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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021

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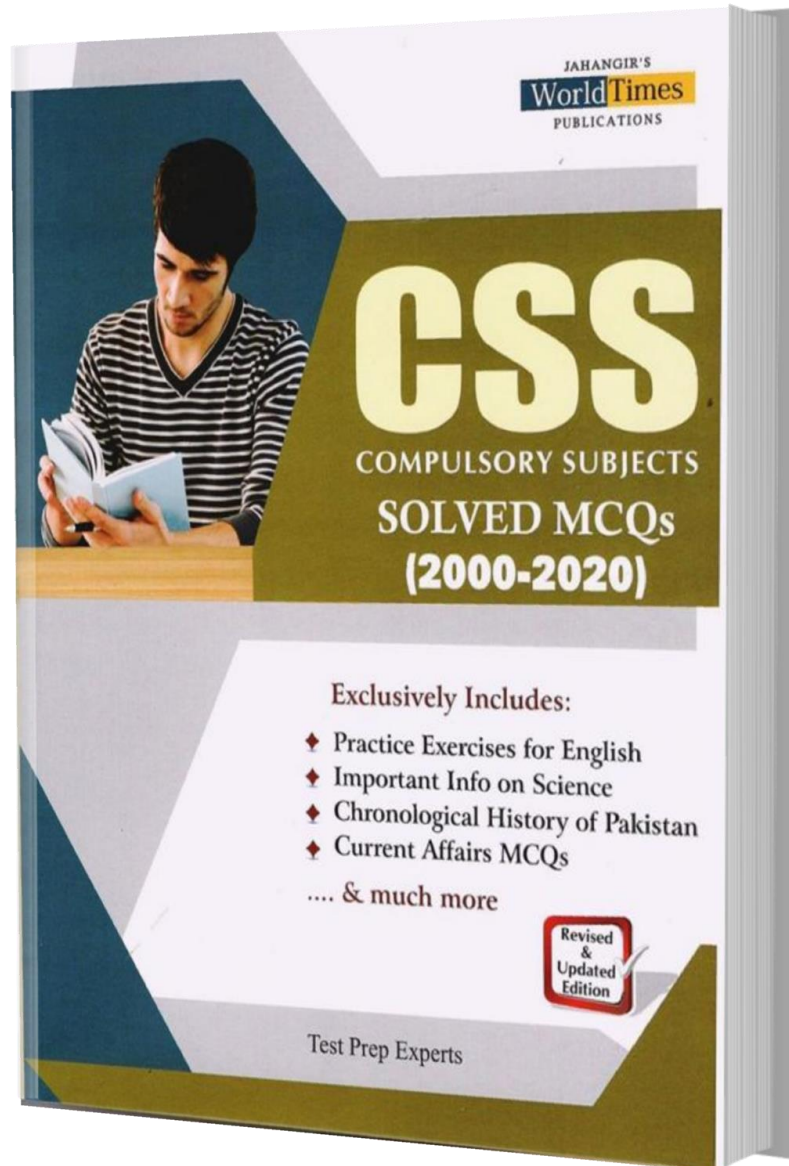
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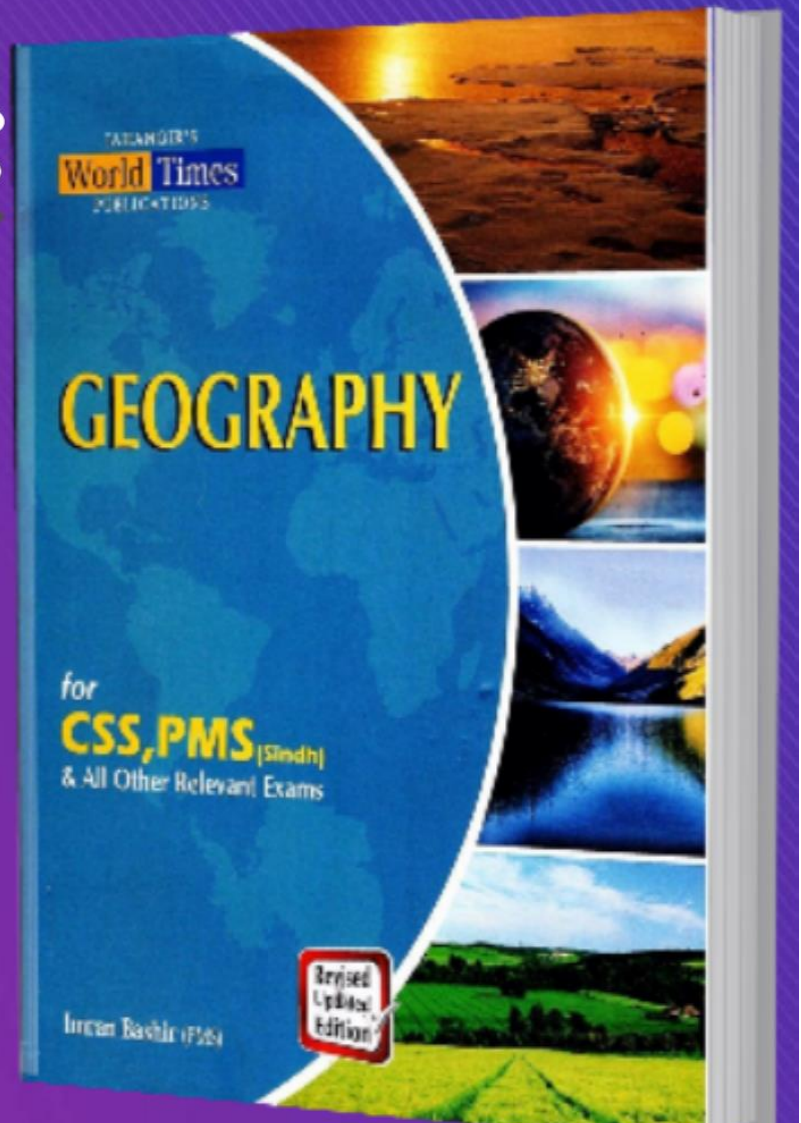
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*Volume 100, Number 1*

## CAN AMERICA RECOVER?

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Volume 1, Number 1 • September 1922

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January/February 2021 · Volume 100, Number 1

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Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

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GST Number 127686483RT  
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In 2014, *The Washington Post* called **JASON FURMAN** “the wonkiest wonk in the White House.” A noted academic voice on macroeconomics and tax policy, he served in two influential positions in the Obama administration: deputy director of the National Economic Council and chair of the Council of Economic Advisers. He is now a professor of economics at Harvard University and a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. In “The Crisis Opportunity” (page 25), he considers the lessons of economic policy after the 2008 global financial crisis—and how they should shape the recovery today.



**CAI XIA** was once a professor at the school that trains the Chinese Communist Party’s elite; now, she is one of the party’s fiercest critics. Born into a proud Communist military family, Cai received her master’s degree and Ph.D. from the Central Party School in Beijing and then joined its faculty, instructing Chinese officials in Marxist ideology. But over the course of two decades, she began harboring doubts about the CCP’s rule, culminating in her decision to break with the party and condemn Chinese President Xi Jinping. In “The Party That Failed” (page 78), she chronicles her political awakening for the first time.



**LUIS ALBERTO MORENO** began his career producing the award-winning Colombian news program *TV Hoy*, before going on to serve in the Colombian government, including as minister of economic development and as ambassador to the United States. From 2005 to 2020, he headed the Inter-American Development Bank, a multilateral lender. In “Latin America’s Lost Decades” (page 138), he argues that the pandemic has underscored the region’s long-standing wealth gap—and the need for reforms to close it.



## CAN AMERICA RECOVER?

**W**hat comes after crisis? Can the United States really “build back better”? And what does history say about the possibilities for national renewal?

The first articles in this issue’s package propose a radical experiment: try an administration with both character and competence. Samantha Power argues that Joe Biden’s team can earn legitimacy and respect by getting the pandemic under control, fighting corruption, and reopening to the world. Jason Furman proposes a two-stage economic plan, with immediate measures designed to help the unemployed and keep the recovery going followed by broader structural reforms. And Jennifer Nuzzo shows how to rethink global health security so as to prevent future catastrophes.

The remaining articles seek guidance from the past, exploring previous national attempts to deal with structural racism, inequality, economic crisis, and democratic regression. David Blight, writing on the Civil War and Reconstruction; Zephyr Teachout, on the Gilded Age and progressivism; Meg Jacobs, on the Great Depression and the New Deal; and John Lawrence, on Watergate and the reforms that followed, all agree: progress is possible, but always slow, hard-won, and partial, with unfinished struggles passed on from one generation to the next.

Seventy years ago, the United States was in trouble. Then, as now, Washington was gripped by a wave of populist demagoguery, with Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy ranting about treasonous deep-state conspiracies. China was also on the march—back then, quite literally, pushing bedraggled UN forces down and maybe off the Korean Peninsula. But in late December 1950, the commanding general of the U.S. Eighth Army was killed in a car accident, and history flipped.

The new commander, Matthew Ridgway, realized that the military situation in Korea was dire but salvageable. He restored professional standards, replaced unfit officers, rebuilt morale, and instilled a sense of purpose. Sure enough, within months, his forces had pushed the enemy back and earned a stalemate, which was eventually translated into an armistice.

A few years later, still chasing his imagined demons, McCarthy took on the U.S. Army in televised hearings. The American public watched closely and, fever passing, decided that decency was a good thing after all.

Character and competence have saved the country before. They could again.

—Gideon Rose, *Editor*



*Restoring American leadership must include the basic task of showing that the United States is a capable problem solver once more.*  
— *Samantha Power*

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**The Can-Do Power**  
*Samantha Power*

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**Monopoly Versus Democracy**  
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# The Can-Do Power

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## America's Advantage and Biden's Chance

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*Samantha Power*

**E**ver since then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright memorably called the United States “indispensable” more than two decades ago, both Americans and publics abroad have vigorously debated the proposition. Today, as President Donald Trump’s term comes to a close, foreign observers of the United States are more prone to use a different word: “incompetent.”

The Trump administration’s response to the most urgent problem in the world today—the coronavirus pandemic—has been worse than that of any other nation. This, in turn, has understandably tarnished perceptions of the United States: according to recent Pew Research Center polling conducted in 13 major economic powers, a median of 84 percent of respondents agreed that the United States has done a poor job of handling COVID-19—by far the most damning appraisal received by any major country or institution. Yet the mishandling of the pandemic is just the latest in a string of lapses in basic competence that have called into

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**SAMANTHA POWER** is Professor of Practice at the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Law School and the author of *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir*. She was U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations from 2013 to 2017.

question U.S. capabilities among both long-standing allies and countries whose partnership Washington may seek in the years to come. A brand once synonymous with the world-changing creations of Steve Jobs, with feats of strength and ingenuity such as the Berlin airlift and the moon landing, and with the opportunity represented by the Statue of Liberty now projects chaos, polarization, and dysfunction.

For all the criticism directed at U.S. foreign policy in eras past, foreign leaders and publics largely retained respect for the United States’ willingness to undertake challenging endeavors and its ability to accomplish difficult tasks—a significant but underappreciated cornerstone of American power. Today, the fact that fewer and fewer people identify the United States as capable of solving big problems should be a major concern for those who believe that U.S. leadership must play a central role in tackling climate change and other shared global problems whose solutions demand both expertise and effective coalition building.

What’s more, unlike in the recent past, today the United States has a potent competitor on the world stage, and it is increasingly common to hear people contrast Washington’s debilitating partisanship and gridlock with the ruthless efficiency of Beijing’s authoritarian rule. Yet even as the United States has faltered in highly visible and costly ways, China is fumbling the mantle of global leadership, too—with its lethal cover-up of the pandemic, its bullying diplomacy and extraterritorial belligerence, its controversial approach to development, and its ongoing human rights horrors, including the mass internment of its Uighur Muslim





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population. This reality creates an opportunity for President-elect Joe Biden and his administration.

Some Americans are confident that after four years of Trump, the relief in foreign capitals will be so immense that U.S. leadership on key issues will be readily welcomed. Biden has said that his first foreign policy move will be to call foreign leaders and say, “America’s back: you can count on us,” and he has laid out plans for reversing U.S. withdrawals from international bodies, revoking harmful policies, ending “forever wars,” and restoring alliances. He has also pledged to prioritize the fight against climate change—outside of addressing the pandemic and its fallout, the most urgent problem for every nation in the world.

These moves will garner headlines, but while they are of course necessary, they will not be enough. The new president will have to grapple with the widespread view that in key domains, the United States—home to over 40 percent of all Nobel Prize winners in peace, literature, economics, chemistry, medicine, and physics—does not have the competence to be trusted. Restoring American leadership, accordingly, must include the more basic task of showing that the United States is a capable problem solver once more.

The new administration will rightly give precedence to problem solving at home—ending the pandemic, jump-starting an equitable economic recovery, and reforming fraying democratic institutions. Biden has said he plans to pull the country out of the current crisis by “building back better” in a way that confronts economic inequality, systemic racism, and climate

change. Yet major structural changes will take time. The Biden administration should therefore also pursue foreign policy initiatives that can quickly highlight the return of American expertise and competence. Here, Biden should emphasize policies that provide clear, simultaneous benefits at home; meet a critical and felt need abroad; are highly visible; and—the missing ingredient in so many U.S. foreign policy endeavors of late—produce tangible outcomes. This means less rhetorical emphasis on the abstract cause of “the liberal international order” and more practical demonstrations of the United States’ distinctive ability to deliver on issues that matter right now in the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Three areas ripe for such leadership are the following: spearheading global COVID-19 vaccine distribution, ramping up educational opportunities in the United States for foreign students, and waging a high-profile fight against corruption at home and abroad. By playing to U.S. strengths and taking advantage of the opening that Chinese overreach has created, such initiatives would have a measurable impact on confidence in U.S. competence—a necessary foundation for the persuasion and coalition building needed to advance U.S. interests in the years ahead.

### **AMERICA THE INCOMPETENT**

Debates among Americans over how the United States should engage with other countries in a post-Trump era have led to valid questions about whether it can conceivably regain the trust needed to lead again. Biden will return the United States to the Paris

climate accord, the World Health Organization, and (if the right terms can be secured) the Iran nuclear deal. He has said that his administration will reengage in a variety of international forums and initiatives that Trump abandoned, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the Global Compact for Migration. He has vowed to end the destructive policies of the Trump administration, such as the travel ban on Muslim-majority nations, the slashing of U.S. refugee numbers to historic lows, family separations at the southern border, the berating of allies, and the embrace of authoritarian leaders. And he has promised to draw on the deep ties he has built over four decades of work in foreign policy to convince countries in Asia and Europe that Washington can once again be counted on as an ally.

These steps may show the United States to be a more willing and honest partner, but they will not be sufficient to address reasonable concerns about whether it is a competent one. Over the past three years, according to Gallup polls, approval of U.S. leadership across more than 130 countries has dropped precipitously. And in the last year alone, Pew's polling has shown favorable views of the United States dropping by double-digit margins and hitting record lows in Australia, Canada, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—which Pew attributes primarily to the view that the United States has done a poor job of handling the pandemic.

Beyond the statistics, examples of diminished faith in U.S. competence have accumulated. After Trump began endorsing malaria medications as

COVID-19 treatments, health authorities in Africa—including the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the continent's primary public health institution—had to scramble to dissuade people from taking them. A Norwegian university encouraged its students to return home from countries “with poorly developed health services and infrastructure . . . for example the USA.” A journalist on Bosnia's 24-hour cable news channel N1 observed of the United States: “The vice president is wearing a mask, while the president doesn't. Some staffers wear them; some don't. Everybody acts as they please. As time passes, the White House begins to look more and more like the Balkans.”

The pandemic may be the most important event of our lifetimes, and it will not be easy to alter impressions of the United States' inability to execute an effective response on behalf of its own citizens, never mind with an eye to the well-being of those in other countries. Reinhard Bütikofer, a German member of the European Parliament, summed up how the United States has come to be seen in Europe: “The shining city on the hill is not as shining as it used to be.”

In 2009, the last time Biden entered the executive branch, those of us who were part of the Obama administration confronted analogous concerns stemming from the disastrous Iraq war and the United States' responsibility for the global financial crisis. President Barack Obama took steps similar to those Biden has promised: moving to rejoin UN bodies and pay UN dues, banning unethical practices such as torture, repairing the damage to alliances caused by the invasion of Iraq, and proclaiming, “We are ready to lead once more.” But while

these moves were necessary and helpful in generating international goodwill, my own impression—as someone who served through all eight years of that administration—is that the United States’ stock didn’t hit its peak until 2014–15, when confidence in U.S. leadership was boosted by a succession of visible results.

In that period, Obama mobilized over 62 countries to eradicate the Ebola virus in West Africa, deploying health-care workers, building Ebola treatment units, and dispatching labs to carry out rapid testing. U.S. nuclear experts negotiated innovative ideas for blocking Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon, and U.S. diplomats rallied the support of China, Russia, and other major powers to back a deal built on those ideas. U.S. scientists and diplomats leveraged immense national climate expertise and political capital to secure an agreement in Paris that included commitments to reduce emissions and take other steps to mitigate climate change from almost every country in the world. By the end of 2015, while walking the halls of the UN as the U.S. ambassador and interacting with my counterparts, I encountered a palpably higher level of faith in the United States and eagerness to partner with us than two years prior.

Perceptions of U.S. foreign policy as unreliable and erratic are of course far more entrenched now that the world has seen such a radical turn from Obama to Trump. Moreover, the strong electoral showing for Trump and the backing he got from prominent Republicans in his attempts to deny Biden’s victory will only deepen concerns that perceived improvements in U.S. foreign policy will prove fleeting. Nonetheless, there is still much one can learn from the past: each

of these Obama-era initiatives relied on more than just the diplomacy that Biden and other Democrats have rightly pledged to restore. They required—and showcased—immense operational know-how and the deployment of economic, technical, and intelligence resources few other countries have at their disposal. Most important, they delivered clear results, on issues then of central concern to publics in both the United States and abroad.

### **CHINESE OVERREACH?**

For all the concerns that China would take advantage of the United States’ retreat from the world stage, the record of the last few years has not inspired a surge in faith in China as an alternative global leader. China’s rise to global power over the past decade has been perhaps the most consistent storyline in the world, but Gallup polling has found that China’s global approval rating—a median of 32 percent among over 130 countries—has hardly budged in ten years. The same Pew polling that has shown the United States’ substantial favorability deficits has also indicated that majorities in those countries surveyed hold unfavorable views of China, too, and in many cases, those views are only getting worse. In the United Kingdom, disapproval of China was under 40 percent five years ago; today, it is almost 75 percent—a trend also evident in Australia, Canada, Germany, and South Korea. Doubts about how China has handled the pandemic remain high: a median of 61 percent of those surveyed agreed that Beijing did a bad job of dealing with the outbreak (only the United States got worse ratings).

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Beijing's combative actions over the last year have compounded the unease. China has stepped up its aggressiveness around Taiwan, in the South China Sea, on its border with India, and in Hong Kong. When Australia called for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, China responded by imposing a punishing 80 percent tariff on barley, a key Australian export. Fijian officials watched in horror as Chinese diplomats showed up, uninvited, to a reception celebrating Taiwan and beat up a Taiwanese diplomat who tried to keep them from entering. After the Netherlands changed the name of its trade-oriented diplomatic mission in Taiwan to Netherlands Office Taipei, reflecting a broadening of the bilateral relationship beyond economics, China threatened to cancel shipments of medical supplies for fighting the coronavirus.

China's bullying is already driving a backlash. As illustrated by the Pew polling, Beijing's threats helped cause Dutch distrust of Chinese President Xi Jinping to rise by 17 percentage points in one year. In Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison is now seeking new powers aimed at diminishing Chinese influence in the country. Canada's defense minister has decried the imprisonment of two innocent Canadians, in retaliation for the arrest in Canada of a Chinese executive, as "hostage diplomacy." During the early months of the pandemic, the French Foreign Ministry publicly rebuked the Chinese ambassador in Paris after his embassy accused France of leaving elderly people to "die from starvation and disease" in nursing homes. India banned over 100 Chinese-made mobile

apps in response to months of border tensions that have led to the deaths of more than 20 Indian soldiers.

Even before the pandemic, global concern was growing about Chinese development practices, pursued most prominently through the massive infrastructure-building drive known as the Belt and Road Initiative, and particularly the steep interest charged on its loans. Sri Lanka's difficulties servicing its debt on a Chinese-built port infamously ended in a deal that left the development under Beijing's control. When the Malaysian prime minister canceled billions of dollars' worth of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects approved by his predecessor, he explained, "It's all about pouring in too much money which we cannot afford, we cannot repay. . . . With that debt, if we are not careful, we can become bankrupt." After Tanzania's president canceled deals his predecessor had made with China, he similarly observed that only a "madman" would accept the terms that had been negotiated. In Nigeria, politicians have demanded an official investigation into China's lending practices after rumors spread last summer that Beijing might begin seizing the country's assets. In Zambia, a former commerce minister has asked the Constitutional Court to rule on the legality of the country's secretive loan deals, which have left the country owing a quarter of its debt to China.

There is debate about whether Beijing is pursuing a deliberate strategy of "debt-trap diplomacy," and it is complicated to pinpoint just how much China is owed by developing countries. But a 2019 study estimated that the 50 biggest recipients of Chinese lending

then had debts with China worth about 15 percent of their GDPs, on average, up from less than one percent in 2005. Meanwhile, Chinese infrastructure development has lost some of its luster because of concerns over transparency, environmental degradation, and the flood of Chinese workers who have taken jobs that locals believed would be available to them. Public opposition to Belt and Road projects has surfaced even in countries that impose strict restrictions on voicing dissent, including Kazakhstan, Laos, and Myanmar.

Many countries naturally still see significant opportunity in deeper ties with China. Yet over the last four years, opinions on Beijing's leadership have soured in critical areas. And for Biden, that provides an opening. But to fully seize it, the new administration must restore the United States' reputation for competence.

### **HOURLY OF NEED**

Demonstrating competence requires an ability to do more than one big thing at once—as the Obama administration did during the financial crisis, rescuing the American economy while also galvanizing the G-20 to provide over \$1 trillion in stimulus for other struggling countries, thus helping keep the global economy intact. The United States can reenter all the deals and international organizations it wants, but the biggest gains in influence will come by demonstrating its ability to deliver in many countries' hour of greatest need.

Beginning with the issue on which the United States' reputation has suffered the most—the pandemic—the Biden administration can spearhead

global vaccine distribution in a way that reminds the world of what the United States can uniquely do. Under any president other than Trump, the government would already be racing not just to produce a vaccine for domestic consumption; it would also be leading the world in developing a blueprint for vaccine distribution globally. Trump has shown no interest in vaccines reaching other countries. Along with initiating the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization, he proudly rejected participation in COVAX, a 184-nation initiative that is aiming to make two billion vaccine doses available worldwide, mainly to high-risk populations and frontline health-care workers, by the end of 2021.

The United States is well positioned to vaccinate Americans when a safe and effective vaccine is available. The U.S. government has already purchased 800 million doses for the country's population of 328 million from companies hustling to develop a viable vaccine. But beginning to vaccinate Americans alone will not be enough to guarantee American well-being; the global pandemic will not fully end, nor will the U.S. economy fully recover, while COVID-19 is still raging elsewhere. China's attempt to convince the world that it is a "responsible great power" through helping other countries gain access to vaccines should provide an additional impetus for Republicans to get onboard with supporting a global effort, even in an immensely difficult budget environment.

Biden should start by having the United States join COVAX, which will play a key role in the equitable distribution of vaccines. Yet even if fully funded

and able to meet its goals, COVAX is expected to reach only a quarter of the global population by the end of 2021. The United States should go further, launching bilateral partnerships with low- and middle-income countries that need help with the complexities of vaccinating their citizens. The United States has an obvious competitive advantage for this effort: its unparalleled scientific expertise and unrivaled global reach. Although China overtook the United States in total number of diplomatic outposts in 2019, having a vast diplomatic network and using it for good are two very different propositions. Both the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have deep experience with immunization programs and long-standing working relationships with ministries of health, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector in foreign countries.

Public health experts have made clear that providing widespread access to a COVID-19 vaccine will be a highly complex undertaking, requiring precise temperature controls during shipping and storage; new methods of global distribution at a time when commercial air traffic has fallen sharply (drug companies typically ship half their products in the cargo holds of passenger planes); the sourcing and manufacture of huge quantities of materials, such as glass vials and syringes; and the development of convincing vaccine messaging tailored to particular populations. In but one testament to the challenge, a recent evaluation of supply chain resilience, conducted by the logistics company DHL, concluded that “large parts of Africa,

South America and Asia could not be readily supplied” with a vaccine due to a lack of the technology needed to keep the doses at the right temperature.

With decades of expertise from global immunization campaigns targeting polio, measles, and smallpox, as well as the more recent campaign against Ebola in West Africa, the United States has a singular capacity to help other countries with their strategies for administering a vaccine. This would include helping manage global logistics for distribution and troubleshooting the inevitable issues that arise with international supply chains, supporting public information campaigns, providing technical expertise on quality control, training local health-care workers, and implementing programs for increasing access and uptake in hard-to-reach communities. All these tasks would draw on long-standing U.S. partnerships with governments and other actors in the more than 60 countries where thousands of CDC and USAID staff already work.

Judging from the reaction to the U.S. provision of lifesaving aid in other contexts, such an effort would also have a significant positive effect on American standing internationally. While this would by no means be the main motivation, it should nonetheless be a relevant consideration for an administration that will be trying to show a skeptical world that the United States can be counted on again. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, high-profile U.S. disaster relief almost immediately boosted favorable opinions of the United States in those places. A more enduring example of this impact



can be seen in the realm of public health, where the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, President George W. Bush's signature international initiative, has provided antiretroviral treatment to more than 16 million people, including 700,000 children. In addition to its enormous humanitarian benefits, PEPFAR has made a significant and lasting impact on the attitudes of foreign publics toward the United States—producing a “substantial” increase in U.S. standing among nations that have participated in the program, according to a 2014 academic study. Indeed, when Bush left office in 2009, Gallup measured his approval rating at 34 percent in the United States—and 73 percent among African nations.

### **ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE**

While no initiative would have the impact of U.S. leadership on vaccines, one of the best ways to showcase the United States' ingenuity and know-how is to again make its universities the most attractive in the world to foreign talent. Biden has pledged to end Trump's most visibly prejudicial immigration policies, such as the Muslim ban and inhumane asylum restrictions. But American universities have a special place in the global imagination, and lowering the visa hurdles for study in the United States while creating better, more accessible pathways for international students to work in the United States after graduation can pay both short- and long-term dividends in expanding U.S. influence.

Before Trump's presidency, initiatives to attract international students to the United States would not have been controversial. For many decades, the

United States has been the leading destination for foreign students. Over one million non-Americans are educated in the United States annually, and according to the Department of State, for the four academic years beginning in 2012, the total number of international students coming to the United States grew between seven and ten percent annually, thanks to efforts that had bipartisan support. Yet due to fresh visa restrictions and the Trump administration's anti-immigrant posture, in the 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) school year, new enrollments were down by eight percent compared with four years earlier.

Prior administrations have supported international education, but their efforts rarely got much attention, as they were in keeping with the general impression of the United States as a diverse nation that welcomed foreign talent. After the last four years, however, Biden has an opportunity to reboot this undertaking in a way that increases global recognition of just how many foreign students obtain education in the United States and expands domestic awareness of the benefits. He can also help neutralize the chilling effects of Trump's xenophobic rhetoric, which even before the pandemic had caused many young people to forgo study in the United States in favor of places such as Australia and Canada. It is hard to think of a more cost-effective way for Biden to reach global populations concerned about the direction of the United States than by celebrating the fact that the country is again welcoming bright young minds from around the world.

