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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Lifting the Veil on Racial Capitalism: American Foreign Policy Before and After Trump

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Donald J. Trump is often viewed as an aberration, or at the very least as someone whose presidency signaled a decisive shift in U.S. politics. A showman with little political experience, he was elected by a narrow margin on the back of “protest votes” by millions disillusioned by the established status quo.¹ Whilst some worry that he will set the stage for other celebrity policymakers, thereby degrading the office of the president, the greater danger is that politics will go on as per normal, but with ever greater legitimacy and space.² Politics as usual amounts to the reinforcement of a (post)colonial and capitalist structure, one which Cedric Robinson has so memorably and aptly termed “racial capitalism.”³

Against this backdrop of global racial capitalism, Trump emerges as neither an exception nor the rule. His presidency was unprecedented because of his outrageous behaviour, not because of his policies while he was in office. Trump became a white nationalist symbol by playing up these themes rather than obscuring them behind normal political niceties. For this reason, his legacy will have ramifications for years to come. Trump represents a racist status quo in American foreign policy, and unlike past presidents, he was not shy about it. So, while many found him personally repulsive, his words and deeds have made it hard to maintain the old facade that the United States stands for progress, development and ‘liberalism.’ Whether the repercussions are experienced as an intensification and bolstering of racial capitalism, with its attendant inequities and hierarchies, or as a breakdown of this established system is still open for debate, and importantly, yet to be determined.

When Barack Obama was elected as president in 2008, commentators across the political spectrum hailed the beginning of an era of post-racial America.⁴ Given the everyday racism in American society, these proclamations sounded at best naïve, and at worst wilfully misleading.⁵ With the passage of time, and as the collective shock of November 9, 2016 reverberated around the body politic, they appeared nothing short of outlandish. Post-racial in this context can only ever be apprehended as a perpetuation, i.e. the ‘post’ signifying continuity with, rather than a departure from, what came before. Much as scholars of imperialism are at pains to situate the ‘post’ in post-colonialism in a long lineage of extractive, violent, and racialized practices, the ‘post’ in post-racial only makes sense if it is there to highlight resonances and linkages, rather than dissonance and rupture. President Trump exemplified these continuities, albeit in a brasher

¹ Although Trump won 304 electoral votes, he lost the popular vote by a significant 2.9 million. “2016 Presidential Election Results,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president>

² See, for instance, Brendan O’Connor, “What Does Trump’s Rise Mean for the Past, Present and Future of Celebrity Politics?” *The Conversation*, September 25, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/what-does-trumps-rise-mean-for-the-past-present-and-future-of-celebrity-politics-65159>

³ Cedric J Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983).

⁴ For a thorough rebuttal of triumphal post-racialism, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Race to the Bottom,” *The Baffler*, June 16, 2017, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/race-to-bottom-crenshaw>.

⁵ Obama’s own frequent invocation of “American exceptionalism” can also be read as complicity in the perpetuation of a racialized myth.

and more aggressive manner than even his harshest critics had feared. If at home Trump ramped up his racist rhetoric and stoked far-right resentment, his actions abroad were entirely in keeping with those of his predecessors.

For instance, one of Trump's ostensible successes has been the Abraham Accords, which saw the "normalisation" of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Israel and Bahrain in 2020.⁶ The deal was negotiated by Jared Kushner – son-in-law and senior adviser to the President – and signed by the UAE's Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Trump himself.⁷ Buoyed by this achievement, Trump outlined his Middle East peace plan, formally known as "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People."⁸ This was Trump's foray into 'solving' the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict,' and has the remarkable hallmark of having included no Palestinian authorities in the negotiations. It also recognised Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel, and put the Haram al Sharif area including the Al-Aqsa mosque under Israeli sovereignty.⁹

May 2021 witnessed an escalation of violence in Palestine/Israel, with Palestine once again bearing the brunt of the casualties, dispossession, and dislocation. The administration in the U.S. had changed, and so had its tone to some degree, but Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was quick to reiterate the U.S. commitment to Israel and Israel's right to defend itself. In a single week, Washington blocked *three* UN statements condemning Israel's campaign of bombardment and calling for an immediate ceasefire.¹⁰ In 2014, when the Israeli Defense Force killed 2000 Palestinians, including 550 children, over a period of 50 days, Obama pledged an additional \$225 million in support of the Israeli army and maintained a stony silence on the question of dead Palestinian children.¹¹ Trump's peace plan, which is referred to colloquially as the "deal of the century," was closely presaged by President Bill Clinton's peace plan in 2000, which also proposed Israeli annexation of vast swathes of Palestine, with Palestinians foregoing their 'right of return'.¹² For Trump, as for Clinton, the diminutive Palestinian state would be entirely demilitarised, contain Israeli military installations, and would be a far cry from what international relations scholars and practitioners recognise as "sovereign."¹³ Far from being a fundamental break with the past, Trump's vision of peace in the Middle East is entirely consistent with years of U.S. foreign policy, both Democrat and Republican.

