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The Misunderstood Roots of International Order— And Why They Matter Again

Since Donald Trump's election as president of the United States, many analysts and policymakers inside and outside the United States have bemoaned his assault on the liberal international order—the norms and institutions championed by the United States since World War II to promote democracy, an open trading system, human rights, and the rule of law. Trump has attacked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, and the World Trade Organization, walked away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Climate Accords, threatened to scrap the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and imposed tariffs on friends and foes alike.

The champions of the order have waxed eloquently about its role in protecting Western values during the Cold War and then upon the order's expansion into the former Soviet bloc after the collapse of communist regimes in 1989-1991. Critics have countered that the Vietnam War, Abu Ghraib, and the loss of manufacturing jobs in the American Midwest were signs of the shortcomings of the order, and they have noted that there were plenty of instances when the old order was not particularly liberal, never truly international, and not all that orderly.

Both sides in the debate have tended to ignore the true origins of the order, focusing on the Cold War and after. But those who designed the order did not initially build it for the Cold War, even though they and their successors

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adapted it for the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Nor did its framers design it merely as a means to preserve and enhance American power after World War II, although that became a core purpose. They were looking backward as they planned forward. In the previous three decades, that generation had suffered through two world wars and the Great Depression. The United States abandoned the principles of neutrality articulated by George Washington to ensure victory for the Allied Powers in both wars, and no one who had gone through those two experiences wanted to see them repeated.

Both sides in the debate have tended to ignore the true origins of the order

The founders of the postwar order believed that the root causes of the political and economic catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century were hyper-nationalism and protectionist trade policies. They posited that without U.S. engagement to prevent these factors from reemerging, the world would fall apart once more, and the United States would have to intervene once again to

right wrongs. The narrative in Washington was fairly simple: Germany and Japan had promoted racist militarist policies undertaken by authoritarian rulers to bring glory to their nations, and the postwar U.S. occupation would seek to turn those countries into democratic allies. The implementation of protective tariffs in the 1930s exacerbated the economic downturn that grew into the Depression, and postwar institutional arrangements would endeavor to break down obstacles to free trade. The founders of the liberal international order believed that building a set of institutions that emphasized political and economic freedom along with collective security would keep the peace and promote prosperity. They believed that the rules and norms underpinning these institutions would lead to a set of best economic and security practices to govern competition and produce responsible governments. The United States would be well positioned to prosper in such a system, but its overwhelming power would also be constrained by international institutions, thereby calming the fears of weaker states. Success would mean the United States would no longer have to mobilize its youth for military service to save the world nor would it suffer high unemployment and long breadlines at home.

Donald Trump's foreign policy poses a danger to world affairs precisely because it indulges and employs those threats that originally motivated the formation of the international order. Now, hyper-nationalism and protectionism—the two scourges that ravaged the world in the first half of the twentieth century—have returned in U.S. policies themselves. Rather than dampening nationalism to promote peaceful relations among neighbors and promoting free trade to achieve greater economic growth among partners, Trump has championed hyper-nationalism and protectionism through his America First slogan, attitudes and policies. Harry Truman's

Secretary of State Dean Acheson titled his memoir *Present at the Creation*, whereas Trump and his team appear to relish being present at the destruction. Those who recognize the dangers of extreme nationalism and protectionism need to find new ways to articulate their goals to appeal to those who feel left behind by the old order, but who will be even worse off if it is destroyed.

Creating the Liberal International Order

George Washington in his 1796 Farewell Address urged the country to take advantage of its distance from Europe and steer a course of neutrality, and that impulse has been a powerful force in American politics ever since. But the world looked a lot different from Washington's times when President Woodrow Wilson went before Congress in 1917 to argue, "Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances."¹ Wilson was successful in bringing the country into that war, but he failed to make the necessary political compromises at home to enable U.S. participation in the League of Nations after the war ended, and the United States largely retreated from global engagement until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

It was not until the end of the Second World War that institutional foundations for the current international order were formed. Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and their advisers were eager to ensure that arrangements could be instituted to prevent major wars from starting in the first place, so that the United States would not once again be required to mobilize and fight at great cost to end them. At the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, the United States and the United Kingdom led the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to regulate the global economy and promote development, and shortly thereafter, they fostered the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to break down protectionist barriers to international commerce.