Biden could start by delivering a major speech announcing that his administration is joining with American

universities in again welcoming international students, making clear that they are assets rather than threats. The administration should set a target to once again annually grow the number of foreign students at the 7–10 percent range achieved earlier in the decade, and it should seek commitments from universities to recruit from parts of the world whose students have historically been underrepresented on U.S. campuses. He should also integrate immigration and visa policy deliberations into the larger discussion of how to safely reopen the United States. And he should take a number of steps that will make an immediate difference for foreigners considering studying in the United States, including issuing and publicizing guidance to U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to stop harassing and intimidating foreign students, ensuring that students will not have to seek visa extensions in the middle of their programs of study, and reconstituting the moribund Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council, composed of university presidents and educational experts that advise the Department of Homeland Security on how its policies affect foreign students, teaching, and academic research. He should also order a speedy review to determine how to modernize the handling of student visa applications, assessing which administrative hurdles can be removed and which can be expedited and made more transparent for students whose lives are often left in limbo as they await the necessary clearances.

Such an educational-opportunity initiative would bring many benefits. At a time when confidence in longtime

American strengths has waned, international students would gain exposure to fonts of knowledge and innovation in the United States. New opportunities, friendships, and professional relationships would generate lasting goodwill. Meanwhile, during what will be a prolonged and difficult economic recovery, more international students would mean more money going into the American economy. In 2019, even as new enrollments ebbed, international education constituted the United States' sixth-largest service-sector export, contributing nearly \$44 billion to the U.S. economy and, according to a Commerce Department analysis conducted during the Trump administration, supporting more than 458,000 jobs. At a time when China has turned itself into a prime destination for students looking to study abroad, this initiative would also be an important counterweight, attracting international talent, exposing future leaders to the values of an open society, and making many of them lifelong ambassadors for democracy—and for strong ties between their home countries and the United States.

Because world-class American universities have been a beacon for high-achieving young people of all nationalities, many foreign graduates have gone on to found companies and make their scientific discoveries in the United States. Others who have returned home have risen to run their own countries: as Bloomberg pointed out recently, more than 20 percent of current African leaders studied in the United States, including those at the helm in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. The long-term benefits of fostering

ties with new generations of foreign nationals has not been lost on the Chinese. “There are more than 300 world leaders, including presidents, prime ministers, and ministers around the globe, that graduated from U.S. universities, but only a few foreign leaders that graduated from Chinese universities,” Wang Huiyao, an influential adviser to China’s State Council, said in 2017. “So we still need to exercise effort to boost academic exchange and educate more political elites from other countries.”

The United States’ competitive advantage has always flowed from its diversity and ability to provide opportunities. Americans should be proud that a majority of the most valuable U.S. startups were created by immigrants—a quarter of whom came to the United States as international students. Ensuring that this trend continues—and doing more to advertise it—will demonstrate to people around the world that it is far too soon to bet against American dynamism.

### **CORRUPTION CRACKDOWN**

If vaccine distribution would harness U.S. capabilities to help save lives and if expanding educational opportunities would demonstrate U.S. intellectual firepower and openness, a global initiative to combat corruption would allow the United States to visibly mobilize its unique capabilities for tracking, exposing, and prosecuting financial crimes, meeting demands for accountability coming from citizens in every corner of the world. Biden has promised to issue a presidential directive that declares the fight against corruption “a core national security

interest.” He has also pledged to host a major summit with other democracies during his first year in office, with corruption as one of its key agenda items. But he can go further, making anticorruption a centerpiece of his international agenda.

The United States is the central hub of a global financial system that between 1999 and 2017 moved at least \$2 trillion in funds connected to arms dealers, drug traffickers, money launderers, sanctions evaders, and corrupt officials. The real amount of illicit money coursing through the global economy is surely much greater (the \$2 trillion includes only what banks themselves flagged), with the annual cost of corruption in 2019 perhaps reaching some \$4 trillion—five percent of global GDP. The World Bank estimates that each year, individuals and business pay \$1 trillion in bribes alone. For the good of people at home and abroad, the Biden administration can take the lead in driving changes that reduce corruption, money laundering, and global tax evasion—practices that finance autocratic leaders and parties, exacerbate income inequality, and violate individual rights.

The notable rise of autocrats and populists around the world has generated a worrying sense of momentum for repressive regimes, but corruption is a key area of vulnerability for these leaders. While they may perceive few costs from constituents when they reject human rights principles or openly admire the “China model” of authoritarian capitalist governance, no leader wants it known that he has used his position of power and privilege to help himself and his cronies profit at the expense of citizens.

Anger over corruption and misconduct has been a driving force behind a surge in mass mobilizations around the world. Over the last decade, the Center for Strategic and International Studies has tracked an average annual 11.5 percent increase in the number of protests taking place around the world, with opposition to corruption playing a central role in roughly half of the record 37 major protest movements that occurred in 2019. In countries including Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Malta, and Sudan, these protests led to leaders' resignations and changes of government. In recent years, revelations that the powerful Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht paid \$788 million in bribes across Latin America brought down major political figures and upended politics in a dozen nations in the region. Although not every corruption scandal leads to such a dramatic fallout, academic studies provide ample evidence that perceptions of corruption contribute significantly to dissatisfaction with democracy, particularly in established democracies. Aggressively tackling corruption can thus play a role in helping blunt the global democratic recession at the same time as it helps countries preserve precious state funds during the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis.

As with most major foreign policy issues, the foundation for Biden's leadership will need to be laid at home, beginning with measures to clean up after the most corrupt and self-dealing presidency in U.S. history. Financial institutions and other private-sector entities that have been caught laundering dirty money appear to view fines as

the cost of doing business; for genuine deterrence, the use of more severe sanctions, including criminal prosecution, is necessary. And Democrats need to dedicate themselves to the uphill work of overturning *Citizens United*, the 2010 Supreme Court decision that allowed corporations and other groups to make unlimited campaign expenditures, and implementing additional measures to keep foreign money out of U.S. elections.

But there is much to do on the international front, as well. The United States could insist that a country make a set of minimum anticorruption commitments in order to enter into preferential trading arrangements, ramping up technical assistance to those countries eager to do more. It can employ the corruption prong of the Global Magnitsky Act, coordinating the resulting sanctions against corrupt individuals and entities with U.S. allies. For those nations with decent laws already on the books, the Biden administration can encourage far greater application of laws prohibiting foreign bribery and money laundering, as enforcement has dropped markedly around the world. Indeed, according to Transparency International, only four out of the top 47 exporting countries actively enforce antibribery laws.

Anticorruption is another domain in which the United States has a competitive advantage over China. Since 1977, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act has prohibited American citizens and companies from bribing foreign officials abroad and has required transparent accounting. Although Trump looked into getting rid of the FCPA and the number of new FCPA

investigations has fallen of late, the Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission continue to enforce it, as well as the Anti-Bribery Convention of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. By contrast, China—the world’s largest exporter, its second-largest economy, and the headquarters of companies implicated in numerous corruption scandals in other countries—did not open any investigations into foreign bribery between 2016 and 2019.

Shell companies registered in the United States are frequently used by corrupt foreign actors to conceal stolen state funds or to hide payments they have received through bribes and kickbacks. Whether through securing passage of the pending bipartisan legislation in Congress called the Corporate Transparency Act or through the Biden administration’s own executive actions, the United States must update its anti-money-laundering practices, which haven’t been reformed in decades, including requiring disclosure of who actually profits from or controls properties, companies, and trusts registered in the United States. In mandating the establishment of a public registry of these actual beneficiaries, the Biden administration should press other countries to do the same, closing loopholes in Europe and beyond, so the true owners can be subjected to legal oversight. These registries are indispensable in ensuring that illegal money flows are detected and investigated. As a complement, Biden should also direct U.S. intelligence agencies to devote more resources to uncovering major transnational finan-

cial crimes, making sure that the administration does not focus disproportionately on technical standard setting while neglecting the evidence gathering needed to actually build cases and dismantle corruption networks.

Few people—whether in the United States or elsewhere—are likely aware of such programs or prosecutions, even when they work as designed. To enhance the profile of U.S. anticorruption efforts, the Biden administration should consider taking steps to ensure that ordinary citizens hurt by corruption begin to actually see benefits from enforcement. When Western countries recover proceeds from foreign bribery, they tend to reflexively return the money to foreign state treasuries. Washington should explore arrangements through which individuals harmed by the paying of bribes or the pilfering of national assets can secure compensation, encouraging other countries to move in a similar direction. The U.S. legal system has stringent requirements for establishing an individual’s or a group’s standing in court. It is essential, however, that those harmed by corrupt actors—whether, for example, through the embezzlement of state funds that could have been used to buy ventilators or the health hazards resulting from environmental permits being wrongly granted—see a far more tangible return on the United States’ global anticorruption work.

As vice president, Biden invested significant time advocating on behalf of the preservation of Guatemala’s anti-corruption commission, known as CICIG, which initiated cases against hundreds of current or former government officials in the country. Estab-

lished by the UN and funded by the United States and other outside donors, the independent commission's experts investigated the country's entrenched criminal networks and then worked with Guatemalan counterparts to prosecute the graft and other crimes they uncovered. CICIG boasted an 85 percent success rate in resolving cases—its targets included both a sitting president and a sitting vice president—and became the most popular institution in Guatemala. But it was disbanded in 2019 by the Guatemalan government without much protest from the Trump administration. Its domestic renown was but one reflection of the desire of citizens around the world to see corruption and lawlessness investigated by independent bodies, a general principle they should know the United States stands behind.

Under both the Obama and the Trump administrations, the State Department's budget for anticorruption efforts averaged just \$115 million annually. Additional resources should be paired with a directive to U.S. diplomats to raise corruption issues frequently with foreign counterparts and with the designation of a high-profile White House anticorruption coordinator to steer the multiple agencies involved and signal the priority accorded the issue at home and abroad.

### **THE WORLD WHERE IT IS**

These initiatives will not heal a divided nation made more divided by the contentious 2020 election. They will not make foreign leaders or publics forget broken American promises, harmful American policies, or the fact that the United States has had one of the worst

per capita death rates from COVID-19 of any high-income country in the world. And they will not make China any less of a formidable challenger.

What these initiatives can do, however, is meet much of the world where it is: reeling from a deadly pandemic, alienated by the United States' xenophobic turn, and hungering for a form of governance that is accountable to the people. They would also remind the world not of the nebulous "return of U.S. leadership" but of specific U.S. capabilities. These assets, squandered or neglected by Trump, remain core strengths that only the United States has the means to project. 🌐

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# The Crisis Opportunity

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## What It Will Take to Build Back a Better Economy

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*Jason Furman*

**O**n January 20, Joe Biden will walk into the White House as U.S. president facing an economic challenge much like the one he faced when he walked in 12 years ago as vice president. In January 2009, the unemployment rate in the country was 7.8 percent, and as of this writing, it was expected to be similar in January 2021. Then, as now, many small businesses had gone bankrupt, and entire sectors of the economy were severely damaged.

In three important respects, however, the economy will be in a very different position than it was 12 years ago—and it is the differences as much as the similarities that should guide Biden's response. In 2009, the worst of the recession was still to come: the unemployment rate was rising, the stock market was falling, and the sense of day-to-day crisis was palpable. Today, in contrast, the unemployment rate is falling, the stock market is strong, and the country's economic problems, although large, don't have

the house-on-fire character that prevailed back then. Biden's most important and urgent task will still be to stop the COVID-19 pandemic, hasten the recovery, provide relief to households, and foster economic growth through the types of measures that were part of the CARES Act, which Congress passed last March but failed to follow up with new legislation after most of the act's benefits expired over the summer. But Biden will also have substantial space to craft a relief package that is responsive to the country's medium-term challenges—what he calls “building back better.” By doing so, he can go beyond merely addressing today's crisis and establish an enduring legacy that helps the United States better respond to future crises.

Biden will have more economic latitude to undertake this project because of another important difference: the United States will have even more room to maneuver on fiscal policy in 2021 than it did in 2009. This might sound paradoxical, or even wrong, given that the debt in January 2009 was less than 50 percent of GDP but will be around 100 percent of GDP when Biden takes office. The distinction between the two periods is interest rates. In January 2009, the real interest rate on ten-year government debt—the cost of borrowing after accounting for inflation—was roughly two percent. In January 2021, it is likely to be around negative one percent. As a result, even though government debt is higher today, its carrying cost is lower.

The final difference is that the United States was widely blamed for unleashing the 2008 global financial crisis and initially suffered as much as, if not more than, other countries. In the

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current case, the COVID-19 pandemic did not originate in the United States, and the country has suffered less economic damage than many other comparable countries. China has recovered more completely, but if anything, its efforts to claim global leadership have been counterproductive. Given the global goodwill that will come with the arrival a new U.S. president, the United States will have a chance to look not just inward but also outward. A Biden administration should take that opportunity to reinvigorate the cooperative system of global economic governance that the United States created and has led ever since the end of World War II. The crises of worldwide collective action that lie ahead—including climate change and future pandemics—endanger everyone and will require all countries to work together.

### **DISASTER AND RESPONSE**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a massive shock to the global economy. The synchronized shutdown in the first half of 2020 was the largest, fastest, and most comprehensive reduction in economic activity ever witnessed in the modern world. It affected both supply and demand and was costliest for less advantaged households, whose members were the most likely to lose their jobs.

At the same time, however, countries around the world have mobilized massive policy responses, providing cash transfers and other assistance to individuals and businesses at a scale never before seen in peacetime. Governments also unleashed their central banks, which not only cut rates but

also increased credit availability to a wide range of actors. The U.S. response was initially among the largest, with fiscal measures equal to around 13 percent of GDP—comparable to the German response and larger than the reactions of most other countries. U.S. measures have also been highly progressive, disproportionately benefiting the lowest-income households.

One pair of figures captures the massive scale of both the shock and the response: in the second quarter of 2020, the U.S. economy contracted by a record nine percent, but disposable personal income, which includes government transfers such as Social Security payments and unemployment benefits, rose by a record ten percent. For the year as a whole, real disposable personal income per capita is likely to have risen at the fastest rate in over 20 years. Moreover, on average, the lowest incomes have increased even faster—although this average conceals substantial suffering, especially since the additional unemployment benefits created by the CARES Act expired at the end of July 2020. As a result, although the largest employment losses were for low-income workers, the same group appears to have enjoyed the strongest rebound in consumption, helped along by the government support they initially received.

The combination of historic shock and unprecedented policy response has brought the United States close to an economic draw. Early assistance prevented a sustained recession of historic proportions, instead leaving the U.S. economy in what is effectively a moderate to bad recession rather than the depression-scale collapse many



feared. The unemployment rate rose extremely high, but only for a short time. In contrast, the country saw longer stretches of high unemployment in the 1970s and in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The unemployment rate for 2020 will likely average around eight percent—certainly bad, but not one for the economic history books. When the smoke clears, this will probably be only the third- or fourth-worst of the 12 recessions the country has faced since the end of World War II.

This prognosis is brighter than what most analysts feared in the spring. The recovery, however, is in large part due to the substantial policy response to date, and it remains contingent on similar actions going forward. The U.S. economy is far from out of the woods. Economic growth since the initial sharp contraction last spring was the easy part, a partial bouncing back of activity akin to what happens after a natural disaster. Businesses reopen, workers go back to their old lives, and at least in some sectors, the economy resumes from where it left off.

The natural disaster is not over. The number of new COVID-19 cases remains high and continues to rise. The most important economic policy for a full recovery is to end the disaster itself. This means reducing disease transmission through mask use, social distancing, testing, contact tracing, isolating infected people, improving treatments, and, eventually, the wide distribution of a vaccine. Whatever amount of money the government needs to spend to achieve these objectives would easily pass any form of cost-benefit test. The United States can ill afford not to spend

the tens of billions of additional dollars necessary to combat the virus itself.

The economic problems associated with COVID-19 are likely to persist, however, even once the virus itself is under control. In addition to the initial “natural-disaster recession,” which has already begun to taper off, the United States is now suffering a more normal recession linked to high unemployment and reduced purchasing power. The number of unemployed people who were temporarily laid off (which was a result of the natural-disaster recession) has fallen from a high of 18 million in April to nearly three million in September. In contrast, the number of unemployed people who are now permanently laid off (which has to do with the more normal recession) actually rose by almost three million over a similar period.

The good news is that economists and policymakers understand how to treat a normal recession. Yet with the Federal Reserve having done virtually all it can, Biden and Congress need to make another round of fiscal stimulus and family relief their first priority.

### **CONDITIONAL STIMULUS**

One of the lessons that U.S. policymakers learned from the inadequate response in the wake of the Great Recession was that it is critical to do something large. The CARES Act reflected this. It was an impressive and well-timed piece of bipartisan legislation that, in its initial months, provided an astounding 30 percent of GDP in fiscal support. The problem, however, was that the legislation did not reflect the second lesson of the financial crisis: responses to disasters need

to be long-lasting. Instead, the act provided extraordinary support for only about four months. After that, most of its provisions expired, leaving a distressed economy without any assistance and a paralyzed Congress and president unable to agree on action. This was predictable. Just as during the financial crisis, it was easier for parties to come together in the beginning of the disaster, when its effects were most acute. After that, differences over how generous social benefits should be, divergent views of the economy's trajectory and the efficacy of policy, and various political considerations all collided to restore the paralysis that has come to characterize the U.S. political system.

Policymakers must not allow that to happen again. Instead, they should make sure that any future response is both large and long-lasting. No one knows when recessionary conditions might end, so instead of making the policy time dependent, policymakers should make it context dependent; assistance should be a function of the unemployment rate. This means aid would scale up or down automatically with economic conditions and provide hard-hit areas with comparatively more assistance.

Within this overall structure, the administration's biggest priority should be expanding and extending unemployment insurance. About ten million people will likely still be out of work by the time Biden takes office, and the most disadvantaged workers will be disproportionately affected. The constraints on job growth will still be more about the absence of opportunity than any lack of effort on the part of job seekers. Evidence collected by the

JPMorgan Chase Institute, moreover, showed that increased unemployment insurance benefits distributed under the CARES Act worked well. They led to increased spending, which in turn created jobs and supported higher incomes. The \$600 increase in the weekly benefit the bill created made sense in April and May, but it is too large for the more normal recession the country is likely to experience in the coming year. A new program should propose restoring the extra benefit at \$400 per week (or, better yet, at a specific fraction of one's previous wages), an amount that could be scaled down automatically based on the unemployment rate. As that rate falls, policymakers need to ensure that they are incentivizing workers to look for jobs. In addition, any new program should allow people to continue to receive unemployment insurance for an extended period of time.

Despite additional benefits, many households have suffered from hunger and have struggled to pay their rent and other bills. This deprivation has been concentrated among people who have not been receiving unemployment benefits, either because they are not aware of them or because they are not eligible based on their work history or immigration status. To reach such households, the president and Congress should increase available funding for nutritional assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. As with unemployment insurance, the level of extra assistance should taper off if the unemployment rate falls. Policymakers should also consider another round of direct payments to lower-income households,

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similar to the \$1,200 checks provided by the CARES Act. As with expanded unemployment benefits, such measures would have a disproportionately positive impact on the overall economy because they would go to households with a high marginal propensity to consume, that is, a far greater likelihood to spend the money rather than save or invest it.

The next priority should be assistance for state and local governments. Inadequate state and local assistance in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis sliced 0.6 percentage points off the GDP growth rate during the five years that followed. And according to the economist Gabriel Chodorow-Reich, the economic benefit of a stimulus from state and local spending is stronger than any other fiscal measure—with more than \$1.70 added in GDP for every \$1 transferred to states and localities. Moreover, this kind of funding also prevents damaging cuts to education and other programs and would help local leaders address shortfalls in their revenue, pay for emergency measures to better virus-proof their communities and schools, and provide additional assistance to low-income households and small businesses.

Although states entered the pandemic with less debt and larger rainy-day funds than at the onset of the last recession, nothing prepared them for the magnitude of the current crisis. Balanced-budget requirements also make it impossible for many states to spread costs out over several years, so federal assistance is essential.

States have already gotten \$212 billion in assistance, just enough for many of them to cover the last fiscal

year. For most states, however, the current fiscal year began in July 2020, and without additional federal help, they will face a combined shortfall of more than \$200 billion in revenue—a number that does not include emergency costs for the next two years. To fill this gap, the Biden administration and Congress should link the level of federal contributions directed to state Medicaid programs to state unemployment rates. This would allow aid to automatically rise in hard times and fall in good.

This agenda would provide immediate relief to households in need and help states and localities avoid otherwise damaging cutbacks. It would also be an effective fiscal stimulus that could add several percentage points to the growth rate in 2021, bringing the unemployment rate down much more quickly than it would come down without help.

Making such steps permanent would help with the current recession and reduce the severity of future recessions, as well: in good times, aid measures would automatically go away, but in bad times, they would return without the need to wait for Congress to act. This is especially important in the United States, which, by virtue of having a smaller and less progressive fiscal system than other advanced economies, has tended to have relatively small automatic increases to federal spending and more limited tax reductions in response to recessions. This was not a big problem when interest rates were higher; the Federal Reserve could simply cut rates to make up for the absence of fiscal support. But with rates likely to be difficult to cut much further

in the foreseeable future, it will be important to improve automatic stabilizers tied to economic conditions.

### **CONNECTING PEOPLE TO JOBS**

Unemployment insurance, nutritional assistance, and state aid are all proven ways to bolster demand quickly and efficiently. On their own, however, they will likely not be enough. Higher demand is good at getting people back to their old jobs and causing businesses to reopen as they get more customers, but it is less effective at helping people find jobs in new industries and occupations. Finding a long-term solution for this problem—known as “labor reallocation”—will be important in the aftermath of a crisis that could permanently alter many sectors of the economy. The travel industry, for instance, may suffer for years to come. Some activities that have mostly ceased during the pandemic, such as business trips and conferences, may be permanently scaled back in favor of videoconferencing. Many firms have realized that they can make do with fewer employees and will either not bring everyone back or will slowly pare down their existing workforces. Some brick-and-mortar stores may permanently give way to online retail. The disruption to the labor market has been massive: all told, some economists estimate that last April, labor reallocation was more than twice as high as it was in the four years before the pandemic.

This aspect of the pandemic is especially concerning because the U.S. economy never fully recovered from the last crisis. At the beginning of 2019, the economy was 22 percent larger than it was at the onset of the

Great Recession, and the unemployment rate was down to a mere 3.5 percent. Even with these impressive numbers, however, the percentage of men aged 25 to 54 who were employed at the end of 2019 was only 86.6—below the 87.2 percent at the start of the financial crisis. The U.S. economy has had a long-standing problem connecting unemployed workers to jobs, and there has been a 50-year slide in the employment rate for men.

One solution to this problem is to create new jobs in new industries. The most effective tool the federal government can use for that task is a substantial increase in infrastructure investment. The Biden administration should propose spending more than \$1 trillion on traditional projects such as roads and bridges and on a green strategy to increase energy efficiency; expand clean energy, including both nuclear energy and renewables; and harden the economy against natural disasters. Such spending was warranted even before the COVID-19 crisis, but the pandemic has made it even more important. Although it is easy to mock claims about so-called shovel-ready jobs, 52 percent of the funds earmarked for highways in the 2009 Recovery Act were spent within two years, and 81 percent were spent within three years—well ahead of projections. And even if infrastructure investment is unlikely to do much immediate good, the economy and the labor market will need support for many years.

A focus on infrastructure building was, however, better suited to replace the construction jobs lost in 2008 and 2009 than it will be to replace the jobs lost this time around, which were

disproportionately face-to-face service-sector positions. Although economists know less than they would like to about the value of programs for training displaced workers and helping them find new jobs, they do know that community colleges have been very successful and that general funds to help dislocated workers pursue their own training can be effective, as well. Additional funding for these kinds of programs, alongside job-search assistance, would all be worthwhile.

Finally, policymakers should take the long-overdue step of complementing unemployment insurance with a new system of wage insurance. Unemployment insurance insures workers against not being able to find any job; wage insurance insures them against being able to find only a job that pays less than their last one. Such insurance should be available primarily to older workers, who are often unable to get retrained for new jobs. Ideally, it would cover roughly half of one's lost wages for a period of about five years. Such insurance would help motivate unemployed Americans to get back into the job market and would also protect Americans from the dislocations that have come with increased globalization and free trade.

### **BUILDING BACK BETTER**

To truly seize the moment, Biden must go beyond merely seeking to address the pandemic's immediate economic fallout. After all, his slogan "Build Back Better" suggests fixing structural problems that predate the COVID-19 shock and shoring up systemic weaknesses that the crisis has highlighted. Among these are serious

inadequacies in the United States' social safety net. The Affordable Care Act made health insurance accessible to millions of Americans whose employer-provided coverage ended when they lost their jobs during the pandemic. But it was not enough: millions of people were unable to get insurance either because they lived in states that had failed to expand Medicaid or because the program's subsidies were not large enough to cover unaffordably high costs. Although Democrats and Republicans have very different views on health care, the Biden administration needs to find a way to extend coverage, perhaps through a compromise that includes a substantial role for private health insurance companies. Unemployment insurance also played a vital part in protecting households and the economy, but long delays, outdated computer systems, and confusing eligibility determinations exposed longstanding problems that were exacerbated by chronic underfunding. Although temporary patches have helped many Americans get benefits, policymakers need to undertake a full reform of the system. This means more administrative funding, better coverage, and possibly a unified federal program.

The United States went into the pandemic as the only advanced economy in the world without nationwide paid sick leave. In March, policymakers were forced to invent a plan for paid sick leave on the fly, a task that proved difficult amid a pandemic. A new system with mandatory sick days covered by employers and a publicly funded option for longer leave is essential not just during crises but also

for the everyday needs of U.S. workers. It would help foster a more flexible workforce.

Finally, the United States also acted quickly to invent brand-new taxpayer-funded programs, such as the Paycheck Protection Program to help small businesses keep workers on the payroll. Although this succeeded in the short term, a better system would rely more on job-sharing (whereby employers temporarily reduce workers' hours instead of laying them off) and on business-interruption insurance that is paid for in good times by firms themselves. Going forward, the government should study ways to help ensure that the private sector offers such policies, and perhaps it should offer a federally backed version, as well.

### DEBT DILEMMAS

An ambitious agenda of this sort will cost a lot of money. When it comes to immediate and temporary relief, however, economists broadly agree that such programs need not be paid for now. And limiting support due to concerns about debt would directly hurt individuals and families while causing lasting damage to the economy. Even those who normally advocate fiscal rectitude, including the International Monetary Fund and economists such as Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, have urged governments to take a less restrained approach. In the long run, new social insurance programs such as wage insurance, paid leave, and business-interruption insurance should be paid for without increasing the national debt above and beyond its current trajectory. Actively reducing the debt, however, should not be a priority right now—or even necessarily a concern.



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Two years ago, Lawrence Summers and I argued in these pages that Washington had been overly concerned about debt and that, with lower interest rates, the debt was much less costly than previously assumed. If anything, U.S. government debt issuance has had some beneficial effects. It increases the scope for monetary policy and provides support for an economy with chronically low demand. Since we wrote that article, our case has only gotten stronger. Even before the pandemic hit, interest rates were negative in real terms, meaning that the government could pay back debt at a lower cost in the future. As a result, the United States and other countries have had no problem borrowing to respond to the crisis. Even in the extreme case of Japan, which has nearly twice the debt-to-GDP ratio of the United States, high debt has not increased interest rates—removing the conventional reason to be worried. Indeed, the biggest threat the economy faces over the next several years is not the debt itself but political concern—sincere or opportunistic—about the debt.

### **A GLOBAL AGENDA**

Even if Americans had been immune to COVID-19, the effects on other economies around the world would still have been severe enough to cause a recession in the United States. Now, similarly, the country cannot enjoy a strong recovery without much of the rest of the world doing the same, and economic growth has been hit even harder in Europe and Latin America than in the United States. Luckily, however, the pandemic has not turned into a financial crisis, and some of the worst fears about its impact on emerging markets have not

materialized. Nevertheless, the global economy still faces the continuing effects of COVID-19, the likelihood of further financial and political instability, and the possibility of even worse crises in the future.