⁶ On this topic see the recent essay in this series by Dirk Moses and Victor Kattan: "The Trump Presidency, the Question of Palestine, and Biden's Business as Usual," <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/PS2021-34.pdf>

⁷ The complicity of Arab states in the "unravelling" of Palestine has a long and chequered history, which ultimately amounts to an abandonment of Pan-Arabism for an integration into the world economy and domestic stability. This is consistent with the demands and exigencies of colonialism and capitalism. For a detailed historical account see Avi Shlaim and E.L. Rogan, eds., *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, eds. Avi Shlaim and E.L. Rogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The introduction to the volume lays the failure of Arab solidarity with Palestine in its stark world-historical context.

⁸ The White House, "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," January 28, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/peacetoprosperty/>.

⁹ Robin Wright, "Trump Unveils the 'Giveaway of the Century'," *The New Yorker*, January 29, 2020.

¹⁰ "Israel-Palestine: US Blocks third UN statement in a week," *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/17/no-us-action-after-third-uns-meeting-on-israel-palestine>.

¹¹ Cornell West, "Pity the Sad Legacy of Barack Obama," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/barack-obama-legacy-presidency>.

¹² Jeremy Bowen, "Trump's Middle East peace plan: 'Deal of the century' is huge gamble," *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-51263815>.

¹³ Nathan Thrall "Trump's Middle East Peace Plan Exposes the Ugly Truth," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/29/opinion/trump-peace-plan.html>.

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and elsewhere in the world, makes little sense outside the context of racism and capitalism. American exceptionalism is a graded system; it is not simply the 'U.S. and the Rest,' but a hierarchy in which the U.S. at the top is closely followed by its Western European allies, and with Africa and the Arab world somewhere at the bottom.¹⁴

In the Middle East, Islamophobia remains a motivating concern, and to that end Trump's foreign policy record is unremarkable beyond Israel/Palestine. Although initially Trump had committed to withdrawing troops from Afghanistan after being allegedly shown a photograph of women in the 1970s in Kabul wearing mini-skirts, Trump reversed this.¹⁵ Hardly a candidate for sophisticated feminist (let alone intersectional) analysis, Trump couched his decision to keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan in the language of women's rights, just as President George W. Bush and Obama had done. For some, Obama even retains pride of place as "drone warrior in chief," having authorised 10 times more drone strikes than Bush, and painting all males of military age in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and perhaps Mali as potential "combatants."¹⁶ As Medea Benjamin notes, the U.S. dropped 26,171 bombs in 2016 alone, as a result of the convoluted legal architecture the Obama administration constructed to legitimise its interventions, and specifically its indiscriminate campaign of extrajudicial drone warfare with no geographic restrictions.¹⁷ Obama expanded the targeted remote control killing programme instituted by Bush, which Trump made more tentacular and less accountable.¹⁸ For much of the world, and especially those who were branded enemies of the United States, the identity of the occupant in the White House is merely a matter of academic interest. Indeed, even Trump's infamous "Muslim Ban" was merely a dreadful extension of an Obama-era policy. American empire neither began nor ended with Donald Trump, and spaces like the military prison in Guantanamo Bay remain a chilling reminder of the durable status quo bias in the upper echelons of policy-making.

And yet, much of the world heaved a giant sigh of relief in November 2020, when voters chose Joe Biden to succeed Trump at the helm of this sprawling enterprise of American empire.¹⁹ How does one grapple with this paradox? If the Trump presidency was merely business as usual, then why are so many people so relieved to see him go? The answer, I submit, lies at least in part in what Obama memorably called "the optics" when he was caught playing golf immediately after discussing the beheading of an American journalist.²⁰ Even not particularly canny observers of Donald Trump's gaffe-prone speeches and incomprehensible rants on Twitter, and of his lack of tact, nuance, and diplomacy in important matters have been quick to point out that he was the most "unpresidential" of presidents.²¹ Many on the left have rightly underscored the many ways in which the veneer of respectability – and its co-articulation through the discourse of "civility" – is

¹⁴ This is necessarily a simplistic portrayal of racial hierarchy and American exceptionalism. Nonetheless, the notion that American exceptionalism is inherently racist is hardly new. See J.W. Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," *American Political Thought* 1:1 (2012), 3-28; and N. De Genova, "Antiterrorism, Race, and the New Frontier: American Exceptionalism, Imperial Multiculturalism, and the Global Security State," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 17:6 (2010), 613-640.

