

“Trumpism, History, and the Future of U.S. Foreign Relations”

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Trying to make critical sense of the current state of foreign affairs is treacherous business for anyone, but for an historian it comes close to pursuing a death wish. Even with all the advantages of hindsight, the past remains shrouded to varying degrees, while decoding the present is like trying to see through a blinding sandstorm of events. But if there is much that remains unclear, at least the basic frame of mind of Donald Trump’s presidency is known. Recently, Stephen K. Bannon, the President’s Svengali, looked forward to the “deconstruction of the administrative state” in America.¹ Given the tenor of Trump’s comments on international issues over the past year—about foreign trade, NATO, China, nuclear weapons, Russia, the Middle East, etc., etc.—the dismantling of the American-led world order that has been in place since the end of World War II is also a real possibility.

Are there any historical precedents for Trump’s preferred policies? At first sight, the answer would appear to be yes. While most historical references thus far have mentioned parallels between Trump and the isolationist 1940-1941 America First Committee, less well known is the fact that the signature features of Trump’s position had an earlier trial in the 1920s in the administrations of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. The 1920s are not the only possible period to which one might harken back—Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism comes immediately to mind (and apparently to Donald Trump’s mind, too), but the parallels with the 1920s are more numerous and striking. Before American-led internationalism became the ‘new normal’ for the second half of the twentieth century, Republican administrations had during the so-called New Era tried out early versions of many of Trump’s foreign policy ideas.

¹ See, for example, Philip Rucker, “Bannon: Trump administration is in unending battle for ‘deconstruction of the administrative state,’” *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2017/02/23/bannon-trump-administration-is-in-unending-battle-for-deconstruction-of-the-administrative-state/?utm_term=.f921a7e178e2.

Once one moves beyond the stark contrast in personalities between the mercurial bluster of Trump and the colorless personalities of 1920s leaders, the list of resemblances is striking. The Republican Party then was more staunchly opposed to free trade than it had been since its founding. William McKinley's campaign slogan in 1896, "Patriotism, protection, and prosperity," with its emphasis on jobs and high wages for workingmen, resonated powerfully in the 1920s, when Republican majorities in Congress passed the two most protectionist tariff bills in American history, the Fordney-McCumber of 1922 and the Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930.² Throughout the decade, the United States ran the kinds of trade surpluses that Trump would like to see, refused to cancel large war debts incurred by its World War I allies, and viewed the politically fraught reparations question as "not a political but a business problem."³ Trump's anodyne references to 'fair trade' sound a lot like the reciprocity schemes that sought with little success to soften the high protectionism of the post-Civil War era.

The 1920s were also a decade when anti-immigration sentiment won legislative victories that capped a long-swellling tide of restrictionist agitation. Culminating a decade of legislative tinkering, the National Origins Plan of 1929 imposed an annual quota of 150,000 incoming aliens, a reduction of nearly ninety per cent from the pre-war high. Of that total, allocations by country were set as a percentage of that country's total proportion of white inhabitants in the 1920 census. As part of the drastic decline in overall numbers, the legislation virtually turned off the spigot of newcomers flowing from eastern Europe and altogether shut off immigration from Asia.⁴

The 1920s were also notable for the country's failure to join the League of Nations, an opposition to participation in international organizations in general, and a traditional avoidance of entangling alliances. The U.S. wanted nothing to do with the League despite having played an outsize role in its creation. Notwithstanding a strong tradition of American leadership in the movement for international law and arbitration, a number of attempts to have the U.S. join the Permanent Court of International Justice, or World Court, at Geneva failed to gain Senate approval. This attitude resembles Trump's view, widely echoed in conservative circles, that the United Nations is just a "talking shop" or "just a club for people to get together, talk, and have a good time... a waste of time and money."⁵ Trump's skepticism about multinational commitments also extends to NATO ("obsolete"), whose 'free-loading' propensities caused him to call into question the alliance's one-for-all and all-for-one security guarantee.⁶

One of the more striking features of the presidential campaign was Trump's repeated expressions of admiration for Russia's autocratic president, Vladimir Putin, ostensibly with a view to advancing a

² President Hoover disliked the Smoot-Hawley bill, but signed it anyway.

³ Calvin Coolidge, State of the Union address, 6 December 1923.