American officials outlined for the public during World War II why the great conflict began, enabling them to make their case in the aftermath of the war how the path they proposed was needed for peace and prosperity. In a radio address to the nation on July 23, 1942, Secretary of State Cordell Hull remarked, "After the last war too many nations, including our own, tolerated, or participated in, attempts to advance their own interests at the expense of any system of collective security and of opportunity for all." He continued, "when policies of nationalism—political, economic, social, and moral—are carried to such extremes as to

exclude and prevent necessary policies of international cooperation, they become dangerous and deadly. Nationalism, run riot between the last war and this war ... encouraged and facilitated the rise of dictators, and drove the world straight toward the present war.”²

In March 1945, as the war was winding down in Europe, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. went before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Banking and Currency to lay out the rationale for the economic institutions created at Bretton Woods, drawing the connection between economic and political security. These new institutions, he summarized, present “stability and order instead of insecurity and chaos.” Morgenthau explained how the IMF would foster more stable international exchange rates and how that would prevent a repeat of the disastrous economic downturn of the 1930s: “Stability in these rates means that all the nations can enter into world commerce without resorting to cut-throat competition. In world trade, such throat-cutting in the 1930’s took the form of currency depreciation, blocked funds, import quotas, multiple currencies and trade preferences. Desperate nations tried to save themselves at the expense of their neighbors. The result was injury to both.” He continued, “Power politics, in the sense of the bullying of small nations by big ones and of weak nations by powerful ones, has become a term of reproach in the world. The United Nations hope to abolish it from the earth. But power economics may be just as dangerous, for if it is not the root of all evil in international affairs it is at the very least a frequent cause of conflict.”³

It is undeniable that the liberal international order created and led by the United States after World War II achieved some enormous successes. Through multiple rounds of the GATT (which became the World Trade Organization in 1995), tariff barriers, initially in manufacturing and then in other sectors, were cut significantly, and global economic growth skyrocketed. Peterson Institute for International Economics President Adam Posen has noted that what the United States achieved was the creation of an economic order “driven by business not bullying,” and the United States was instrumental in fostering that order by providing two key global goods: security alliances and freedom of navigation.⁴ Trade could flow freely around the world thanks to the United

It is undeniable that the liberal international order achieved some enormous successes.

States’ global military dominance, which kept the sea lanes open to commercial traffic. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty in countries like India and China, which began integrating into the global economic order in the 1980s and 1990s. While war has not disappeared as an instrument of states and

armed groups, the world became far less violent in the second half of the twentieth century than it was in the first: the great powers have not gone to war with one another since 1945, and until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, they did not take territory by force from their smaller neighbors.

Critics of the Liberal International Order

Given the global conflagrations and economic despair that marked the first half of the twentieth century, why has there been such withering criticism of the liberal international order, not just from Donald Trump, but from international relations scholars? The criticisms tend to fall into two categories. One is that the United States used the institutions it created to enhance its own power and pursue global primacy while violating the norms it established whenever it suited its interests. The United States was not just a “hyperpower” in the words of former French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine,⁵ it was a hypocritical power because it violated the norms of the order it created when doing so served its interests. The other critique is that the order had its great economic success early on—with the dramatic reduction in economic barriers to trade, particularly in manufacturing—but it has not been well-suited to growth more recently, nor has it adequately addressed the existential threat of the twenty-first century: climate change. In addition, say the critics, it has never been broadly inclusive, and it worked poorly for significant parts of the developing world.

Charges of hypocrisy reached their peak with the 2003 Iraq War and its aftermath. The Bush administration sold the war on grounds that there were weapons of mass destruction that could potentially threaten the United States and its allies in the future, and opposition to launching a war absent an imminent threat—raised by countries including France, Germany and Russia—were brushed aside. Not only did the United States go to war in 2003 without U.N. Security Council authorization and topple the regime of a country that did not in fact possess weapons of mass destruction, it then proceeded to engage in and justify torture. American standing took a significant hit when the images from Abu Ghraib shocked the world.

To critics, however, this was just the latest in a long-standing string of U.S. excesses, including as analyst Andrew Bacevich argued, “meddling in foreign elections; coups and assassination plots in Iran, Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, South Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua, and elsewhere; indiscriminate aerial bombing campaigns in North Korea and throughout Southeast Asia; a nuclear arms race bringing the world to the brink of Armageddon; support for corrupt, authoritarian regimes in Iran, Turkey, Greece, South Korea, South Vietnam, the Philippines, Brazil, Egypt, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and elsewhere ...”⁶