¹⁵ See Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 223-224.

¹⁶ Medea Benjamin, "America Dropped 26,171 Bombs in 2016. What a Bloody End to Obama's Reign" *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/america-dropped-26171-bombs-2016-obama-legacy>. See also Jeanne Morefield, "Business as Usual," December 15, 2016, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2016/12/15/business-as-usual-donald-trump-and-american-empire/>

¹⁷ Benjamin, "America Dropped 26,171 Bombs."

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch has documented some of the legal chicanery that has accompanied the expansion of the drone programme by Obama. For one prominent example, which involved the droning of a wedding procession in Yemen, see Human Rights Watch, "A Wedding that Became a Funeral," February 19, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/19/wedding-became-funeral/us-drone-attack-marriage-procession-yemen>

¹⁹ Biden's decision to pull out troops from Afghanistan is an interesting one. It's too early to say whether this is the beginning of the end to American "forever wars," but my gut instinct and Biden's motto ("America is back") suggest otherwise.

²⁰ NuNu Japaridze, "Obama: Golfing after Foley statement was a bad idea," *CNN*, September 8, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/07/politics/obama-golfing-optics/index.html>

²¹ For a comprehensive list, see China Miéville, 'One thing that ouerthroweth all that were graunted before: on being presidential,' *Salvage*, January 30, 2018, <https://salvage.zone/in-print/one-thing-that-ouerthroweth-all-that-were-graunted-before-on-being-presidential/>

precisely the mode through which politics as usual functions and the elite reproduces itself.²² Without diminishing the naked violence, racism, and misogyny that Trump personified, they question the value of a system that legitimates and romanticises what came before (and, indeed, what is likely to come after) – the upholding and perpetuation of a system of oft-disguised exploitation, asymmetry, and oppression. This is the system of racial capitalism: the dominant mode of social, political and economic organisation that works through the logics of bordering and the relegation of some populations as unworthy, “undeserving,” or “surplus.”²³

Although once can be overwhelmingly in agreement with these commentators, it is important to remain cognizant of the emotive as well as tangible impact of “optics.” “Optics” as systems of representation contain within them the power of symbolism which cannot be overstated. A Nazi salute met with tacit acceptance at a white-power rally in Charlottesville; the spotting of a camp Auschwitz hoodie on a member of the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6; the First Lady adorning a jacket with the caption “I really don’t care, do u?” during a June 2018 trip to a migrant child detention facility cannot be dissociated from the contexts and situations within which they are embedded.²⁴ The “optics” here go beyond the “simulacra” that Jean Baudrillard has shown saturate our reality, because the symbols themselves act as synecdoche of that very reality.²⁵ As such, Trump’s foreign policy may not have been more lethal than other American presidents, but his symbolic embrace of the far right at home represents a significant and frightening change. Perhaps, just as Obama’s greatest victory was symbolic – being a Black man in power for eight years in an unapologetically white U.S. – so too, is Trump’s biggest achievement, his capitulating to the worst excesses of racism and right-wing propaganda. One can acknowledge the limits of the former, while simultaneously conceding the absolute horror of the latter.

The only way out of this (ultimately misleading) dichotomy between the “sameness” of neoliberal militarism on the one hand, and extreme right-wing mania on the other, is to reject the premise that these are the only politically viable options available to Americans, and indeed that they are anathema to each other. Ironically enough, Trump’s performative and over-the-top race baiting makes it harder to whitewash and paper over the persistence of the racial capitalist global system over which the United States presides. A qualitative change necessitates going beyond “the optics,” and instead involves a commitment to abolition, to the dissolution of American Empire and its cognates, and an outright disavowal of global racial capitalism. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and Rhodes Must Fall were already beginning to “change everything” before the arrival of Trump both in the United States and elsewhere in the world.²⁶ The rest of us merely need to get behind that agenda, an agenda that is global and much greater than simply about the occupant of The White House.

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²² Morefield, “Business as Usual”; and Miéville, “One thing.”

²³ See Gargi Bhattacharya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and the Undeserving Poor: From Abolition to Brexit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

²⁴ For more on each of these instances see: ABC News, “White Supremacist gives Nazi Salute in Charlottesville,” August 18, 2013, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-13/white-supremacist-gives-nazi-salute-in-charlottesville/8802292?nw=0>; CNN, “Man in ‘Camp Auschwitz’ Sweatshirt during Capitol Riot identified,” January 20, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/10/politics/man-camp-auschwitz-sweatshirt-capitol-riot-identified/index.html>; BBC, “Melania Trump Says ‘Don’t Care’ Jacket was a Message,” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45853364>

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

²⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).