The world sorely needs U.S. economic leadership. Although Washington has been mostly absent from the global economic stage during the COVID-19 crisis, now is the time for it to reassert itself. In the past, the United States has helped solve systemic crises to its own benefit, including the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. U.S. engagement (without direct American resources) was also crucial to addressing the 2010 eurozone crisis, which strengthened the United States' post-recession recovery.

The most important step is also the easiest: reasserting the U.S. commitment to global governance and institutions. To date, there has been little international coordination on the economic response to COVID-19. Countries around the world, and not just the United States, have largely turned inward to focus on solving their own problems. Instead of coordinating, advanced economies have undertaken so-called correlated actions: they faced a similar menace at a similar time and thus behaved comparably. Although correlated actions have worked relatively well for advanced economies facing similar problems, a full recovery will require additional coordination on fiscal and monetary commitments.

Correlated actions, for example, are completely inadequate when it comes to addressing the debt and capital flow issues plaguing many emerging markets. Their interests and positions are different



from those of more developed economies. Coordination, including debt-service suspensions, debt relief, and, if needed, resources for the International Monetary Fund, will be necessary to help prevent another financial crisis, sustained increases in poverty, and hardship in some developing economies.

Finally, countries will have to solve the tricky issues of global vaccine distribution and the fallout from trade wars over personal protective equipment and medical supplies. Here, Biden should step back from his “Buy American” policies, which are at best ineffective and at worst damaging, since they will raise the costs of U.S. government procurement and weaken the market for American exports to foreign governments. Biden should also move to immediately join COVAX, the global vaccine development, production, and distribution effort in which almost every country in the world is now participating, including every major country except Russia and the United States. Joining would set a tone of moral leadership, one the United States will need to adopt if it hopes to make any progress on other thorny issues, such as international taxation, climate change, and cyberwarfare.

### **LOOKING AHEAD**

The economics of the situation Biden faces will ultimately be the easy part of responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The hard part will be the political challenge of a potentially Republican Senate. In some areas, both sides will have similar goals, and Biden should do everything he can to seize those opportunities. Responding to the immediate economic emergency and infrastructure invest-

ment are two items that Republicans have already expressed interest in. On other issues, Biden may need to compromise more in order to make progress, something he has substantial experience with both as a senator and as vice president. On a host of other topics, however, he will likely need to build a long-term case for policy change.

The biggest difference between Biden’s experience today and the experience of the administration he helped lead in 2009 might be the trajectory of the recovery and its associated political implications. The fiscal, monetary, and financial measures Washington undertook during the last crisis prevented a second Great Depression. But it was hard to make that case when the actual unemployment rate did not fall below 7.8 percent until the end of President Barack Obama’s first term.

Biden’s timing is likely to be better. If he implements anything like the policies he has campaigned on, the recovery will speed up. The natural business cycle and (one hopes) a vaccine will help, as well. This combination should allow Biden to convincingly and correctly argue that his efforts were successful, putting him in a position to build political support for the structural changes he seeks to make. Good timing alone, however, will not be enough. A successful presidency has to start with a good plan. 🌐

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# To Stop a Pandemic

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## A Better Approach to Global Health Security

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*Jennifer Nuzzo*

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic, in the words of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization (WHO), “is a once-in-a-century health crisis.” Indeed, the last public health emergency to wreak such havoc was the great influenza pandemic that began in 1918, which sickened about a third of the world’s population and killed at least 50 million people. But because global conditions are becoming increasingly hospitable to viral spread, the current pandemic is unlikely to be the last one the world faces this century. It may not even be the worst.

The novel coronavirus hit a world that was singularly unprepared for it. Lacking the capacity to stop the spread of the virus through targeted measures—namely, testing and tracing—countries were left with few options but to shut down their economies and order people to stay at home. Those policies worked well enough to slow the growth of cases by late spring. But over

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the summer and into the fall, governments faced pressure to relax those restrictions, and cases rose. On November 4, more than 685,000 new cases worldwide were reported in a single day—then an all-time high. By that point, more than 48 million people had been infected with COVID-19, and more than 1.2 million had died.

The economic and societal effects of the pandemic will linger for decades. Worldwide productivity is expected to have contracted by five percent in 2020. The United States alone has suffered an estimated \$16 trillion cost from lost productivity, premature deaths, and sickness. More than one billion children around the world have had their schooling interrupted. The World Bank has warned that some 150 million additional people will enter the ranks of extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic.

This staggering toll reveals the severe inadequacy of the global systems in place to protect against pandemics. Today’s public health architecture was built for outbreaks and epidemics, but pandemics require a different approach. In outbreaks and epidemics, the spread of disease is geographically limited, so the unaffected countries can, in theory at least, help the affected ones. In a pandemic, however, nearly everyone is hit at once, which means that there is far greater demand on the limited resources of the WHO, the World Bank, and other international organizations. This means that countries have to rely on themselves to stop the spread.

The United States and other countries are rightly focused on recovering from the current crisis, but they need to look past it and focus on preparing for the next one, too. That requires a

fundamental change in the way that countries think about global health security. They have to give the WHO and other international institutions the resources and mandate they need to identify emerging threats and incentivize countries to develop the capacities to contain them. And they have to strike agreements to share data and conduct joint trials, so as to enable a truly global response to a pandemic. Otherwise, the world's response will once again prove to be too little, too late.

### **CONDITIONS FOR CONTAGION**

The emergence of COVID-19 should not have been surprising. Respiratory viruses, including the novel coronavirus behind this pandemic, are often well suited to widespread transmission. Because each infected person can pass the virus to several others, it spreads exponentially until control measures are put in place. Respiratory viruses also tend to have short periods between exposure and contagiousness, which leaves only a narrow window of time to intervene. To make matters worse, they often cause symptoms that look like those of other, more common diseases—and sometimes cause no symptoms at all—creating difficulties in identifying who is infected and who isn't.

Then there is the matter of mortality. Respiratory viruses have a demonstrated potential to cause serious illness and death in a high percentage of cases. The coronavirus that caused the SARS epidemic in 2003 is estimated to have killed ten percent of the people who caught the disease, and the one that has caused outbreaks of MERS since 2012 has killed about 35 percent. Both are respiratory viruses.

Once a pathogen like this emerges and starts spreading locally, if it is not contained quickly, it can easily spread globally. Although there is no single definition of “pandemic,” epidemiologists generally use the word to describe an outbreak of infectious disease that has spread across multiple parts of the globe. Such spread is much easier today, in an era of international travel, mass displacement, migration, and urbanization, all of which allow pathogens to reach new susceptible populations. And the prevalence of chronic diseases, including obesity, makes people more prone to develop serious cases once they are infected.

The H1N1 influenza took only two months from when it was first detected, in April 2009, to circulate around the world—and just a year to kill somewhere between 150,000 and 575,000 people. That pandemic turned out to be just the first in a series of infectious disease emergencies. After H1N1 came the emergence of the deadly coronavirus that causes MERS; the two biggest Ebola epidemics on record, first in West Africa and then in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and the global spread of the once obscure Zika virus. There will be more. Even when accounting for better surveillance, the number of new emerging infectious diseases has increased steadily since 1940. Most of these new pathogens originated in wildlife and jumped to humans—a phenomenon called “spillover,” which is driven by globalization and humans' increasing encroachment on nature.

The emergence of new, worrisome pathogens is to be expected; whether they cause a global pandemic depends

on how the world responds. As the epidemiologist Larry Brilliant once put it, “Outbreaks are inevitable; epidemics are optional.” Even as global conditions empower pathogens, countries and international organizations can take measures to stop outbreaks from becoming epidemics and epidemics from becoming pandemics. But doing so successfully will require changing the way they approach the basic task.

### **PANDEMIC GOVERNANCE**

The International Health Regulations, or IHR, are a set of guidelines first adopted by the WHO in 1969 and strengthened after the 2003 SARS epidemic. A legally binding agreement, the IHR require governments to develop the capacity to respond to outbreaks that have the potential to spread widely, and it gives the director general of the WHO the power to declare a “public health emergency of international concern.” Arguably, the IHR’s greatest strength lies in their requirements for early detection. The regulations establish the expectation that countries will develop the public health capacities necessary to identify and report potential global emergencies. If national governments can quickly detect and notify the WHO of major outbreaks, the logic goes, then the rest of the world has a chance to prevent them from growing.

Yet many countries have failed to fulfill their obligations under the IHR. By 2012, less than a quarter of all WHO members had reported full compliance. Two years later, that fraction had increased only slightly, to just over a third. As was made clear during the West African Ebola epidemic that

began in 2013, the lack of progress is deadly. Delays in detecting an outbreak in Guinea allowed the disease to spread to Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, eventually sickening close to 30,000 people and killing more than 11,000. Only after foreign governments and international organizations sent in personnel to help was the epidemic eventually contained.

In the wake of that episode, several independent commissions concluded that it was not enough for countries to grade themselves on their compliance with the IHR; rigorous external review was needed. In response, the WHO developed a voluntary process for outside evaluation. To date, more than 100 countries have opened themselves up for inspection, although there are some notable exceptions: China, India, and Russia, along with much of western Europe and all of Latin America. And although this process represents an improvement over self-assessment, few countries, even wealthy ones, have taken steps to address the gaps that have been identified.

The WHO’s implementation of its own regulations has also come under scrutiny, particularly its process for determining whether to declare a global public health emergency. During the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, the organization waited until August 2014 to make that declaration, more than four months after the virus had spread internationally and more than eight months after the epidemic likely began. After another outbreak of the disease began in Congo in August 2018, it waited 11 months to do the same, even as the number of deaths exceeded 1,000. When Tedros finally declared the epidemic a global

emergency, he stressed that countries should not respond by implementing travel or trade restrictions, reflecting concerns about the political consequences of making such a designation.

The WHO's judgment was called into question again once COVID-19 started spreading in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019. At meetings on January 22 and 23, the organization declined to declare an emergency, contending that there were insufficient data from China, before reversing course a week later. A week's delay may not have mattered much in terms of the virus's spread, but it suggested something troubling: that the WHO was letting Beijing influence what was supposed to be an independent, science-driven process.

The IHR are also limited by their lack of teeth. The regulations grant the WHO the power to recommend which travel and trade restrictions are necessary and which aren't, but governments often go their own way. As the H1N1 pandemic swept across the United States and Mexico, the WHO issued strong warnings against the use of travel or trade restrictions, contending that they would do little to slow a virus that was already spreading widely across the globe. Nonetheless, China and Russia quarantined planes from North America and banned U.S. pork imports, which likely exacerbated the social and economic toll of the pandemic. Similarly, during the West African Ebola epidemic, more than a third of countries went beyond what the WHO recommended, instituting measures that did nothing to prevent Ebola from coming out of West Africa but did make it harder for doctors and supplies to get in.

When COVID-19 first appeared, the WHO did not recommend travel restrictions, a decision that has been the subject of much controversy since. But the WHO was trying to keep in mind a larger consideration: that the prospect of such restrictions can make countries unwilling to report major outbreaks. When countries respond to reports of new disease outbreaks by penalizing those that first report them, it undermines the IHR's greatest strength: early detection. The later the rest of the world learns of an outbreak, the harder it is to respond. Ideally, countries that honor their obligations to report outbreaks early should be rewarded with help and priority access to resources—not penalized. Yet the IHR offer no such incentives.

The shortcomings brought to light by COVID-19 have led to renewed calls for strengthening the IHR. Tedros himself has called the pandemic “an acid test” for the regulations, and in August 2020, he announced that an independent committee would review them. Upgrading the IHR would not be easy: the last major overhaul came after a decade of debate and was completed only in response to the shock of SARS. Especially in the wake of the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the WHO, countries may decide it's not worth trying to negotiate stronger regulations.

### **GETTING GOVERNMENTS TO ACT**

Ultimately, it's up to sovereign states to prepare for pandemics. The problem, however, is that efforts to motivate action have largely failed. COVID-19 may have caught political leaders by surprise, but health experts had been sounding the alarm for decades, making it clear that a serious pandemic was a matter not of if

but of when. Perhaps the highest-profile of these warnings came in a September 2019 report. The Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, an independent panel convened by the WHO and the World Bank, called a fast-moving, highly lethal pandemic a “very real threat” and urged countries to prepare.

Despite such premonitions, governments dragged their feet in reacting to COVID-19. Many restricted travel from China or otherwise closed their borders, but it was too late: the virus had already leaped across continents. Governments waited weeks and weeks to institute lockdowns at home—a delay that gave the virus crucial time to flourish. Part of the problem may have been the WHO’s reluctance to call COVID-19 a “pandemic.” It was only on March 11 that the organization first used that word to describe the disease. By then, more than 100,000 cases and more than 4,000 deaths had been reported. The label carries no legal significance, so the delay in using “pandemic” to describe the spread of a virus to more than half of the world’s countries was puzzling.

Tedros justified the WHO’s hesitation by making the dubious argument that the word “pandemic” could “cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over, leading to unnecessary suffering and death.” In refusing to use the word for months, the WHO missed a chance to educate the public that the term “pandemic” indicates a disease’s geographic spread, not its severity. It also missed a chance to motivate governments to take preemptive action. In all likelihood, some of them failed to institute lockdowns in part because they did not understand the virus’s transmission potential.

As countries began to grasp the gravity of the unfolding pandemic, they found themselves hindered by inadequate health-care systems. Efforts to “flatten the curve,” such as shut-downs, have been aimed largely at preventing hospitals from becoming overwhelmed by a surge of patients. In the United States, images of overrun intensive care units in Italy spurred politicians into action. The realization that there wasn’t enough personal protective equipment for health-care workers only added to the concern.

Countries were right to fear that their health-care facilities wouldn’t be able to cope with COVID-19. The 2019 Global Health Security Index—published jointly by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security (where I work), the Nuclear Threat Initiative, and the Economist Intelligence Unit—looked at 195 countries and assessed their readiness for an epidemic across six categories. The average score for their health-care systems was 26 out of 100, the lowest average among all the categories. Even rich countries lost the most points in this category.

Yet even though hospitals and clinics play a central role in mitigating or amplifying the toll of public health emergencies, governments have given them short shrift. The WHO, for its part, has issued a list of “core capacities” needed to combat infectious disease outbreaks, but that list excludes the tools needed to deal with serious respiratory illnesses. It doesn’t include the capacity to keep critical government functions working in the face of widespread illness and absenteeism, for example. Nor does it include the capacity to rapidly acquire medicines and

protective equipment when other countries are trying to do the same. COVID-19 has revealed both the fragility of global supply chains and the unequal distribution of medical supplies around the world. Low-income countries, in particular, have suffered a severe shortage of masks, respirators, gloves, gowns, and much else.

### **ON THE LOOKOUT**

COVID-19 has also uncovered the inadequacies of existing efforts to conduct surveillance for pandemic threats. Early on, it was clear that there was no single official source for tracking the spread of the disease in real time, which sent public health researchers scrambling to fill the void. The COVID-19 dashboard set up by my school, Johns Hopkins University, emerged as one of the first places to publish reliable, up-to-date case numbers from around the world. But the very fact that a university website, rather than the WHO, became the go-to source for information about the pandemic's spread exposed the gaping holes in international surveillance. There are no clear expectations that governments should share data about potential pandemics, nor is there a standardized way for them to do so.

A key flaw of surveillance efforts is that they rely on voluntary reports from governments. As COVID-19 took off in Wuhan, the Chinese government delayed sharing information about the number of cases and the ease of transmission, a decision that limited the rest of the world's understanding of the new pathogen. Relying on individual governments to report data in a timely, complete fashion has not worked out well, and nongovernmental sources are often

more reliable: after all, it was the Seattle Flu Study, a project funded by Bill Gates, that first detected community transmission of the novel coronavirus in the United States. Such initiatives should be encouraged. Health-care facilities, for example, should band together to create a global network that shares hospitalization data.

Governments should also pledge to share samples of emerging pathogens. Although Chinese researchers shared early genetic sequencing data from patients infected with the novel coronavirus, they held back samples of the virus. Their reluctance was problematic because scientists need more than genetic specimens to develop vaccines, medicines, and diagnostic tests; they need actual samples of the virus. It would be useful, then, for the world to expand on the method it has employed since 2011 to share samples of avian influenza, a WHO framework known as "pandemic influenza preparedness." Indeed, global pandemics require global responses. With COVID-19, larger, more international trials of medicines and vaccines have fared far better than smaller, unilateral ones. For example, the Solidarity trial, an approximately 12,000-patient study of COVID-19 treatments organized by the WHO, has yielded useful data about which therapeutics work and which don't.

One of the biggest challenges to pandemic preparedness, of course, is funding. Historically, much more money has been spent on responding to epidemics and other emergencies than preparing for them. Making matters worse, the economic toll of the current pandemic will squeeze budgets, as was the case following the recession that

began in 2008. That's why there is an urgent need for new financing mechanisms to fill the gaps in countries' core capacities. One option would be to create a global health security challenge fund, through which donors would agree to match low-income countries' spending on preparedness. Another idea is for the World Bank to encourage the world's poorest countries to use its grants and loans to pay for pandemic preparedness; historically, countries have spent World Bank money on other priorities, only to turn to the bank for emergency funds once an outbreak occurs.

### THE OTHER THREAT

As challenging as COVID-19 has been, there are even worse scenarios out there. The very same scientific advances necessary to develop new therapies and vaccines also raise the possibility of an accidental or deliberate release of a deadly novel pathogen—natural or laboratory-engineered. The harm from such an event could eclipse anything ever seen. A new pathogen could prove more severe than known diseases and resistant to traditional methods of diagnosis and treatment. Moreover, if it were thought to have been released deliberately, then countries' security and intelligence agencies would no doubt spring into action. They would be unlikely to act transparently and share information about the nature of the pathogen. That, in turn, could make it harder for countries to assess their risk and develop evidence-based response plans.

An exercise at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 showed just how unprepared the world is for such a scenario. A key finding was that dealing with natural diseases is hard

enough, but dealing with a deliberate one requires capabilities beyond those found in public health agencies. And there is a distinct lack of clarity about who would be in charge were such a scenario to occur. Although the WHO's mandate includes leading the global response to pandemics of natural origin, it is the UN secretary-general who is empowered to investigate state-sponsored biological attacks. It is far from clear which organization would be responsible for looking into an event that was neither natural nor carried out by a state. Countries need to figure out the division of labor now rather than trying to work it out on the fly during an emergency.

It's impossible to put a number on the probability of an accidental or deliberate release of a new pathogen, but given the enormous consequences, it certainly merits more attention. Working with the private sector and philanthropies, governments should establish norms and safety measures to safeguard biological research and make plans for how to respond if those efforts fail. The goal should be to discourage ill-intentioned governments or people from unleashing a disaster. Of course, as COVID-19 has shown, disasters do not require malevolence. A lack of preparation is enough. 🌐



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# The Reconstruction of America

## Justice, Power, and the Civil War's Unfinished Business

David W. Blight

In 1882, Walt Whitman, the American poet of democracy and nearly everything else in the human spirit, worried that his book *Specimen Days*, compiled from jottings, diaries, and memorandums written during and after the Civil War, would be read as nothing but a “batch of convulsively written reminiscences.” But he decided to publish it anyway. The writings were “but parts of the actual distraction, heat, smoke and excitement of those times,” Whitman admitted. “The war itself, with the temper of society preceding it, can indeed be best described by that very word *convulsiveness*.”

The American Civil War was a tragedy of cataclysmic proportions. Some 750,000 combatants and other military personnel perished on the battlefield and from disease. Great political, constitutional, and economic transformations followed from the results of the struggle. The American experiment died but was then reborn. The republic tore itself asunder over slavery and conflicting views of the federal Union. After unimaginable

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slaughter, the United States experienced a second founding of its polity and its constitution. Nearly everything had changed. The Civil War, wrote the southern poet and essayist Robert Penn Warren in 1961, is the country’s “felt history,” the past “lived in the national imagination.” It draws Americans, he said, “as an oracle, darkly unriddled and portentous, of national as well as personal fate.” Americans still contemplate its enduring influence in classrooms, in jurisprudence, in scholarship, in elections, and in the public square.

Today, Americans are polarized in a cold civil war. Many core questions of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era remain unresolved: Who is an American? What is equality, and how should it be established and protected? What is the proper relationship between states and the federal government? What is the role of government in shaping society? Is federalism a strength or a weakness?

In November, the United States held a presidential election that inspired record turnout, but many Americans legitimately worry that some of the country’s basic institutions are broken. One political tribe has to fight constant efforts to suppress the right to vote; the other tribe cries voter fraud without evidence. The federal enforcement of voting rights, once a matter of settled law, is now a free-for-all in the courts. The Senate and the Electoral College are undemocratic institutions by any contemporary measure. The Supreme Court is more politicized than at any time in nearly a century. The idea of equality before the law has become as fiercely controversial as it was when it debuted in the Constitution in amend-



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ments that followed the Civil War. President Donald Trump turned the White House into a vehicle for authoritarianism and personal corruption, shattering norms and creating a level of chaos unrivaled in U.S. history since the crisis sparked by the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson in 1868. Meanwhile, the ideology of white supremacy, always waiting in the wings of the American consciousness, has experienced a potent and violent resurgence on the political right.

These echoes of Reconstruction abound and will shape the coming era. If there are any lessons that Americans should take from that troubled time, they are that when it comes to protecting basic rights, there is no substitute for federal power, and that in the wake of national crises, healing and justice must be pursued together—which is no small feat.

### HELL ON EARTH

The most stark and immediate legacy of the Civil War was loss. From his three years of working in hospitals, caring for suffering and dying soldiers, Whitman weighed that loss in anguished terms. Civil War prisons, he wrote, could find comparison only in “Dante’s pictured hell.” He evoked the lonely passing of those slain in battle but left unburied: “Somewhere they crawl’d to die, alone, in bushes, low gullies, or on the sides of hills—(there, in secluded spots, their skeletons, bleach’d bones, tufts of hair, buttons, fragments of clothing, are occasionally found yet).”

Some of the country’s best writers wondered if there could be any meaning at all in the trenches filled with corpses. The writer Ambrose Bierce, a badly wounded veteran of the Union army,

was haunted all his life by what he called “phantoms of that blood-stained period.” Death on the battlefield, he wrote, was “not picturesque, it had no tender or solemn side—a dismal thing, hideous in all its manifestations and suggestions.” The poet Emily Dickinson saw the mounting dead in her imagination: “And then I hated Glory / And wished myself were They.”

In the roiling contest over the memory of the war that took place in the decades that followed it, most Americans would come to prefer more sentimental narratives: stories of unquestioned valor on both sides, tales of sacrifice and reconciliation in which no one was wrong and everyone could be right. But an assault on the dignity and rights of Black people became the terrible price paid for sectional reunion. A racially segregated society would demand and forge a segregated memory of the struggle that ended slavery.

The fall of the Confederacy and the second founding embodied in the constitutional amendments of the Reconstruction era, which lasted from 1863 to approximately 1877, could not banish racism and neoslavery in the United States or solve the inherent challenges of federalism. In the decades that followed, despite technological and social progress, it remained the case that racial and ethnic strife were often easier to foment and more politically useful than democracy.

### RADICALISM AND RESISTANCE

In his first annual message to Congress, delivered on December 3, 1861, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln expressed his hope that the Civil War would “not degenerate into a violent and remorse-

less revolutionary struggle.” At that point, he still hoped to limit the North’s aims to preserving the Union, rather than expanding the mission to include ending slavery. Just over three years later, in his second inaugural address, Lincoln—who by then commanded a war machine that officially sought abolition—admitted that now “all knew” that slavery was, in fact, “the cause of the war.” He declared that both sides had “looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding.” Then, with a chastened sense of tragedy and firm purpose, he acknowledged that the war had brought about the very revolutions that he and many others had tried to avert. The extended crises that followed, and the lasting markers of what those revolutions meant, are what became known as Reconstruction.

After Confederate forces surrendered in 1865, most of the armies of the United States and the Confederacy disbanded. But varying degrees of military occupation lasted for around three years across much of the South, and in some areas until 1871. As the historian Gregory Downs notes in his book *After Appomattox*, in the early years of Reconstruction, the federal government enacted an “ideologically and spatially ambitious occupation” of the conquered South. But the politics of restoring the Union and extending basic human rights to freed slaves became war by other means. Without any blueprint, members of Congress in the Republican Party—in particular, a faction known as the Radical Republicans—adopted an aggressive vision of using activist government to remake the South and the rest of the country. The

lesson of their efforts was clear: true freedom can be forged and protected only by the state, by law enforcement, and sometimes by military means.

The Radical Republicans, who were ascendant in Washington in 1866–68, made revolutionary strides for racial equality by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the first statutory definition of citizenship rights in U.S. history, and by pushing forward the 14th and 15th Amendments. The 14th Amendment enshrined birthright citizenship and equality before the law in the Constitution, and the 15th Amendment extended voting rights to Black men. The Radical Republicans sought to root out the causes of the Southern rebellion and dismantle its leadership and to create a new political order. They crafted the four Reconstruction Acts, passed in 1867 and 1868, which divided the defeated Confederate states into five military districts and established new governments in all of them. The result was an experiment in multiracial democracy. Black men embraced the right to vote as a sacred act; in 1868, their support was a crucial factor in the victory of the Republican candidate for president, Ulysses S. Grant. More than 1,500 Black men were elected to state and local offices during Reconstruction across the South, and 16 won seats in the U.S. Congress. The Republican regimes in the South, while they lasted, fostered the region’s first public schools, democratized political institutions in the former slave states, and in limited ways tried to redistribute property to freed slaves.

This agenda put the Radical Republicans on a collision course with Johnson, who, after replacing the martyred

Lincoln, pushed for a lenient vision of Reconstruction based on the protection of states' rights, white supremacy, and a decidedly nonrevolutionary approach to the remaking of the federal Union. His slogan was "the Union as it was, the Constitution as it is." In practice, this meant that as long as former Confederate states renounced secession and ended slavery (however reluctantly), they could swiftly regain full statehood without having to confer any civil or political rights on freed slaves. Johnson envisioned a postwar order in which former slaves would transition into permanent serfdom, destined for labor but no independent economic life and no place in politics. He resisted radical Reconstruction by vetoing nearly every act passed by the Republicans in Congress. But Republican success in the midterm elections of 1866 gave them a veto-proof legislature, and they overrode most of Johnson's vetoes.

Johnson's continued obstructionism, obstinate personal behavior, and virulent racism led to his impeachment in early 1868. Owing to a complex set of deals and votes, as well as the Republicans' use of a law of dubious constitutionality, Johnson was not convicted and removed from office. By the spring of 1868, the Republicans did not want to be tarnished as the party of impeachment (an unpopular position then, after so many years of strife), nor did they want to hurt Grant's chances in the election that fall.

#### **RETREAT FROM RECONSTRUCTION**

That Reconstruction did not ultimately succeed proves only that revolutions, even those firmly grounded in law,

always prompt counterrevolutions. By 1870, all of the ex-Confederate states had been readmitted to the Union. But in the South, the Democratic Party revived itself by clinging to an ideology of white supremacy, stoking embittered war memories, and deploying violence through the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist groups. In time, these revanchist forces defeated Reconstruction on the ground. In the 1870s, white Southerners "redeemed" their states, their societies, and especially their control over the racial order. Several thousand African Americans, as well as some white Republicans, were assaulted, tortured, or murdered, especially when they attempted to vote. In 1873, a paralyzing economic depression hit the country, leading to a national retreat from Reconstruction. Numerous corruption scandals tarnished the Grant administration, limiting its leverage. Meanwhile, as the war receded, the Republican Party began to change, leaving behind its abolitionist, egalitarian roots and aligning itself with big business and railroad interests. By the late 1870s, the Republicans were the party of low taxes and high tariffs.

These political changes were accompanied by demographic and economic shifts. In the wake of the war, immigration surged; three million new immigrants entered the country between 1865 and 1873. In the South, whites violently and successfully opposed efforts to distribute land to freed slaves. By 1868, a new system of tenant farming and sharecropping had emerged. In a cash-poor economy with few sources of credit, millions of former slaves, as well as some poor whites, became mired in

dependency, working “on halves”—giving half of their crop to a landlord and using the other half to try to feed their families and acquire goods from “furnishing merchants,” whose extortive practices usually forced farmers into a dead end of debt. By the 1890s, roughly 20 percent of former slaves and their descendants owned some land or other property, but the vast majority possessed no real hope of material independence, as their political liberty was slowly crushed.

