

Transatlantic Relations after Trump: Mutual Perceptions and Historical Perspectives

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America has had its share of sins, many of them forgiven, largely because of its countervailing virtues. Now it stands in stark relief against an unforgiving world, or at least a skeptical one. In particular, European allies' doubts about the U.S. global role have grown to unprecedented levels.

Throughout its history, NATO has survived many storms, after quarreling over budget allocations, global strategies, trade policies, the politics of détente, and even film quotas and other aspects of an alleged “Americanization.” The literature on the alliance features a vast majority of scholarly studies and memoirs that stress not so much its harmony, but, as the book title of the still academic Henry Kissinger once put it, its nature as a “Troubled Partnership.”¹ But partners they did remain. The norm-breaking presidency of Donald J. Trump signified the unraveling of what was once recognized as the “liberal hegemony,” in which, for all the disputes, the U.S. hegemon “identif[ie]d its own national interests with the openness and stability of the larger system,”² a system that was consensually based on the very liberal internationalist order forged by the United States for a multilateral, rule-based international cooperation protecting or advancing free trade and democracy. Now, we are here addressing the “Chaos of the Liberal Order,” perhaps its “end” altogether³ – presuming that even the new Biden administration cannot have a full restorative effect, much like the Obama administration could not fully repair the tensions within NATO caused by the international actions of President George W. Bush.⁴

Trump’s transgressions were not an aberration, but the extreme manifestation of a growing distance between transatlantic partners. The rift has been widening not just over strategic or economic matters, but over a whole set of problems that marked, to use the Freudian definition once suggested by Peter Baldwin’s study on transatlantic relations, “the narcissism of minor differences.” While minor, Freud argued, those differences were asserted to foster “group solidarities against an outsider who was perhaps not as ‘other’ as his would be enemies would have liked. His foreignness therefore had to be narcissistically elaborated in lavish detail.”⁵ It is on these mutual perceptions that I will focus here.

¹ Henry Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership: A Reappraisal of the Atlantic Alliance* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965).

² G. John Ikenberry, “Illusions of Empire: Defining the New American Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2004, 149; Ikenberry developed a more pessimistic view in “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?,” *Foreign Affairs*, (May-June 2017), and *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

³ 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); Niall Ferguson, Fareed Zakaria, Rudyard Griffiths, eds., *Is This the End of the Liberal International Order?* (Toronto: House of the Anansi Press, 2017).

⁴ On this see esp. Erik Jones “The US and the EU: Game Over?,” in Mario Del Pero and Paolo Magri, eds., *Four Years of Trump: The US and the World* (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2020), 162.

⁵ Peter Baldwin, *The Narcissism of Minor Differences: How America and Europe are Alike* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 10.

In a broad cultural sense, the very idea of American exceptionalism has paradoxically survived better in Europe than in the United States – at least one based on high hopes or expectations of the U.S. maintaining its role as liberal hegemon, and norm-setter. This reliance has its flipside, too, for, as Jessica Gienow-Hecht best put it, the tension between alleged philo and anti-Americanism “represents the very condition necessary to support the existence of both: high expectations and bitter disillusion are always joined at the hip.”⁶ The disillusion has grown deeper over the past four years, as the “minor differences” have caused a wider gap, both because the assertions of “group solidarities” have become stronger, and because objectively the differences are perhaps no longer so minor.

And the alleged anti-Americanism has had its counterpart in growing anti-Europeanism. Part of the reactive, if not reactionary side of the American right – but also much of the entire political spectrum – has been informed by fear that America might become another Europe. It’s a fear that, since the turn of the twentieth century, mirrored what British journalist William Stead then called, for the first time, “The Americanization of the World.”⁷ With the specters of massive industrialization, unchecked urban development, corporate and political corruption, class warfare, and even classic imperialism, the United States entered global politics and the Progressive Era making that very Progress a preemptive cure to all those European “ills” – a cure including, of course, President Woodrow Wilson’s liberal internationalist agenda. Even more than for other peoples, the American identity, given its peculiar origins, relied on this negation, or counter-identity (being a non-Europe), to which it added an affirmation of universality (being the beacon for Europe first, then for the rest of the world). For the past three decades, America’s conservatives have been particularly vehement against the excesses of Europe’s welfare state and statutory regulations.⁸ With the variety of responses to COVID-19, that criticism reached a crescendo. And it was so much so that even progressive Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, in his sparring debate with Bernie Sanders in March 2020, chastised the Vermont senator’s Medicare for All proposal comparing it to the single-payer system in Italy – as an example of how not to handle the virus (to which Italian commentators rose in arms, contradicting the Democratic Party candidate’s faux pas).⁹

At the same time, America and its European allies have remained bonded together by what, starting in the 1950s, became broadly defined as a “political” or “Atlantic Community,” one that, as Karl Deutsch suggested in 1957, was not merely a security community, balanced, in realist terms, against the perceived threat of Soviet Communism. It was also a “pluralistic security community,” whose shared values helped develop a sense of “we-ness,” one that was further nourished by currents of trade, tourism, cultural exchange at every level, intellectual and popular – and constantly reinforcing the liberal institutions that generated “dependable expectations of peaceful exchange.” It has been this perhaps West-centric, if not Eurocentric bond that made realist and liberal assumptions merge together, and that constituted one of the main reasons for what Geir Lundestad called “‘empire’ by invitation,” or – in reference to the U.S. support of Europe’s own unifying drive (within a *transatlantic framework*), an “‘empire’ by integration.”¹⁰ NATO in this sense was to keep the Europeans together (mainly against their fickle electorates) even more than keeping the Russians out, by also keeping the Americans in.¹¹ Far from homogenized, it was the “pluralistic” nature of this community, besides its realist considerations, that allowed it to overcome so many quarrels.

⁶ Jessica Gienow-Hecht, “Always Blame the Americans: Anti-Americanism in Europe in the Twentieth Century,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 111, Issue 4, October 2006, 1070.

⁷ William T. Stead, *The Americanization of the World* (New York and London: H. Markley, 1901).

⁸ Of course, this is not to imply that the whole EU is modeled on welfare statism. In particular, some of the new members from the East have been oriented primarily toward the free-market American model.

⁹ See for ex. Giacomo Gabbuti and Lorenzo Zamponi, “Joe Biden Lied in Last Night’s Debate — Italy’s Public Health Care is Saving it From Collapse,” *Jacobin Magazine*, March 16, 2020, <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/joe-biden-italy-coronavirus-public-health-care-debate>, and Vale Disamistade, “No, Italy Is Not the Case Against Medicare for All,” *The Nation*, April 14, 2020.

¹⁰ Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945: From “Empire” by Invitation to Transatlantic Drift* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Karl Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) is also highlighted here, 65-66. See also Geir Lundestad, *“Empire” by Integration: The United States and European Integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Thomas Risse Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on US Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

¹¹ On this see esp. the recent account by Timothy Andrews Sayle, *The Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

This counts for intra-European relations, too. For all its own internal divisions, Europe has maintained that sense of shared values. Ironically, neither the “rise of the rest” nor growing euro-skepticism has diminished certain Eurocentric notions of the global balance, both for those who see an embattled Europe declining, and those who still trust EU institutions and their inclusive (sometimes paternalistic) multicultural and multiethnic policies. The extent to which this political community, both in transatlantic and European terms, endured the Trump years, including the sovereignist trends that have gained momentum on both sides of the Atlantic, remains to be seen.