⁴ Through the 1930s, the annual average of immigrants dropped to about 70,000.

⁵ Juliet Elperin, "Trump calls U.N. 'just a club for people' to 'have a good time,'" *The Washington Post*, 27 December 2016.

⁶ The complaint is not unique to Trump. President Barack Obama also complained about "free riders" in NATO, though without questioning the continuing need for the alliance. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic* (April 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

rapprochement. In some ways, this echoed business sentiment in the 1920s, when prominent business leaders like W. Averell Harriman, Armand Hammer, and Henry Ford believed that they could do business with Soviet Russia, especially during the New Economic Policy (NEP) period when the USSR seemed to be retreating from direct control of the economy. This desire to truck with the Russians became even stronger during the Depression decade of the 1930s, as the allure of the Russian market beckoned a nation starved for export markets. One also finds echoes in the 1920s of Trump's expressions of admiration for authoritarian leaders like Egypt's Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and even North Korea's Kim Jong-un. Earlier, the affection for strong men was most pronounced in the Caribbean, where caudillos took the place of US forces of occupation in countries like Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. And, as the historian John Diggins has pointed out, Italy's Benito Mussolini and Fascism had a very favorable public image in the U.S. during the 1920s. The prevailing view then and now is that dictators, however noxious, at least bring stability to otherwise chaotic lands.⁷

As any historian would expect, there are also significant differences between then and now. The immigration policies of the 1920s were more sweeping than Trump's (for now) more narrowly targeted proposals. The United States, though it was the world's dominant economic power, was by choice politically far less influential. While its navy was huge, the army was in the bantamweight class, and nuclear weapons were not yet on the horizon. Issues that would later come to the fore—global warming and the environment, world poverty, women's rights and human rights, and decolonization, for example,—were in their infancy. International organization in various forms would take on a new life only after 1945 largely because of newfound American support. Despite a history of occasional 'red scares,' terrorism was not a major political problem. The status of China and Japan and the U.S. position in Asia was thoroughly different in the 1920s. Finally, until 1929 at least, the international perspective was suffused with an overall sense of optimism, much as it had been throughout the nineteenth century.

All in all, the 1920s were a period of "independent internationalism," to use Joan Hoff's term, in which the U.S. was far from being an isolationist nation.⁸ On especially important issues, the U.S. worked side by side on an ad hoc basis with other major powers—most notably in the German reparations crisis, the Washington Conference for reduction of naval armaments and promotion of the Open Door principle in China, and the symbolically important 1928 Kellogg-Briand pact outlawing war. Behind this cooperative impulse lay a belief that a healthy and growing international economy, globalization in short, would continue to heal the wounds from the Great War. Policymakers understood that American prosperity was closely linked to prosperity elsewhere. They also believed in a maturing world opinion that was bringing the great powers together, quite unlike the kind of zero-sum world of winners and losers that Trump takes for granted. When the U.S. role in the world during the 1920s is viewed synoptically, nationalism is a misleading descriptor of policies that were, fatally, more contradictory than terms like isolationism and nationalism would suggest. In short, because the deep differences far outweigh any the surface similarities, the takeaway from this comparison is, no, we have not been here before.

⁷ John Patrick Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View From America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁸ Joan Hoff Wilson, *American Business & Foreign Policy, 1920-1933* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1971).

That being said, it is clear that a review of America's behavior in the past reveals some significant precursors for Trump's key policies. But what does it mean to say that policies have historical grounding? Some historically literate Trump enthusiasts see his administration as a restoration, as "a return to the pre-New Deal Republican Party."⁹ Former presidential aspirant Pat Buchanan believes that Trump is taking the party "back to the Old-Time Religion."¹⁰ But unlike legal precedents, which are cited and whose footsteps are followed, historical precedents have little authority unless they have been institutionalized as policy and applied over time. That is not the case with Republican policies of the 1920's, which have since been soundly repudiated.

My guess is that a search for precursors explains nothing about the sources of Trump's positions, but it does nevertheless raise a number of interesting and perhaps important questions. One is whether an academic understanding of history has anything at all to contribute to an explanation of Trump's policies, which may instead be driven by a very different kind of historical understanding. Another question, given Trump's 'America First' nationalist focus, centers on the implications of an absence of a broader sensibility for the future of U.S. foreign relations. Republican leaders in the 1920s at least had a sense of where the world was going. The same cannot be said of the current administration. Finally, despite some obvious historical parallels, one might ask whether the overall situation today is so fundamentally unlike that of the 1920s that an attempt to return to the mind-set of that decade makes any sense.