Meanwhile, an emerging alliance between big business and the political class began to stifle some of the victories won by the emancipation revolution, as financial scandals distracted Republicans and the country from the cause of equal rights. Railroads, built with ample federal subsidies, became the symbol of the dawning age of American industrial capitalism. By the end of the century, for the first time in U.S. history, nonagricultural workers outnumbered farmers and wage earners outnumbered independent artisans.

As poor Blacks and whites in the South found farming less and less tenable, they moved to cities, and especially new mill towns. With investments from Northern capitalists, textile mills grew steadily all across the former Confederacy. As one North Carolina evangelical preacher shouted, “Next to God, what this town needs is a cotton mill!” In 1860, the South had some 10,000 mill workers. By 1880, that number had grown to 16,700; by 1900, it was 97,500. In this way, the so-called New South bred not only a system of racial apartheid but also a vulnerable new class of wage earners in an industrializing economy.

## **THE DISPOSSESSED**

Racial strife and economic transformations played out vividly in the American West, as well. The Indian Wars between 1860 and 1890 left a trail of blood and agony across many landscapes; in a sense, the Civil War did not end in 1865. From 1860 to 1864, the Navajos of Arizona fought white incursions into their lands; defeated and starving, their houses and livestock destroyed, they were forced in “the Long Walk” to a reservation in New Mexico. At the Sand Creek massacre in Colorado in 1864, an entire Cheyenne village was slaughtered by the state militia. The most famous battle of the Indian Wars took place along the Little Bighorn River in southern Montana in June 1876, just before the United States was to celebrate the centennial of its independence. There, Lakotas and Cheyennes, led by Chiefs Rain-in-the-Face, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse, surrounded and annihilated 256 U.S. cavalry troops under the command of the Civil War veteran George Custer. But it was a Pyrrhic victory for the Native American people of the Upper Plains, one that provoked a brutal counterstrike. By 1879, 4,000 U.S. troops forced the surrender of the Utes in western Colorado and in effect requisitioned their ancestral lands. In California, white ranchers and farmers often forced Native Americans into captive labor; some practiced “Indian hunting,” treating the indiscriminate slaughter of Native Americans as a murderous sport. By 1880, 30 years of such violence had left an estimated 4,500 indigenous people dead.

The dispossession of Native American peoples across the West resulted

from ecological as well as human conquest. Indigenous groups depended on buffalo in the Great Plains, on sheep-herding in the Southwest, and on salmon fisheries in the Northwest. By seizing lands and expanding railroads, white settlers threatened all three livelihoods. In 1820, there were some 25 million buffalo on American soil; by the 1880s, there were just a few hundred. Washington made treaties with tribes but routinely violated them.

Other, less overt forms of dispossession took a toll on Native Americans, as well. The federal government instituted a reservation system and established a “reform” policy of separating Native American children from their families and educating them in Christian schools, hoping to break their identification with their tribes and prepare them to become property-owning farmers. But the limits on such assimilation were clear: Supreme Court decisions in 1884 and 1886 defined Native Americans as wards of the state, denying them the right to become U.S. citizens and therefore all the protections of the 14th and 15th Amendments.

### **THERE IS NO ARC OF HISTORY**

Among all the enactments of Reconstruction, none embodies its lasting significance better than those two amendments, which spun a tenuous web of possibility for the American ideal of equality. Both were products of political compromise; their lack of specificity meant they would be perpetually open to interpretation. But as the historian Eric Foner writes in *The Second Founding*, “ambiguity creates possibilities. . . . Who determines which of a range of possible meanings is

implemented is very much a matter of political power.” Indeed, that is the legacy of Reconstruction’s “Second Constitution”: a series of never-ending fights over race and federalism.

Today, Americans live in a country forged by Reconstruction and remade again by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the profound social movements that forced their passage. Pluralism and equality were born and reborn in those two revolutions, which took place a century apart. But the events of recent years, especially during the Trump era, serve as a reminder that no change is necessarily permanent and no law can itself protect Americans from their own worst impulses: racism, nativism, authoritarianism, greed. The past few years have revealed the potency of sheer grievance, whether born of genuine economic travail or ludicrous conspiracy theories. It should be clear to all now that history does not end and is not necessarily going to any particular place or bending in an inevitable arc toward justice or anything else.

Some of the convulsions of the Civil War and Reconstruction advanced the American experiment, and some set it back. Whitman worried that the “real war will never get in the books” and that its “undream’d of depths of emotion” and the “infinite dead” would be forgotten. His fear was misplaced: poets have chronicled the war and its toll, scholars have searched and found Whitman’s “convulsiveness,” historians have written its great and terrible story. Americans, however, have not yet solved the most profound questions the era left in its wake, and their country is now in desperate need of another remaking. 🌐





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# Monopoly Versus Democracy

## How to End a Gilded Age

### *Zephyr Teachout*

**T**he so-called Gilded Age in the United States began with the Compromise of 1877, which settled the disputed presidential election of 1876 by awarding the White House to the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops from three Southern states. In the short term, the compromise effectively ended Reconstruction. In the longer term, it empowered white terrorists in the South and led to a major realignment in U.S. politics that weakened the federal government's ability to govern the "Money Power," the term used by critics at the time to describe the forces that were steadily taking over markets and political systems.

By 1900, one percent of the U.S. population owned more than half of the country's land; nearly 50 percent of the population owned just one percent of it. Multimillionaires, who made up 0.33 percent of the population, owned 17 percent of the country's wealth; 40 percent of Americans had no wealth at all. Black men had been violently and systematically deprived of the hard-won right to vote in the South, where authorities had thrown up every possible

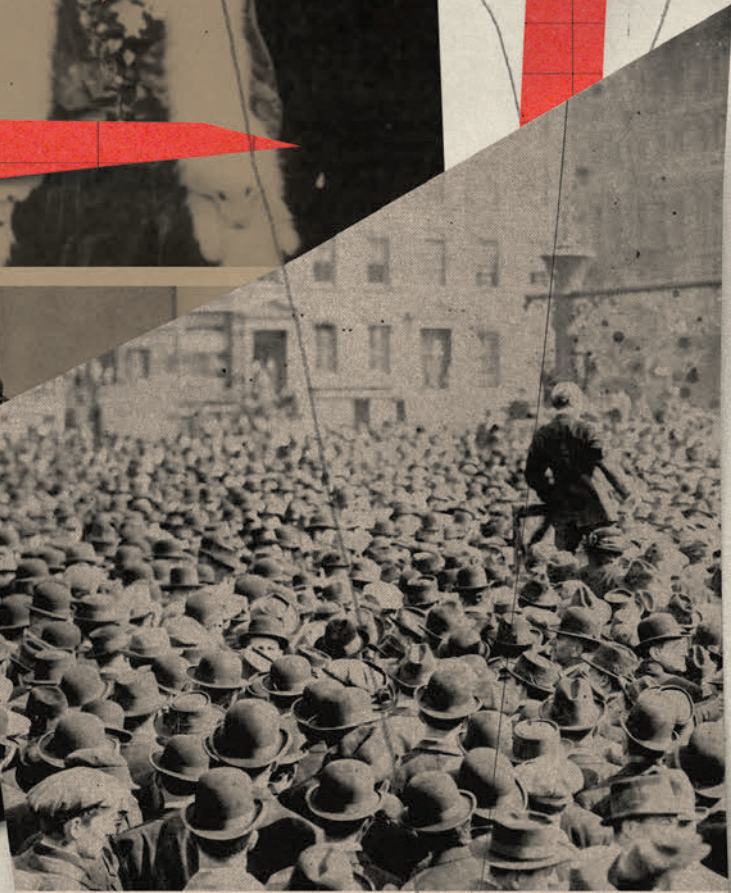
barrier—literacy tests, poll taxes, gerrymandering, grandfather clauses—to prevent the restoration of Black political rights and the growth of Black economic power. After a quarter century, it had become impossible to see these outcomes as aberrations: monopolization and repression had come to define the American system.

The president was William McKinley, a Republican. Both his 1896 and his 1900 campaigns were fueled by large corporate donations collected by his chief strategist, "Dollar Mark" Hanna. John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company alone kicked in a direct contribution to McKinley's first campaign equal to more than \$7 million in today's dollars. The resulting war chest allowed McKinley to outspend his populist Democratic rival, William Jennings Bryan, by a factor of 20. Rockefeller was one of a handful of men who controlled the monopolies that had come to dominate virtually every sector of the newly industrialized economy. Men such as Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, and J. P. Morgan had built up power by acquiring a foothold in various markets and then destroying or buying out their competitors. These magnates defended their dominance by claiming they merely represented new, more efficient systems and technologies. They had enormous access to capital, with a long leash from creditors on Wall Street.

At all levels of government and in every part of the country, these "robber barons" used their tremendous wealth to stop or avoid regulations and subvert the democratic process. Their most memorable invention was the trust, a legal entity that allowed them to hold power in multiple companies. To create

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trusts, they had to get around certain state laws, and so they played U.S. states against one another, driving a race to the bottom as states rushed to attract their capital by changing the rules to allow for more and more corporate concentration.

But throughout the Gilded Age, American society was beginning to change in ways that would eventually challenge the robber barons and the political class they controlled. Massive shifts were underway in the country's labor force and demographics. In 1880, fewer than three million American women worked; by 1910, that number would triple, and the women's labor movement organized some of the first industrial strikes and successfully pushed for major reforms. During the 1880s, as agriculture declined and the pace of industrialization quickened, as many as 40 percent of rural towns lost population. Meanwhile, cities were growing rapidly. Immigrants were arriving in massive numbers—20 million between 1880 and 1914, at first mostly from northern European countries and later predominantly from southern Europe. The new arrivals established political clubs, institutions, and machines, remaking the electorate.

As the robber barons decorated their palaces and mused about their public responsibilities, slums and tenements were rife with disease, farmers struggled under crushing debts, and factory workers and miners risked death and dismemberment to eke out a living. Meanwhile, the chorus of dissent that had been rising since the 1870s grew louder, as farmers, factory workers, antitrust leagues, labor unions, and local-level politicians joined forces.

Three groups emerged as the main opponents of the status quo: the populists, the progressives, and the socialists. What all three realized, to varying degrees, was that the root of the inequalities of the Gilded Age was the extreme concentration of market share, wealth, and political power. American socialism fell short as a political force, but the Populist and Progressive movements—which overlapped and merged in important ways—became powerful vectors of change.

The parallels with the present day are obvious, and it has become commonplace to hear the current era described as a new Gilded Age. As the journalist Barry Lynn points out in his book *Liberty From All Masters*, the robber barons shared with today's high-tech monopolists a strategy of encouraging people to see immense inequality as a tragic but unavoidable consequence of capitalism and technological change. But as Lynn shows, one of the main differences between then and now is that, compared to today, fewer Americans accepted such rationalizations during the Gilded Age. Today, Americans tend to see grotesque accumulations of wealth and power as normal. Back then, a critical mass of Americans refused to do so, and they waged a decades-long fight for a fair and democratic society. On the other hand, today's antimonopoly movements are intentionally interracial and thus avoid a massive failure of the populists and progressives of the late Gilded Age, who abandoned Black Americans even though they had played a crucial role in fostering both movements.

Over time, the ultrarich and the many well-compensated professionals who are always available to do their

bidding chipped away at the progress that the Populist and Progressive movements achieved. Today's populists and progressives would do well to remember what are perhaps the most important lessons of those limited victories: the struggle against inequality is primarily a fight against monopoly power in its many guises, and because monopoly power is never race-neutral, that fight cannot truly succeed unless it does so in an inclusive way.

### **PEOPLE POWER**

Of the three main forces challenging the Gilded Age status quo, the populists emerged first, beginning in the 1870s. Their movement was concentrated in the South and the Midwest but was not monolithic: there were Black and white populists, urban and rural populists, and populists from different faith traditions. All shared a set of core goals: loosening monetary policy, strengthening interstate industrial regulation, breaking up the trusts, allowing the direct election of U.S. senators, and establishing a national income tax. In an alliance with the last remnants of the Radical Republican faction, the driving force behind the expansion of rights during the Reconstruction era, the populists successfully pushed through several pieces of legislation. The first was a national campaign finance reform law, the Pendleton Act of 1883, which outlawed many forms of political patronage. Next came the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, the first federal law regulating the monopolistic practices of the railroad industry and forbidding railroads from treating different users of its service differently. The Sherman Act of 1890 was the first federal

antitrust law, although it was quickly gutted by the Supreme Court. In 1894, Congress established the first peacetime federal income tax—but it met an even harsher fate, as it was struck down altogether by the Supreme Court.

After crushing electoral defeats and infighting, the Populist movement faded in the early twentieth century, but the core of its antitrust agenda was absorbed by the leaders and organizers of the Progressive movement. Compared with the populists, the early progressives were a less socioeconomically and geographically diverse lot; most tended to come from upper-class urban Protestant backgrounds. They sought to combat the excesses of the Gilded Age by making government more efficient, meritocratic, and transparent. They wanted to reshape American society and restore the American soul through cleanliness, purity, moral uprightness, and charity. They decried slums, party bosses, and drinking and advocated the rapid assimilation of immigrants and the expansion of public education.

The merger of populism and progressivism was never total, and as a result of lingering tensions, two distinct strains of progressivism emerged. Populist progressives bore a deep distrust of concentrated, unregulated private power and believed it was incompatible with democracy. Elite progressives were more likely to worry only about monopolies that were clearly involved in price fixing or corruption scandals, but not about ones that distorted markets or political systems through entirely legal means. Along these lines, Theodore Roosevelt, a leading elite progressive, distinguished between “good trusts” and “bad trusts.”

The much smaller American socialist movement had been a part of the Populist movement in the nineteenth century and then emerged as a distinct political party in the first decade of the twentieth. Socialists looked at the concentration of wealth and power and concluded that the only way forward was state ownership of most major industries. The Socialist Party had a small but committed base: Eugene Debs, a labor organizer who became a socialist in prison after being convicted for his role in the massive Pullman strike of 1894, ran for president five times between 1900 and 1920 and won six percent of the vote in 1912. But the party never took off, in part because the major labor unions didn't embrace it and in part because the structure of the U.S. electoral system purposely limits the influence of third parties.

### **INCOMPLETE VICTORIES**

Between the end of Reconstruction and the U.S. entry into World War I in 1917, populism, progressivism, and socialism were in constant dialogue at every level of government. They were also frequently at odds with other schools of thought, such as corporatism, which celebrated the growing size of big companies as a sign of progress and efficiency and held that although minor tweaks might be necessary, government-aligned industry was the key to growth.

The most clarifying political moment of the era came with the 1912 presidential election, when corporate concentration was explicitly on the ballot. Debs, the Socialist candidate, proposed nationalizing big industries. The Republican candidate, William Taft, defended the status quo, pledging to prosecute egregiously abusive trusts but forswearing any fundamental change.

Roosevelt, who had served as president as a Republican from 1901 to 1909, failed to secure his party's nomination this time around and ran instead as the candidate of the Progressive Party, advocating a top-down alliance between government and business that he called "the New Nationalism." Roosevelt had made his name as a trustbuster. But by 1912, despite the name of his party, he had become a full-throated corporatist. The Democratic candidate, Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey, adopted something closer to a populist approach in an agenda he called "the New Freedom," which focused on systematically decentralizing private power and more extensively regulating industry.

Wilson won decisively, with 435 Electoral College votes. He quickly moved to put his antimonopoly vision into action. Among the most consequential steps he took was to sign into law the Clayton Act of 1914, which toughened antitrust regulations. As Lynn relates in his book, Wilson sent the pen that he had used to sign the bill into law to Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor, the most important labor union in the country. Both men understood that labor policy and antitrust policy were two sides of the same coin: pro-labor laws made it easier for workers to unionize, and antitrust laws made it harder for capitalists to collude with one another and abuse workers. Gompers called the Clayton Act "Labor's Magna Carta."

This victory, however, was incomplete. Although Wilson's antimonopoly agenda benefited workers of all races,

his presidency failed to advance the cause of racial justice. In the 1912 election, W. E. B. Du Bois, a leading Black intellectual, had broken with the tradition of Black alignment with the Republican Party to back Wilson. Du Bois, whose book *Black Reconstruction* is a classic of antimonopolism, chose Wilson in part because of his pledge to take on the trusts and in part because of Roosevelt's open racism. (Wilson's own deep-seated racial prejudices were slightly less public.) But Du Bois was left bitterly disappointed when Wilson, after winning the election, shut out Black leaders from key posts and embraced segregation.

Wilson was hardly alone: during those years, white populists, progressives, and labor leaders broadly abandoned Black citizens. For the first 20 years of the Gilded Age, it seemed possible that cross-racial organizing would be successful. Black agrarian populists represented an independent political force in the South, and they worked with their white counterparts. The early American Federation of Labor welcomed Black and white workers. The Republican Party had once embraced Black voters. Wilson had also promised a home for them, and for a brief moment, it looked like the Democratic Party of 1912 might serve as one. But it all came to naught: when confronted with the challenge of building a multiracial coalition, populists and progressives shrank from the task, embracing first helplessness, then racism, and finally segregation—preferring, in the end, to keep the support of white southern Democrats, in a prelude to the dynamic that, years later, would limit the reach of the New Deal.

## **THE PUBLIC GOOD**

Like their forebears in the early twentieth century, today's Americans have experienced decades of growing inequality and increasing concentrations of wealth and power. The last decade alone witnessed nearly 500,000 corporate mergers worldwide. Ten percent of Americans now control 97 percent of all capital income in the country. Nearly half of the new income generated since the global financial crisis of 2008 has gone to the wealthiest one percent of U.S. citizens. The richest three Americans collectively have more wealth than the poorest 160 million Americans. In most industries, a few companies control the field, dictating terms, squeezing out competitors, and using differential pricing to extract cash and power. Three companies control digital advertising, four companies dominate beef packing, and an ever-shrinking number own the country's hospitals. To turn back this monopolistic tide, today's populists and progressives should focus on the priorities that drove their forebears: breaking up companies that have become too big (or reclassifying them as public utilities) and making it harder for wealth to buy political influence by strictly limiting campaign contributions.

During the Gilded Age, farmers and workers facing abusive trusts had a problem: certain services worked better when they were national in scope, and there was value in a broad user base. City transit, water delivery, and national railroads needed to be unified, or at least not wholly decentralized. But centralized private power erodes democracy and creates inequality. Populists and progressives solved this problem by

applying the ancient principle of “common carriage” to the modern industrial state. Common carriage holds that certain industries serve essential public functions and should be regulated in the public interest—that is, forced to charge reasonable and fixed rates and prohibited from discriminating between purchasers. Gilded Age organizers demanded that the big networked industries be subject to such regulation or be nationalized. For both highly regulated and state-owned industries, they often used the phrase “public utility.” They applied that framework to a wide range of goods and services that were important to society but could not be easily or effectively provided in a decentralized way, such as water, electricity, gas, the telegraph, and transportation. Antimonopolists today are using this same approach, pursuing a blend of breakups and public-utility regulation—demanding, for instance, that Amazon treat all sellers in its marketplace equally and also insisting that Amazon’s marketplace be split from its warehouses and its warehouses split from one another, so that their workers have a chance to unionize.

During the Gilded Age, populists, progressives, socialists, and even some corporatists clamored for campaign finance reform—and they made a good deal of progress. In 1907, the Tillman Act banned corporate donations to election campaigns. Three years later, Congress passed the Federal Corrupt Practices Act, which created the first requirement for federal-level candidates to disclose their sources of funding. That was followed by further limits on contributions. The impact of these steps was immediate and long-lasting:

on a per capita basis, campaign contributions to candidates for federal office plummeted. Only in recent decades, in fact, have corporate campaign expenditures reached the levels that characterized the Gilded Age. These steps on campaign finance exemplified the populist-progressive nexus: populists in the South and the West supported them because they loathed the grinding power of big corporations; urban progressives backed them because they opposed sinful, wasteful, and corrupt behavior; and elected officials had no choice but to embrace them thanks to that bottom-up support.

In the decades that followed, however, organized money found ways to hollow out these limits. Today, money floods American politics like never before: according to the Center for Responsive Politics, political campaigns spent a total of \$14 billion in the 2020 U.S. election. To combat this scourge, today’s activists need to go much further than their Gilded Age predecessors and push for full public financing of all campaigns at the federal level.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

This agenda will require a new populist-progressive movement. That prospect seems less far-fetched than it might have just a few years ago. Today, small-business owners and warehouse workers are joining forces in new grassroots groups that are taking on today’s monopolies and putting the plight of nonwhite people front and center. One such organization is Athena, a diverse, multiracial coalition whose nonwhite leaders argue that Amazon has been particularly abusive to Black workers and has had particu-



larly damaging effects on minority-owned businesses. Meanwhile, national political figures such as Senator Bernie Sanders, a Democratic-aligned independent from Vermont, and Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, regularly rail against abusive monopolists, as do many other Democratic members of Congress and state attorneys general. David Cicilline, a Democratic U.S. representative from Rhode Island and the chair of the House Antitrust Subcommittee, recently wrapped up a remarkable 16-month-long investigation into Big Tech, gathering over a million documents, interviewing hundreds of experts (including me), and calling the chief executives of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google to testify before Congress. The resulting report calls for “structural separation,” or the breaking up, of Big Tech companies; nondiscrimination regimes for companies that have big network effects (a form of public-utility regulation); the overturning of harmful court decisions; and the enforcement of existing laws against abusive behavior—a regulatory agenda that could easily be extended beyond Big Tech.

Also important is the way in which the report frames monopoly power as the root of inequality and a threat to democracy. “American democracy has always been at war against monopoly power,” Cicilline said at a committee hearing last July. He noted that Big Tech platforms, like the trusts of the Gilded Age, “enjoy the power to pick winners and losers, shake down small businesses, and enrich themselves while choking off competitors. Their ability to dictate terms, call the shots, upend entire

sectors, and inspire fear represent the powers of a private government.”

Antitrust has the potential to bridge the partisan divide that has paralyzed U.S. politics in the past decade. Recent polls have shown high levels of support for trustbusting among Republicans. And a number of GOP members of Congress enthusiastically participated in Cicilline’s investigation. In the end, they issued a separate report, mostly agreeing with the Democratic majority report’s diagnoses but stopping short of endorsing its prescriptions. Most Republican leaders have done little more than use populist language; none has stepped up to support antitrust actions. That could change, however, if their voters become more focused on the issue.

Standing in the way of a new populist-progressive antimonopoly movement will be elite politicians and their deep-pocketed corporate backers. Another impediment will be an incrementalist tendency among contemporary progressives. Excessive concentration of wealth and power is not an isolated issue that can be dealt with via modest reform; it is the operating system of the contemporary United States, and it needs to be fully overwritten. Bottom-up anger and a thirst for more democracy could overcome these obstacles—but only if today’s activists avoid the errors of the Gilded Age reformers who abandoned their Black allies. Today’s populist-progressives should not minimize the connection between concentrated wealth and racial injustice—they should highlight it, and foster a broad, multiracial coalition. If they fail to do so, any victories they win against today’s robber barons will prove hollow, and the cause of democracy will be set back once again. 🌐

# Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

## The Lessons of the New Deal

*Meg Jacobs*

**I**n the summer of 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt flew to Chicago to accept the Democratic Party's nomination for president. His campaign theme song, "Happy Days Are Here Again," rang out in the arena where the convention was being held, but few there would have agreed with the song's chirpy lyrics: "The skies above are clear again." One in four Americans was out of work, and millions more were enduring wage cuts. Hundreds of thousands were homeless. Disease was on the rise, especially in African American communities, where the prevalence of tuberculosis was five times as high as it was in white communities. Mob violence was spiking, too, with Black men and labor organizers the most frequent victims. In his acceptance speech at the convention, Roosevelt, then governor of New York, promised a way out of the national crisis—"a new deal for the American people."

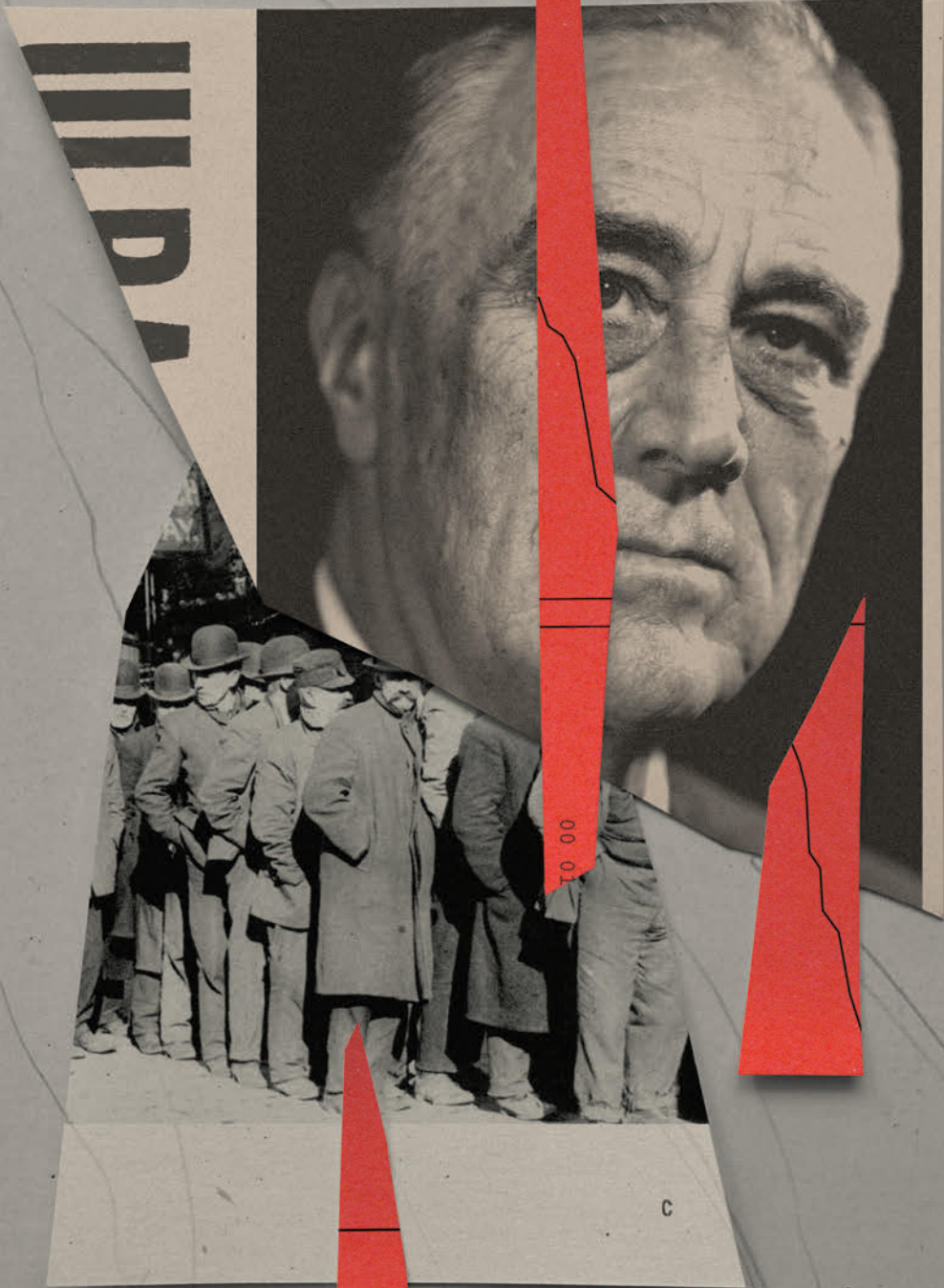
Weeks later, his opponent, President Herbert Hoover, doubled down on his failed approach to the Depression. Tens of thousands of impoverished World War I veterans had set up a shantytown

**MEG JACOBS** is a Senior Research Scholar at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs.

in Washington, D.C., to petition Congress for an advance of the bonuses they were due to receive for their service. The idea of paying the veterans had some support in Congress, but not enough, and even less in the White House. The president opposed any kind of federal relief—"prosperity cannot be restored by raids on the public treasury," he liked to say—and soon he ordered the U.S. Army to clear out the camps. Soldiers were sent in with drawn bayonets, tear gas, tanks, and blowtorches. Two men died from gunshots. "Why didn't Hoover offer the men coffee and sandwiches?" Roosevelt asked an aide.