NATO: The Rift Involves much More than Burden-Sharing

Complaints about Europeans “free-riding” on America’s military commitment to NATO are as old as the alliance itself – in a strict sense, nothing new from the Trump administration. This historical record has been amply addressed in this forum. So here I am just highlighting how the rumbling against the “European allies’ preference for butter over guns at the expense of the American taxpayer” has been bipartisan, dating back to the very inception of the alliance, as Congress questioned the European allies’ ability or willingness to contribute to the common defense.¹² Second, from the American side, there was a persistent belief in Europe’s self-reliance and integrationist impulse that could even create a genuine, stronger, autonomous European “third force” (between the two superpowers). This would allow the United States, in President Dwight Eisenhower’s words, to “sit back and relax somewhat.”¹³

Washington expected even more of this after the end of the Cold War. While Clinton’s assertive multilateralism gave the U.S. the lead in the Bosnian conflict – the first major test for the alliance in the post-Soviet era – those same actions also warranted renewed requests for Europe’s fair share of the military burden.¹⁴ Under the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2002 of the Bush administration, a uniquely powerful but also uniquely vulnerable United States demanded more of its allies – while also turning more fiercely protective of itself and of its autonomy. But a Democratic successor to Bush was no less demanding, arguing that the U.S. unilateralist approach, as the former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger noted, “left our allies off the hook” giving them “an excuse to shirk [...] global responsibilities.” As late as 2016, President Barack Obama continued to lash out at the European “free riders.”¹⁵

For all these grievances, the transatlantic divide over expenses or strategies was never perceived as an existential threat, not even during the clash over the war in Iraq. Donald Trump made the break seem catastrophic at times. The problem of a neglect of, if not potential divorce from NATO was bad enough. But Trump further shunned organizations or agreements that underpinned the transatlantic consensus on liberal internationalism, such as, on top of all, the Paris Climate Accords, the UN Human Rights Council, the Global Compact on Migration, the Iran nuclear deal, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the World Health Organization, and even COVAX, a 184-nation initiative aimed at accelerating the distribution of vaccine doses against COVID-19. And then there was, of course, economic retribution of the most transactional type, with retaliatory tariffs on European wine, cheese, and food imports.

It would be bad enough that the United States reverted to absenteeism (more than traditional political disengagement, which to some extent recognized some responsibility for Europe’s welfare, as it did in the 1920s); to that absence, as Carl Bildt, a former Swedish prime minister, noted, Trump added “an element of brutality and vulgarity”¹⁶ – insult added to injury.

¹² William R. Keylor, “The Future of the Atlantic Alliance under President Trump,” in Robert Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, 323. See also Stanley R. Sloan, “Donald Trump and NATO: Historic Alliance Meets A-historic President,” in Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order*. On congressional pressures see also Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: NATO, the European Union, and the Transatlantic Bargain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), chap. 2.

¹³ Quoted in Editorial Note, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57*, vol. IV, 349.

¹⁴ Transcript of the Remarks by President W. J. Clinton To People of Detroit, *United States Information Agency*, 22 October 1996, <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1996/s961022a.htm>

¹⁵ Mark Landler, “Obama Criticizes the ‘Free Riders’ Among America’s Allies,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2011; Samuel R. Berger, “Foreign Policy for a Democratic President,” *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 2004), 54.

¹⁶ Quoted in Fareed Zakaria, *GPS*, October 17, 2020 broadcast, CNN transcripts <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2010/17/csr.01.html>.

During his 2016 campaign, Trump infamously uttered in an interview: “NATO is obsolete. It’s old. It’s fat. It’s sloppy.”¹⁷ Through various permutations the jibe was oft-repeated until his presidency – so reiterated was the insult that European partners did not know whether to express concern, derision, or both. By the last year in office, the president had almost done a full turnaround, seeing NATO, as in past decades, having a role in the Middle East: “NATO - right? – he said in January 2020 - and then you have ME, Middle East. You’ll call it NATOME. I said, what a beautiful name, NATOME. I’m good at names, right?” Of course, within the NATO commands, and with the U.S. ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison, rather than the president, mediating the dialogue, the simplistic blurt was articulated as possible scenarios in which NATO could deploy a standing maritime force to the Arabian Gulf to keep those sea lanes of communication open; or use its surveillance craft of AWACS and Global Hawks; or even provide cybersecurity in the region.¹⁸ All this, of course, was nothing new. Although Trump tried to get credit for pushing NATO to prioritize the fight against terrorism, the allies had done so since they contributed to the military effort in Afghanistan, invoking, for the first time, Article 5 of the alliance, and providing cybersecurity ever since the 2002 Alliance Prague Summit created the NATO Computer Incident Response Capability (NCIRC).¹⁹ As Hal Brands and Stanley Sloan have illustrated, Trump’s endorsement of NATO did not mitigate his “profit-oriented, transactional” approach to allies. Indeed, the president missed the whole point of the alliance when he framed the shared defense obligations as “past dues” owed to the organization, and the U.S. in particular. Trump, in sum, continued to exact “dramatically higher rents” treating allies “as tributary states rather than partners.”²⁰

All this was aggravated by Trump’s refusal to challenge Russia on its aggression against Ukraine, or its threats to NATO allies. Détente with Russia, initially championed by Trump’s first foreign policy team of the pro-Russian Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (a long-time friend of President Vladimir Putin) and National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, seemed to evolve more and more into a “special” relationship – reflecting Trump’s own personal interests, or even his ostensible preference for strongmen over allied democracies.²¹ At the infamous Helsinki summit with Putin in July 2018, Trump did pay homage to the Russian president, while calling the EU America’s “greatest foe” on military budget matters and trade policies.²²

Through the record of the past four years, the transatlantic disengagement seems to have gained momentum, becoming a reciprocal one. With neutralist sentiments rising, Europeans, including Germany – though not NATO members bordering Russia – no longer feel the need for a U.S. security guarantee as much as they used to up until the first post-Cold War decade. One reason is that they no longer trust the United States: Chancellor Angela Merkel’s repeated assertions, throughout the Trump years, that Europe could no longer count on

¹⁷ For Trump’s statement of March 29, 2016, and its subsequent reiterations in the following months (including the president’s retraction on April 12, 2017) see <https://www.msnbc.com/brian-williams/watch/candidate-trump-nato-is-obsolete-pres-trump-no-it-isn-t-920138819701>

¹⁸ Ari Shapiro, “Former NATO Commander On President Trump’s Changing Messages About The Alliance” (including quotation from Donald Trump), *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/10/795366617/former-nato-commander-on-president-trumps-changing-messages-about-the-alliance>. See also James M. Goldgeier, “Trump Goes to Europe,” *Washington Post*, July 10, 2018, reprinted by *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/article/trump-goes-europe>; “Donald Trump’s Baffling Proposal to Withdraw Troops from Germany,” *The Economist*, June 27, 2020; Tim Stanley, “Trump Departure: ‘Rarely Has a President Shown such Little Personal Evolution in Office’,” *The Telegraph*, January 18, 2021.

¹⁹ Susan Davis, “NATO in the Cyber Age,” Report, April 18, 2018, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2019-04/087_STC_19_E%20-%20NATO.pdf

²⁰ Sloan, “Donald Trump and NATO,” 224-227; Hal Brands, “The Last Chance for American Internationalism: Confronting Trump’s Illiberal Legacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-20/last-chance-american-internationalism>

²¹ “Les liaisons dangereuses de Donald Trump et Vladimir Poutine,” editorial staff, *Le Monde*, July 17, 2018; Krishnadev Calamur, “Nine Notorious Dictators, Nine Shout-Outs From Donald Trump,” *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/trump-xi-jinping-dictators/554810/> On the prospects of a more productive trilateral cooperation among China, Russia, and the U.S. see Robert Legvold, “US-Russia Relations Unhinged,” in Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, 294-299 in particular.

