

H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series

America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Has Trump Changed How We Think about American Security?

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Published on **17 June 2021** | issforum.org

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

<https://issforum.org/to/ps2021-40>

...it is now impossible to read a great deal of writing on international relations published in the US, including new books like these, without noting the prevalence of a bland indifference toward—if not total neglect of—questions of race, social justice, and hierarchy.¹

What are the legacies of President Donald Trump's years for how we think about foreign policy and security? Many might point to the "American first" frame the former president championed, which has increased attention to national security and American advantage. Less obviously, though, the Trump presidency's acceleration of polarization, racism, and dysfunction has generated greater scholarly awareness of the way that racism, sexism, and other tools for exclusion, which are designed to advantage some and dismiss others, have shaped many conceptions in the field.² This latter trend, which I focus on below, has generated attention to the interconnections between human security, international security, and national security that promises a more realistic analysis of the U.S. role in the world and better strategies for managing its various relations.

As many have pointed out, polarization and dysfunction did not begin with the Trump years.³ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt trace the beginnings of institutional breakdown to former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, and his Republican Revolution in the 1990s.⁴ A litany of studies have argued that polarization is deeply connected with racism and goes back much further in U.S. politics.⁵ Jeet Heer documented a long tradition of Republican Party appeals to racism.⁶ And Julia Azari argued that, contrary to Ta-Nehisi Coates' assertion, Trump was not the first white president, but the third.⁷ Presidents Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and

¹ Howard French, "Can America Remain Preeminent," *New York Review of Books*, 29 April 2021, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/04/29/can-america-remain-preeminent/?lp_txn_id=1236172.

² Joshua Busby and Jonathan Monten, "Trump's Foreign Policy Legacy," *H-Diplo ISSF Policy Series American and the World – the Effects of the Trump Presidency*, 12 March 2021, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/PS2021-13.pdf>.

³ James Goldgeier and Bruce W. Jentleson, "The United States is not Entitled to Lead the World," *Foreign Affairs*, September 25, 2020.

⁴ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2019).

⁵ See Christian Sebastian Parker and Christopher C. Towler, "Race and Authoritarianism in American Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* (2019), <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-064519>; Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011 [2000]); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁶ Jeet Heer, "How the Southern Strategy Made Donald Trump Possible," *The New Republic* February 18, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/130039/southern-strategy-made-donald-trump-possible>.

⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President," *The Atlantic* (October 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/>. See summary of Azari's remarks in Deborah Avant, "Is the Liberal Order in Crisis?" *Political Violence@ a Glance*, March 13, 2018, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2018/03/13/is-the-liberal-order-in-crisis/>.

Donald Trump were each elected after a major racial disruption. They were also each impeached and served only one term (Azari's analysis of Johnson and Nixon in 2018 proved prescient of what would unfold with Trump).

Polarization and racism under Trump, though, accelerated markedly. Many Trump voters were motivated by racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant sentiments.⁸ The former president's rhetoric and actions intensified these sentiments in ways that deepened partisan divides and the potential for violence. FBI data demonstrate a spike in hate crimes after Trump's election.⁹ The Anti-Defamation League also reported a doubling in the numbers of militia groups between 2008 and 2020.¹⁰ The Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 838 hate groups in 2020.¹¹

Though hate groups and militias without connections to political parties or social entrepreneurs rarely engender broader conflict,¹² with an advocate in the White House these groups took on greater public prominence in support of controversial administration policies and solidified in a movement supportive of Trump. Some portions of the bureaucracy, particularly Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), proved particularly fertile ground for these ideas.¹³ This led analysts to worry about the security threat these groups posed. In 2018 Peter Bergen and David Sterman argued in *Foreign Affairs* that the real terrorist threat in the U.S. was domestic – including far right terrorism but also perpetrators that elude ideological categorization such as “Incels.”¹⁴ And there is evidence of increased connections between militia groups and police forces.¹⁵

Alongside polarization and racism was dysfunction. Most entertainingly discussed in Daniel Drezner's, *Toddler in Chief*, Trump's predilections generated incompetence and corruption.¹⁶ As Fred Hiatt put it, “Trump's primary motivations are spite, self-aggrandizement and greed.”¹⁷ His naked pursuit of these very narrow interests often enlisted the US bureaucracy and appeals to U.S. national interests. Though perhaps most obviously on display during his summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2018,

⁸ Brian F Schaffner, Matthew Macwilliams, and Tatishe Nteta, “Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: the Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism,” *Political Science Quarterly* 133 (2018): 1, 9-34. See also Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville. 2018. Explaining the Trump Vote: The effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-immigrant Sentiments, *Political Science*, July.