Roosevelt's private musings reflected more than his preferred tactical approach to the protesters; they embodied his overall strategy for lifting the United States out of the Great Depression. Once he became president, they would form the basis of a radical departure in American public policy. Through an unprecedented burst of legislative and executive activity, the New Deal redistributed political and economic power to the most downtrodden. It sought to provide help to everyone who needed it: the out-of-work veteran, the tenant farmer, the migrant vegetable picker, the textile mill hand, the coal miner, the assembly-line worker, and millions more.

More than is often remembered, Roosevelt's policies generated intense pushback from critics who thought the federal government was straying dangerously far beyond its mandate. But what the president knew—and what those contending with the United States' contemporary difficulties would do well to remember—was that the biggest mistake one can make in a crisis is not to do too much. It is to not do enough.



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### EMERGENCY MEASURES

As Roosevelt delivered his inaugural address, on a cold, gray Saturday in March 1933, he made it clear that he would be a different kind of president. He asked for “broad executive powers to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if in fact we were invaded by a foreign foe.” But even with such powers, FDR could not wish away a depression that had sunk the country so low. At the very moment he was telling the country, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” panicked Americans were withdrawing their life savings from banks and forcing governors to declare bank holidays to stop the runs. Thousands of small-town banks had already failed, and now Wall Street itself faced insolvency.

FDR wasted no time. On the Monday after his inauguration, he declared a national bank holiday, and on Thursday, he signed legislation insuring deposits. The following Sunday, in the first of many “fireside chats,” he implored Americans to leave their money in banks rather than stashing it under their mattresses. “Capitalism was saved in eight days,” the political scientist Raymond Moley, a member of Roosevelt’s so-called Brain Trust, would remark.

But what about the unemployed and the hungry? Within the first 100 days of his administration—a new benchmark for future presidents—FDR set up the Civilian Conservation Corps, putting 250,000 young men to work tending the land; “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” they were called. And for those who had walked the breadlines and relied on charity, Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which provided grants to the states to feed the hungry.

On his first day on the job, Harry Hopkins, one of FDR’s closest advisers and the head of that agency, set up shop at a hallway desk and, within his first two hours, spent \$5 million. The approach signaled a stark departure from Hoover, who had relied on loans to big business in the vain hope that prosperity would trickle down.

To get people through the winter of 1933–34, Hopkins oversaw the creation of the Civilian Works Administration, which by Roosevelt’s first Christmas in the White House had given jobs to more than three million Americans. Roosevelt also established two job-creation programs that lasted throughout the New Deal—the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration—and handed them budgets bigger than any previous public outlay in peacetime. While the PWA worked through private contractors and focused on large-scale projects, the WPA hired the unemployed directly—8.5 million, all told—and put them to work immediately.

These programs not only supplied relief but also laid the groundwork for economic growth for decades to come. Each year, the PWA purchased nearly half the concrete and a third of the steel in the United States. From the 650,000 miles of roads and 800 airports to the thousands of dams and sewers, the PWA and the WPA created a massive infrastructure, especially in the underdeveloped South and West. The PWA built new schools in nearly half of all counties, including African American schools in 24 states, mostly in the South.

These programs alleviated the worst of the Great Depression. But a fundamental question remained: What would it take to avoid another one?

## MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

From the beginning of his presidency, Roosevelt repeated the same message: the economy was out of balance. The 1920s had witnessed phenomenal growth, with Fords and Chevys flying off assembly lines and the stock market reaching new heights. But income and wealth remained concentrated at the top. Years before the Keynesian revolution awakened economists to the importance of sustaining demand, liberal policymakers saw a crisis of capitalism in the modern consumer economy and argued that only the state could fix it. “Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods,” Roosevelt said. “It is the soberer, less dramatic business . . . of meeting the problem of underconsumption, . . . of distributing wealth and products more equitably, of adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people.”

At the top of the list of those needing a bailout were farmers, who had suffered terribly throughout the 1920s and were now up in arms. Having leveraged their land to expand and purchase modern equipment during World War I, they found themselves deep in debt and caught in a vicious cycle. As they dumped more and more of their crops onto the market, commodity prices fell ever lower. Between 1929 and 1932, the average per capita income of farm families dropped by more than two-thirds. By the day of FDR’s inaugural, it would have taken a football field’s worth of wheat to buy a \$4 pair of shoes.

Roosevelt was determined to rescue the farmers. By creating the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, he allowed them to enter into contracts with the

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federal government to receive direct cash payments in exchange for limiting their production. In a fireside chat to push the bill through Congress, over the opposition of skeptical senators who feared a federal takeover of agriculture, Roosevelt tried to paint the program as democratic rather than radical. Pointing to its voluntary nature and its provision for local committees that would decide on quotas for each farm, he called it “a partnership between government and farming, not a partnership in profits.” Still, everyone knew that the Agricultural Adjustment Administration represented an unprecedented level of federal involvement in the oldest of businesses.

There were problems, to be sure. Most immediately, there were the troubling optics of paying farmers to plow under their crops at a time when so many were going hungry. The government bought six million hogs, some of which were killed in what critics called “the slaughter of the innocents.” Moreover, to quell opposition from southern legislators, who controlled the key committees in Congress, the final program gave checks to landowners, who in turn decided what fields to allow to lie fallow, instead of giving the aid directly to farmers. That meant that nearly a million tenant farmers and sharecroppers got kicked off the land. But the New Deal boosted farmers’ incomes, and thus consumer demand, as well. Without such a plan, Roosevelt explained, “millions of people engaged in industry in the cities cannot sell industrial products to the farming half of the nation.”

Some in agriculture were even more impoverished. FDR offered grants and loans to resettle hundreds of thousands of destitute farmers and built federal camps

for migratory workers. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck captured a sense of collective hope at these clean camps with running water and free medical care, one of which housed the fictional Joad family, who, like thousands of other so-called Okies, had lost their farm and come to California. “This is the beginning—from ‘I’ to ‘we,’” Steinbeck wrote. When large landowners banned and burned the best-selling novel, the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, lauded it in her syndicated column. Her husband received Steinbeck at the White House twice.

To spur regional development and deliver cheap power in the South, FDR established the Tennessee Valley Authority. From the time he had spent in Warm Springs, Georgia, convalescing from the polio that had left him paralyzed from the waist down, Roosevelt knew firsthand how rural America had been left out of the Roaring Twenties. In the Tennessee River basin, only a handful of families had electricity. Few had indoor bathrooms or even outhouses, and many farm wives had to walk hundreds of yards to get household water.

The Rural Electrification Administration brought even greater changes to the lives of farmers. Private utilities had long neglected rural America because there was no profit in connecting an isolated farmhouse to the grid, and so the program funded local cooperatives that distributed cheap power to the most remote ranches and cabins. Crews strung power lines across the country, wired millions of homes and barns, and installed lighting fixtures and electrical outlets in every room of the most run-down shacks. Electricity revolutionized rural life. Thanks to “liberty trees for farmers,” as utility poles became known,

families could refrigerate food and pump water. Diets improved, and infant mortality declined. In the two years after the creation of the Rural Electrification Administration, 350 cooperatives across 45 states delivered electricity to 1.5 million farms.

### **THERE IS POWER IN A UNION**

The New Deal also revolutionized the United States' factories, mills, and mines. Like farmers, industrial workers had been left out of the 1920s boom; the bottom 40 percent of nonfarm families earned an average of just \$725 a year at a time when a radio, the newest consumer item, cost \$75. Over the course of the 1920s, disposable income declined for the lower 93 percent of nonfarm workers; for the top one percent, it rose by 75 percent.

To boost their income, Roosevelt sought to grant workers the right to form unions; he wanted to solve the problem of underconsumption not through government spending but by expanding workers' bargaining power, which would allow them to wrest higher pay from their bosses. That, he argued in a fireside chat, "is better for the employer than unemployment and low wages, because it makes more buyers for his product." FDR presented this rationale as a matter of fact, but it signaled a historic departure from the 1920s, when court injunctions and state militias had suppressed labor activism.

The National Industrial Recovery Act, also passed in Roosevelt's first 100 days, suspended antitrust laws to allow businesses to coordinate production and wages. It proved to be a failure, used mostly by business leaders to keep cutting hours and pay. But the law protected the right of workers to organize, thus

planting the seed for one of the most far-reaching reforms of the New Deal: bringing democracy to the workplace.

It helped that workers had Roosevelt on their side. "The president wants you to join a union," declared John Lewis, the president of the United Mine Workers of America. In coal-producing states, miners who had long feared the consequences of joining rushed to organize. New rights, especially ones that challenged the prerogatives of big business, didn't come easily. In the spring and summer of 1934, striking workers, demanding that their employers recognize their right to organize, took to the streets in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco, clashing violently with police. But by the time Americans cast their ballots in the midterm elections that November, New Deal programs had succeeded in lowering unemployment by millions and generating a sense of national purpose. The Democrats increased their majority by nine in the House of Representatives and ten in the Senate—only the second time since the Civil War that the incumbent party had expanded its representation in Congress.

The electoral victory laid the groundwork for more far-reaching reforms. In the summer of 1935, Senator Robert Wagner of New York, the leading congressional liberal, had the votes needed to push through what would become known as the Wagner Act. For the first time, workers not only had the right to speak freely, to petition, and to assemble; they could also choose their own union in elections, free from employer interference, that the federal government would now supervise. In the two years after the act's passage, nearly five million workers went on strike to force

employers to live up to the new law of the land. The most famous strike took place at General Motors in Flint, Michigan, where, beginning in 1936, autoworkers staged a “sit-down strike,” physically occupying plants and eventually winning union recognition. As one GM employee said, “Even if we got not one damn thing out of it other than that, we at least had a right to open our mouths without fear.”

### **A NEW ORDER**

Along with the right to organize, the New Deal gave workers the right to social insurance with the passage of the Social Security Act. At a time of massive unemployment, FDR argued, the government had to offer protections against the vicissitudes of life, such as the loss of a job or penury in old age.

The act had its flaws. For one thing, it excluded domestic and agricultural laborers, thus leaving out the vast majority of African American workers, a price that southern legislators in the Jim Crow South extracted for their support of the bill. For another, it created a two-track system that offered earned pensions to largely male breadwinners but stingier, means-tested public assistance to widows, people with disabilities, and children without wage-earning fathers.

Yet as much as Social Security and the other New Deal programs rested on existing assumptions about race and gender, which privileged white male workers, they still brought the federal government into every town in the country, depriving local officials of their historical power to rule with unquestioned authority over the existing social order. From the farms to the factories, a new link had been created between the federal government and the poor, with

the potential to upend economic relations. In Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, where anti-union steel barons had ruled over this company town and dominated its politics for decades, steelworkers marched in support of Roosevelt. “America is yours,” read their signs. “Organize it and claim it!”

FDR believed that the New Deal would work to prevent future depressions in part by encouraging citizens to claim a new set of economic rights, protected by a new “economic constitutional order,” as he called it. The goal, he had explained when he first ran for president, was to empower Americans to achieve a “more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth.” After a decade of Wall Street speculation and a sky-high stock market, one that Roosevelt’s predecessor did little to rein in, everyone understood the radicalism of these words.

### **THAT MAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE**

Although many remember him as a great hero today, Roosevelt was not universally loved in his day. For the millions who revered him and returned him to office three more times, there were millions who despised him. They called him a dictator, a traitor to his class. Some, unwilling to even utter his name, referred to him as “that man in the White House.”

This came as no surprise to Roosevelt. “There is one issue in this campaign,” he said in 1936, not long after a poll found that 83 percent of Republicans believed that his administration might lead to dictatorship. “It’s myself, and people must be either for me or against me.” On Halloween, he held a mass rally at Madison Square Garden. “Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today,” he defiantly



proclaimed. "They are unanimous in their hate for me, and I welcome their hatred." Three days later, Roosevelt won reelection with 60 percent of the popular vote, the biggest landslide since 1820.

Roosevelt's opponents hated him not because he had abandoned the allegiances of his aristocratic upbringing, nor because he was bent on accruing unprecedented executive power, both of which were true. They hated him because he made a radical break with traditional public policy. The New Deal was so popular that the Democratic Party drew in millions of new working-class, immigrant, and African American voters, leading to an enduring coalition that propelled him and then his final vice president, Harry Truman, to victory. It gave the Democrats control of both houses of Congress for most of the next 50 years, allowing them to set the legislative agenda for decades to come. But Roosevelt's policies, by design, created winners and losers. As he himself put it, "Economic royalists complain that we seek to overthrow the institutions of America. What they really complain of is that we seek to take away their power."

In a time of national emergency, with so much desperation at home and the rise of dictators abroad, Roosevelt sought to rebuild the U.S. economy as a way of restoring prosperity and preserving democracy. As he surveyed the devastation in 1932, he told the country that it would not do to take "stopgap" measures. "A real economic cure must go to the killing of the bacteria in the system rather than to the treatment of external symptoms," he said. A true solution required what he called "building from the bottom up." If Roosevelt stoked animosities, he did so because he

believed that to succeed, the New Deal had to replace an ethos of individual self-reliance with an expansion of government powers that could boost the incomes and wherewithal of the millions at the lowest rung of the economic ladder. It was no time for restraint.

Nearly a century later, the United States again faces epic threats to the body politic: the COVID-19 pandemic, a sharp economic downturn, and attacks on its democratic institutions. An unpopular Republican president, seen as having done too little to solve the nation's crisis, has been voted out of office. Like Roosevelt, the new Democratic president faces a choice between the incremental and the bold. In dealing with the trauma before it, Washington could decide to confine itself to the limited role it has traditionally played in recent years, hoping that more of the same will somehow get the country out of its current rut. But desperate times call for desperate measures, and so the wiser path is to err on the side of action rather than inaction.

"Governments can err, presidents do make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted in different scales," Roosevelt said in 1936, as he accepted his party's renomination in Philadelphia. "Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference." 🌐

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# Cleaning House

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## Watergate and the Limits of Reform

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*John A. Lawrence*

**O**n the morning of August 9, 1974, Richard Nixon signed a statement that no American leader had ever before written: “I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States.” Nixon then walked out to the South Lawn of the White House, boarded the presidential helicopter, and flashed an incongruous victory sign with both hands, bidding farewell to his staff and to the American people.

As his helicopter floated into the sky, Nixon seemed to be fleeing a United States that had hit rock bottom. The post-World War II economic boom had run its course, and unemployment was rising. Arab oil exporters had enacted a humiliating embargo, and the price of oil had nearly quadrupled. Although the last U.S. troops had left Vietnam, the unpopular war had eroded Americans’ trust in government. So had scandal in the White House. In the fall of 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned over bribery charges. In the spring of 1974, nearly two years after Nixon’s operatives had been caught breaking into the Watergate office building, the House

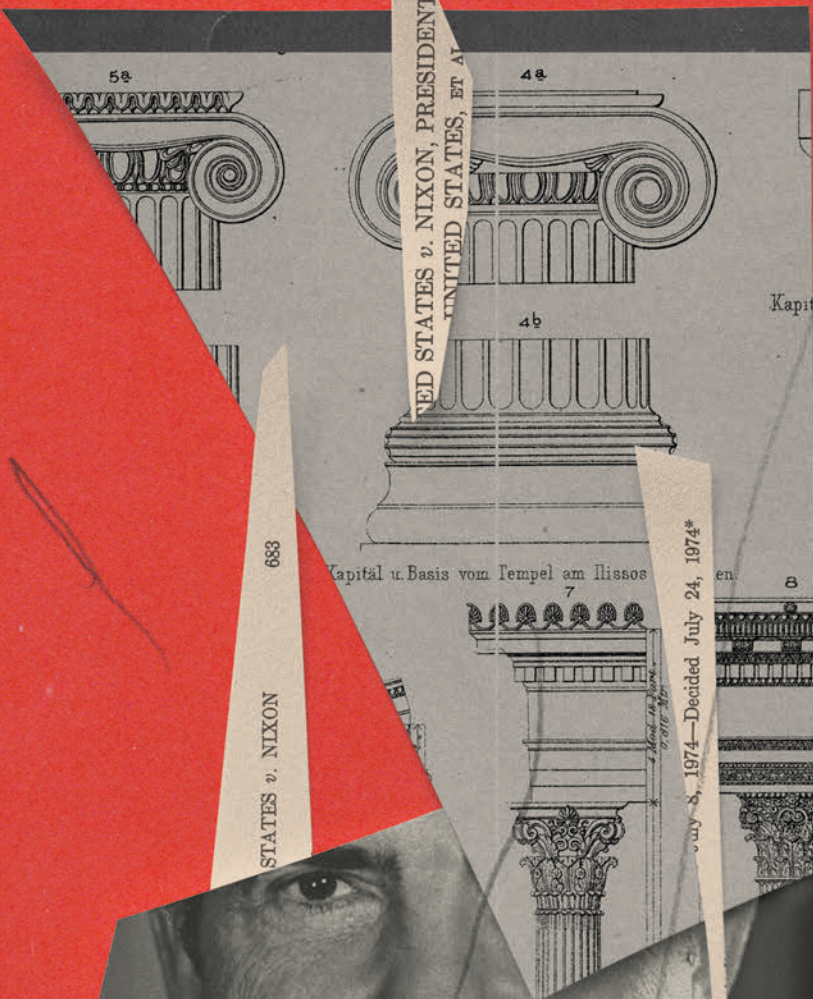
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**JOHN A. LAWRENCE** is a Visiting Professor at the University of California’s Washington Center and the author of *The Class of ’74: Congress After Watergate and the Roots of Partisanship*. From 2005 to 2013, he was Chief of Staff to U.S. Representative Nancy Pelosi.

Judiciary Committee had held the first impeachment hearings of a sitting president in over a century. A month after Nixon’s resignation, President Gerald Ford would pardon his disgraced predecessor, fueling speculation of some sort of quid pro quo. From a high of 77 percent in 1964, Americans’ confidence in their elected leaders, as measured by the Pew Research Center, plunged to 36 percent by the end of 1974.

Yet from these pessimistic depths emerged a powerful wave of government reform. The movement had been gaining steam during Nixon’s presidency, but it took off with the midterm elections in November 1974, which put in power 92 new members of the House of Representatives, 80 percent of them Democrats. The class of 1974 was a diverse group. It included veteran politicians, businesspeople, a consumer activist, a housepainter, a steelworker, and a urologist. But what unified this group was its members’ commitment to restoring public faith in government. The “Watergate babies,” as they were derisively called, had campaigned on a promise to shake up Capitol Hill and had little investment in its traditional protocols. When they were sworn in, in 1975, they joined forces with veteran advocates of reform who had long wanted to modernize the way Congress worked. Only once they had succeeded at that, the veterans lectured them, could they achieve the policy goals they cared about: a complete extrication from Vietnam, civil rights for African Americans, expanded opportunities for women, energy independence, and environmental preservation.

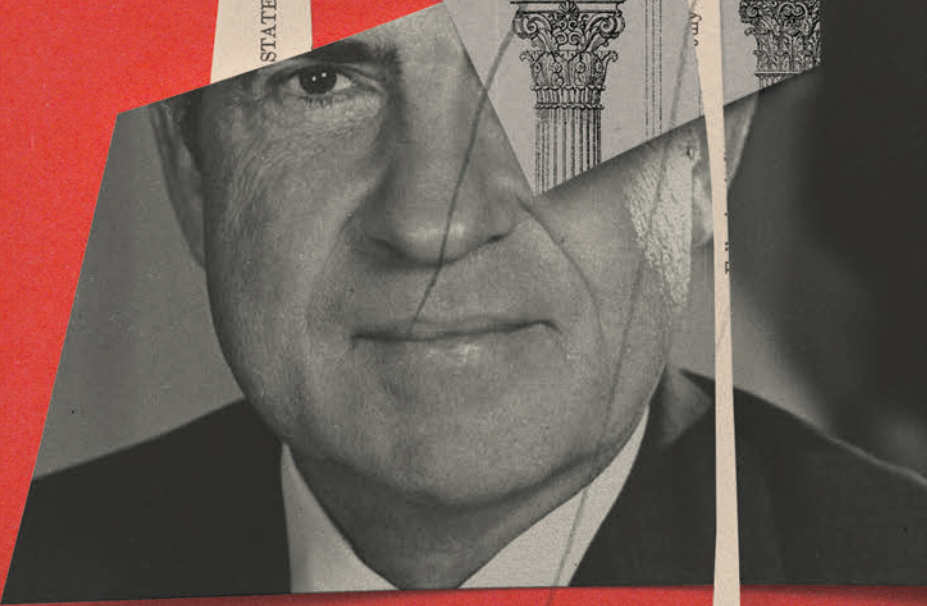
Over the course of the 1970s, these youthful idealists ushered in a series of



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far-reaching reforms. They democratized the operation of the House and the Senate to loosen senior members' hold over the young bucks. They expanded transparency and accountability to counter unethical behavior. And they tried to make Congress a coequal branch of government to rein in a powerful executive. These reforms marked an important step forward in terms of democratic representation, ethics, and openness. But in many respects, they also backfired, leaving Congress more vulnerable to partisanship and special interests. For would-be reformers hoping to fight corruption and executive overreach today, the lesson is clear: proceed with caution.

### **SENIORITIS**

By the early 1970s, Congress was in thrall to autocratic committee chairs. These members of Congress—mostly southern Democrats who held safe seats—used their power to restrict the role of junior members, limiting their ability to question witnesses or introduce amendments. “I hate and detest junior members interrupting a senior member asking a question,” Harold Cooley, the North Carolina Democrat who chaired the House Agriculture Committee, had once announced. The senior members brooked little ideological diversity. F. Edward Hébert, a Democrat from Louisiana who headed the House Armed Services Committee, resented that two younger, antiwar Democrats had joined the committee against his will. At its first meeting of 1973, Hébert slighted the two by making them share a single chair at the dais.

The members who took their seats in 1975 immediately sought to overturn the seniority system, which virtually

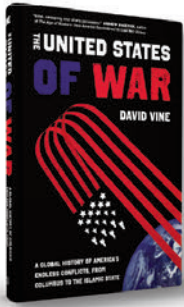
guaranteed that whoever in the majority party had served longest on a committee would be its chair. Even representatives who voted against their own party 80 percent of the time would remain at the head of committees, a position that gave them enormous power to shape hearings and legislation. For the first time, the freshmen demanded that prospective chairs appear before them to earn their votes. It was an unprecedented act of effrontery, and the chairs initially refused to comply. “That’s OK,” replied the Iowa Democrat Berkley Bedell; “we will just all vote against you.” When the old guard begrudgingly showed up, recognizing that the rules of the game had changed, the reformers dethroned three of them—including Hébert, who had caustically addressed them as “boys and girls.”

Before the next election, a half dozen more chairs, unwilling to subject themselves to the discipline of the caucus, chose to retire. So did the Speaker of the House, Carl Albert, Democrat of Oklahoma, who had been heavily criticized for opposing reform.

The freshmen also demanded limits on the number of positions senior members could hold on committees and subcommittees. Flocking to fill the resulting vacancies, the younger members ended up dominating subcommittees dealing with progressive issues, such as the environment, energy, and civil rights. They succeeded in changing the rules so that subcommittees could hire their own staffs and hold hearings without the approval of the chair.

This devolution of power made it easier for younger members to advance once suppressed goals. In January 1975, for example, Ford requested \$300 million in additional military aid for the

# DEEP HISTORY MEETS THE PRESENT

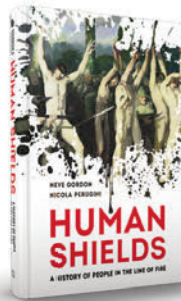
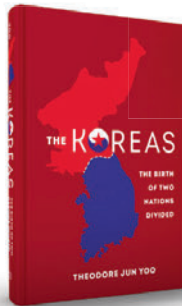


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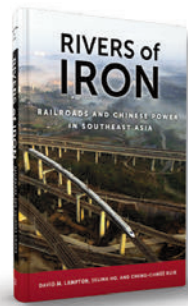


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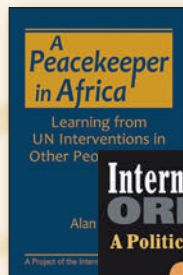
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South Vietnamese government. The Democratic Party's old guard was inclined to accede to the request, but the anti-war members forced the party's caucus to hold a vote, and the aid was denied. Later that year, the freshmen passed a sweeping energy conservation bill that had been resisted by much of their leadership, especially those from states that produced oil or cars. They also scored notable victories on regulating toxic substances and educating children with special needs.

But much of the unity the freshmen displayed during the battles for structural reform crumbled once they faced contentious issues that divided the rest of the party and the nation. On campaign finance, health care, labor rights, and the environment, the interests of local constituencies prevented the Democrats from voting as consistently as they had on reform. Meanwhile, Ford's prodigious use of the veto left many reformers frustrated that even with healthy majorities, they could not find the two-thirds needed to override presidential resistance.

Change came fitfully in the more tradition-bound Senate, but the body did make a key reform to the filibuster, the time-honored practice by which a small group of senators could bring business to a halt by extending debate for hours and hours. During the 1950s and 1960s, the filibuster had become a favored tactic of southern segregationists determined to block popular civil rights legislation. So in 1970, the Senate modified its rules to allow other business to be conducted while filibusters took place, and in 1975, it lowered the number of votes required to end a filibuster from 67 to 60.

Like the House reforms, these changes were designed to curb the ability

of a small group of ideologically rigid members from overriding the majority's will. But the reform backfired. Although the number of filibusters dropped briefly, in an increasingly partisan Senate, it soon began a sustained rise and eventually exploded. Because Senate business could continue while a senator spoke, it became far less costly to launch a filibuster.

### **OPEN SESAME**

The Nixon presidency was defined by a lack of transparency, but the problem of secrecy went beyond the White House and predated Nixon. Hearings and markups of legislation were usually conducted without public oversight; votes often took place behind closed doors. Advocates of reform argued that special interests and private deals flourished in secret, making it hard for the public to hold politicians accountable and leading to policy that served the few rather than the many. The consumer activist Ralph Nader, for example, contended that it was backroom deals and secret campaign contributions that left Americans with unhealthy air and unsafe cars.

Beginning in the late 1960s, a series of reforms pulled back the curtain on the legislative process. Committees were required to produce written reports explaining legislation, and votes in committee and on the floor were formally recorded. Traditionalists, who feared that transparency would undermine delicate dealmaking, resisted these efforts. In 1970, when the newcomer Dave Obey, a Democrat from Wisconsin, tried to open up the deliberations of the House Appropriations Committee, John Rooney, a 27-year veteran of the House from New York, growled, "Sit down, you smart-ass young punk." But the reform-

ers had been emboldened. Obey replied, “Kiss my fanny, you senile old goat.”

Such efforts gained steam with the publication of exposés concerning Vietnam and Watergate, which showed the lengths to which officials would go to hide misconduct. And the reforms succeeded in allowing Americans to see their legislators at work. That had been a rarity in previous years, when only exceptional events were nationally broadcast, such as the 1954 hearings held to investigate the inquest into the U.S. Army led by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. Openness allowed individual citizens to track their representatives’ votes, preventing legislators from being able to hide their true views.

But the rise in transparency also had a dark side. Gone were the closed-door negotiations and secret voting that had allowed legislators to hammer out difficult compromises. To pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act over the opposition of southern conservative Democrats, for example, Republicans had cast key votes to allow the bill to advance—votes that, had they been public, could have cost those legislators their seats. With so much of the legislative process taking place in the open, legislators grew far more wary of taking courageous stands.