²² Andrew Roth, David Smith, Edward Helmore, and Martin Pengelly “Trump Calls European Union a ‘Foe’ – ahead of Russia and China,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/15/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-helsinki-russia-indictments>

the U.S. military umbrella, are not entirely superseded by her statement on, or rather hopes of, better ties with the Biden administration.²³ French President Emmanuel Macron, even while hailing Biden's return to NATO, doubled down on his previous calls for a European "strategic autonomy."²⁴ While a European common defense is still elusive, given the diverse strategic priorities of each EU member, it remains significant that its two leading nations have taken this autonomous stance. Furthermore, although still guarded on Putin's regime, most Europeans shun notions of a second cold war, with Russia or – more frequently alluded to – China, for the capitalist-Communist divide has also become blurred.²⁵ They certainly will not stop their own "transactions" with Moscow, including the (for Washington) controversial Nord Stream pipeline supplying natural gas to the EU.

Unilateralism and Insults

Turning inward has had different meanings for either side of the Atlantic. Even while questioning certain effects of globalization (or taking independent actions within it), European nations have remained essentially wedded to multilateralism. For America, the inward trend, which has grown by fits and starts since the end of the Cold War,²⁶ has reflected a general public reluctance to maintain the burdens of hegemony in a multilateral setting – with excesses of unilateralism, in the aftermath of 9/11, or, just as significantly, during the America-First years of Trump.

Trump's absence or neglect did not mean isolationism, not in the same sense invoked by the "America First Committee" that opposed America's entry in World War II. It rather reflected Trump's transactional type of nationalism – one that manifested itself in his knack for bilateral deals, with a rather unilateral bent (what's in it for the U.S. – or "for me"). And it is the U.S. attack on multilateral institutions that has defined Europe's main fears – fears that had emerged long before French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine popularized the term "hyperpuissance."²⁷

Accepting America's hegemony, the NATO allies, from the start, also championed integration and multilateralism, to both overcome the excesses of their own balance of power policies and to mitigate the influence of U.S. power. In a way, the sense of "we-ness" also meant acting in concert with the United States toward a better international environment. As early as the 1950s, the middle-ranking NATO powers of Italy, Canada, and Norway supported the implementation of article 2 of the Atlantic Pact, which pledges its members to "seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies" and to "encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them." This was a peculiar way to revert military assistance into a concert of powers managing global economic development – to some extent a

²³ See Gideon Rachman, "Angela Merkel's Blunder, Donald Trump and the End of the West," *Financial Times*, May 29, 2017; "Europe Can't Count on US Protection Anymore: Merkel," *The Straits Times*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/europe-cant-count-on-us-protection-any-more-merkel>; and "Together We are Stronger" - Germany Bets on Better U.S. Ties under Biden," in *Reuters*, January 25, 2021.

²⁴ Macron in Roger Cohen, "Macron Tells Biden That Cooperation with U.S. Cannot Be Dependence," *New York Times*, January 29, 2021; for previous announcements see: Patrick Wintour "Macron Sets out 10-year Vision for EU with Call for More Integration," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2020.

²⁵ Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "The Crisis of American Power: How Europeans See Biden's America," Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, January 19, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/>; Daniel Baer, "America Is Back. Europe, Are You There?" *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/09/america-europe-biden-transatlantic-alliance/>. For a critical look at Merkel's and Macron's positions see Barbara Kunz, "The Evolving Transatlantic Link: What European Response? Disentangling the European Security Debate," in Maud Quessard, Frédéric Heurtebize, Frédéric Gagnon, eds., *Alliance and Power Politics in the Trump Era* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 33-51.

²⁶ See similar observations in T.G. Otte, "2016 Revisited: The Trump Presidency in Perspective," ISSF Policy Series America and the World — The Effects of the Trump Presidency, February 18, 2021, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/7266056/policy-series-2012-8-2016-revisited-trump-presidency-perspective>

²⁷ "To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a 'Hyperpower'," *International Herald Tribune*, February 5, 1999.

precursor of the G-7 concert. The proposal was curtly rejected by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles as the allies' ploy "to extract a little more money out of the United States."²⁸

Europe's attempts at mitigating U.S. unilateralism – dictated in no small part by Eurocentric concerns – persisted for the rest of the Cold War and beyond. This was particularly the case with all presidential "doctrines," which often caused qualms among NATO allies: first, because they all shifted U.S. strategies away from Europe; second, because they also reiterated the unilateralist bent of America's foreign policy (from its first signaling, via doctrine, in the early nineteenth century), coated with a certain sense of "moral right" (since President Theodore Roosevelt pledged to correct "the wrongdoings of uncivilized nations") – culminating in the most expressly unilateralist policies of the George W. Bush administration. Here I will cite just a few cases. Germany, Italy, France, and the UK – all in their own way – tried to redirect the Eisenhower Doctrine's unilateral designs in the Middle East toward cooperative ventures involving integrative economic aid or military strategies in the region.²⁹ President Charles de Gaulle's seemingly nationalist objections to various U.S. unilateral actions (the Johnson Doctrine) were in fact ways to revamp a "France-first" policy, but in a cooperative framework, championing multilateralism and integration "from the Atlantic to the Urals."³⁰ Jimmy Carter's post-Vietnam desire for reconciliation with Europe was marred by his own doctrine on the Gulf area, coupled with a "preaching" human rights campaign (without consultation with the allies), which prompted German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to lambast the White House's "policy from the pulpit."³¹ Notoriously, the Reagan Doctrine's unilateral support for "freedom fighters" against the Soviet "evil" empire seemed to Europeans both "evangelical" and cynical. And from Downing Street, Tony Blair tried his best to do the British act of influencing Washington by working with it, from the war in Kosovo to the conflict in Iraq, also invoking the ever-elusive common defense and foreign policies of the EU.

For America's neo-conservative authors (and policy-makers), simply, Europe has resorted to multilateralism as a substitute for the power it doesn't have.³² The alleged gulf between a Kantian Europe and a Hobbesian America had seemingly a lot to do with capabilities as much as with Europe's anachronistic (and somewhat hedonistic) liberal internationalism that unwittingly ignored the dangers from rogue states or groups. Despite Europe's pragmatic approach to the liberal order – often bending it, especially on economic issues, to realist considerations – the popular impression in America, so well utilized by conservatives ("neo" or traditional), was that Europe had "played" the U.S., "flourishing [...] under the umbrella of American power exercised according to the rules of the Hobbesian order."³³ European leaders, from their standpoint, took on an attitude of cultural and diplomatic superiority (never a hard effort for them) toward the simple-minded, jingoistic, bigoted America exemplified by the George W. Bush administration, in both its domestic and foreign policies.

Trump took to an extreme the Hobbesian view of the world, one in which each nation pursues its own self-interest, with wide disregard of international cooperation (certainly a multilateral one). Aside from the substantial risks of a zero-sum approach to foes and allies alike, the ways in which it was broadcast had its tangible effects, too. Style can become substance, as the abrasive tones of the Bush administration – with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld turning up the heat – had already shown. Trump's rabid-tweet style tended even more to magnify the normal disagreements among allies. To reduce those communications to matters of mere style presumes that the issues of contention were personal, with only superficial effects on the structural issues. But consider just one of the major structural

²⁸ Dulles to Eisenhower, May 5, 1956, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57*, vol. IV, 41; I explored in depth the attempt to apply NATO's Art. 2 in Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States and the Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944-1958* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 132-134 and 197-201.

