that individuals everywhere should be free to choose democracy, capitalism, and life in the United States. For a segment of influential U.S. policymakers, the movement of people supplanted economic development as the keystone of American ideological authority, hence the symbolic importance of the Berlin Wall during the Cold War's endgame. In that 2017 paper, my claims about the difference between liberal and neoliberal internationalism rested upon this shift. These two projects were not in conflict, but they used alternative metaphors—the construction site versus the marketplace—to rationalize American exceptionalism, and they flowed one into the other during the second half of the twentieth century. With the benefit of four years, I still think neoliberal internationalism buckled after the Iraq War, and broke down completely during the Syrian refugee crisis. While Obama and his advisors did not cause this breakdown, they made adjustments that carried into Trump's presidency and will surely shape the Biden administration.

In short, I prefer the third part of the paper to the first. But that's not really my main point. Historicizing neoliberal internationalism draws attention to assumptions that have melted away during the past decade. On the eve of the Iraq War, for example, Washington treated the military as an instrument for democracy promotion. The 1989-1990 Panama invasion was a template, and subsequent administrations sent soldiers to affect change on almost every continent during the next quarter century. Today, the premise that the U.S. military can create a democracy is laughable. Wertheim is right to draw attention to the destructive hubris of a bygone era and wrong to

⁸ For thoughtful reflections, G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁹ Joseph Biden, Jr., "Remarks by President Biden on America in the World," 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

¹⁰ Joseph Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

¹¹ Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹² For thoughtful reflections, Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

¹³ Stephen Wertheim, "Why Joe Biden's Foreign Policy Isn't so Visionary," *Responsible Statecraft*, 9 March 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/03/09/why-joe-bidens-foreign-policy-vision-isnt-so-visionary/>.

pretend there has been no change since 2012. Washington's claims about trade have changed too. After 1992, the United States invented a free trade zone in North America and embraced China as an economic partner. Rather than returning to the halcyon days of the mid-twentieth century, this arrangement eroded restraints on multinational companies and financial institutions. Geopolitically, the main winner was China, a country that arguably leveraged cheap labor for computer technology. Finally, the politics around migration have changed. The percentage of Americans born abroad has increased exponentially since the 1990s, which makes sense in the aforementioned intellectual context, and this shift has triggered two kinds of backlashes. Trump's defense of white privilege is self-explanatory. Yet his relative popularity—holding at 40% regardless of what he says or does—has coexisted with a reckoning over white supremacy in business, education, and media. American social norms feel fraught right now because these backlashes are accelerating with equal fervor in opposite directions.

When will things go back to normal? Maybe some things shouldn't. Future historians will probably remember Washington's humanitarian interventions the same way they remember the imperial small wars of the late nineteenth century. Strip away the jargon or consider these interventions from a local perspective, and the logic of the enterprise becomes ridiculous. Today, the democratic peace hypothesis looks as simplistically arrogant as the civilizing mission. Similarly, with the benefit of hindsight, the assumption that China would adopt American culture and money with the same enthusiasm is embarrassingly naïve, as is the belief that deregulating prosperous multinational companies would lead to shared national prosperity. Retired to history already, these mindsets might be viewed by future scholars as the two greatest policymaking blunders of the late twentieth century. Finally, while the politics around immigration are fluid, no one is clamoring for the pre-Trump status quo. Even before Trump's ascendancy, Obama's policies had earned him the moniker of "Deporter-in-Chief" and the nativism unleashed by Trump, dramatized by his horrific child separation efforts, laid bare the incoherence of modern conservatism.¹⁴ Normal should not have a future when a movement claiming to champion family values starts tearing vulnerable families apart.

Perhaps I prefer the third part of that original paper because it invites dreams of a normal to be. Some of the most interesting debates of the past four years have sidestepped internationalism altogether. Take for instance historian Jill Lepore's effort to reimagine American nationalism—and the pushback she has encountered from historian Daniel Immerwahr, who castigated her for failing to acknowledge truths about the U.S. empire.¹⁵ The debate is provocative, but neither scholar assumes a future for American world-making. This assumption holds in other contexts, even if the conversation looks different. Consider the intervention by former U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, who recently insisted on the pages of *Foreign Affairs* that the next threat facing Americans will be the proliferation of nuclear weapons among their Cold War allies. Or contemplate analyst Fareed Zakaria's insistence that the United States would lose a sustained Cold War-style confrontation with China.¹⁶ The U.S. foreign policy establishment "successfully blocked or slowed down Trump's attempted withdrawals from . . . the 'endless wars' in West Asia," reporter Patrick Coburn explained in January 2021. "It is not clear, however, that [Biden's advisors] have a realistic alternative approach."¹⁷ Nobody really believes neoliberal internationalism has a future. More compelling are questions about the American nation: Can the United States change without uprooting rituals that hold it together—or do these rituals need to be cast aside? Can Americans achieve social justice on common ground—or does the evocation of such ground serve the narrow interests of white supremacy? American leadership abroad probably turns on whether the country has the ability to answer such questions.

The riddle resonates in particular ways in these early weeks of Joe Biden's presidency. Like so many exhausted people, my wife and I wept when the inauguration finally came. Neither of us could explain ourselves; we are not weepy people. The tears just came. The event's

¹⁴ Alex Nowrasteh, "Obama's Mixed Legacy on Immigration," The CATO Institute, 25 January 2017, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/obamas-mixed-legacy-immigration>; Reid Epstein, "NCLR head: Obama 'deporter-in-chief,'" *Politico*, 4 March 2014, <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/national-council-of-la-raza-janet-murguia-barack-obama-deporter-in-chief-immigration-104217>.

¹⁵ Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019); Daniel Immerwahr, "The Center Does Not Hold," *The Nation*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/jill-lepore-these-truths-this-america-review/>.

¹⁶ Chuck Hagel, Malcolm Rifkind, Kevin Rudd, and Ivo Daalder, "When Allies Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-02-12/when-allies-go-nuclear#author-info>; Fareed Zakaria, "The New China Scare," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare>.

¹⁷ Patrick Coburn, "War Zones," *New Left Review: Sidecar*, 14 January 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/war-zones?pc=1310>.

unironic pageantry made us realize that we had lost something we did not know we had to have. We had lost the lie that everything would be okay soon.

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