The introduction of television cameras into the House in 1979 (and later into the Senate) led to even more dramatic changes. Although expanded coverage enabled millions of Americans to keep a closer watch over their elected representatives, the quality of debate on the floor deteriorated. Loquacious members who represented the fringes of their party played for the cameras rather than engaging in substantive

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debate. Legislators introduced hundreds of amendments not to improve bills but to force vulnerable members to choose between their constituents and their party. Gridlock grew.

Other reform efforts met with mixed results, too. In 1974, Congress amended the Federal Election Campaign Act to limit spending, but two years later, the Supreme Court struck down key parts of the law. In 1978, Congress passed the Ethics in Government Act, which requires public officials to disclose their income and assets and restricts lobbying after leaving office, so as to close the revolving door between the government and K Street. But all too often, violations have been met with slaps on the wrist. And given the widespread ethical lapses of the Trump administration, it does not appear to be working as a deterrent.

### THE IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY

The 1970s reformers had another goal: to regain power lost during World War II and the Cold War to what the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., called “the imperial presidency.” Many on Capitol Hill and among the public were starting to believe that the executive branch had amassed too much power, with too little accountability. Journalists such as Seymour Hersh, Bob Woodward, and Carl Bernstein shocked the country with their dogged investigations, informing the public of a host of abuses. The U.S. military was covertly bombing Cambodia and Laos and covering up atrocities in Vietnam, the FBI was harassing and spying on political opponents, and the CIA was planning assassination plots around the world. Through the exhaustive investigations of *The Washington Post*, Americans learned that the break-in at

the Democratic National Committee’s offices in the Watergate complex was not a “third-rate burglary,” as a White House spokesperson insisted, but part of a sordid criminal conspiracy involving Nixon’s reelection committee, the Department of Justice, and the White House.

As the Watergate crisis unfolded, Nixon grew more vulnerable, giving Congress the opportunity it needed to flex its muscles and reclaim its status as a coequal branch of government. In 1973, over Nixon’s veto, it passed the War Powers Resolution, which requires the president to obtain congressional authorization to use military force for more than 60 days. The next year, it passed the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, which clawed back budgetary power from the White House. Most dramatic, of course, Congress held systematic hearings that, when combined with the Supreme Court’s rulings against the president, forced Nixon to resign in the face of certain impeachment by the House and conviction by the Senate.

Congress also greatly expanded its oversight of the executive branch. The reformers passed new rules requiring each committee to create a new oversight subcommittee to probe the administration. Harsh inquisitors regularly summoned officials to Capitol Hill; the California Democrat John Moss, for example, held their feet to the fire on such issues as domestic surveillance and corrupt defense contracts. Legislators sent aggressive letters to cabinet members and bureaucrats from both parties, demanding exhaustive responses to questions about their agencies’ activities.

One of Congress’s most powerful oversight initiatives was its inquest into



abuses by the CIA and other agencies. In 1975, the Senate voted 82 to four to create a select committee for that purpose, chaired by Frank Church, a Democrat from Idaho. Armed with a staff of 150 investigators, the Church Committee, as it was known, gained insight into the government's far-reaching clandestine activities, which had never before been disclosed. Its 126 hearings uncovered "intelligence excesses," in the words of its earthshaking report, that had "undermined the constitutional rights of citizens." The CIA, it revealed, had plotted to kill the leaders of Congo and Cuba. The National Security Agency had put thousands of U.S. citizens on a watch list. And the FBI had spied on civil rights and antiwar protesters in the United States. The Church Committee's work led to the creation of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and to the passage of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which limits the federal government's power to intercept communications.

Like other post-Watergate congressional reforms, oversight fell prey to the heightened partisanship that characterized the ensuing decades. As voters realigned into two ideologically distinct parties, oversight grew increasingly selective and weaponized. The majority party in Congress tended to wield it far more aggressively when the White House was occupied by a president of the opposite party and less so during periods of unified government.

### **THE LEGACY OF REFORM**

The post-Watergate reforms dramatically altered Congress's internal operations and relationship to the executive branch. Gone was the era in which Congress's leadership was determined solely by

seniority; its agenda, set by a small clique. Gone, too, was a secretive legislative process that concealed corruption and deception. In its place was a Congress that had disseminated power throughout its ranks, that demanded greater accountability of its own leaders as well as of the executive branch, and that was far more willing to assert its constitutional status as a coequal branch of government.

Yet in many ways, the reforms fell short of their goals. Part of the problem was that they inadvertently helped facilitate the rise of a more combative environment. It wasn't just liberal Democrats who benefited from the devolution of power within Congress; over the course of the 1970s, so did the conservative Republicans who emerged from the changing South, the suburbs, and the Southwest. As each party grew apart from the other, the number of persuadable members in the center dwindled. In the 93rd Congress, whose term began in 1973, 240 out of 435 House members and 29 of 100 senators were moderates based on their votes, by the Pew Research Center's count. Twenty years later, those numbers had shrunk to nine members of the House and three senators. By 2011, they had reached zero. In that environment, it's hard to get much done.

Nor did the reforms succeed in reining in executive power. Despite the War Powers Resolution and greater oversight, presidents of both parties have consistently defied congressional demands for disclosure and accountability. Occasionally, the White House will endure reprimands, but rarely will it bend to the will of slighted legislators. In 2011, when President Barack Obama ordered airstrikes in Libya, he perfunctorily consulted the congressional

leadership but made it clear that the decision was his alone.

By its nature, Congress rarely moves as quickly or decisively as a determined president. It was designed to be an inefficient body, riven by party, ideology, regionalism, ambition, and special interests—unable “to be fast on its 1,070 feet,” as the political scientist Thomas Cronin once remarked. Unlike presidents, legislators are compelled to collaborate to produce consensus legislation. Reform can improve its efficiency and productivity, but ultimately, Congress faces inevitable challenges to performing as firmly or expeditiously as reformers and much of the public would prefer.

That is as true today as it was in 1974. Now, as then, an unpopular Republican president is leaving office, and Democrats have gained in the Senate and held the House. Now, as then, after bitter oversight struggles and an impeachment process, the Democratic Party faces the temptation to enact sweeping reforms. And now, as then, a group of younger, more liberal, and more aggressive members feels pressure to rewrite Congress’s norms and rules. If the Democrats gain a majority in the Senate, there may be a movement to extend the changes to the filibuster made in 2013 and 2017—when it was eliminated for judicial nominations—and end the tactic for all legislation.

But today’s prospective reformers should consider the experiences of their predecessors. Reforms often not only fail to achieve their goals but also produce unintended consequences. They can complicate efforts to improve efficiency in the House and the Senate. For example, some critics of the status quo have called for a return to “regular

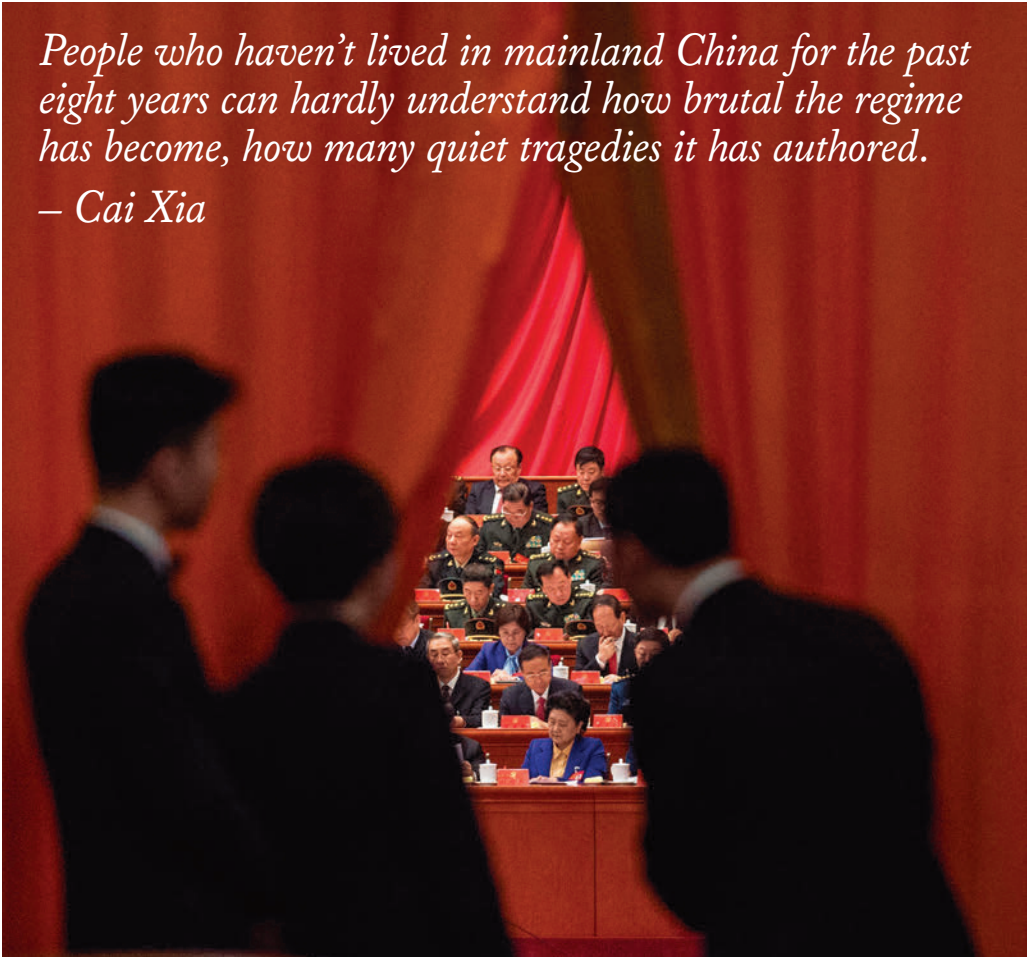
order,” meaning that instead of being designed by the party leadership in consultation with members behind closed doors, legislation would be produced through hearings and markup sessions in committees, and amendments would be introduced openly on the floor. But in the context of a hyperpartisan House, that change, by exposing carefully crafted legislation to politicized amendments, could turn the floor into a partisan free-fire zone and complicate any attempt to pass significant legislation. No institution should be exempt from change, but reforms need to be undertaken with a clear sense of history and the nature of the institution—something that zealous newcomers sometimes lack.

In fact, the reforms most needed today are likely ones that lie outside Congress’s control: the easing of a charged, combative style of politics that prevents compromise and the reduction of an influx of money, media, special interests, and aggressive grassroots activists that rewards division. Solving those much bigger problems would require a U-turn in American political culture: away from the type of politics that punishes those who dare to reach across the aisle and toward the kind of collaborative politics that most Americans profess to want. 🌐

# ESSAYS

*People who haven't lived in mainland China for the past eight years can hardly understand how brutal the regime has become, how many quiet tragedies it has authored.*

– *Cai Xia*



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# The Party That Failed

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## An Insider Breaks With Beijing

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*Cai Xia*

**W**hen Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, I was full of hope for China. As a professor at the prestigious school that educates top leaders in the Chinese Communist Party, I knew enough about history to conclude that it was past time for China to open up its political system. After a decade of stagnation, the CCP needed reform more than ever, and Xi, who had hinted at his proclivity for change, seemed like the man to lead it.

By then, I was midway through a decades-long process of grappling with China's official ideology, even as I was responsible for indoctrinating officials in it. Once a fervent Marxist, I had parted ways with Marxism and increasingly looked to Western thought for answers to China's problems. Once a proud defender of official policy, I had begun to make the case for liberalization. Once a loyal member of the CCP, I was secretly harboring doubts about the sincerity of its beliefs and its concern for the Chinese people.

So I should not have been surprised when it turned out that Xi was no reformer. Over the course of his tenure, the regime has degenerated further into a political oligarchy bent on holding on to power through brutality and ruthlessness. It has grown even more repressive and dictatorial. A personality cult now surrounds Xi, who has tightened the party's grip on ideology and eliminated what little space there was for political speech and civil society. People who haven't lived in mainland China for the past eight years can hardly understand how brutal the regime has become, how many quiet tragedies it has authored. After speaking out against the system, I learned it was no longer safe for me to live in China.

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**CAI XIA** was a Professor at the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party from 1998 to 2012. This essay was translated from the Chinese by Stacy Mosher.

## THE EDUCATION OF A COMMUNIST

I was born into a Communist military family. In 1928, at the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, my maternal grandfather joined a peasant uprising led by Mao Zedong. When the Communists and the Nationalists put hostilities on hold during World War II, my parents and much of my mother's family fought against the Japanese invaders in armies led by the CCP.

After the Communists' victory, in 1949, life was good for a revolutionary family such as ours. My father commanded a People's Liberation Army unit near Nanjing, and my mother ran an office in that city's government. My parents forbade my two sisters and me from taking advantage of the privileges of their offices, lest we become "spoiled bourgeois ladies." We could not ride in our father's official car, and his security guards never ran family errands. Still, I benefited from my parents' status and never suffered the privations that so many Chinese did in the Mao years. I knew nothing of the tens of millions of people who starved to death during the Great Leap Forward.

All I could see was socialism's bright future. My family's bookshelves were stocked with Marxist titles such as *The Selected Works of Stalin* and *Required Reading for Cadres*. As a teenager, I turned to these books for extracurricular reading. Whenever I opened them, I was filled with reverence. Even though I could not grasp the complexity of their arguments, my mission was clear: I must love the motherland, inherit my parents' revolutionary legacy, and build a communist society free of exploitation. I was a true believer.

I gained a more sophisticated understanding of communist thought after joining the People's Liberation Army in 1969, at age 17. With the Cultural Revolution in full swing, Mao required everyone to read six works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, including *The Communist Manifesto*. One utopian passage from that book left a lasting impression on me: "In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Although I didn't really understand the concept of freedom at that point, those words stuck in my head.

The People's Liberation Army assigned me to a military medical school. My job was to manage its library, which happened to carry Chinese translations of "reactionary" works, mostly Western literature and political philosophy. Distinguished by their gray covers, these

books were restricted to regime insiders for the purpose of familiarizing themselves with China's ideological opponents, but in secret, I read them, too. I was most impressed by *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by the American journalist William Shirer, and a collection of Soviet fiction. There was a world of ideas outside of the Marxist classics, I realized. But I still believed that Marxism was the only truth.

I left the military in 1978 and got a job in the party-run trade union of a state-owned fertilizer factory on the outskirts of the city of Suzhou. By then, Mao was dead and the Cultural Revolution was over. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, was ushering in a period of reform and opening, and as part of this effort, he was recruiting a new generation of reform-minded cadres who could run the party in the future. Each local party organization had to choose a few members to serve in this group, and the Suzhou party organization picked me. I was sent to a two-year program at the Suzhou Municipal Party School, where my fellow students and I studied Marxist theory and the history of the CCP. We also received some training in the Chinese classics, a subject we had missed on account of the disruption of education during the Cultural Revolution.

I plowed through *Das Kapital* twice and learned the ins and outs of Marxist theory. What appealed to me most were Marx's ideas about labor and value—namely, that capitalists accrue wealth by taking advantage of workers. I was also impressed by Marx's philosophical approach, dialectical materialism, which allowed him to see capitalism's political, legal, cultural, and moral systems as built on a foundation of economic exploitation.

When I graduated, in 1986, I was invited to stay on as a faculty member at the school, which was short-staffed at the time. I accepted, which disappointed some of the city's leaders, who thought I had a promising future as a party apparatchik. Instead, my new job launched my career as an academic in the CCP's system of ideological indoctrination.

## **THE STUDENT BECOMES THE MASTER**

At the top of that system sits the Central Party School in Beijing. Since 1933, it has trained generations of top-ranking CCP cadres, who run the Chinese bureaucracy at the municipal level and above. The school has close ties to the party elite and is always headed by a member of the Politburo. (Its president from 2007 to 2012 was none other than Xi.)

In June 1989, the government cracked down on pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds. Privately, I was appalled

that the People's Liberation Army had fired on college students, which ran contrary to the indoctrination I had received since my childhood that the army protected the people; only Japanese "devils" and Nationalist reactionaries killed them. Alarmed by the protests, plus the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the CCP's top leadership decided it had to counteract ideological laxity. It ordered local party schools to send some of their teachers to the Central Party School to brush up on the party's thinking. My school in Suzhou chose me. My brief stay at the Central Party School made me want to study there for much longer. After spending a year preparing for the entrance examinations, I was admitted to the master's program in the school's theory department. So devoted was I to the CCP's line that behind my back, my classmates called me "Old Mrs. Marx." In 1998, I received my Ph.D. and joined the school's faculty.

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*I remained loyal to the CCP, yet I was constantly questioning my own beliefs.*

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Some of my students were regular graduate students, who were taught a conventional curriculum in Marxist political theory and CCP history. But others were mid- and high-level party officials, including leading provincial and municipal administrators and cabinet-level ministers. Some of my students were members of the CCP's Central Committee, the body of a few hundred delegates that sits atop the party hierarchy and ratifies major decisions.

Teaching at the Central Party School was not easy. Video cameras in the classrooms recorded our lectures, which were then reviewed by our supervisors. We had to make the subject come alive for the high-level and experienced students in the class, without interpreting the doctrine too flexibly or drawing attention to its weak spots. Often, we had to come up with smart answers to tough questions asked by the officials in our classes.

Most of their questions revolved around puzzling contradictions within the official ideology, which had been crafted to justify the real-world policies implemented by the CCP. Amendments added in 2004 to China's constitution said that the government protects human rights and private property. But what about Marx's view that a communist system should abolish private property? Deng wanted to "let a part of the population get rich first" to motivate people and stimulate productivity. How did that square with Marx's promise that communism would provide to each according to his needs?

I remained loyal to the CCP, yet I was constantly questioning my own beliefs. In the 1980s, Chinese academic circles had engaged in a lively discussion of “Marxist humanism,” a strain of Marxist thinking that emphasized the full development of the human personality. A few academics continued that discussion into the 1990s, even as the scope of acceptable discourse narrowed. I studied Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which said that the purpose of socialism was to liberate the individual. I identified with the Marxist philosophers who stressed freedom—above all, Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse.

Already in my master’s thesis, I had criticized the idea that people should always sacrifice their individual interests in order to serve the party. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I had challenged the ancient Chinese slogan “rich country, strong army” by contending that China would be strong only if the party allowed its citizens to prosper. Now, I took this argument a step further. In papers and talks, I suggested that state enterprises were still too dominant in the Chinese economy and that further reform was needed to allow private companies to compete. Corruption, I stressed, should be seen not as a moral failing of individual cadres but as a systemic problem resulting from the government’s grip on the economy.

### **THEORY AND PRACTICE**

My thinking happened to align in part with that of Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin. Determined to develop China’s economy, Jiang sought to stimulate private enterprise and bring China into the World Trade Organization. But these policies contradicted the CCP’s long-held theories prizing the planned economy and national self-sufficiency. Since the ideology of neither Marx nor Mao nor Deng could resolve these contradictions, Jiang felt compelled to come up with something new. He called it “the Three Represents.”

I first heard of this new theory when everyone else did. On the evening of February 25, 2000, I watched as China Central Television (CCTV) broadcast a report on the Three Represents. The party, Jiang said, had to represent three aspects of China: “the development requirements of advanced productive forces,” cultural progress, and the interests of the majority. As a professor at the Central Party School, I immediately understood that this theory presaged a significant shift in CCP ideology. In particular, the first of the Three Represents im-



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plied that Jiang was abandoning the core Marxist belief that capitalists were an exploitative social group. Instead, Jiang was opening the party to their ranks—a decision I welcomed.

The Central Propaganda Department, the body in charge of the CCP's ideological work, was responsible for promoting Jiang's new theory, but they had a problem: the Three Represents had come under attack from the extreme left, which thought Jiang was going too far in wooing entrepreneurs. Hoping to skirt this dispute, the Propaganda Department chose to water down the theory. The *People's Daily* published a full-page article demonstrating the correctness of the Three Represents with cross-references to texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Deng.

I found this unconvincing. What was the purpose of the Three Represents if it merely restated existing ideology? I was disgusted by the superficial methods of the party's publicity apparatus. I grew determined to reveal the true meaning of the Three Represents, a theory that in fact marked a bold departure for China. This, it turned out, would bring me into conflict with the entrenched bureaucracy of the CCP.

### THE UNLEARNED ELITES

My opportunity to promote a proper understanding of the Three Represents arrived in early 2001, when CCTV, hearing from a colleague that I was especially interested in Jiang's new theory, invited me to write a television program on it. I spent six months researching and writing the documentary and discussing it at length with producers at the network. My script emphasized the need for innovative new policies to meet the challenges of a new era. I stressed the same things Jiang did: that the government was now going to reduce its intervention in the economy and that the role of the party was no longer to make violent revolution against the exploitative capitalists—instead, it was to encourage the creation of wealth and balance the interests of different groups in society.

On the afternoon of June 16, four CCTV senior vice presidents gathered in a studio in the network's headquarters to review the three 30-minute episodes. As they watched it, their faces darkened. "Let's stop here," one of them said when the first episode ended.

"Professor Cai, do you know why you were invited to produce a program on the Three Represents?" he asked.

"The party has put forward a new ideological theory," I replied, "and we need to publicize it."

The official was unmoved. “Your research and innovation can be presented at the Central Party School, but only the safest things can be shown on TV,” he said. At that point, nobody was quite sure what the Three Represents would ultimately be interpreted to mean, and he worried that my script might be out of step with the Propaganda Department’s views. “If there’s any discrepancy, the impact would be too great.”

Another station administrator chimed in. “This year is the 80th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party!” he exclaimed. Such an anniversary demanded not a discussion of challenges facing the party but a heroic celebration of its triumphs. At that moment, I understood. The CCTV people weren’t interested in the real implications of ideology. They just wanted to make the party look good and flatter their superiors.

Over the next ten days, we scrambled to remake the documentary. We edited out potentially offensive words and phrases, working day and night as my script went through several political reviews by teams from across the party bureaucracy. Finally, a dozen officials arrived for one last review, during which I learned even more about the party’s hypocrisy. At one point, a high-level member of the vetting committee spoke up. In the program’s second episode, I had quoted two of Deng’s famous sayings, which are often strung together: “Poverty is not socialism; development is the hard truth.”

“Poverty isn’t socialism?” the official asked dubiously. “So what is socialism?” His critique went on, growing louder. “And development is the hard truth? How are those two sentences related? Tell me!”

I was dumbfounded. These were Deng’s exact words, and this senior official—the head of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, the powerful agency overseeing all broadcast media—didn’t know it? I thought immediately of Mao’s criticism of bureaucrats during the Cultural Revolution: “They don’t read books, and they don’t read newspapers.”

## **AN EMPTY IDEOLOGY**

Over the course of 2001, as part of its efforts to promote Jiang’s signature theory, the Propaganda Department began work on a study outline for the Three Represents, a summary that would be issued as a Central Committee document for the entire party to read and implement. Perhaps because I had worked on the CCTV program and had given a speech on the Three Represents at an academic conference, I was asked to help.

Along with another scholar and 18 propaganda officials, I was sent to the Propaganda Department's training center near the foothills west of Beijing. The department had settled on a general framework for the outline, and now it was asking us to fill the framework with content. My task was to write the section on building the party.

Drafting documents for the Central Committee is a highly confidential process. My colleagues and I were forbidden from leaving the

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*The system I had long considered sacred was in fact unbearably absurd.*

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premises or receiving guests. When the Propaganda Department convened a meeting, those who weren't invited weren't allowed to ask about it. We writers could eat and take walks together, but we were prohibited from

discussing our work. I was the only woman in the group. At dinner, the men gossiped and cracked jokes. I found the off-color, alcohol-fueled conversation vulgar and would always slink out after a few bites of food. Finally, another participant took me aside. Talk of official business would only get us in trouble, he explained; it was safer and more enjoyable to confine the conversation to sex.

Helping with the study outline was the most important writing assignment of my life, but it was also the most ridiculous. My job was to read through a stack of documents cataloging Jiang's thoughts, including confidential speeches and articles intended for the party's internal consumption. I would then extract relevant quotations and place them under various topic subheadings, annotating the source. I couldn't add or subtract text, but I could change a period to a comma and connect one quote to another. I was amazed that the formal explanation of one of the party's most important ideological campaigns in the post-Mao era would be little more than a cut-and-paste job.

Because the task was so easy, I spent a lot of time waiting in boredom for my work to be vetted. One day, I sounded out another participant, a professor from Renmin University of China. "Aren't we just creating another version of *Quotations From Chairman Mao*?" I asked, referring to the Little Red Book, a pocket volume of out-of-context aphorisms that circulated during the Cultural Revolution. He looked around and smiled wryly. "Don't worry about it," he told me. "We're in a lovely scenic location with good food and pleasant walks. Where else could we convalesce so comfortably? Just go fetch a book to read. All that matters is that you're here when they call you for a meeting."

In June 2003, a high-profile press conference was held at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, to unveil the study outline, and all of us who had helped write it were told to attend. Liu Yunshan, a Politburo member and the head of the Propaganda Department, presented the report. As he and other officials took to the stage, I felt a sinking feeling. My understanding of the Three Represents as an important pivot in the ruling party's ideology had been completely squeezed out of the document and replaced with pablum. Remembering the lewd chatter around the dinner table every night, I felt for the first time that the system I had long considered sacred was in fact unbearably absurd.

### **IDEAS FOR SALE**

My experience with the study outline taught me that the ideas the party sanctimoniously promoted were in fact self-serving tools used to deceive the Chinese people. I soon learned that they were also a way of making money. An official I came to know at the General Administration of Press and Publication, which controls the right to publish books and magazines, told me of a disturbing episode involving a turf war over publishing revenues within the CCP.

For many years, Red Flag Press had been one of three organizations responsible for publishing the party's educational books. In 2005, the press was in the process of publishing a routine book of readings when an official from the Central Organization Department, the powerful agency in charge of the CCP's personnel decisions, stepped in to insist that only his department had the authority to publish such a book. He tried to get the General Administration of Press and Publication to prevent the book from being published. But Red Flag Press's main job was precisely to publish works on ideology. To get out of this fix, the agency vetted the book in the hopes of finding problems that would justify banning it—but awkwardly, it came up empty.

Why was the Organization Department so territorial about publishing? It all came down to money. Many departments have slush funds, which are used for the lavish enjoyment of senior officials and divided among personnel as “welfare subsidies.” The easiest way to replenish those funds is to publish books. At that time, the CCP had more than 3.6 million grassroots organizations, each of which was expected to buy a copy of a new publication. If the book was priced

at ten yuan per copy, that meant a minimum of 36 million yuan in sales revenue—equivalent to more than \$5 million today. Since that money was coming from the budgets of the party branches, the scheme was essentially an exercise in forcing one public entity to transfer money to another. No wonder the Organization Department promoted a new political education topic every year. And no wonder almost every institution within the CCP had a publishing arm. With nearly every unit inventing new ways to make money, venality has permeated the regime.

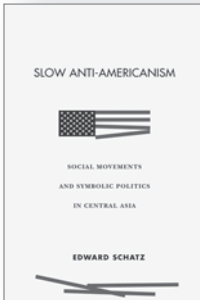
Despite my growing disillusionment, I didn't completely reject the party. Along with many other scholars inside it, I still hoped that the CCP could embrace reform and move in the direction of some form of democracy. In the later years of the Jiang era, the party started tolerating a relatively relaxed discussion of sensitive issues within the party, as long as the discussions never went public. At the Central Party School, my fellow professors and I felt free to raise deep-seated problems with China's political system among ourselves. We talked about reducing the role of party officials in deciding administrative issues that were best handled by government officials. We discussed the idea of judicial independence, which had been written into the constitution but never really practiced.

To our delight, the party was in fact experimenting with democracy, both within its own operations and in society at the grassroots level. I saw all of this as hopeful signs of progress. But subsequent events would only cement my disillusionment.