²⁹ For an analysis see Alessandro Brogi, "'Competing Missions': France, Italy, and the Rise of American Hegemony in the Mediterranean," *Diplomatic History* 30:4 (September 2006), 741-770.

³⁰ For a different viewpoint, see Thomas G. Weiss, "Democrats and Trump: Multilateralism Should Not Be Ignored," *The Global*, February 4, 2020, <https://theglobal.blog/2020/02/04/democrats-and-trump-multilateralism-should-not-be-ignored/>

³¹ Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 20.

³² Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, June-July 2002, "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2004; Robert Kagan, William Kristol, "Burden of Power is Having to Wield It," *Washington Post*, March 19, 2000; Charles Krauthammer, "A World Imagined," *The New Republic*, March 15, 1999; Norman Podhoretz, "Strange Bedfellows: A Guide to the New Foreign-Policy Debates," *Commentary*, December 1999. On Neoconservatives see also Justin Vaïsse, "Why Neoconservatism Still Matters," Policy Paper n. 20, May 2010, *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_neoconservatism_vaisse.pdf

³³ Robert Kagan, *Of Power and Paradise: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 73.

changes: the U.S.-European mutual dependence dictated by the Cold War. Open disdain toward allies has become a heavy liability precisely because the reciprocal structural need that made transatlantic relations so impervious to slights and insults is no more. Moreover, for most of NATO's history, even at the peak of the various transatlantic rifts, leaders in Washington always catered to their allies' self-respect, ostensibly raising rather than dismissing their status in international forums: concerns about rank figured prominently – and still do – for formerly leading world powers. The U.S. also remained aware of the notion that short-lived alliances of convenience, which often backfired, could never replace the enduring bond with democratic nations. Trump's truculent tones against those closest to the U.S. further delegitimized America's leading role in the global community.³⁴

The Hegemon as "Flawed Democracy"

There are other reasons why U.S.-NATO relations have remained tense – more deeply than in earlier times. In the past the arguments grew heated in diplomatic or congressional circles. In the Trump era, they have become a populist outcry that invokes not just the controversies over burden-sharing or multilateralism (and even those controversies were handled with minimal knowledge and populist tones by the president himself³⁵), but a whole set of issues revolving around popular resentment in the U.S. against all the setbacks brought about economic and cultural globalization.

To this tension one must add the uncomfortable reality for Europe: in an increasingly multipolar world, in which the "rise of the rest" eclipses the rather stagnant "west," Europe, too, faces the consequences of declining global competitiveness. Europe's popular and political attitudes have varied, but with nationalism stronger in several instances than it had ever been during the Cold War.

Nationalism in Europe had been largely discredited by two disastrous nationalist-fueled world wars. The Cold War, with its universal, non-nationalist ideologies, was hardly fertile ground for nationalist reassertions – hence, even the most "Gaullist" expressions of grandeur had to be channeled through multilateral instruments, or a Cold War framework. As Odd Arne Westad has recently noted, "Cold War internationalists claimed that the national category would matter less and less. The post-Cold War era has proven them wrong. Nationalists have thrived on the wreckage of ideology-infused grand schemes for the betterment of humankind." Trump was not exactly the trend-setter of a nation-first approach. Europe had, in many respects, preceded him in "stressing identity and national interest as main features of international affairs."³⁶ But he certainly has been recognized as the catalyst for a transatlantic mutually nourishing right-wing populist animus. It is difficult to establish who emulated whom in this dialogue. Former Chief Strategist of the Trump administration Steve Bannon has indeed traced his main inspiration all the way to French right-wing thinker and leader of the *Action française* Charles Maurras.³⁷ But the point remains: America's allies in Europe expect the United States to be the norm-setter, not a rogue nation of sorts. The other anomaly is the polarizing effect that a right-wing militancy has generated in the United States – the nation that for decades had been admired for the relative balance and moderation of its two-party system.

The "lure of authoritarianism," as Anne Applebaum has aptly called it, has affected the Western world broadly. And it originates from both the anti-elitist populist bottom and the ideologues – journalists, writers, political and corporate representatives – who orchestrate

³⁴ Brands, "The Last Chance;" Nicholas Burns, "Trump Violates Diplomacy's Golden Rule: At the NATO Summit, the President Publicly Heaped Abuse on America's Closest Friends," *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2019.

³⁵ On this point, see Sloan, "Donald Trump and NATO," 224.

³⁶ Odd Arne Westad, "Has a New Cold War Really Begun? Why the Term Shouldn't Apply to Today's Great-Power Tensions," *Foreign Affairs*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-27/has-new-cold-war-really-begun>; cf. also Charles A. Kupchan, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the New Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

³⁷ Guy Sorman, "La source française du Trumpisme," *France-Amérique*, February 16, 2017, <https://france-amerique.com/fr/the-french-source-of-trumpism/>

them.³⁸ In part, it concerns what on both sides of the Atlantic has been frequently called “The Politics of Cultural Despair,” using the title of Fritz Stern’s seminal book, in a perhaps too facile analogy with pre-Nazi Germany.³⁹

By 2018, eight of the EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) were ruled by far right, xenophobic parties, or coalitions including them. While most of those coalitions unraveled, with moderate reshuffles, the influence of right-wing populism in all of those countries remains strong. In France, the National Front lost the presidential run-off election in 2017, but only after reaching a high of 34% of the vote; and in Germany *Alternative für Deutschland* gained a presence in the Bundestag with 13% of the vote.⁴⁰ And of course, there was also Brexit, in part driven by what Irish columnist Fintan O’Toole called “the fatal attraction of heroic failure,” equating British nationalism to “hysterical self-pity.”⁴¹ And long before Trump, Italy’s prime minister Silvio Berlusconi had reintroduced certain plebiscitary aspects in democracy that faintly – or for some not so faintly – invoked old fascist archetypes. Indeed, since the time of Trump’s election, several commentators have thrown in more or less apt analogies between the two tycoons-made-politicians.⁴²

One notable difference in Europe where extreme right-wing unrest occurred is the speed with which remedies have been devised. The example of Germany, after the assault on the Reichstag in August 2020 to protest anti-COVID restrictions, is now brought up in comparison to the Capitol insurrection, as are the anti-terrorist responses in Norway and New Zealand, on how to tackle the global challenge, with a “wide-ranging reform agenda that treats far-right extremism as not simply a security threat but a societal problem.”⁴³ The pandemic emergency also helped redirect populist conservatism in Europe. A maverick like Boris Johnson revamped his credentials with a moderate approach to government response, pledging the UK to “build better, build greener, build faster.”⁴⁴ Italy’s Northern League, while remaining highly sovereignist on immigration issues, has now accepted some EU guidance, placing trust in – and joining the broad coalition of – the new prime minister, and former president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi.

By 2020, in the index of democracies the United States ranked as “flawed” – next to, in Western Europe, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and (for the first time this year), France, among others. To a large extent, the shortcomings of the Western European democracies are attributed to

³⁸ Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

³⁹ Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study of the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961). See for ex. Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right* (London: Verso, 2019); Emily Turner-Graham, “The Politics of Cultural Despair: Britain’s Extreme Right,” in Alan Waring (ed.), *The New Authoritarianism: Vol. 2: A Risk Analysis of the European Alt-Right Phenomenon* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2019).

