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America and the World—2017 and Beyond

“The End of American Liberal Internationalism?”¹

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One hundred years ago this month, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was agonizing over whether to enter World War I. Just a few months earlier, Wilson had won re-election partly by campaigning on a policy of neutrality, which he was now preparing to abandon, along with the slogan ‘America first.’ But now, for the first time in more than 80 years, a U.S. president has taken it up again, to promote a foreign-policy stance that directly controverts the doctrine Wilson embraced.

It was not until 1919, after the war was over, that Wilson defined his foreign-policy vision of “liberal internationalism”: support for collective security and promotion of open markets among democracies, regulated by a system of multinational institutions ultimately dependent on the United States. Though the U.S. Senate initially rejected Wilson’s vision, particularly his support for joining the League of Nations, President Franklin D. Roosevelt revived liberal internationalism after 1933. It has helped to shape the foreign policies of most U.S. presidents ever since – until Trump.

Among the striking aspects of the Trump presidency are the ways the new President rejects more completely than any other since the interwar years virtually the entire range of positions that President Woodrow Wilson set up by 1919 as the framework for American liberal nationalism. But gone today from Trump’s agenda are the hallmarks of this American-born tradition: a call for collective security and open markets with fellow democracies regulated through a complex of multinational institutions ultimately dependent on Washington. So President Trump dismisses the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as “obsolete,” and has no regard for the integrity of the European Union (EU), as manifest in his support for parties that want their

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared on Project Syndicate at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-ends-liberal-internationalism-by-tony-smith-2-2017-03>. It appears here in revised form with the permission of Project Syndicate’s editor.

countries to leave the EU combined with disdain for the idea of Germany's leadership role in Europe.² Trump similarly turns his back on multilateralism, as attested by his decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on climate controls and the Trans-Pacific Partnership fostering economic openness. Or witness not simply his willingness to talk with authoritarians, but his apparent preference for doing so, with democratic leaders often left watching from the wings.

So far as words alone go there are two ways Trump might conceivably be thought as sounding a bit like Wilson. First, Trump opposes open, unregulated world markets that leave American banks and businesses free to export capital, technology, and jobs as they might like whatever the cost to the domestic working and middle class. So too would Wilson.

But differences overwhelm similarities. Wilson did not oppose freeing world markets so much as he insisted on their regulation for the sake of the public good. This would mean taxation and spending of increased wealth should be directed to the common interest: universal health care, improved educational opportunities, infrastructure development, and a wide arrangement of welfare programs designed to put a floor under everyone. Think Sweden. Think Senator Elizabeth Warren, as well as Nobel Prize Laureates in economics Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman. By contrast, Trump is likely to sponsor crony capitalism at worst or state capitalism at best, in either case for the sake of a small elite. More, for regulation to be effective, Wilson would have insisted on a multilateral approach with democratic states dominating the process. Trump will care not a whit for multilateral organizations unless they serve the cause of 'America first.'

Second, Trump debunks the idea that democracy is 'universal value' with 'universal appeal,' claims heard repeatedly during the last two presidencies. Wilson would certainly have been surprised by such talk as well. For Wilson it would be an illusion to think that democratic societies and states could appear anywhere and everywhere if we but act to promote them. Neither Wilson nor Trump presumably would have any interest in the democratizing nation- and state-building formulas that found favor with Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Again, however, differences overwhelm any similarities. Wilson hoped to see human rights and democracy spread for the sake of world peace, but he would have used indirect ways to promote this end, working through the League of Nations. His vision looked toward the creation of a community of peace operating through international institutions, law, popular values, and an elite possessed of a democratic vision. Resolving differences by negotiation and defending the common interest through collective security would be a cooperative endeavor. Initially this bold framework for peace would be a *Pax Americana*, but in due course it would become a *Pax Democratica*. None of this internationalist talk matters to Trump.

Following in Wilson's steps, president after president since 1940 has affirmed American 'exceptionalism.' The claim is not simply that the United States, as President Bill Clinton put it, is the 'indispensable nation' because its relative power position makes it a party to all major international issues. Rather, America should expect deference from other states because it does not seek to pursue its own narrow self-interest so much as to insure an international order that at a minimum could defend the world's democracies through

² For this claim see, for example, "Trump worries Nato with 'obsolete' comment," BBC News, 16 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38635181>.

collaborative action. How distant this is from Trump’s proud assertion in his Inaugural: “From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first.”³

The bottom line is unambiguous. Donald Trump is the most anti-liberal internationalist president we have seen since 1940, if not 1933. Yet we must recall that the promise of this framework to serve national security was snuffed out before—through three presidencies, from the election of Warren G. Harding in 1920 until Roosevelt took office in 1933. Faced with the problems of the Great Depression and then World War II, however, Wilsonianism ultimately came back to guide American policy makers, and this in ways that ultimately contributed to the unity, prosperity, and freedom that won the Cold War.

But Wilson’s vision may not prove so easy to quash. Back in the twentieth century, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War impelled U.S. policymakers to embrace liberal internationalism. Today, too, a tumultuous world is likely to vindicate its deep and enduring appeal. There is good reason to believe today that given its deep-set appeal, a renewal of liberal internationalism will manifest itself so long as the character of this tradition is held high. Here is why reflecting on the legacy of Woodrow Wilson matters today.

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³ See, for example, “Trump’s Full Inauguration Speech 2017” (video), *New York Times* (website), 20 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000004863342/donald-trump-full-inaugural-address-2017.html>.