One can say with confidence that Trump's approach to making foreign policy has little or nothing to do with an informed reading of history.¹¹ A man who, according to his ghostwriter, "has [n]ever read a book straight through in his adult life" does not have a cosmopolitan outlook.¹² Instead, his appreciation of the world is rooted in direct experience. But because the world we see is not the world as it actually is, this makes for quirky anecdotal knowledge that allows him to deny basic truths of science and to contradict readily provable facts. Trump prefers easily digestible information delivered succinctly and likes to make decisions off the top of his head based on his gut instinct. His views on issues resemble Facebook 'likes' and 'dislikes' in which complexity and contradiction are absent (Obamacare is a 'disaster,' the 'world is a mess,' etc., etc.) "I'm a very instinctual person," he says, "but my instincts turn out to be right."¹³ This intuitive style is seen as a virtue by some. For instance, the author of a wildly worshipful article claims that Trump's success in leading with his

⁹ Jennifer Schuessler, "Charge the Cockpit or You Die': Behind an Incendiary Case for Trump," *New York Times*, 20 February 1917.

¹⁰ Pat Buchanan, "It's Trump's Party, Now," *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, 3 March 2017.

¹¹ Trump's remarks about Frederick Douglass on his visit to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture bring to mind a slacker student trying to fake his way through an answer to an essay question.

¹² Jane Mayer, "Donald Trump's Ghostwriter Tells All," *The New Yorker*, 25 July 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/donald-trumps-ghostwriter-tells-all>.

¹³ *TIME* magazine interview with President Trump, 23 March 2017.

gut has “recalibrated the nature of insight itself.”¹⁴ Given this visceral and ahistorical sensibility, his views emanate from an impulsive dislike and negation of the way things are, not from a desire to recreate the past.

In other words, *pace* Stephen Bannon, Trump does not have an ideology. This is a serious shortcoming, because an ideology or an articulated world view is essential to effective functioning in the modern world. Though often associated with zealots or narrow doctrinaires, ideology when broadly considered is a much more positive thing than that. It is only through the mediation of a complex, coherently articulated world view that combines hard information (which includes science), historical background, and personal values that one can formulate a strategy that allows us to navigate the world. Think of liberalism, for example, and how it accommodates beliefs, science, and practical prescriptions that deal with everything from love, child rearing, the economy, speech, the status of women, race, international relations, and a whole lot more.

An immediate objection to the claim that Trumpism is not a deeply held or complex belief system is that nationalism surely qualifies as such and that Trump is its present-day incarnation. Yet Trump’s views are far removed from nineteenth century nationalisms, which were based on coherent syntheses of geography, ethnicity, language, religion, culture high and low, and history. Nationalism then took various forms that not only competed with internationalism and each other, but which in its liberal wing was actually a subset of internationalism. Moreover, the divergent versions of nationalism could then all claim with some plausibility to have history on their side. By contrast, Trump’s reliance on protean gut instincts and his process-oriented preoccupation with making ‘deals’ pretty much forecloses any possibility of an emergent ideology of ‘Trumpism.’

Parenthetically, this lack of an overriding belief system is not limited to Trump. It is also characteristic of many present-day politicians whose operational code has been warped by a cynical form of party politics that operates with little regard for principle. As a case in point, Trump’s election has been mightily aided by the triumph of sophism in the classical sense, whereby any argument, even any reality, can be confuted by a rhetorically adept spokesperson. Sharing this troubled relationship with facts are Trump’s spinmeisters, who with their jaw-dropping ability to adroitly defend and criticize just about anything, have unwittingly embraced a *de facto* postmodernism whose core argument is that there is no objective truth. In this view, truth is something that is made, or better yet made up, rather than something that exists in its own right and is to be sought after and occasionally found. For classical Greek sophists like Thucydides, the conclusion drawn from this radically relativist position was that the underlying basis for society lay in power and the desire for power rather than, say, justice or virtue. Perhaps Congressional types do have sincere ideological motives for throwing overboard their previous allegiances to free trade and an anti-Russian stance in the hope that Trump might repay them by supporting more deeply cherished items on their agenda, but this deference to Trump’s iconoclastic ideas suggests that these principles, as well as others, were wobbly articles of faith for the Republican establishment to begin with.