⁴⁰ On this see also Traverso, *The New Faces*, 3-8; Andrea Mammone, “Right-Wing Nationalists are on the Rise in Europe — and There’s No Progressive Coalition to Stop Them,” *Washington Post*, April 7, 2019. In Bulgaria, the role of ‘United Patriots’ in Boyko Borisov’s government was far more marginal than that of other far right parties in coalitions elsewhere.

⁴¹ Fintan O’Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (London: Apollo, 2019). In some respects, O’Toole echoes the similar arguments once made by Robert Gildea on France: “The collective memory of defeat,” in that case, “ha[d] itself served as a crucible of national solidarity and national revival,” in Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 133-134.

⁴² See for ex. Roger Cohen, “The Trump-Berlusconi Syndrome,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2016; Celestine Bohlen, “For Italians, Donald Trump’s Act Is Familiar,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2016; Beppe Severgnini, “What a Trump America Can Learn from a Berlusconi Italy,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2016; Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “If Berlusconi is like Trump, what can America learn from Italy?” *The Guardian*, November 21, 2016; Rachel Donadio, “Berlusconi Was Trump before Trump,” *The Atlantic*, April 13, 2019. For a critique highlighting differences between the two leaders, see “Is Trump a Berlusconi? Let a Berlusconi Expert Explain” (Interview with Paul Ginsborg), *Washington Post*, November 16, 2016. For broader analogies with other right-wing European leaders, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Co-opt & Corrupt: How Trump Bent and Broke the GOP,” *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 2020.

⁴³ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Daniel Koehler, “A Plan to Beat Back the Far Right Violent Extremism in America Demands a Social Response,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-03/plan-beat-back-far-right>; for a more pessimistic view of the spread of the right in Europe see Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 137-158.

⁴⁴ “In full: Boris Johnson’s ‘Build Back Better’ Speech,” July 1, 2020, *Sky News*, <https://skynews.detops.net/qqqbrb-ksqh7q6c/in-full>

severe lockdowns related to the pandemic. There are instead a variety of causes for the United States' modest performance: first of all, the democratic erosion that has been constant in the U.S. since 2017; second, while political engagement has been high, particularly in 2020, it has also reflected a societal polarization, and deep dysfunction in the government; civil liberties have also not scored optimally.⁴⁵ And then, of course, there were the events of January 6, 2021.

Some of the adverse effects of globalization are matters of perception rather than reality. Public opinion everywhere has remained relatively unlearned on issues of foreign policy or trade policies. But the consequences of poor understanding of the complexities of global interdependence, of strategic priorities, and of cultural differences are heavier when the superpower, which is more entangled with the rest of the world than any other power, acts with obtuse, gut level, zero-sum nationalism as the Trump administration did. Even by a narrow definition of national self-interest, such foreign policy was remarkably almost devoid of lasting achievements. And of course, this further aggravated Europe's disenchantment with the lack of even a resemblance to a U.S. grand strategy – a deficiency with obvious repercussions on Europe's security and welfare.⁴⁶

Europe's lower expectations are now also nurtured by analyses that dig deeper into the social and demographic currents that propelled Trump to power. In this view, the mob produced Trump as much as Trump led the mob.⁴⁷ Clearly, the populist phenomenon did not suddenly surface with him. It is rooted further into the end of Cold War centrist consensus, the Moral Majority's appropriation of the discourse on the "American family" (particularly working class white families), and the campaign style of Newt Gingrich and his 1994 "Contract with America" pledge.⁴⁸

And why not go further (it has been popular among pundits and scholars) and find reasons for pessimism, as most left-wing European intellectuals did by mid-century, in the poignant critique of American right-wing populism by Richard Hofstadter?⁴⁹ One may argue – as eloquently as Leo Ribuffo did – that invocations of Hofstadter's seminal essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" "inhibit efforts to figure out Trump's way of thinking [...] and to understand the grievances of his supporters;" nor do those parallels help understand that "the latest 'extremists' on the right are not hermetically sealed off from temporarily less volatile conservatives—including most

⁴⁵ From Democracy Index 2020, *The Economist – Intelligence Unit* <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>

⁴⁶ The seeming grand strategy of an alleged Trump "doctrine" – one that considers the world as a "an arena without rules," has been amply criticized in Mario Del Pero, "Oui, le président des États-Unis a une doctrine précise en politique étrangère," *Le Figaro*, June 25, 2019; Ville Sinkkonen, "Contextualizing the 'Trump Doctrine': Realism, Transactionalism and the Civilizational Agenda," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/contextualizing-the-trump-doctrine>; Klaus Brinkbäumer, "Time for Europe to Join the Resistance," *Spiegel International*, May 11, 2018; Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ Fintan O'Toole, "The Trump Inheritance," *New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2021; Chiara Migliori, "He's one of us': pandemia, proteste e il significato della figura di Donald Trump per i suoi elettori," *Acoma*, n. 19, autunno-inverno 2020; Mario Del Pero, "USA 2016, sfida tra due Americhe: con Donald i bianchi antisistema, per Hillary le élite e le minoranze," *Il Messaggero*, November 5, 2016; cf. Jeff Manza and Ned Crowley, "Ethnonationalism and the Rise of Donald Trump", *Contexts*, XVII (2018), n.1, 28-33.

⁴⁸ McKay Coppins, "The Man Who Broke Politics: Newt Gingrich turned partisan battles into bloodsport, wrecked Congress, and paved the way for Trump's rise. Now he's reveling in his achievements," *The Atlantic*, October 17, 2018; Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020); cf. Arlie R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York: Random House, 2011); George Packer, "The Uses of Division," *The New Yorker*, August 11 & 18, 2014.

⁴⁹ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, 77-86. The number of critiques along similar lines by Europe's intellectuals are too numerous to sample here, but suffice to mention Jean-Paul Sartre, "Individualism," in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Verso, 1955).

congressional Republicans.”⁵⁰ This last observation was not even prophetic, as Elizabeth Tandy Shermer has observed on this forum,⁵¹ for this sort of what I would call “rise to respectability” of the extremists or their “con man-in-chief” does have the historic roots in the militant tactics that seized the “Silent Majority” in order to turn it into a “Moral” one. And to be sure, Hofstadter’s catchphrase has often been applied at the cost of reductionism, even of the original argument in which it was used.

But whatever the targets of the conspiracists of the moment are (and Hofstadter showed how often American politics had been the “arena for angry minds”⁵²), it remains undeniable that Trump tapped their fears, or even self-servingly forged the next line of conspiracy. A good dose of “anti-intellectualism,” to use the title of the other famed text by Hofstadter, also helped.⁵³ And, with or without knowledge of American history, this is how overseas leaders or commentators see the “QAnon” irrational rants.⁵⁴ There was something “decidedly rotten in America,” Jean-Paul Sartre wrote after the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. This was evidence that the United States was the “cradle of a new fascism.” For that reason, Europe had to “scream: Watch out, America has rabies! We must cut all ties with it or else we shall be bitten and infected next.”⁵⁵ The chorus in Europe against this “political pandemic” borne in the U.S. is now larger and less ideologically identifiable than in the years of the Red Scare.⁵⁶

Furthermore the “infection” is this time more carefully orchestrated than in the 1950s, for its allies in the media (social media, too), the bureaucracy, the seats of local and national power are more pervasive and popularly followed. It is plausible to argue, as Frank Ninkovich has done, that Trump’s “spinmeisters [...] with their jaw-dropping ability to adroitly defend and criticize anything have unwittingly embraced a de facto postmodernism whose core argument is that there is no objective truth, an outlook that until recently was associated with the extreme left.”⁵⁷ Aside from the irony clearly suggested here, this postmodernism can be qualified as being, besides “de facto,” a rough-hewn one at best.