And that litany is merely with respect to national security issues. On the economic front, the United States has used subsidies, tariffs, quotas and other barriers to trade to protect certain sectors of the American economy at various points such as automobile manufacturers in the face of Japanese competition in the 1980s and sugar producers dating back to the nation's founding. While acknowledging that "[b]roadly speaking, the post-1945 period was, on many measures, more prosperous, less violent, and more collaborative than what came before," University of Birmingham professor Patrick Porter argues, "While liberalism and liberal projects existed, such 'order' as existed rested on the imperial prerogatives of a superpower that attempted to impose order by stepping outside the rules and accommodating illiberal forces."⁷

The other critique is that the current order is not up to the global task of managing economic, environmental and security issues because it was never sufficiently global to begin with. Researchers Naazneen Barma, Ely Ratner and Steven Weber argue that the traditional story—of the United States using its power throughout the Cold War to build an order in the West upholding a set of norms in the face of the Soviet threat, and then extending its largesse as the rest of the world demonstrated its eagerness to join the order after 1989—is woefully lacking. Barma et al suggest that the major economic gains from the order came early in the post-World War II period and note that the order did not work particularly well for those countries in the developing world that had to adopt a "Washington Consensus" that wreaked havoc on economies and societies outside of the West, for example throughout Latin America.⁸

Handwringing over the Return of Nationalism and Protectionism

No doubt the liberal order was in trouble before Trump became president. While the United States undertook successful actions in the 1990s to defend the inter-

The liberal order was in trouble thanks to the 2003 Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis.

national order in places like the Persian Gulf and the Western Balkans, the order took a major hit thanks to the 2003 Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis. In the run-up to and execution of the 1991 Gulf War, the United States upheld the order with a U.N.-authorized international coalition to reverse an invasion of a weak country (Kuwait) by its stronger neighbor (Iraq) and to defend against potential further Iraqi aggression toward Saudi Arabia. It

was exactly the scenario the order was established to uphold in 1945. Twelve years later in Iraq, the United States committed one of its worst foreign policy blunders in its history, casting doubts on U.S. global leadership.

Similarly, on the economic side, the United States prior to 2008 was seen as the country that was able to save the international order, for example in the 1997-1998 financial crisis that began in Asia and spread globally. In the aftermath of that crisis, *Time* magazine even put the top two Treasury Department officials and the Chairman of the Federal Reserve on its cover, calling them “The Committee to Save the World.”⁹ A decade later, the United States caused the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression thanks to bad practices in the housing and banking sectors.

Even in those two extreme instances, however, the United States was not trying to destroy the order. George W. Bush sought to protect the United States and its allies against the possibility that one of the world’s worst dictators would possess weapons of mass destruction. The economic policies of deregulation begun under Bill Clinton and continued under Bush fit with an impulse to build an ever more open international economic order. The Iraq War and the financial crisis were mistakes of the highest magnitude, but U.S. presidents continued to believe they were upholding the liberal order. No longer. The current American president wants to take a blowtorch to the old order, championing extreme nationalism and economic protectionism, which is why those who still believe that the lessons of the first half of the twentieth century require continued U.S. engagement have recoiled in horror.

One only has to compare the inaugural addresses of Franklin Roosevelt in January 1945 and Donald Trump 72 years later to understand why defenders of the old order have been so agitated since January 20, 2017. At his fourth and final inaugural address, FDR stated, “We have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that ‘The only way to have a friend is to be one.’ We can gain no lasting peace if we approach it with suspicion and mistrust or with fear.”¹⁰ In contrast, Trump’s inauguration was an opportunity for the new president to talk about promoting America First and protecting it from the outside world. The United States, he said, has “made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.” He added, “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.”¹¹ It was a far cry from Morgenthau’s articulation of the purpose of Bretton Woods.

Brookings Institution scholar Thomas Wright has noted that Trump has been committed to a few deeply held views about foreign policy for 30 years. Among them is the view that America’s military alliances are disadvantageous to the United States, for in the president’s mind, wealthy countries have let the United States pay to provide their defense while they simply got rich. Trump’s worldview does not have room for the notion that we are all in this together, as FDR argued in his last inaugural address. We now have a president articulating

a vision of every nation for itself. In a 1990 interview Trump said, “We Americans are laughed at around the world for losing a hundred and fifty billion dollars year after year, for defending wealthy nations for nothing, nations that would be wiped off the face of the earth in about 15 minutes if it weren’t for us. Our ‘allies’ are making billions screwing us.” Tied to this is Trump’s belief that American leadership of an ever more open global economy has undermined rather than strengthened the United States.¹² For defenders of the liberal order, this is nothing less than a full-blown crisis. University of Texas historian Jeremi Suri declares, “Trump is taking America back to the historical nightmares of the world before December 1941: closed borders, limited trade, intolerance to diversity, arms races, and a go-it-alone national race to the bottom.”¹³