And yet, despite the patchy discursive connection to past policies, is it possible that history continues to exert a powerful gravitational pull in the form of deeply embedded cultural patterns? Cultures are among humankind’s most enduring creations and thus are saturated in history. Cultures do change, of course, but typically at a slower pace than changes in society. The various components of a culture do not mutate

¹⁴ Victor Davis Hanson, “The Animal Cunning and Instinct of Donald Trump,” *National Review*, 20 December 2016.

holistically in lockstep or at a uniform pace, but in segments, slower or faster depending on the particular issues. When we try to connect culture with foreign affairs, one obvious question is: how quickly do deep-seated attitudes change? That is impossible to say in general, but in the U.S. there is one area, public opinion, whose complexion has not changed very much. Whereas the post-World War II transformation in U.S. foreign policy took place principally at the elite level, the public's understanding of Cold War strategy and its internationalist outlook remained sketchy, at best. The same was true for trade, which was perceived in simple terms—good when it created jobs, bad when it took them away. Opinion polls on complex topics are always difficult to translate into policy. Indeed, public opinion is notorious for having irreconcilable desires, low taxes and balanced budgets coupled with generous entitlements and a military second to none, for example. However, the public was never sold on the counterintuitive virtues of free trade, an axiom of the otherwise fractious science of economics.

Trump's allure is partially explained by his uncanny appreciation of the personal hurts of the masses—Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's 'deplorables'—and his advocacy of nationalist economic solutions that strike a responsive chord with mass culture. The point is that a strong case can be made for nationalism as the intuitive, default cultural response of populism to accumulated problems of globalization, as the concurrent rise of far right movements in Europe confirms. The populist demands for monetary inflation and anti-immigrant agitation that have periodically roiled American politics in the past have been succeeded by today's outburst of protectionist sentiment, an intuitive feeling that the shrinkage of low-skill high-wage manufacturing jobs is the fault of free traders who care little about American workers. If this is correct, it could be that Trump's views, though historically illiterate by one interpretation, may from another angle be profoundly historical in their deep-rootedness. Ergo Trump's first beatitude: 'I love the poorly educated!'

To be clear, gut instincts matter and should not be cavalierly waved off as something diametrically at odds with intelligence. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer maintained that "prejudices" (i.e., pre-judgments) were a condition of our humanity and thus were indispensable starting points for understanding the world.¹⁵ He was right, for that is how we know straightaway where we stand on most important issues. And it is from this unavoidable starting position that we are able to develop more complex and nuanced understandings and arguments as we become more deeply engaged with problems. It should also be acknowledged that some of Trump's gut instincts are not necessarily wrong-headed. I have no room to go into the particulars here, but U.S. foreign policy was indeed ripe for an overhaul after the Cold War and the seemingly endless war on terror.

However, it is a long way from prejudgments to policy. The problem with Trump's gut-level nationalism is that its spooky rapport with a minority strain of mass opinion simultaneously disconnects it from a very entangled world. Its domestic strength is its international weakness, precociously brilliant on one level and hopelessly obtuse on another. It is a long-standing dogma of internationalist thought that internationalism depends on education, i.e. an extended engagement with expert knowledge about the world, the more the better. At a minimum, a grounding in the history of relations with other countries, combined with a knowledge of how and why one's own foreign policy has evolved, is indispensable for the effective conduct of foreign affairs. In this case, having a grasp of the big picture has enormous practical implications because it enables one to appreciate what is at stake in a policy whose various aspects quickly tend to become knotty once one starts to calculate costs and benefits. At the extreme, a policy that seems obviously beneficial to

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), esp. chapter 3.

begin with may, upon extended consideration, prove to be harmful to the national interest. Regrettably, in Trump's cognitive universe, knowledge of foreign affairs stops at simple prejudgments, and the same holds true for his loyal base of followers. If numerous surveys are to be believed, Americans' historical, scientific, and geographic literacy is in a sad state, oftentimes hilariously so, and their familiarity with the issues and details of foreign relations is no less pathetic. If it were to be generalized, a foreign policy reduced to a gut level would be akin to relations between rival inner city gangs. A foreign policy made from the gut would be no more a policy than a bull lunging toward the toreador's cape. In a nutshell: in international relations, attitude and intuition can too easily become enemies of achievement.