Indeed, one cannot help agreeing that the country, as Jonathan Kirshner has noted, has entered “an age of unreason, with large swaths of its population embracing wild conspiracy theories.” Comparing America to 1930s France, Kirshner continues that a country “consumed by domestic social conflict is not one that will likely be capable of practicing a productive, predictable, or trustworthy foreign policy.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Leo Ribuffo, “Donald Trump and the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American (Intellectual) Politics,” in Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, 357 and passim. See also Kathryn Olmstead, “A Conspiracy So Dense: The dubious half-life of Richard Hofstadter’s ‘paranoid style’,” *The Baffler* 42 (November-December, 2018), 36-45; For an argument strongly dissecting Trump’s approach to politics following the “paranoid style” see esp. Roderick P. Hart, “Donald Trump and the Return of the Paranoid Style,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50:2 (June 2020).

⁵¹ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Leo Ribuffo and the ‘Paranoid Style’ in American (Intellectual) Politics,” Policy-Series 2021-2, January 14, 2021, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/PS2021-2.pdf>

⁵² Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 77.

⁵³ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

⁵⁴ See for ex. Sandro Modeo, “Non solo QAnon: alle radici del delirio complottista dietro l’assalto a Washington,” *Corriere della Sera*, January 8, 2021; Mario Del Pero, “QAnon e la politica della cospirazione,” *Atlante*, July 23, 2020, https://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlante/geopolitica/Qanon_politica_cospirazione.html; Thibaut Faussabry, “Qu’est-ce que ‘QAnon’, le phénomène complotiste visible dans les meetings de Trump?,” *Le Monde*, February 24, 2018; Patrick Beuth, Marie Groß, Roman Höfner, Max Hoppenstedt, Judith Horchert, Katrin Kuntz, Alexandra Rojkov, Alexander Sarovic, Christoph Scheuermann and Daniel C. Schmidt, “QAnon’s Inexorable Spread Beyond the U.S.,” *Spiegel International*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-most-dangerous-cult-of-our-times-qanon-s-inexorable-spread-beyond-the-u-s-a-c2b13c80-246a-43e5-945b-80ad7767a170>

⁵⁵ Sartre in Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Vol. 2, *Selected Prose*, Trans. Richard McCleary (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 207-11.

⁵⁶ It is pointless to cite the long list of commentaries, but suffice to highlight Patrick Beuth et al., “QAnon’s Inexorable Spread Beyond the U.S.”

⁵⁷ Frank Ninkovich, “Trumpism, History, and the Future of US Foreign Relations,” in Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order*, 401.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Kirshner, “Gone but Not Forgotten: Trump’s Long Shadow and the End of American Credibility,” *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2021), 23.

Moral decline has been compounded with incompetence. At the peak of the pandemic mismanagement by the Trump administration, it was common to say in Europe “The world has loved, hated and envied the US. Now, for the first time, we pity it.”⁵⁹ It may not be the first time that the world replaced prevailing envy with incredulous pity toward the United States. But even in the worst moments of America’s fall from hubris (in Vietnam) or institutional disarray (during Watergate or the 2000 elections), global perceptions never focused so much on the ineptitude at the White House, combined with widespread ignorance (or dishonesty) of conspiracy theorists, or their fervent followers.

What Julia Sweig used to call “friendly fire” – the damage caused by America’s errors, by commission or omission – resulting in “losing friends,” and inciting their anti-Americanism,⁶⁰ may have turned more pervasive and universal. Europe’s critique of America may now, with more ease than in the past, conflate what America is – or is alleged to be – with what America does (the specific actions of the U.S. government).⁶¹ A large majority of Europeans feel dread in knowing that 74 million people voted for Trump, and little solace in knowing that Biden earned 81 million votes. And with the prospect of the “lure” of authoritarianism, or even just right-wing populism metastasized from its most powerful center (America) through Europe’s own manifestations of the same, the fear is widespread and almost prejudicial. Anti-Americanism could indeed evolve fully to be about *what America is*, not about its transient leaders and policies, but its essence, its way of life, the set of values that Seymour Martin Lipset called “American Creed.”⁶² That resentment, or disillusion targets even America’s renewed xenophobia, which in many ways refutes that “creed,” and for sure pushes away the world’s young and brightest, whose enrollment at U.S. universities has rapidly declined – a trend that started much before the pandemic.⁶³ And of course European observers can relish in both clever tropes and lazy stereotypes of the basest Americans to confirm that the “minor differences” with Europe are actually a civilizational rift of gaping proportions.

“Two Americas”

One of the greatest saving graces for America has been its exceptional countenance of self-criticism and dissent. At the peak of the political divide caused by the Vietnam War, Senator J. William Fulbright embodied that critical stance. In his famed *Arrogance of Power*, he reminded the public, at home and abroad, that there were “two Americas” the “self-righteous” and the “self-critical” one; “one is inquiring, the other pontificating,” and “one is judicious and the other arrogant in the use of great power.” “Both are characterized by a kind of moralism – he concluded – but one is the morality of decent instincts tempered by the knowledge of human imperfection and the other is the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit.”⁶⁴ Regardless of his record of opposition to civil rights, the Arkansas senator remained a model – one of the very few U.S. senators to become a global household name – of America’s self-inquiry and self-correcting mechanisms.

The contradictions, or dialectics of America’s politics have indeed been long celebrated in Europe. The European left in particular praised the country for its open vigorous dualism between conservatism and progressivism, for America, as an Italian writer put it in 1946, was “an immense theater where our common drama was played out with greater frankness than elsewhere.”⁶⁵ In the immediate postwar years,

⁵⁹ Fintan O’Toole, “Donald Trump has destroyed the country he promised to make great again,” *The Irish Times*, April 25, 2020.

⁶⁰ Julia Sweig, *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

⁶¹ On this distinction see esp. Robert O. Keohane and Peter Katzenstein, “Introduction: The politics of Anti-Americanisms,” In Peter J. Katzenstein, and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

⁶² Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), passim.

⁶³ I am drawing some of these observations from similar arguments in David Ellwood, “Anti-Americanism: Why Do Europeans Resent Us?,” April 2003, *History News Network*, <http://hnn.us/articles/1426.html>. On enrollment declines: Elizabeth Redden, “International Student Numbers Decline,” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/11/16/survey-new-international-enrollments-drop-43-percent-fall>.

⁶⁴ J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), 245–46.

⁶⁵ Cesare Pavese, *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (Turin: Einaudi), 194; cf. Italo Calvino, “Hemingway e noi,” *Il Contemporaneo*, November 13, 1954.

French visitors, including Sartre, corrected the Tocquevillian view of American democracy as stifled and conformist, acknowledging the new country of “untamed cosmopolitanism,” of “infinite possibilities,” with a “pride [that was] sometimes tragic and menacing, and sometimes attractive.”⁶⁶ Even a critic like British intellectual Harold Laski would highlight the self-adjusting, somewhat bridled, but still genuine mechanisms of the American two-party system.⁶⁷ All this presumed a certain atonement for Europe’s previous decades of tragic authoritarianism or, at best, jaded approaches to democracy and pluralism.