⁹ Aaron Williams, “Hate Crimes Rose the day after Trump was elected, FBI data show,” *The Washington Post*, March 23, 2018.

¹⁰ Seth Cohen, “How Right Wing Militias Pose a Challenge to America and Its Leaders,” *Forbes*, October 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sethcohen/2020/10/10/how-right-wing-militias-pose-a-challenge-to-america-and-its-leaders/?sh=6c6fd49e6fe1>.

¹¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/issues/hate-and-extremism>.

¹² Paul Staniland, “America's Militias in Comparative Perspective,” October 26, 2016, <https://paulstaniland.com/2016/10/26/americas-militias-in-comparative-perspective/>.

¹³ Franklin Foer, “How Trump Radicalized ICE,” *The Atlantic*, September 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/trump-ice/565772/>.

¹⁴ Peter Bergen and David Sterman, “The Real Terrorist Threat in America: It's No Longer Jihadist Groups,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 30, 2018.

¹⁵ Sam Levin, “White Supremacists and Militias have Infiltrated Police across U.S., Report Says,” *The Guardian*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/27/white-supremacists-militias-infiltrate-us-police-report>.

¹⁶ Daniel Drezner, *Toddler in Chief: What Donald Trump Teaches us about the Modern Presidency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹⁷ Fred Hiatt, “Yes, Trump is Incompetent. But He's Becoming Alarming Good at Corrupting the Government,” *The Washington Post*, 9 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-learning-to-bend-the-bureaucracy-to-his-will/2020/08/09/f9b48ab0-d8dd-11ea-aff6-220dd3a14741_story.html.

enriching family members and Trump property coffers were routine.¹⁸ David Halperin called him the most corrupt president in U.S. history.¹⁹

The implications of this polarization, racism, and dysfunction were dramatically illustrated in the in last year of his presidency. The administration politicized the COVID-19 pandemic, simultaneously underplaying its severity, generating little national coordination, questioning the importance of mask wearing and social distancing, racializing blame by using the term the “China virus,”²⁰ and asserting a go-it-alone strategy in its withdrawal from the World Health Organization. Then, as protests over extraordinary incidents of police brutality erupted in the spring, Trump escalated the rhetoric against the activists “by telling governors to ‘dominate’ protestors, threatening to send in the military, and using decades-old racist dog whistles—as well as by using actual violence against peaceful protestors outside the White House.”²¹ His egregious actions led his former Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, to break his silence with a blistering critique of Trump that accused him of dividing the nation and ordering the military to violate the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens.²² It is hard to overstate the loss of hope that many felt in the midst of these events, even before the January 6, 2021 Capitol insurrection.

But with the despair has also come greater attention to the deeper problems that enabled Trump and Trumpism. As Ibram X. Kendi describes it, racism is a social construct designed to advantage some at a cost to others, and it is closely related to other exclusionary justifications such as those based on class, gender, and sexuality.²³ Consistent with decades-long calls from feminists²⁴ and advocates of broader approaches to security²⁵, mainstream venues have begun to question not only the racism and dysfunction in the Trump administration, but its roots in many of the IR concepts that are central to security analysis.

Traditional analyses often assume that exclusionary behavior is normal, even beneficial.²⁶ Security scholars have long focused most of their attention on great powers, ignoring that these are also largely white powers. Their attention to maintaining balance and order among great powers has justified the subjugation of much of the world’s population.²⁷ And assumptions that states are unitary actors pursuing

¹⁸ John Harwood, “Trump Pushed His Personal Agenda, not the National Interest, at Putin Summit,” 16 July 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/16/trump-pushed-his-personal-agenda-not-the-national-interest-at-putin-hrml>; Fernanda G. Nicola and Günter Frankenberg, “Trump (and Other Autocrats) See Power as Private Property,” *The National Interest*, 21 January 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/trump-and-other-autocrats-see-power-private-property-176790>

¹⁹ David Halperin, “Ten Reasons Trump is the Most Corrupt President in U.S. History,” *Republic Report*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.republicreport.org/2020/ten-reasons-trump-is-the-most-corrupt-president-in-u-s-history/>.

²⁰ Andrea Salcedo, “Racist anti-Asian hashtags spiked after Trump first tweeted ‘China virus,’ study finds,” *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/19/trump-tweets-chinese-virus-racist/>

²¹ Jeremy Venook, “Trump’s Record on Police Brutality and Peaceful Protest: Making the Problem Worse,” 2020 <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/security/news/2020/06/15/177851/trumps-record-police-brutality-peaceful-protests-making-problem-worse/>

²² Jeffrey Goldberg, “James Mattis Denounces President Trump, Describes Him as a Threat to the Constitution,” *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/06/james-mattis-denounces-trump-protests-militarization/612640/>

²³ Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2019).