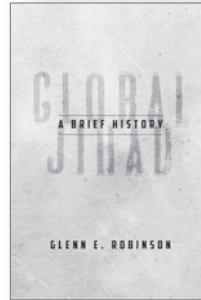
### **ANOTHER WAY**

A key turning point came in 2008, when I took a brief but fateful trip to Spain. Visiting the country as part of an academic exchange, I learned how Spain had transitioned from autocracy to democracy after the death of its dictator, Francisco Franco, in 1975. I could not help but compare Spain's experience to China's. Mao died just ten months after Franco, and both countries underwent tremendous changes in the ensuing three decades. But whereas Spain quickly and peacefully made the leap to democracy and achieved social stability and economic prosperity, China accomplished only a partial transition, moving from a planned economy to a mixed economy without liberalizing its politics. What could Spain teach China?

I came to the pessimistic conclusion that the CCP was unlikely to reform politically. For one thing, Spain's transition was initiated by re-



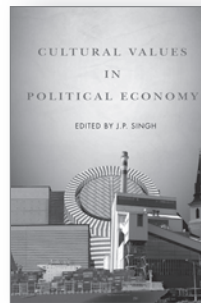
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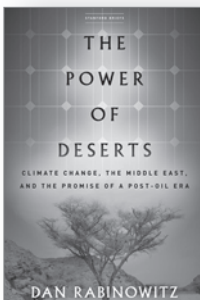
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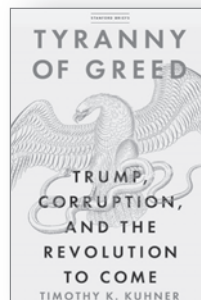
**Women as  
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*Gender, Agency,  
 and Justice*  
 Izabela Steffja and  
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formist forces within the post-Franco regime, such as King Juan Carlos I, who placed national interests above their personal interests. The CCP, having come to power in 1949 through violence, was deeply wedded to the idea that it had earned a permanent monopoly on political power. The party's record, particularly its crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests, demonstrated that it would not give up that monopoly peacefully. And none of the post-Deng leaders had the courage to push for political reform; they simply wanted to pass the buck to future leaders.

I also learned that after Franco's death, Spain quickly created a favorable environment for reform, consolidating judicial independence and expanding freedom of the press. It even incorporated opposition forces into the transition process. The CCP, by contrast, has treated demands for social and economic justice as threats to its power, suppressing civil society and restricting people's liberties. The regime and the people have been locked in confrontation for decades, making reconciliation unthinkable.

My newly acquired understanding of the democratic transition in Spain, along with what I already knew about those in the former Soviet bloc, led me to fundamentally reject the Marxist ideology in which I once had unshakable faith. I came to realize that the theories Marx advanced in the nineteenth century were limited by his own intellect and the historical circumstances of his time. Moreover, I saw that the highly centralized, oppressive version of Marxism promoted by the CCP owed more to Stalin than to Marx himself. I increasingly recognized it as an ideology formed to serve a self-interested dictatorship. Marxism, I began to hint in publications and lectures, should not be worshiped as an absolute truth, and China had to start the journey to democracy. In 2010, when some liberal scholars published an edited volume called *Toward Constitutionalism*, I contributed an article that discussed the Spanish experience.

My vision—shared with other liberal scholars—was that China would start by implementing democracy within the party, which, over the long run, would lead to a constitutional democracy. China would have a parliament, even a real opposition party. In my heart, I worried that the CCP might violently resist such a transition, but I kept that thought to myself. Instead, when speaking with colleagues and students, I argued that such a transition would be good for China and even for the party itself, which could consolidate its legitimacy by making itself more accountable to the people. Many of the offi-



cials I taught acknowledged that the party faced problems, but they could not say so themselves. Instead, they cautiously urged me to persuade their superiors.

### **THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF XI**

The problem was that at that very time, Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, was moving in the opposite direction. In 2003, while in the process of taking over the reins of power, Hu had put forward "the Scientific Outlook on Development," his substitute for Jiang's Three Represents. The concept was another attempt to justify China's mixed development model with a thin cover of Marxist-sounding ideology, and it avoided the big questions facing China. China's breakneck development was producing social conflict as farmers' land was seized for development and factories squeezed workers for more profits. The number of petitioners seeking redress from the government increased dramatically, and nationwide, demonstrations eventually exceeded 100,000 per year. To me, the discontent showed that it was becoming harder for China to develop its economy without liberalizing its politics.

Hu thought otherwise. "Don't muck up things," he said in 2008, at a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the policy of reform and opening. I understood this to mean that the economic, political, and ideological reforms the party had made so far should be maintained but not pushed forward. Hu was defending himself against accusations from both sides: from conservatives who thought that reform had gone too far and from liberals who thought it hadn't gone far enough. So China, under his watch, entered a period of political stagnation, a decline similar to what the Soviet Union experienced under Leonid Brezhnev.

Thus it was with optimism that I looked to Xi when it became clear that he was going to take power. The easy reforms had all been made 30 years ago; now it was time for the hard ones. Given the reputation of Xi's father, a former CCP leader with liberal inclinations, and the flexible style that Xi himself had displayed in previous posts, I and other advocates of reform hoped that our new leader would have the courage to enact bold changes to China's political system. But not everyone had such confidence in Xi. The skeptics I knew fell into two categories. Both proved prescient.

The first group consisted of princelings—descendants of the party's founders. Xi was a princeling, as was Bo Xilai, the dynamic party chief of Chongqing. Xi and Bo rose to senior provincial and ministe-

rial positions at almost the same time, and both were expected to join the highest body in the CCP, the Politburo Standing Committee, and were considered top contenders to lead China. But Bo fell out of the leadership competition early in 2012, when he was implicated in his

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*I hoped that Xi would have the courage to enact bold changes to China's political system.*

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wife's murder of a British businessman, and the party's senior statesmen backed the safe and steady Xi. The princelings I knew, familiar with Xi's ruthlessness, predicted that the rivalry would not end there. Indeed, after Xi took power, Bo was convicted of cor-

ruption, stripped of all his assets, and sentenced to life in prison.

The other group of skeptics consisted of establishment scholars. More than a month before the 18th Party Congress of November 2012, when Xi would be formally unveiled as the CCP's new general secretary, I was chatting with a veteran reporter from a major Chinese magazine and a leading professor at my school who had observed Xi's career for a long time. The two had just wrapped up an interview, and before leaving, the reporter tossed out a question: "I hear that Xi Jinping lived in the Central Party School compound for a period of time. Now he's about to become the party's general secretary. What do you think of him?" The professor's lip twitched, and he said with disdain that Xi suffered from "inadequate knowledge." The reporter and I were stunned at this blunt pronouncement.

In spite of these negative views, I willingly suspended disbelief and put my hopes in Xi. But shortly after Xi's ascension, I started to have my doubts. A December 2012 speech he gave suggested a reformist and progressive mentality, but other statements hinted at a throwback to the pre-reform era. Was Xi headed left or right? I had just retired from the Central Party School, but I still kept in touch with my former colleagues. Once when I was talking to some of them about Xi's plans, one of them said, "It's not a question of whether Xi is going left or right but rather that he lacks basic judgment and speaks illogically." Everyone fell silent. A chill ran down my spine. With deficiencies like these, how could we expect him to lead a struggle for political reform?

I soon concluded that we probably could not. After Xi released his comprehensive reform plan in late 2013, business and academic circles excitedly predicted that he would push ahead with major re-



*Leading man: Xi in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, March 2018*

forms. My feeling was just the opposite. The plan avoided all the key issues of political reform. China's long-standing problems of corruption, excessive debt, and unprofitable state enterprises are rooted in party officials' power to meddle in economic decisions without public supervision. Trying to liberalize the economy while tightening political control was a contradiction. Yet Xi was launching the biggest ideological campaign since Mao's death to revive Maoist rule. His plan called for intensified societal surveillance and a clampdown on free expression. A ban on any discussion of constitutional democracy and universal values was shamelessly promoted under the banner of "governance, management, service, and law."

This trend continued with a package of legal reforms passed in 2014, which further exposed the party's intent to use the law as a tool for maintaining totalitarian rule. At this point, Xi's perverse tendencies and the CCP's political regression were clear. If I once had a vague hope for Xi and the party, my illusions were now shattered. Subsequent events would only confirm that when it came to reform, Xi was taking China from stagnation to regression. In 2015, the party rounded up hundreds of defense lawyers. The next year, it launched a Cultural Revolution-style campaign against an outspoken real estate tycoon. It was my reaction to that episode that landed me in hot water.

DAMIR SAGOLJ / TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY / REUTERS

### **THE LAST STRAW**

The tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang, had increasingly come into conflict with Xi, whom he criticized for censoring Chinese media. In February 2016, a CCP website labeled Ren as “anti-party.” I didn’t know Ren personally, but his case struck me as especially disturbing because I had long relied on the principle that within the CCP, we were allowed—even encouraged—to speak freely in order to help the party correct its own mistakes. Here was a longtime party member who had been demonized for doing just that. Having lived through the Cultural Revolution, I knew that people branded with the label “anti-party” were deprived of their rights and subjected to harsh persecution. Since a defense of Ren could never be published in censored media outlets, I wrote one up and sent it to a WeChat group, hoping my friends would share it with their contacts. My article went viral.

Although most of my article simply quoted the party’s constitution and code of conduct, the Central Party School’s disciplinary committee accused me of serious errors. I faced a series of intimidating interviews in which my interrogators applied psychological pressure and laid word traps in an effort to induce a false confession of wrongdoing. It was uncomfortable, but I recognized the process as a psychological contest. If I didn’t show fear, I realized, they would lose half the battle. And so a stalemate ensued: I kept publishing, and the authorities kept calling me in for questioning. Soon, I concluded that security agencies were tapping my phone, reading my digital correspondence, and following me to see where I went and with whom I met. Retired professors from the Central Party School usually need permission only from the school to travel to Hong Kong or abroad, but now the school hinted that I had to clear such trips with the Ministry of State Security in the future.

In April 2016, the text of a speech I had given a few months earlier at Tsinghua University—in which I argued that if ideology violates common sense, it deteriorates into lies—was published on an influential website in Hong Kong. The timing was bad: Xi had just announced that some of the free inquiry taking place at the Central Party School had gone too far and urged greater supervision of its professors. As a result, in early May, I was called in again by the school’s disciplinary committee and accused of opposing Xi. From then on, the CCP blocked me from all media in China—print, online, television. Even my name could not be published. Then, one night in July, I was summoned again to a meeting at the Central Party School,

where a member of the disciplinary committee placed a foot-tall pile of documents on the table in front of me. “There’s already this much material on you,” he said. “Think it over.” It was clear that I was being warned to keep silent and that if I so much as tweeted a word, I would be subjected to disciplinary action, including reduced retirement benefits. I was indignant at my treatment, even though I understood that others had been dealt with even more harshly.

In all my years as a member of the CCP, I had never violated a single rule, nor had I ever been called in for a reprimand. But now, I was regularly interrogated by party officials. The school’s disciplinary committee repeatedly threatened the humiliating prospect of holding a large public meeting and announcing a formal punishment. At the end of each conversation, my interrogators demanded I keep it a secret. It was all part of an underworld that couldn’t be exposed to the light of day.

Then came a cover-up of police brutality that triggered my final break with Xi and the party. Earlier, in May 2016, Lei Yang, an environmental scientist, was on his way to the airport to pick up his mother-in-law when, in circumstances that remain murky, he died in the custody of the Beijing police. In order to evade responsibility for the crime, the police framed Lei, alleging that he had been soliciting a prostitute. His classmates from his university days, outraged at this attempt at defamation, banded together to help his family seek justice, starting a campaign that reverberated throughout China. To quell the fury, the CCP’s top leaders ordered an investigation. The prosecution agreed to an independent autopsy, and a trial was scheduled to argue the matter.

A strange thing happened next: Lei’s parents, wife, and children were put under house arrest, and the local government offered them massive compensation, about \$1 million, to give up their pursuit of the truth. When Lei’s family refused, the payment was increased to \$3 million. Even after a \$3 million house was thrown in, Lei’s wife insisted on clearing her late husband’s name. The government then pressured Lei’s parents, who knelt before their daughter-in-law and begged her to abandon the case. In December, prosecutors announced that they would not charge anyone for Lei’s death, and his family’s lawyer revealed that he had been forced to stand down.

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*After 20 years of hesitation, confusion, and misery, I made the decision to emerge from the darkness.*

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When I learned of this outcome, I sat at my desk all night, overcome with grief and anger. Lei's death was a clear-cut case of wrongdoing, and instead of punishing the police officers responsible, their superiors had tried to use the people's hard-earned tax money to settle the matter out of court. Officials were closing ranks rather than serving the people. I asked myself, If the CCP's officials are capable of such despicable actions, how can the party be trusted? Most of all, I wondered how I could remain part of this system.

After 20 years of hesitation, confusion, and misery, I made the decision to emerge from the darkness and make a complete break with the party. Xi's great leap backward soon left me with no other choice. In 2018, Xi abolished presidential term limits, raising the prospect that I would have to live indefinitely under neo-Stalinist rule. The next summer, I was able to travel to the United States on a tourist visa. While there, I received a message from a friend telling me that the Chinese authorities, accusing me of "anti-China" activities, would arrest me if I returned. I decided to prolong my visit until things calmed down. Then the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, and flights to China were canceled, so I had to wait a little longer. At the same time, I was disgusted by Xi's mishandling of the outbreak and signed a petition supporting Li Wenliang, the Wuhan ophthalmologist who had been harassed by police for warning his friends about the new disease and eventually died of it. I received urgent phone calls from the authorities at the Central Party School demanding that I come home.

But the atmosphere in China was growing darker. Ren, the dissident real estate tycoon, disappeared in March and was soon expelled from the party and sentenced to 18 years in prison. Meanwhile, my problems with the authorities were compounded by the unauthorized release of a private talk I had given online to a small circle of friends in which I had called the CCP "a political zombie" and said that Xi should step down. When I sent friends a short article I had written denouncing Xi's repressive new national security law in Hong Kong, someone leaked that, too.

I knew I was in trouble. Soon, I was expelled from the party. The school stripped me of my retirement benefits. My bank account was frozen. I asked the authorities at the Central Party School for a guarantee of my personal safety if I returned. Officials there avoided answering the question and instead made vague threats against my daughter in China and her young son. It was at this point that I accepted the truth: there was no going back. 🌐



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# How to Save Democracy From Technology

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## Ending Big Tech's Information Monopoly

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*Francis Fukuyama, Barak Richman, and  
Ashish Goel*

**A**mong the many transformations taking place in the U.S. economy, none is more salient than the growth of gigantic Internet platforms. Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Twitter, already powerful before the COVID-19 pandemic, have become even more so during it, as so much of everyday life moves online. As convenient as their technology is, the emergence of such dominant corporations should ring alarm bells—not just because they hold so much economic power but also because they wield so much control over political communication. These behemoths now dominate the dissemination of information and the coordination of political mobilization. That poses unique threats to a well-functioning democracy.

While the EU has sought to enforce antitrust laws against these platforms, the United States has been much more tepid in its response. But that is beginning to change. Over the past two years, the Federal Trade Commission and a coalition of state attorneys general have initiated investigations into potential abuses of these platforms' monopoly power, and in October, the Justice Department filed an antitrust suit against Google. Big Tech's critics now include both Democrats

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who fear manipulation by domestic and foreign extremists and Republicans who think the large platforms are biased against conservatives. Meanwhile, a growing intellectual movement, led by a coterie of influential legal scholars, is seeking to reinterpret antitrust law to confront the platforms' dominance.

Although there is an emerging consensus about the threat that the Big Tech companies pose to democracy, there is little agreement about how to respond. Some have argued that the government needs to break up Facebook and Google. Others have called for more stringent regulations to limit these companies' exploitation of data. Without a clear way forward, many critics have defaulted to pressuring platforms to self-regulate, encouraging them to take down dangerous content and do a better job of curating the material carried on their sites. But few recognize that the political harms posed by the platforms are more serious than the economic ones. Fewer still have considered a practical way forward: taking away the platforms' role as gatekeepers of content. This approach would entail inviting a new group of competitive "middleware" companies to enable users to choose how information is presented to them. And it would likely be more effective than a quixotic effort to break these companies up.

## **PLATFORM POWER**

Contemporary U.S. antitrust law has its roots in the 1970s, with the rise of free-market economists and legal scholars. Robert Bork, who was solicitor general in the mid-1970s, emerged as a towering scholar who argued that antitrust law should have one and only one goal: the maximization of consumer welfare. The reason some companies were growing so large, he argued, was that they were more efficient than their competitors, and so any attempts to break up these firms were merely punishing them for their success. This camp of scholars was informed by the laissez-faire approach of the so-called Chicago school of economics, led by the Nobel laureates Milton Friedman and George Stigler, which viewed economic regulation with skepticism. The Chicago school argued that if antitrust law should be structured to maximize economic welfare, then it ought to be highly restrained. By any standard, this school of thought was an astounding success, influencing generations of judges and lawyers and coming to dominate the Supreme Court. The Reagan administration's Department of Justice embraced and codified many

tenets of the Chicago school, and U.S. antitrust policy has largely settled on a lax approach ever since.

After decades of dominance of the Chicago school, economists have had ample opportunity to evaluate the effects of this approach. What they have found is that the U.S. economy has grown steadily more concentrated across the board—in airlines, pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, media outlets, and, of course, technology companies—and consumers have suffered. Many, such as Thomas Philippon, explicitly link higher prices in the United States, compared with those in Europe, to inadequate antitrust enforcement.

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*Internet platforms' real danger is not that they distort markets; it is that they threaten democracy.*

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Now, a growing “post-Chicago school” argues that antitrust law should be enforced more vigorously.

Antitrust enforcement is necessary, they believe, because unregulated markets cannot stop the rise and entrenchment of anticompetitive monopolies. The shortcomings of the Chicago school's approach to antitrust have also led to the “neo-Brandeisian school” of antitrust. This group of legal scholars argues that the Sherman Act, the country's early federal antitrust statute, was meant to protect not just economic values but also political ones, such as free speech and economic equality. Since digital platforms both wield economic power and control communication bottlenecks, these companies have become a natural target for this camp.

It is true that digital markets exhibit certain features that distinguish them from conventional ones. For one thing, the coin of the realm is data. Once a company such as Amazon or Google has amassed data on hundreds of millions of users, it can move into completely new markets and beat established firms that lack similar knowledge. For another thing, such companies benefit greatly from so-called network effects. The larger the network gets, the more useful it becomes to its users, which creates a positive feedback loop that leads a single company to dominate the market. Unlike traditional firms, companies in the digital space do not compete for market share; they compete for the market itself. First movers can entrench themselves and make further competition impossible. They can swallow up potential rivals, as Facebook did by purchasing Instagram and WhatsApp.



*Platformed: Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifying on Capitol Hill, July 2020*

But the jury is still out on the question of whether the massive technology companies reduce consumer welfare. They offer a wealth of digital products, such as searches, email, and social networking accounts, and consumers seem to value these products highly, even as they pay a price by giving up their privacy and allowing advertisers to target them. Moreover, almost every abuse these platforms are accused of perpetrating can be simultaneously defended as economically efficient. Amazon, for instance, has shuttered mom-and-pop retail stores and gutted not just main streets but also big-box retailers. But the company is at the same time providing a service that many consumers find invaluable. (Imagine what it would be like if people had to rely on in-person retail during the pandemic.) As for the allegation that the platforms purchase startups to forestall competition, it is hard to know whether a young company would have become the next Apple or Google had it remained independent, or if it would have failed without the infusion of capital and management expertise it received from its new owners. Although consumers might have been better off if Instagram had stayed separate and become a viable alternative to Facebook, they would have been worse off if Instagram had failed altogether.

The economic case for reining in Big Tech is complicated. But there is a much more convincing political case. Internet platforms cause political harms that are far more alarming than any economic damage they create. Their real danger is not that they distort markets; it is that they threaten democracy.

## THE INFORMATION MONOPOLISTS

Since 2016, Americans have woken up to the power of technology companies to shape information. These platforms have allowed hoaxers to peddle fake news and extremists to push conspiracy theories. They have created “filter bubbles,” an environment in which, because of how their algorithms work, users are exposed only to information that confirms their preexisting beliefs. And they can amplify or bury particular voices, thus having a disturbing influence on democratic political debate. The ultimate fear is that the platforms have amassed so much power that they could sway an election, either deliberately or unwittingly.

Critics have responded to these concerns by demanding that the platforms assume greater responsibility for the content they broadcast. They called for Twitter to suppress or fact-check President Donald Trump’s misleading tweets. They lambasted Facebook for stating that it would not moderate political content. Many would like to see Internet platforms behave like media companies, curating their political content and holding public officials accountable.

But pressuring large platforms to perform that function—and hoping they will do it with the public interest in mind—is not a long-term solution. This approach sidesteps the problem of their underlying power, and any real solution must limit that power. Today, it is largely conservatives who complain about Internet platforms’ political bias. They assume, with some justification, that the people who run today’s platforms—Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Sundar Pichai of Google, and Jack Dorsey of Twitter—tend to be socially progressive, even as they are driven primarily by commercial self-interest.

This assumption may not hold up in the longer run. Suppose that one of these giants were taken over by a conservative billionaire. Rupert Murdoch’s control over Fox News and *The Wall Street Journal* already gives him far-reaching political clout, but at least the effects of that control are plain to see: you know when you are reading a *Wall Street Journal* editorial or watching Fox News. But if Murdoch were to control Facebook or Google, he could subtly alter ranking or search

algorithms to shape what users see and read, potentially affecting their political views without their awareness or consent. And the platforms' dominance makes their influence hard to escape. If you are a liberal, you can simply watch MSNBC instead of Fox; under a Murdoch-controlled Facebook, you may not have a similar choice if you want to share news stories or coordinate political activity with your friends.

Consider also that the platforms—Amazon, Facebook, and Google, in particular—possess information about individuals' lives that prior monopolists never had. They know who people's friends and family are, about people's incomes and possessions, and many of the most intimate details of their lives. What if the executive of a platform with corrupt intentions were to exploit embarrassing information to force the hand of a public official? Alternatively, imagine a misuse of private information in conjunction with the powers of the government—say, Facebook teaming up with a politicized Justice Department.

Digital platforms' concentrated economic and political power is like a loaded weapon sitting on a table. At the moment, the people sitting on the other side of the table likely won't pick up the gun and pull the trigger. The question for U.S. democracy, however, is whether it is safe to leave the gun there, where another person with worse intentions could come along and pick it up. No liberal democracy is content to entrust concentrated political power to individuals based on assumptions about their good intentions. That is why the United States places checks and balances on that power.

## **CRACKING DOWN**

The most obvious method of checking that power is government regulation. That is the approach followed in Europe, with Germany, for example, passing a law that criminalizes the propagation of fake news. Although regulation may still be possible in some democracies with a high degree of social consensus, it is unlikely to work in a country as polarized as the United States. Back in the heyday of broadcast television, the Federal Communications Commission's fairness doctrine required networks to maintain "balanced" coverage of political issues. Republicans relentlessly attacked the doctrine, claiming the networks were biased against conservatives, and the Federal Communications Commission rescinded it in 1987. So imagine a public regulator trying to decide whether to block a presidential tweet today. Whatever the decision, it would be massively controversial.

Another approach to checking Internet platforms' power is to promote greater competition. If there were a multiplicity of platforms, none would have the dominance enjoyed by Facebook and Google today. The problem, however, is that neither the United States nor the EU could likely break up Facebook or Google the way that Standard Oil

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*Digital platforms' concentrated power is like a loaded weapon sitting on a table.*

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and AT&T were broken up. Today's technology companies would fiercely resist such an attempt, and even if they eventually lost, the process of breaking them up would take years, if not decades, to complete. Perhaps more important, it is not clear that breaking up

Facebook, for example, would solve the underlying problem. There is a very good chance that a baby Facebook created by such a breakup would quickly grow to replace the parent. Even AT&T regained its dominance after being broken up in the 1980s. Social media's rapid scalability would make that happen even faster.

In view of the dim prospects of a breakup, many observers have turned to "data portability" to introduce competition into the platform market. Just as the government requires phone companies to allow users to take their phone numbers with them when they change networks, it could mandate that users have the right to take the data they have surrendered from one platform to another. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the powerful EU privacy law that went into effect in 2018, has adopted this very approach, mandating a standardized, machine-readable format for the transfer of personal data.

Data portability faces a number of obstacles, however. Chief among them is the difficulty of moving many kinds of data. Although it is easy enough to transfer some basic data—such as one's name, address, credit card information, and email address—it would be far harder to transfer all of a user's metadata. Metadata includes likes, clicks, orders, searches, and so on. It is precisely these types of data that are valuable in targeted advertising. Not only is the ownership of this information unclear; the information itself is also heterogeneous and platform-specific. How exactly, for example, could a record of past Google searches be transferred to a new Facebook-like platform?

An alternative method of curbing platforms' power relies on privacy law. Under this approach, regulations would limit the degree to which a technology company could use consumer data generated in

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one sector to improve its position in another, protecting both privacy and competition. The GDPR, for example, requires that consumer data be used only for the purpose for which the information was originally obtained, unless the consumer gives explicit permission otherwise. Such rules are designed to address one of the most potent sources of platform power: the more data a platform has, the easier it is to generate more revenue and even more data.

But relying on privacy law to prevent large platforms from entering new markets presents its own problems. As in the case of data portability, it is not clear whether rules such as the GDPR apply only to data that the consumer voluntarily gave to the platform or also to metadata. And even if successful, privacy initiatives would likely reduce only the personalization of news for each individual, not the concentration of editorial power. More broadly, such laws would close the door on a horse that has long since left the barn. The technology giants have already amassed vast quantities of customer data. As the new Department of Justice lawsuit indicates, Google's business model relies on gathering data generated by its different products—Gmail, Google Chrome, Google Maps, and its search engine—which combine to reveal unprecedented information on each user. Facebook has also collected extensive data about its users, in part by allegedly obtaining some data on users when they were browsing other sites. If privacy laws prevented new competitors from amassing and using similar data sets, they would run the risk of simply locking in the advantages of these first movers.

### **THE MIDDLEWARE SOLUTION**

If regulation, breakup, data portability, and privacy law all fall short, then what remains to be done about concentrated platform power? One of the most promising solutions has received little attention: middleware. Middleware is generally defined as software that rides on top of an existing platform and can modify the presentation of underlying data. Added to current technology platforms' services, middleware could allow users to choose how information is curated and filtered for them. Users would select middleware services that would determine the importance and veracity of political content, and the platforms would use those determinations to curate what those users saw. In other words, a competitive layer of new companies with transparent algorithms would step in and take over the



editorial gateway functions currently filled by dominant technology platforms whose algorithms are opaque.

Middleware products can be offered through a variety of approaches. One particularly effective approach would be for users to access the middleware via a technology platform such as Apple or Twitter. Consider news articles on users' news feeds or popular tweets by political figures. In the background of Apple or Twitter, a middleware service could add labels such as "misleading," "unverified," and "lacks context." When users logged on to Apple and Twitter, they would see these labels on the news articles and tweets. A more interventionist middleware could also influence the rankings for certain feeds, such as Amazon product lists, Facebook advertisements, Google search results, or YouTube video recommendations. For example, consumers could select middleware providers that adjusted their Amazon search results to prioritize products made domestically, eco-friendly products, or lower-priced goods. Middleware could even prevent a user from viewing certain content or block specific information sources or manufacturers altogether.

Each middleware provider would be required to be transparent in its offerings and technical features, so that users could make an informed choice. Providers of middleware would include both companies pursuing improvements to feeds and nonprofits seeking to advance civic values. A journalism school might offer middleware that favored superior reporting and suppressed unverified stories, or a county school board might offer middleware that prioritized local issues. By mediating the relationship between users and the platforms, middleware could cater to individual consumers' preferences while providing significant resistance to dominant players' unilateral actions.