Take terrorism, for example—obviously a bad thing, but how bad? Defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) is the nation's number one foreign policy goal, says Trump. As a warning against overreaction, President Barack Obama liked to remind his White House staffers that “terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs do,” which, though it rings emotionally false, happens to be statistically true.¹⁶ It is also true that terrorism is not a new problem. It goes back to the nineteenth century and since that time has been successfully managed by numerous governments with police and intelligence methods short of the kind of the kind of overblown mobilization and ill-conceived foreign embroilments that have dominated U.S. policy since 9/11. Still, even though it is by no means an existential threat and an endowment of historical experience shows that it can be handled without necessarily going on a wartime footing, terrorism continues to be treated as an apocalyptic menace or as a clash of civilizations. In the absence of a sound grasp of historical context that helps distinguish the desirable from the possible, military means tend to be divorced from political ends. Unsurprisingly, with few roadblocks in public opinion to stand in its way, a belligerent knee-jerk disposition to rely on military force has yet to produce much relief from the spectral threat of terrorism.

Means-ends problems also plague Trump's approach to trade and business. It is doubtful that Trump's *idée fixe* of making deals, which originates in a family-centered business reminiscent of a pre-corporate world of interpersonal haggling, is capable of dealing effectively with a far more complicated world. As the economic journalist Adam Davidson notes, far from being a “loutish ignoramus,” Trump is “a canny spokesman for a different sort of economy, one that often goes by the technical name “rent seeking,”¹⁷ an approach that is more pertinent to the insular world of Manhattan real estate than to a global economy. While economists agree overwhelmingly that trade as a continuation of warfare by other means is a bad idea, it is true that zero-sum nationalism has worked well for some ‘free riders’ (of which the United States was long the most prominent example). But that does not mean that nationalism can work well for all. There are serious questions about how many such neo-mercantilist players an open international system can tolerate at any given time or whether it makes any sense for the hegemon to mimic the free riders. In his eagerness to use the political clout of the United States to back out of multilateral agreements that provide the framework for the global economy in favor of bilateral trucking and bartering, Trump risks making the world the chaotic place he imagines it already is. Moreover, pure and simple antipathy to the established global order ignores the enormous privileges, most notably but not restricted to the dollar, which the United States enjoys due to its

¹⁶ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

¹⁷ Adam Davidson, “What Trump Doesn't Understand About ‘the Deal,’” *New York Times*, 17 March 2016.

hegemonic status. If the U.S. has indeed been taken advantage of, it has been with open eyes and with an appreciation of the benefits, financial and otherwise, that accrue to global leadership.

Tellingly, there is no mention of democratization in Trump's foreign policy agenda. Nationalist patriotism may be the last refuge of scoundrels, but in today's world it is also the first refuge of autocrats and dictators, many of whom Trump has lauded for their admirable leadership qualities. To be sure, democracy promotion abroad is inherently problematic if not quixotic, but to shelve democracy as an ideal risks losing something vital to America's conception of itself. There is a depressing irony here that deserves mention. By rooting foreign policy in culture (and an embattled white culture, at that), Trump's version of American greatness turns its back on the traditional understanding of American exceptionalism that anticipated the eventual adoption of American ideals throughout the world. Trump's enthusiastic endorsement of Great Britain's exit from the European Union and the simultaneous rise of far-right nationalist politicians in Europe who echo his viewpoint underscore the broader implications of this nativist turn: the encouragement of a kind of kind of mimicry that is not likely to end in a harmony of interests. Wittingly or not, his program would mean having the U.S. adopt the kind of narcissistic behavior that has characterized other countries over time. In promising to make America great again he has disowned what has made America truly exceptional: its role in creating and supporting a global system that has in turn encouraged the growth of a global community.