What worries many analysts is the link between what is happening in the United States and what is happening in Europe. Nothing epitomizes the post-World War II liberal order more than the European Union, designed to overcome extreme nationalism and promote economic interdependence after the destruction in Europe from 1914-1945. Europe today is simply a different continent than it was prior to 1945—when it seemed unable to break the cycle of war, intimidation and bullying—or even prior to 1989 when the West enjoyed peace and prosperity but the East was brutally suppressed by the USSR and unable to participate in the U.S.-led liberal economic order. But the open polities, societies and economies that produced extraordinary economic growth in the West in the post-World

War II period and in the East after the Cold War found themselves facing increased immigration, which accelerated in recent years from the Middle East and Africa. Now, many Europeans are clamoring to close their countries off to the outside world. *New York Times* journalist Max Fisher has noted the growing “contradiction between the European Union as an experiment in overcoming nationalism versus the politics of the moment, in which publics are demanding more nationalism.”¹⁴

Trump himself has fed the anti-European Union nationalist sentiment. As a presidential candidate, he supported Brexit. Early in his pre-

sidency, he had kind words for French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who sought a similar path out of the European Union for her country, and he has supported avowedly illiberal Hungarian leader Viktor Orban. He has even called the European Union a “foe.”¹⁵ His hostility from the start of his presidency led European Council President Donald Tusk to label the United States as a threat in January 2017 along with Russia, China and Islamic extremism.¹⁶ On top of it

The Western economic order was set up to mitigate the possibilities of the strong bullying the weak.

all, Trump has expressed his admiration for Vladimir Putin, who signaled with his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and subsequent actions his desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal international order.¹⁷

As economist Adam Posen reminded us, the Western economic order was set up to mitigate the possibilities of the strong bullying the weak. Trump's whole political approach is based, however, on bullying others, and thus he is a threat to fundamental premises of the order. And his support for extreme nationalism and protectionism strikes at the very heart of the beliefs held by those who had gone through the Depression and two World Wars.

The Future of the Order

What are the options for the United States, the previous guarantor of the liberal order, going forward? There appear to be at least four. First, an effort by the next president to try to go back all-in on the old order and treat the Trump presidency as an aberration. Second would be for the United States to take a more “Jeffersonian” attitude and retrench on foreign policy while rejuvenating itself politically and economically to once again serve as a model for the world. Third, the United States could embrace Trump-style “Jacksonianism” and let the chips fall where they may, possibly through an avowedly “spheres-of-influence” foreign policy.¹⁸ Finally, the next president could recognize that the old order cannot be meaningfully saved, in terms of its post-World War II institutional arrangements, but find a way to create new mechanisms that allow for greater positive expressions of nationalism and protect those negatively affected by globalization.

There appear to be at least four options for the United States, going forward.

Given the daily assaults on the old order, whether through Trump's questioning of NATO or his avowedly protectionist trade policies, it seems rather preposterous on the face of it that the United States could simply wait out the Trump years (particularly if they do not end until 2025) and go back to January 19, 2017. After all, other countries that have in the past followed U.S. leadership in the meantime—having given up on the United States playing its traditional role—might seek to make alternative arrangements. In June, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas exclaimed, “How can Europe hold its own in a world radicalized by nationalism, populism and chauvinism ... [O]ur common response to ‘America First,’ today must be ‘Europe United.’”¹⁹

Not so fast. What if, on the national security side, U.S. policies do not change all that much? After all, despite Trump's rhetoric, NATO continues its daily

business, as epitomized by the comprehensive communique issued at its latest summit in July 2018, and the continuation of its military exercises and deployments.²⁰ There are very few people across the U.S. executive and legislative branches who agree with Trump's approach toward NATO.²¹ Furthermore, what alternatives do many other countries actually have? Europe cannot easily alter its dependence on the United States for its security. Nor can Japan and South Korea, for that matter. And on the economic side, what we have seen from other countries is an effort to build their own liberal trade arrangements without the United States. The European Union has signed free trade agreements with Canada and Japan, and the 11 countries that remain in the Trans-Pacific Partnership decided to move forward on the accord without the United States.

Still, the old order has clearly been shaken. The debates taking place in countries like Germany and Japan regarding their ability to count on the United States going forward will only heighten the more the president tweets. And if the tariff wars escalate, they will be difficult to manage. The World Trade Organization is atrophying; the Trump administration is vetoing judicial nominees to fill vacant seats thus leaving the trade body's dispute mechanism function in potential disarray once the WTO no longer has a quorum to review cases.²² It is hard to imagine that the WTO will regain the stature it had in the years immediately following its formation in 1995.