²⁴ For instance, Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); J. Ann Tickner, “You Just Don’t Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41:4. (1997) 611-632.

²⁵ See, for instance, Jessica Tuckman Matthews, “Redefining Security,” *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1989).

²⁶ See, for example, John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

²⁷ Kelebogile Zvebgo and Meredith Loken, “Why Race Matters in International Relations,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 June 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir/>

national interests has masked the deeply political struggle over just what national interests are and who is ignored (or worse) in different manifestations of them.²⁸

But all of this is increasingly in question. *Foreign Policy* magazine ran a series of articles reflecting on race in the field. Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken focused attention on how western privilege and white dominance permeate the field.²⁹ Robbie Shilliam reminded us that analyses of race and racism have been a productive part of international relations analysis in the past and could be again.³⁰ And nine leading thinkers laid out claims on why and how the IR field fell short by ignoring issues surrounding racism and colonialism.³¹ Those who had not done so already flocked to read Robert Vitalis's 2015 book documenting the racism and imperialism behind the contemporary IR field and the often forgotten black scholars who opposed it.³²

Traditional realist Stephen Walt pondered whether developments and policies inside the U.S. might be far more consequential for its global standing than "any of the clever stratagem, initiatives, ploys, schemes, or interventions they undertook abroad."³³ While also critical of Trump's foreign policy missteps, Walt held that the president's domestic damage was worse and that the next administration's attention to innovative capacity, tempering deep polarization, and rebuilding infrastructure was key to the country's future. There were many others. Susan Hennessey claimed that the greatest threat to U.S. national security was the possibility that Donald Trump would be re-elected.³⁴ Tamara Cofman Wittes worried about the permissive environment Trump had provided for those (in and outside the U.S.) who were eager to increase division and violence in the U.S. in order to fuel their agenda that could lead to violence regardless of whether he was re-elected.³⁵ Ross Douthat wrote of a progressive revolution spurred by Donald Trump's presidency.³⁶

Academic programs in international affairs intensified their self-reflection. The 'Bridging the Gap' program deepened its efforts on diversity and inclusion – hosting webinars, launching a new voices program to bring voices to national security that are typically outside the Washington DC orbit as well as a diversity fellowship.³⁷ Social media feeds buzzed with mainstream security scholars seeking advice on works that incorporate race to include in their syllabi. Scholars and policy makers alike grappled with instances where calls for national

²⁸ Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, "Security and 'Security Studies': Conceptual Evolution and Historical Transformation," *Oxford Handbook of International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2018) 14-28.

²⁹ Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, "Why Race Matters in International Relations." *Foreign Policy*, 19 June 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir/>.

³⁰ Robbie Shilliam, "When did racism become solely a domestic issue?" *Foreign Policy*, 23 June 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/23/racism-ir-international-relations-domestic/>.

³¹ Gurminder K. Bhambra, Yolande Bouka, Randolph B. Persaud, Olivia U. Rutazibwa, Vineet Thakur, Duncan Bell, Karen Smith, Toni Hastrup, Seifudein Adem, "Why is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism?" *Foreign Policy*, 3 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/03/why-is-mainstream-international-relations-ir-blind-to-racism-colonialism/>.

³² Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

³³ Stephen Walt, "All Great Power Politics is Local. Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* August 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/24/all-great-power-politics-is-local/>.

³⁴ Susan Hennessey, "Rational Security: Buckle Your Seatbelts' Edition," October 28, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/rational-security-buckle-your-seatbelts-edition>. Hennessey has since joined the Biden administration's Department of Justice in the National Security Division.

³⁵ Tamara Wittes, "Rational Security: Buckle Your Seatbelts' Edition," October 28, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/rational-security-buckle-your-seatbelts-edition>.

³⁶ Ross Douthat, "Did Trump Make Everything Progressive?" *New York Times*, May 4, 2021.

³⁷ <https://bridgingtheproject.org/programs/new-voices-in-national-security/>.

security are an exclusionary guise for pursuing narrow interests that harm, rather than protect, the common concerns of Americans.³⁸ As Michael Barnett points out, the rule of law in the United States is imprinted with racism and builds on two separate genocides – one against African Americans and the other against Native Americans.³⁹ And many, including Barnett, reflected on their lack of attention to race in their own past analyses.