Europe’s notions of a “frank” dialectic between the “two Americas,” one entrenched the other emancipating, endured. Echoing Fulbright, Italian historian Alessandro Portelli thus reminisced about his years as a radical student in the 1960s: “America was [...] both the disease and the antidote: racism and civil rights, napalm and pacifism, the Hays codes and Marilyn Monroe, and so on. There was no need to go beyond America to find alternatives to America.”⁶⁸ Even better, what mattered then, and matters now, too, was that the “alternatives” came from even powerful places in America, from the political and media establishment; that having figures like Fulbright, General James Gavin, CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, Senator Robert Kennedy all express their dismay at an “arrogant” America proved that dissent could be integral part of foreign policy making and testimony to a higher patriotism. For those working within the establishment, the point was not so much about finding an “alternative” America, but the genuine one, true to its original values and standards. In sum, the critics, in Europe above all, were not prejudicially anti-American. Their categorization as anti-Americans, as Max Paul Friedman has best noted, was rather a foil used by Washington to deflect, downplay, and even demonize that criticism. In fact, highly critical leaders like Charles de Gaulle displayed a greater appreciation for the values that defined America, asking, sometimes demanding that the U.S. remain consistent with those values.⁶⁹

America’s recognition of its own limits and contradictions still constitutes one of its main soft power aspects. As Peter Beinart once noted, “the irony of American exceptionalism is that by acknowledging our common fallibility, we inspire the world.”⁷⁰ So now there are abundant calls for a return to “morality” in foreign policy,⁷¹ to a liberal internationalism that celebrates how “[Woodrow] Wilson [still] matters,”⁷² to reflections on “America’s exceptionalism” not based on its “military strength” but on “its cultural and ethnic diversity.”⁷³ The global impact of Black Lives Matter, its echoes in Europe, seem to confirm Portelli’s quip on Europe’s searching for its own answers in the frankness of America’s political debate. But the echoes come also from a reactionary America, now more vocal, and even violent than ever.

With the polarization of American politics as it stands, America’s contradictions have appeared more “freakish” than frank. Political conflict is intrinsic in a democratic society, making its pluralism most apparent. But political discord at this level can be paralyzing. Also, dissent has in so many instances upended its meaning to favor not self-inquiry but the worst impulses of human nature. America’s recognition of its own fallibility was founded on the ability to self-correct as well, and the reassurance that certain norms would be followed, regardless of the party in power. The United States seems no longer to be a nation that, with a Catholic “*mea culpa*,” can also

⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” *Atlantic Monthly*, 178 (August 1946); Jean-Paul Sartre, “Individualism and Conformism in the United States” (1945), in Sartre, *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, 110-11; Claude Roy, “Le ciel est ma frontière,” *Les Lettres françaises*, November 1, 1946; Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day* (1954), trans. Carol Cosman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁶⁷ Harold Laski, *American Democracy* (New York: Viking, 1948).

⁶⁸ Alessandro Portelli, “The Transatlantic Jeremiad: American Mass Culture, and Counterculture and Opposition Culture in Italy,” in Rob Kroes, Robert W. Rydell, and D. F. J. Bosscher, eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe* (Amsterdam: UV Press, 1993), 131.

⁶⁹ Max Paul Friedman, *Rethinking Anti-Americanism: The History of an Exceptional Concept in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 157-189.

⁷⁰ Peter Beinart, “The Rehabilitation of the Cold War Liberal,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2006.

⁷¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Do Morals Matter?: Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷² Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁷³ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 219.

have a Catholic absolutism. And the assumption that the norm-breaking Trump experience has been an aberration does not convince any American ally, let alone the United States' closest and most-guarded friends in Europe. None of them can rest assured that the continuity of America's commitment to a liberal global order won't be shattered again by a Trump or Trumpist return in 2025. As the European Council on Foreign Relations has summarized, "majorities in key member states now think the US political system is broken, and that Europe cannot just rely on the US to defend it."⁷⁴

It May Be Not All That Bad

The Trump administration's chaos will have enduring effects – this opinion is almost unanimous on both sides of the Atlantic.⁷⁵ There are other contingent and general reasons for such pessimism, besides all of Europe's realizations noted above, and the specter of a 2024 electoral turnaround.

Repairing America's global presence won't be easy – it is widely recognized – in part because of domestic priorities, which compel moderation on the foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, the Biden administration's accomplishments will have to be quite exceptional to be able to drive a highly polarized polity toward at least some consensus. A tall order.

U.S. demographics also do not bode well for an enduring "special" connection with Western Europe. For decades now the large population growth of the U.S. has shifted in two ways: to the west and south, and toward a less European ethnic composition. Both are reflected in a diminished interest in and focus on European affairs, which has been traditionally stronger from the eastern and midwestern states. Obama's Pivot to Asia was mainly due to international developments – but the changing demographics at home helped, too.

Conservative commentators, even those, like Walter Russell Mead, who are favorable to strong transatlantic ties, note the commercial and geopolitical reasons that forced some backpedaling on Biden's multilateralism.⁷⁶ European governments are simply not renouncing their pragmatic needs, continuing to engage China, Russia, and other "rogue" nations economically, regardless of Washington's call for unity against those nations' human rights or trade violations. Indeed, the seemingly idealist rule-based international order grounded in multilateral institutions is for Europeans quite a realist endeavor, sometimes at odds with U.S. interests (nothing particularly new there, either); hence the persistent tensions, which include Macron's and Merkel's pushback against the influence of America's "woke" culture, though not as grave as that against Trump's jingoism.

Idealist or realist, that rule-based liberal order has been the lynchpin of transatlantic relations for seventy-five years. It is rather common, however, to see it as never fully recovered from its first deep crisis during the Vietnam War years. Like its domestic equivalent, New Deal liberalism, it is often mourned, perhaps a victim of reaction, or of its own contradictions, or its excesses – carried out as it was in distorted, aggressive, and burdensome ways, especially after the attacks of 9/11. Ironically, it has appeared to be a casualty of its own success, too: its expansion to include states with a broader array of ideologies and agendas, thus setting new bargains, has undermined the authority of its original champions.⁷⁷ With all these reconsiderations, liberal internationalism may even be cast as the true exception to a rather

⁷⁴ Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "The crisis of American power: How Europeans see Biden's America," January 19, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/>

⁷⁵ For the European perspective see esp. Valerie Höhne, Ralf Neukirch, René Pfister, Alexandra Rojkov, and Alexander Sarovic, "The Mess Created By Trump Will Be with Us for Years," *Spiegel International*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-mess-created-by-trump-will-be-with-us-for-years-a-e6a059c1-3422-4c19-b3c3-4e4b726f7820>; "La défaite de Trump signe-t-elle un recul du populisme ?" *France Culture*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/le-temps-du-debat/la-defaite-de-trump-signe-t-elle-un-recul-du-populisme>; Ana Alonso, "¿Sobrevivirá el trumpismo global sin Donald Trump en el poder?" *El Independiente*, January 23, 2021; Massimo Teodori, "Stati Uniti, ancora faro di democrazia?" *Ispionline*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/stati-uniti-ancora-faro-di-democrazia-28965>; the essays in Quessard et al., *Alliances and Power Politics*; see also Kirshner, "Gone but not Forgotten."

⁷⁶ Walter Russell Mead, "Biden's Rough Start with the World," *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2021.