A second option is that the United States could pursue a more "Jeffersonian" approach, which author Walter Russell Mead argues was a feature of Barack Obama's mindset, given his belief that the United States needed to pull back on its global footprint.²³ It was actually George W. Bush in the 2000 campaign who suggested the United States needed to be more "humble" in its foreign policy and seemed to be on a path to cut back on the types of military missions that had led the United States into war in places like the Balkans in the 1990s, but the September 11, 2001 attacks provoked him to a far more expansive policy. Obama came into office promising retrenchment and an end to the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but found himself engaged in war and regime change in Libya. Trump's national security focus during the 2016 campaign was on defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but he has maintained the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and signed a \$717 billion defense budget for FY2019. An approach focused on improving an American democracy in disarray does not necessarily have to include either more protectionism or more nationalism, but it would seek less of a leadership role for the country in world affairs.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, those believing the United States needs to do less internationally have been a significant force in American domestic politics. Former Richard Nixon speechwriter and television commentator Patrick Buchanan won 37 percent of the vote in the 1992 New Hampshire Republican primary on his platform of America First, and later that year, businessman Ross

Perot won nearly 19 percent of the popular vote running as a third-party candidate in the general election, arguing that the United States needed to do more to protect jobs going to Mexico and other countries. Those votes were an early sign of what we now view as Trump's base, supporting a withdrawal from entangling overseas commitments, protection of (white) Americans from immigrants, and rebuilding the country's manufacturing base.

That group could form the basis for a more "Jacksonian" foreign policy, to once again use a term popularized by Mead. One possibility would be an explicit spheres-of-influence foreign policy. In this scenario, the United States would acknowledge that it can no longer dominate global affairs, nor should it want to, and it would pull back in particular from areas where China and Russia are dominant while protecting the American homeland, and being prepared to launch attacks against any outside force threatening the country's security. Putin clearly wants the former Soviet Union recognized as a privileged Russian sphere of influence, and China appears to want a much reduced U.S. naval presence in the Western Pacific. A more "realist" U.S. president could argue that recognizing other great powers' spheres of influence (and expecting them to recognize the United States') is the basis for order. This approach would attempt to contain the dangers of nationalism by recognizing great power areas of control in the hopes that this would lessen the prospect of conflict among them. But consider one rationale for the liberal order to begin with: the United States rejected the spheres-of-influence policies it believed had marked the old order and given rise under nationalist autocrats to major conflagrations that required the United States to mobilize in both Europe and Asia.

For those who still believe that the impulses to mitigate the destructiveness of extreme nationalism and protectionism were correct, but recognize the shortcomings and transgressions of the seven-decade liberal international order, the task at hand is to incorporate the values of the old into something new. To be successful, however, whatever approach follows the Trump years will need to recognize that nationalism remains a force in world affairs that must be channeled in positive directions and that those who lose their jobs through trade or automation do need assistance. Scholars Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper have argued in these pages, "Twenty-first century American internationalism must acknowledge and address the roots of contemporary nationalism if it is to survive."²⁴ They suggest that the United States will have to confront three key issues in developing a new strategy built on liberal values: the return of

Nationalism remains a force in world affairs that must be channeled in positive directions.

great power politics, the changing nature of violent conflict, and the growth of under-governed spaces (like cyber).

No U.S. president will have public support for a global engagement on the scale of the Cold War or even the 1990s and early 2000s. Barma et al. have posed the following question: “What would a meaningful liberal world order actually look like if it were operating in practice? Consider an objective-based definition: a world in which most countries most of the time follow rules that contribute to progressively more collective security, shared economic gains and individual human rights. States would gradually downplay the virtues of relative advantage and self-reliance.”²⁵ That definition says nothing about post-World War II institutions. That then, will be the question that will dominate the post-Trump years: how can the United States and its fellow market democracies foster an order infused with liberal political and economic values, channeling nationalism in positive directions without giving in to its basest attitudes and providing assistance for those disadvantaged by globalization without resorting to the type of “cut-throat” protectionist policies Morgenthau decried at the end of World War II?

Recasting the bargains that a liberal international order rest on will not be easy, and will require a U.S. leadership role that recognize shifts in the balance of global power. The United States does not have the ability to shape global affairs as it did after 1945 or 1989, particularly due to the rise of China but also the growing influence of other powers such as India and Russia. But a United States that hypes nationalism and imposes protectionism as it is doing under the idea of America First risks dragging us back to a world that devastated not just the United States but most of the globe more than seven decades ago.

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