Practical impediments to one side, the general reason why Trump's nationalism will not work well is that it is out of step with history's deep globalizing trends. According to a Brookings paper, "a resistance to globalization was arguably the foremost policy theme in Trump's election campaign."¹⁸ But apart from his visceral condemnations of its shortcomings, Trump has said nothing about the why and the how of industrial globalization, which is, after all, the most consequential historical development of the past two centuries—indeed, of the millennia since the Neolithic age. Nationalism in the nineteenth century appeared to have historical traction as an ideology with a promising future. It was not clear until the middle of the twentieth century whether narrow nationalism or liberal internationalism would win out in the long run. Today, the verdict is in: structurally speaking, the contest is over as internationalism has swept the field. The world today actually exists as a society in a sociological sense and not simply as an anarchic 'family' of nations. With nationalism, conversely, we have seen a future that does not work. It might be useful to ask, as an exercise in counterfactual history, if the world would have been a better place without modernizers such as South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and, yes, China; without multilateral institutions; without the European Union; and without the growing international trend to democracy. Would it have been better off had spheres-of-influence deals been reached with the USSR and the People's Republic of China? Would a 'realist' post-1945 system based on power politics have been preferable? If the answer to such questions is 'yes,' then one might logically conclude that U.S. foreign policy over the past seventy-five years was exceedingly foolish.

Trump is a disrupter, everyone says, but is he a creative disrupter? This is an important question given the possibility that he might trigger a catastrophic collapse of globalization, which has happened before and might well happen again in the absence of some TLC. Without a willingness to engage in the difficult task of creating a feasible substitute, mere antipathy to a state of affairs is a half-baked standpoint. As Benjamin Franklin said, 'Any fool can criticize, condemn and complain and most fools do.' Thus far Trump has shown no interest in continuing to assume responsibility for the world system or in making a reasoned case for a

¹⁸ Brina Seidel and Launce Chandy, "Donald Trump and the future of globalization," *Brookings Up Front*, 18 November 2016.

superior substitute; nor does the possibility of system collapse and its consequences appear to concern him. One suspects that, like his predecessors in the 1920s, he believes that he can eat one's cake and have it, that globalization will somehow continue to function well in the background even when confronted with an outbreak of competitive nationalisms. But a frontal assault on the existing order is not the immediate cause for concern. Even benign neglect has its dangers because all systems, technological and human, even if not abused inevitably break down without regular maintenance and the occasional overhaul. There is no sign that Mr. Trump aims to be a Mr. Fixit.

The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. once proposed that American political history moves in alternating cycles of reformism and conservatism. Along the same lines, historians of foreign relations have written a good deal about America's alternation between nationalism and internationalism, or isolation and intervention. White House Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon, it is reported, is attracted to a cyclical theory of history in which internationalist overreach has produced a boomerang return to a natural unilateralism. But revivalism is better suited to religion than to politics. If so, cyclical theories, which are rooted in an essentialist and continuity view of history, may be irrelevant to an understanding of what is going on today.

In today's context, we need to ask if we are living in a new era altogether. In recent centuries, the change to modernity has been so pronounced that there is no going back. Indeed, in the last seventy-five years America and the world have experienced more and faster change than ever before as the river of time, flowing with overwhelming force and swiftness, has carved a new channel entirely. Despite the many resemblances, the world is a fundamentally different place from the 1920s. To be sure, the 1920s can be used as historical justification of Trumpist ambitions in U.S. foreign relations—unfortunately, historians can find justifications for anything—but this kind of exercise would be little more than an attempt to apply scholarly gilding to a chimerical structure of ideas, for the reality is that Trump has no desire to return to a past of which he knows little. And even if such a desire did exist, it would be impossible to fulfill. Trump's vow to "Make America Great Again" finds its historical expression par excellence in the 1950s and 1960s, internationalist decades whose unique constellation of circumstances cannot be brought back. But pick a decade, any decade, and the same conclusion will hold true: America's greatness, however one defines it, can never be restored to what it was in the past.

My dark premonitions about how events will play out may prove to be well-founded or they may turn out to be wildly alarmist speculation. An understanding of history has its limits. History cannot fully explain the past and it cannot foresee the future. But it can reliably tell us where we are and how we have reached this provisional destination in time. Without such historical understanding or an interest in acquiring it, we can have no idea of where we are going or how to get there. As it now stands, however, policy is neither understood backwards nor is it being lived forwards in a well thought-out manner. To approach our foreign relations with the kind of historical vacuity that now dominates thinking in Washington would mean that we have truly lost our way.

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