In trying to explicitly connect national security to common concerns, analysts heightened attention to the human security of individuals as well as the larger international concerns such as climate change and global health that impact all of our lives. Attention to the lives of black Americans, Ambassador Bonnie Jenkins argued, is a key part of national security. What people seek “is security in a more holistic way, whether those threats originate from international or domestic factors.”⁴⁰ The organization Jenkins helped start, Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security, began to survey committed organizations about the struggles they face in fighting discrimination.⁴¹ These are key elements in the Biden administration’s “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class” and animate its Interim Strategic Guidance.⁴² And mainstream security scholars have demonstrated growing awareness of the value of feminist and critical analyses, which have long made these connections. The International Studies Association’s International Security Studies Section, for instance, recognized feminist and critic of militarism, Cynthia Enloe, as its 2020 Distinguished Scholar and issued a diversity statement for in tandem with the call for proposals for the 2022 annual meeting.

These developments have begun to shift the ground on which academic studies must start. The quotation at the beginning of this essay is from a recent review of three new books on the future of American power. Howard French’s statement reveals that in the year between the publication of these highly acclaimed books and his review of them, it became obvious that what was once seen as “normal” analysis – ignoring the racism and injustice on which international hierarchies are often based – is now worth taking note of.

It may be that Trump has precipitated what George Packer (drawing on Gershom Scholem) deemed “America’s Plastic Hour.” Trump did not create these long-standing problems, but his corrupt, bigoted and inept presidency pushed them to new depths in ways that helped generate a “crucial moment when it is possible to act.”⁴³ Sociologists have long argued that unsettled times provide opportunities for new approaches that reframe our understandings and practices⁴⁴ and many claim that the U.S. is at such a strategic inflection point.⁴⁵ Packer reminds us that plastic hours are not only rare, but they can also be wasted: “Nothing happens unless you move.”

³⁸ Nikhil Kalyanpur, “Hegemony, Inequality, and the Quest for Primacy,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 3:3 (2018) 371-384.

³⁹ Michael Barnett, “The Trump Presidency: Trump 1, IR Theory 0,” *H-Diplo/ISSF Policy Series* 2021-22: The Trump Presidency, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/ps2021-22>.

⁴⁰ Bonnie Jenkins, “Redefining our Concept of Security,” *Brookings Institution Blog*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/04/redefining-our-concept-of-security/>.

⁴¹ Organizations in Solidarity. *Standing Against Racism and Discrimination: Baseline Survey Report*, WCAPS, June 2021, https://issuu.com/wcapsnet/docs/ois_survey_results_2020_final.

⁴² James Traub, “Biden’s ‘Foreign Policy for the Middle Class’ is a Revolution,” *Foreign Policy* March 17, 2021 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/17/bidens-foreign-policy-middle-class-revolution/>; Daniel Drezner, “Let’s Grade the Biden Administration’s Interim Strategic Guidance,” *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/08/lets-grade-biden-administrations-interim-strategic-guidance/>.

⁴³ George Packer, “America’s Plastic Hour is Upon Us.” *The Atlantic*, October 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/make-america-again/615478/>; Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

⁴⁴ Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (1986): 273-286.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, the first 2021 issue of the US Army War College Journal, *Parameters* <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/>.

Indeed, there have been plastic hours before. The debate over security's meaning begun at the end of the Cold War generated new language, opened paths for new actors, and pulled some of these actors within expanded notions of global public norms.⁴⁶ It has less impact, though, on traditional studies of national security. As Alexandra Stark, Candace Rondeaux, and Heather Hurlburt put it, "We don't have the language, let alone the policy, to begin confronting the national security challenges we currently face."⁴⁷ And, as Julia Azari reminds us, "just because Trump is out of office doesn't mean some values aren't still under threat."⁴⁸ If we are to shift the exclusionary underpinnings of national security in the midst of growing inequality, distrust in institutions, politicization of voting and elections at home, and multiple global crises, it will require all hands on deck, including the international relations analysts who shape how we think about who we are and what is possible.⁴⁹ The activities of last year offer hope that the security field may, this time, be up for the task.

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⁴⁶ Deborah Avant and Virginia Haufler, "Public-private Interactions and Practices of Security," 350-364, *Oxford Handbook of International Security* edited by Alexandra Gheciu and William Wohlforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ Alexandra Stark, Candace Rondeaux, and Heather Hurlburt, "The Meaning of Security: Can a Divided Society Provide for the Common Defense," *New America*, April 2021, 11.

⁴⁸ Julia Azari, "Democratic Values are still under Attack even without Trump in the White House," *FiveThirtyEight*, 12 April 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/democratic-values-are-still-under-attack-even-without-trump-in-the-white-house/>.

⁴⁹ Henry Farrell and Jack Knight, "Dewey's Democratic Account of International Politics," 2018, Unpublished paper available at: <http://henryfarrell.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Dewey-Paper.pdf>.