⁷⁷ On this last point see Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*, 257-259.

transactional approach to foreign policy, a product of Cold War imperatives, and, as has been noted “an artifact of the Cold War’s immediate afterglow.”⁷⁸

One cannot dismiss these general assumptions about an enduring crisis of liberal internationalism, about America’s institutional incapacity, and consequently, its troubled legitimacy. But is it as bad as it looks? Here I am suggesting a few points of departure from the rather somber assessments of the potential of the U.S. to restore collaboration with its main allies – including that sense of “we-ness” that transcended many tensions in the past.

First of all, in terms of global leadership, the United States should perhaps drop the claim altogether (as some have suggested),⁷⁹ and resort to partnership instead, accepting much of the multilateralist frameworks upheld by its transatlantic allies. The so called “unipolar” moment has been known more for its setbacks than its benefits. Europeans, as other parts of the world, have been able to act in concert *without* the United States. But its partnership and solidarity with the world, or lack thereof, are still the most consequential among all powers, and the standards expected of the U.S. are still the highest.

America’s institutional capacity can also be mended. Despite the political discord that is reigning in the U.S., the pursuit of bipartisanship can work both ways. It can moderate Republicans out of fear of appearing too parochial and hawkish, much as it can moderate Democrats out of fear of appearing too globalist and dovish. Outside the issue of climate change (which surely has created partisan divide), foreign policy agendas, including the restoration of alliances, show more common ground between the two parties than domestic issues.

American demographics, with an increasingly multiethnic composition, while ostensibly set against certain Eurocentric orientations of U.S. foreign policy, can move the United States closer in terms of values to the liberal internationalist and welfare ideas of Europe. In sum, diversity within the U.S., and the concomitant issues of refugees and economic inclusion, can make American cosmopolitanism less the exclusive prerogative of Eastern elites.

This globally inclusive orientation is not contradicted but buttressed by the return of Europe-versed, elite-bred personalities who are at the helm of U.S. foreign policy. Schooled in his youth in Paris, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken – a clear contrast to the Kansas conservative evangelist Mike Pompeo, or Tillerson and Flynn – is not only fluent in French but also fluid in the mild manners that are closer to the norm in European diplomatic circles. In part this moral compass comes from his family upbringing, too. The son of a diplomat, he also had a Polish-born stepfather who survived Auschwitz. He also had his upbringing in France during a time (the post-Vietnam years) in which America’s moral reputation was low, and France had led much of the critique against U.S. choices.⁸⁰ National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, a Yale graduate and Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, also has an extended European pedigree; yet, when working in 2016 as senior campaign adviser for Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, he dealt mostly with issues ranging from health to gun control and immigration. In his outlook, “national security lies primarily in a thriving American middle class, whose prosperity is endangered by the very transnational threats the Trump administration has sought to downplay or ignore.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Michael Beckley, “Rogue Superpower: Why This Could Be an Illiberal American Century,” *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2020.

⁷⁹ See esp. Peter Beinart, “Biden Wants America to Lead the World. It Shouldn’t,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2020; Aaron David Miller, Richard Sokoloski, “Opinion: With Biden, America Is Back — But Not At The Head Of The Table,” NPR, December 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/02/940807637/opinion-with-biden-america-is-back-but-not-at-the-head-of-the-table>; Editorial staff, “After the chaos of the Trump era, what can Joe Biden hope to achieve?” *The Economist*, January 23, 2021. Robert Kagan insists that a world that is not US-led suffers from “unwarranted optimism”: Robert Kagan, “A Superpower, Like It or Not,” *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2021), 38.

⁸⁰ “Antony Blinken, Courtly New Top US Diplomat, Preaches Humility and Intervention,” *France 24*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210126-antony-blinken-courtly-new-top-us-diplomat-preaches-humility-and-intervention>

⁸¹ Natasha Bertrand, “The inexorable rise of Jake Sullivan,” *Politico*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/27/jake-sullivan-biden-national-security-440814>

These improvements in connectivity and style can play favorably at the bargaining table to advance U.S. interests. Engaging NATO allies, and doing so with persuasion, perhaps through multilateral action rather than hand-picked bilateral deals, certainly does not mean renouncing the persistent demand for burden-sharing.⁸²

Anti-elitist views can also change more rapidly than expected, given the pandemic tragedy that is making knowledge and expertise a cooperative endeavor. While it is true that skepticism about executive power, technocratic expertise, and social democracy has grown, feeding populist, mostly right-wing trends, we are also witnessing the resilience of that very technocracy and inclusive social “engineering” that the populists assailed – in part thanks also to the need for scientific certainties in the pandemic era. In a way, COVID-19 has had some psychological and social effects comparable to those caused by the Great Depression. While politics remain highly polarized, faith in social progress is peeking out of the pandemic ashes on both sides of the Atlantic.

This also means that Washington’s focus on domestic priorities can bode well. Competence at home is indeed the premise for global responsibility, especially for the nation that is held so accountable for its exemplary role, and for the impact its own domestic equilibrium has abroad. According to Samantha Power, the Biden administration’s first call of order is to restore the credibility of the U.S. as the “Can Do Nation,” offering efficient global leadership, for example spearheading global vaccine distribution, improving academic excellence by easing visa hurdles for study in the United States, and tackling global corruption through effective sanctions and promoting corporate transparency. Indeed, this is not the first time that allies excoriated the U.S. for its ineffectiveness as much as its morality. Power herself soberly notes that it took Obama six years to restore the country’s credibility, repairing “the damage to alliances caused by the invasion of Iraq.”⁸³ The same could be said about the NATO rift over the war in Vietnam. The path to moral and pragmatic recovery in that case, it may be said, was even more arduous than after Iraq. In fact, transatlantic cooperation, while sometimes fraught, was restored relatively quickly in strategic terms, on détente, and economic terms, through the new G-7 gatherings.

The challenges ahead seem even more formidable. The technological and economic competition with China above all, if played in transactional, or in antagonistic ways, adds to the difficulties of this reset. U.S.-EU cooperation could offset this competition; it can do so by laying down the political norms of international liberalism, but only if it is trusted to do so, on an enduring and predictable basis, and thus can help on issues ranging from the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic to internet security, from trade to digital currencies.

The failure of scholars and policymakers to predict the popular appeal of the Trump anomaly still haunts us. Now the essence of what makes U.S. politics unpredictable, their volatility, seems to be the “new normal,” and a reason for Europe’s wait-and-see attitude. But the failure to predict the worst risks becoming the failure to predict the best: the resilience of American democracy. After all, much of Trump’s assault on democracy, while leaving its mark, was ultimately delusional, an inept farce.⁸⁴ It would be just as unwise on our part to now play the role of doomsayer of U.S. stability and the transatlantic dialogue.

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⁸² Some saw prospects of transatlantic reconciliation even under a second Trump mandate. It might not have been the type of “charm offensive” attempted by George W. Bush in 2005, but it was based on realist assumptions of shared interests: Bruce Stokes, “What Would a Less Europhobic Trump Look Like—if He Wins?,” *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/22/trump-europe-election/>

⁸³ Samantha Power, “The Can-Do Power: America’s Advantage and Biden’s Chance,” *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2021, 13 and 14. See also Richard Haass, “Repairing the World: The Imperative – and Limits – of a Post-Trump Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-09/repairing-world>. On the US potential role in the global fight against the pandemic see also Fareed Zakaria, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020); and Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin, eds., *COVID-19 and World Order: The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

⁸⁴ On this see especially (aside from some other dubious assertions) Barton Swain, “Trump and the Failure of the Expert Class,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 22, 2021.