Many details would have to be worked out. The first question is how much curation power to transfer to the new companies. At one extreme, middleware providers could completely transform the information presented by the underlying platform to the user, with the platform serving as little more than a neutral pipe. Under this model, middleware alone would determine the substance and priority of Amazon or Google searches, with those platforms merely offering access to their servers. At the other extreme, the platform could continue to curate and rank the content entirely with its own algorithms, and the middleware would serve only as a supplemental filter. Under this model, for example, a Facebook or Twitter interface would remain largely unchanged. Middle-

ware would just fact-check or label content without assigning importance to content or providing more fine-tuned recommendations.

The best approach probably lies somewhere in between. Handing middleware companies too much power could mean the underlying technology platforms would lose their direct connection to the consumer. With their business models undermined, the technology companies would fight back. On the other hand, handing middleware companies too little control would fail to curb the platforms' power to curate and disseminate content. But regardless of where exactly the line were drawn, government intervention would be necessary. Congress would likely have to pass a law requiring platforms to use open and uniform application programming interfaces, or APIs, which would allow middleware companies to work seamlessly with different technology platforms. Congress would also have to carefully regulate the middleware providers themselves, so that they met clear minimum standards of reliability, transparency, and consistency.

A second issue involves finding a business model that would incentivize a competitive layer of new companies to emerge. The most logical approach would be for the dominant platforms and the third-party providers of middleware to strike revenue-sharing agreements. When someone made a Google search or visited a Facebook page, the advertising revenue from the visit would be shared between the platform and the middleware provider. These agreements would likely have to be overseen by the government, since even if the dominant platforms are eager to share the burden of filtering content, they should be expected to resist sharing advertising revenue.

Yet another detail to be worked out is some sort of technical framework that would encourage a diversity of middleware products to spring forth. The framework would need to be simple enough to attract as many entrants as possible, but sophisticated enough to fit atop the big platforms, each of which has its own special architecture. Moreover, it would have to allow middleware to assess at least three different kinds of content: widely accessible public content (such as news stories, press releases, and tweets from public figures), user-generated content (such as YouTube videos and public tweets from private individuals), and private content (such as WhatsApp messages and Facebook posts).

Skeptics might argue that the middleware approach would fragment the Internet and reinforce filter bubbles. Although universities might require their students to use middleware products that di-

rected them to credible sources of information, conspiracy-minded groups might do the opposite. Custom-tailored algorithms might only further splinter the American polity, encouraging people to find voices that echo their views, sources that confirm their beliefs, and political leaders that amplify their fears.

Perhaps some of these problems could be resolved with regulations that required middleware to meet minimum standards. But it is also important to note that such splintering can already happen, and it may well be technologically impossible to prevent it from occurring in the future. Consider the path taken by followers of QAnon, an elaborate far-right conspiracy theory that posits the existence of a global pedophilia cabal. After having their content restricted by Facebook and Twitter, QAnon supporters abandoned the big platforms and migrated to 4chan, a more permissive message board. When 4chan's moderation teams started tempering incendiary comments, QAnon followers moved to a new platform, 8chan (now called 8kun). These conspiracy theorists can still communicate with one another through ordinary email or on encrypted channels such as Signal, Telegram, and WhatsApp. Such speech, however problematic, is protected by the First Amendment.

What's more, extremist groups endanger democracy primarily when they leave the periphery of the Internet and enter the mainstream. This happens when their voices are either picked up by the media or amplified by a platform. Unlike 8chan, a dominant platform can influence a broad swath of the population, against those people's will and without their knowledge. More broadly, even if middleware encouraged splintering, that danger pales in comparison to the one posed by concentrated platform power. The biggest long-term threat to democracy is not the splintering of opinion but the unaccountable power wielded by giant technology companies.

## **GIVING BACK CONTROL**

The public should be alarmed by the growth and power of dominant Internet platforms, and there is good reason why policymakers are turning to antitrust law as a remedy. But that is only one of several possible responses to the problem of concentrated private economic and political power.

Now, governments are launching antitrust actions against Big Tech platforms in both the United States and Europe, and the resulting cases are likely to be litigated for years to come. But this approach is

not necessarily the best way to deal with platform power's serious political threat to democracy. The First Amendment envisioned a marketplace of ideas where competition, rather than regulation, protected public discourse. Yet in a world where large platforms amplify, suppress, and target political messaging, that marketplace breaks down.

Middleware can address this problem. It can take that power away from technology platforms and hand it not to a single government regulator but to a new group of competitive firms that would allow users to tailor their online experiences. This approach would not prevent hate speech or conspiracy theories from circulating, but it would limit their scope in a way that better aligned with the original intent of the First Amendment. Today, the content that the platforms offer is determined by murky algorithms generated by artificial intelligence programs. With middleware, platform users would be handed the controls. They—not some invisible artificial intelligence program—would determine what they saw. 🌐

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# The Arab Uprisings Never Ended

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## The Enduring Struggle to Remake the Middle East

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*Marc Lynch*

There are few, if any, celebrations planned for the tenth anniversary of the uprisings that swept the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011. The days of television screens filled with crowds chanting, “The people demand the overthrow of the regime” seem like ancient history. Early hopes for revolutionary change crashed into the blunt force of military coups, civil wars, and fractured states. In 2021, there may be few beliefs more universally shared than that the Arab uprisings failed.

It is easy to understand the appeal of this idea, eagerly promoted by autocratic regimes and foreign policy realists alike. It means a return to business as usual. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations tacitly accepted that view as they shifted their gaze to other goals in the region—the former to nuclear negotiations with Iran, the latter to normalizing Arab relations with Israel.

Yet that conviction is in fact just the latest in a series of premature conclusions. Before 2011, most analysts took the stability of Arab autocracies for granted. This was wrong. As popular pressure drove four long-ruling dictators from power—Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Libya’s Muammar al-Qaddafi, and Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh—some observers rushed to assume that an unstoppable democratic wave had arrived; others warned that democratization would open the door to Islamist domination. Both were wrong. In 2012, most thought that the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad was fin-

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ished. Wrong. In 2013, supporters of Egypt's military coup argued it would put the country back on a path toward democracy. Wrong again.

In the heat of the revolutionary moment a decade ago, it did feel as though the region had changed forever. The autocratic wall of fear had broken, and empowered Arab citizens seemed destined to never again tolerate authoritarian rule. Within a few short years, however, those hopes were crushed. A military coup in Egypt ended its nascent democratic experiment. Fragile transitions in Libya and Yemen collapsed into civil war. Syria descended into a nightmarish mixture of insurgency and international proxy warfare. Eventually, autocrats across the region clawed back most of the power they had lost.

Still, the consensus that the Arab uprisings ended in failure is similarly premature and as likely to prove wrong in time. The effects of the uprisings should not be measured in regimes overthrown or democratic elections held, although their record there is not insignificant. The fact that dictators once again sit on the thrones of the Middle East is far from evidence that the uprisings failed. Democracy was only one part of the protesters' demands. The movement was engaged in a generations-long struggle that rejected a regional order that had delivered nothing but corruption, disastrous governance, and economic failure.

By that standard, the uprisings have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics, including individual attitudes, political systems, ideologies, and international relations. Superficial similarities might mask the extent of the change, but today's Middle East would be unrecognizable to observers from 2010. The forces set in motion in 2011 virtually guaranteed that the next decade will witness even more profound transformations—changes that will confound any policy based on a return to the old ways.

## **WHAT REALLY HAPPENED**

After a decade of dashed hopes, it is easy to forget just how powerful and surprising the revolutionary moment that started in December 2010 truly was. By late 2010, it was clear that the Arab world was experiencing mounting popular frustration and growing economic inequality, but the region's rulers believed that they were capable of crushing any potential threat. So did the academics studying them and the activists confronting them.

Nobody was prepared for the sheer scale, speed, and intensity of the protests that erupted simultaneously across the entire region.



*An unfinished revolution: demonstrating in Tahrir Square, Cairo, January 2012*

Arab satellite television stations such as Al Jazeera and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter accelerated the process, quickly transmitting images, ideas, and emotions across borders. Regimes that were well prepared for isolated local unrest were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of citizens who swarmed the streets and failed to leave. When some militaries refused to kill for their embattled presidents, the people declared victory.

Those victories in Tunisia and Egypt, where mass protests successfully evicted entrenched autocrats and set the stage for elections, galvanized protesters in other Arab countries. It is difficult to recapture the magic of the time, the new sense of community crafted in the chaos of Cairo's Tahrir Square, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout, Tunisia's Avenue Habib Bourguiba, and Yemen's Change Square. Everything seemed possible. Change seemed inevitable. Autocrats were running scared, and nothing—not U.S. military support, not the seemingly omnipotent security services, not protesters' own fears and divisions—could stop the movement.

But no other country emulated the path of the Tunisian and Egyptian trailblazers. Regional powers backed old regimes in their efforts to destroy the uprisings, and the West did nothing to stop them. Poor governments such as Jordan and Morocco drew on financial and political support from Gulf monarchies to weather their own smaller protest movements, while passing modest constitutional reforms to placate their citizens. Bahrain's monarchy violently crushed its nascent antigovernment popular uprising, unleashing a wave of sectarian repression. Libya's Qaddafi turned the full force of his military on the protesters, triggering a rapid escalation that culminated in civil war and international intervention. Yemen fell into a long and bloody stalemate as its military splintered after months of protests.

As conflicts dragged on and revolutionary momentum flagged, most regimes' overwhelming military and financial advantage eventually won out. The surviving governments then sought revenge, punishing the activists who had dared challenge their rule. They aimed to restore fear and crush hope. The United States did little to stand in the way. When Egypt's military overthrew the elected president Mohamed Morsi and massacred hundreds of protesters in the center of Cairo, the Obama administration refused to even call the event a coup.

Nowhere was this reversal of fortune more evident than in Syria. What started as a peaceful protest movement against Assad's government slowly escalated into a civil war as the regime cracked down violently on demonstrators. The country's degeneration into conflict carried incalculable costs: hundreds of thousands dead, millions of refugees, the spread of newly virulent forms of sectarianism, and a revitalized jihadi movement. Syria's horrors have provided a useful scarecrow for autocrats. This, they signal, is what might happen if you return to the streets.

By 2013, in large part due to Syria's descent into chaos and Egypt's military coup against Morsi, a new consensus had taken hold. The autocrats had won, the uprisings had failed, and the Arab Spring was turning into an Arab Winter.

## **THE ISLAMISTS**

Few other dynamics illustrate the uprisings' transformative effects better than the fortunes of mainstream Islamist groups. Originally hailed as important players in new democratic systems, many were eventually suppressed by resurgent autocracies or struggled to navigate transitional democracies. This arc further reinforced a sense that the uprisings had failed.



In the decade before 2011, Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, an influential movement founded in Egypt in the 1920s, were the dominant opposition force in many Arab countries. Their organizational skill, ability to provide social services, reputation for integrity, and religious appeal made them a formidable political force. Starting in the 1990s, Brotherhood intellectuals generated elaborate arguments for Islam's compatibility with democracy and critiqued existing secular regimes' autocratic governance.

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*The Middle East is far beyond the ability of any outside power to control.*

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Islamists did not play a significant role in the early days of the uprisings. In Tunisia, the government had largely removed such groups from public life. In Egypt, they joined the Tahrir Square protests late. When opportunities arose, however, Islamists quickly entered the political arena. Tunisia's Ennahda Party and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood scored massive victories in those countries' first transitional elections. Morocco's equivalent, the Justice and Development Party, formed a series of governments after its electoral victories in 2011 and 2016. Libyan Islamists also joined in the electoral game, with less success. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood played a critical organizational role, mostly from abroad, in the uprising against Assad. By 2012, Islamists seemed to be ascendant.

But these groups proved attractive targets for autocratic crack-downs and regional power politics. The post-2011 antidemocratic backlash was marketed in the West by the regimes partly as a response to an alleged Islamist takeover. Egypt's military used arguments like this to legitimate its July 2013 coup and the sweeping, violent repression that followed. In Tunisia, the Ennahda Party practiced a strategy of self-limitation; its prime minister stepped down in favor of a technocrat to short-circuit rapidly escalating political conflict. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of which viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat and a Qatari proxy, began to crack down on the movement and declared it a terrorist organization. In response, Qatar and Turkey stepped up their support to the group, welcoming members fleeing Egypt's crackdown and aiding branches still active on the ground in Libya and elsewhere.

Rather than winning the democratic game, most Islamist groups failed thanks to both their own mistakes and government crackdowns. The

Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—the largest and most influential of those groups—no longer exists in a recognizable form. Tens of thousands of its members are in prison, its remaining leaders are dead or in exile, and its money was confiscated by the Egyptian government. In Jordan, the government has gone a long way toward dismantling the Brotherhood, leaving it fragmented and divided. Morocco's Islamist Justice and Development Party has lost its luster after years of governing within the king's constraints. Tunisia's Ennahda ostentatiously disavowed Islamism and rebranded itself a party of Muslim democracy. And outside of Kuwait, Islamist movements barely function in most Gulf countries. Modern mainstream political Islam is a shadow of its former self.

Violent Islamism is another story. Al Qaeda and its ilk were initially caught off-guard by the uprisings. The rapid success of peaceful protests made the argument that only violent jihad could bring about change look extreme. But Syria's war rescued them. Early in the conflict, Assad released a cadre of jihadis from prison in an attempt to frame the war as a struggle against terrorism. They were subsequently joined by remnants of what was then the Islamic State in Iraq, which moved some of its leaders and fighters into Syria to join in the battle against Assad. As the uprising morphed into an insurgency, governments from inside and outside the region funneled arms and money to rebel groups. Although Western governments tried to vet and direct aid toward moderate partners, others showed little restraint. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey all channeled assistance to armed Islamist groups and tolerated private financial support for the conflict. Those funds overwhelmingly went to the most extreme groups, tilting the balance within the rebellion.

The blowback came quickly. In 2013, jihadis in Syria initially split over the declaration of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, but then the group quickly turned its guns against the rest of the opposition. ISIS swept across eastern Syria and western Iraq, erasing the border and theatrically declaring itself the new caliphate. Its savvy social media campaigns and starkly apocalyptic messaging, coupled with demonstrable military success, drew tens of thousands of supporters to its ranks and inspired attacks abroad. Mainstream Islamist movements now found themselves squeezed between their longstanding rejection of violent jihad and their constituencies' enthusiasm for groups such as ISIS. How could the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood continue to call for peaceful politics when its electoral

participation had brought about only fierce repression and organizational disaster, while ISIS's violence produced astonishing results?

A decade after they began, the uprisings have radically reshaped Islamist movements. The fortunes of organizations that participated in formal electoral politics spiked and then crashed. In contrast, jihadis suffered grievous setbacks but are still a viable political and ideological force: with few mainstream movements remaining as safety valves and entrenched conflicts offering ample opportunities for mobilization, more jihadi insurgencies seem likely.

### **THE REGION THE COUNTERREVOLUTION MADE**

It wasn't just Islamist groups that saw their fortunes take sharp turns in the wake of the uprisings. The protesters' democratic aspirations seemed to portend a new role for the United States—one that might deliver on U.S. President Barack Obama's famous Cairo speech promising a "new beginning" for American relations with the region. The reality, however, was much different.

The Arab uprisings challenged the entire U.S.-backed order, accelerating Washington's retreat from the region. American disengagement has many causes, including the fiasco of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, shifts in energy dependence, the strategic need to pivot toward Asia, and domestic distaste for far-flung wars. But the uprisings profoundly undermined the United States' core alliances, encouraging local powers to pursue policies at odds with Washington's and inviting global competitors such as China and Russia into the once unipolar region.

A more vigorous U.S. embrace of the uprisings might have helped more democratic transitions take hold. But the Obama administration's efforts proved tepid and ineffective, simultaneously leaving activists feeling betrayed and autocratic allies feeling abandoned. The administration's reluctance to act more forcefully in Syria and its determined pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran further alienated the United States' autocratic partners. As a result, through much of the past decade, putative U.S. allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have often worked openly against American policies.

In contrast, the Trump administration shared the worldview of those allies, including their contempt for Arab democracy and the Iran deal. But its policies often proved no more reassuring. President Donald Trump's nonresponse to the 2019 Iranian missile attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil refinery, for instance, which shut down

nearly five percent of global oil production, shocked the region. On most regional issues, the United States under Trump seemed to have no policy at all. As the U.S. presence in the region has faded, Middle Eastern powers have been forging an incipient new order of their own.

Some parts of this alternative regional system are familiar. The death of an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution has been a long time coming. The struggle between Iran and its Sunni Arab rivals has metastasized but follows familiar contours from the early years of the century. Iran has upped its use of proxy forces, especially in Iraq and Syria, retaining its regional influence in spite of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and campaign of "maximum pressure." Tehran's attack on Abqaiq sent a message to Gulf states that a potential conflict would be costly. The steady campaign of attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq by Iranian-backed Shiite militias even pushed U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to warn that the United States might abandon its embassy in Baghdad—a long-standing Iranian dream.

The real change in the post-uprising region is the emergence of a fault line within the Sunni world stretching across the Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa. With the United States either on the sidelines or obsessed with Iran, Sunni aspirants to Arab leadership, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, fought proxy conflicts across the regional map. These competing Sunni blocs backed rival groups in virtually every political transition and civil war, turning local political contests into opportunities for regional competition. The effects were devastating: fractured Egyptian and Tunisian politics, the collapse of Libya's post-Qaddafi transition, and a divided Syrian opposition.

It was into that polarized landscape that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman blundered like a wild elephant. MBS, as the crown prince is widely known, rose to power in 2015 by sidelining rivals and cowering potential opponents with abandon. Since then, he has initiated a series of disastrous foreign policy moves. He launched an intervention in Yemen that rapidly descended into a quagmire and a humanitarian catastrophe, bizarrely detained Lebanon's prime minister, and allegedly ordered the assassination of the opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Such moves deeply damaged Saudi Arabia's global standing.

Nothing exemplifies the erratic patterns of this newly multipolar Middle East better than the quixotic 2017 Saudi-UAE blockade of Qatar, launched in response to Qatar's supposed support for terrorist groups. The diplomatic spat tore apart the Gulf Cooperation Coun-

cil, once the region's most effective multilateral body, and hobbled U.S. efforts to build a unified anti-Iranian front. Rather than succumb to the pressure, Qatar simply drew on Iranian and Turkish support, U.S. protection (Doha hosts the massive Al Udeid Air Base, which is used by the United States), and its own vast financial resources. The blockade eventually settled into a semipermanent, but not particularly dangerous, new reality, with tensions mostly playing out through proxy competition in Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere. The United States' inability to compel its allies to resolve their differences and cooperate against Iran shows just how far its influence has fallen since 2011.

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*The uprisings have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics.*

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This intra-Gulf squabble, moreover, invited an aggressive Turkish bid for regional leadership. In northern Syria, the Turkish military redrew the region's de facto borders and put sufficient pressure on U.S.-backed Kurdish units to force American troops to withdraw. Turkey followed this success with an aggressive intervention in Libya designed to counter Egyptian and UAE support for Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the military forces that oppose the interim government recognized by Turkey and other foreign powers. Turkey's military expansion, closer ties to Qatar, and support for Sunni groups abandoned by Saudi Arabia all crystallized a new regional axis cutting through the Shiite-Sunni divide.

The United States has been virtually invisible in most of these conflicts. Under Trump, whose administration was fixated on Iran and uninterested in the nuances of regional politics, Washington largely disappeared as a major actor, even in areas such as Iraq and Syria, where U.S. troops remain deployed. Far from encouraging democratic change or even defending human rights, Trump instead chose to rely on the United States' autocratic partners—hoping they could ignore public opinion and enter into an open alliance with Israel. Israel's newly formalized relationships with Bahrain and the UAE, alongside broader Gulf support for Israeli efforts to target Iran, offer some vindication of that approach. In the absence of U.S. mediation elsewhere, however, interventions by regional actors have prolonged existing conflicts, with little regard for the well-being of those on the ground. Although the combatants have long since lost

sight of their original purpose, entrenched violence grinds on—held in place by regional meddling and local war economies.

### **WHAT IS TO COME**

Despite the Arab uprising's premature obituary and dark legacy, the revolutionary wave of 2011 was not a passing mirage. Ten years on, the region's autocratic façade is cracking once again. Major uprisings recently blocked the reelection of Algeria's infirm president, led to the overthrow of Sudan's long-ruling leader, and challenged sectarian political orders in Iraq and Lebanon. Lebanon barely has a government after a year of protests, financial disaster, and the fall-out of an incomprehensible explosion at Beirut's port. Saudi Arabia has witnessed rapid change at home as it prepares for MBS's presumed royal ascension.

These events initially seemed puzzling. Wasn't the autocrats' victory supposed to restore stability? Weren't Arab publics defeated, exhausted, and despairing? In reality, what looked like an ending was only another turn of a relentless cycle. The regimes supposedly offering stability were, in fact, the primary causes of instability. It was their corruption, autocracy, failed governance, rejection of democracy, and abuse of human rights that drove people to revolt. Once the uprisings began, their violent repression fueled internal polarization and civil war, while exacerbating corruption and economic woes. As long as such regimes form the backbone of the regional order, there will be no stability.

More eruptions of mass protests now seem inevitable. There are simply too many drivers of political instability for even the most draconian regime to stay in power indefinitely. The COVID-19 pandemic, the collapse in the price of oil, and a sharp reduction in remittances from migrant laborers have piled intense new pressures onto already disastrously weak economies. Simmering wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen continue to spew out refugees, weapons, and extremism while attracting external intervention. And things could get worse. The tense U.S. standoff with Iran could escalate suddenly into a hot war, or the collapse of the Palestinian Authority could spark another intifada.

That is why, for all their assertiveness, most autocratic regimes in the region radiate palpable insecurity. Egypt's government crushes every possible sign of popular unrest. Ankara has never recovered from the trauma of a failed coup attempt in 2016. Iran's leaders obsess over external attempts to foment unrest as they struggle to cope with economic

sanctions. Even the government of the UAE, where there have been few signs of domestic instability, raised eyebrows by arresting a British academic for alleged espionage. These are not the behaviors of confident governments. For them, the lesson of 2011 is that existential threats—such as democracy—can emerge from anywhere at any time. Their paranoia, in turn, drives them toward precisely the policies that fuel popular discontent. And thanks to nearly a decade of increased government repression, civil society and political institutions that might ordinarily channel popular frustration no longer exist. When such anger inevitably boils over, it will be more dramatic than ever before.

Future protests are unlikely to resemble the 2011 uprisings. The region has changed too much. Autocrats have learned how to co-opt, disrupt, and defeat challengers. Domestic unrest or regional contagion is unlikely to catch regimes off-guard, and governments are less likely to refrain from using force in the early stages of protest. But potential protesters have also learned valuable lessons. Although autocratic successes have left many Arab publics demoralized and broken, the recent revolutionary movements in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan have demonstrated that discipline and commitment remain. In all four countries, citizens proved able to sustain nonviolent mobilization for months on end despite crackdowns and provocation.

The political environment in the Middle East has also polarized into competing axes, which blocks the sort of cross-national identification that allowed the Arab uprisings to spread so easily. Unlike in 2011, today there is no unified Arab public. Regional media, once a source of unity, have fragmented. Al Jazeera is now seen as a partisan instrument of Qatari policy, not a platform for shared debate. Arab social media, meanwhile, has been thoroughly colonized by information warfare, bots, and malware, creating a toxic environment in which new cross-ideological coalitions struggle to coalesce. But as the interactions between Algerian and Sudanese protesters and the tenacity of Iraqi and Lebanese movements suggest, these difficulties are surmountable.

Compared with in 2011, moreover, the international environment is less open to a revolutionary wave today, but it is also in less of a position to prevent it. Whereas the Obama administration struggled to reconcile democratic values with strategic interests, the Trump administration fully supported regional autocrats and shared their contempt for popular protest. Nobody in the Middle East today will

be looking to Washington for signals or guidance. Arab regimes and protesters alike understand that they are on their own.

To say that another surge of uprisings is coming does not mean subscribing to a deterministic view of history in which the right side inevitably triumphs. Far from it. Uprisings will happen, and when they do, they may well shatter existing orders in ways 2011 did not.

But for all the enormous untapped potential of the Middle East's young population, there is little reason to be hopeful about the Middle East's prospects. Nor will there be any easy, automatic reset when President-elect Joe Biden takes office. The Trump-brokered axis of Gulf states and Israel will likely resist every incremental change in U.S. policy. Iran will not trust U.S. commitments anytime soon. Shattered states will not be easily reconstructed. Refugees will not soon return. Jihadi insurgencies will continue to find ways to regenerate. If no other lesson is learned from 2011, it should be that the Middle East is far beyond the ability of any outside power to control. 🌐



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# The End of the Wilsonian Era

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## Why Liberal Internationalism Failed

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*Walter Russell Mead*

**O**ne hundred years after the U.S. Senate humiliated President Woodrow Wilson by rejecting the Treaty of Versailles, Princeton University, which Wilson led as its president before launching his political career, struck his name from its famous school of international affairs. As “cancellations” go, this one is at least arguably deserved. Wilson was an egregious racist even by the standards of his time, and the man behind the persecution of his own political opponents and the abuses of the first Red Scare has been celebrated for far too long and far too uncritically.

But however problematic Wilson’s personal views and domestic policies were, as a statesman and ideologist, he must be counted among the most influential makers of the modern world. He was not a particularly original thinker. More than a century before Wilson proposed the League of Nations, Tsar Alexander I of Russia had alarmed his fellow rulers at the Congress of Vienna by articulating a similar vision: an international system that would rest on a moral consensus upheld by a concert of powers that would operate from a shared set of ideas about legitimate sovereignty. By Wilson’s time, moreover, the belief that democratic institutions contributed to international peace whereas absolute monarchies were inherently warlike and unstable was almost a commonplace observation among educated Americans and Britons. Wilson’s contribution was to synthesize those ideas into a concrete program for a rules-based order grounded in a set of international institutions.

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His failure to win broad-based support at home for that vision broke him, and he died a bitterly disappointed man. In the decades that followed, however, his ideas became an inspiration and a guide to national leaders, diplomats, activists, and intellectuals around the world. During World War II, many Americans came to regret their country's prewar isolationism, including its refusal to join the League of Nations, and Wilson began to appear less like a martinet hobbled by poor political skills and more like a prophet whose wisdom, had it been heeded, could have prevented the second great global conflagration in 20 years. Inspired by that conclusion, American leaders during and after World War II laid the foundations of what they hoped would be a Wilsonian world order, in which international relations would be guided by the principles put forward in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and conducted according to rules established by institutions such as the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and the World Trade Organization.

This task was complicated by the Cold War, but "the free world" (as Americans then called the noncommunist countries) continued to develop along Wilsonian lines. Inevitable compromises, such as U.S. support for ruthless dictators and military rulers in many parts of the world, were seen as regrettable necessities imposed by the need to fight the much greater evil of Soviet communism. When the Berlin Wall fell, in 1989, it seemed that the opportunity for a Wilsonian world order had finally come. The former Soviet empire could be reconstructed along Wilsonian lines, and the West could embrace Wilsonian principles more consistently now that the Soviet threat had disappeared. Self-determination, the rule of law between and within countries, liberal economics, and the protection of human rights: the "new world order" that both the George H. W. Bush and the Clinton administrations worked to create was very much in the Wilsonian mold.

Today, however, the most important fact in world politics is that this noble effort has failed. The next stage in world history will not unfold along Wilsonian lines. The nations of the earth will continue to seek some kind of political order, because they must. And human rights activists and others will continue to work toward their goals. But the dream of a universal order, grounded in law, that secures peace between countries and democracy inside them will figure less and less in the work of world leaders.



*Ideas man: Woodrow Wilson*

To state this truth is not to welcome it. There are many advantages to a Wilsonian world order, even when that order is partial and incomplete. Many analysts, some associated with the presidential campaign of former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden, think they can put Humpty Dumpty together again. One wishes them every success. But the centrifugal forces tearing at the Wilsonian order are so deeply rooted in the nature of the contemporary world that not even the end of the Trump era can revive the Wilsonian project in its most ambitious form. Although Wilsonian ideals will not disappear and there will be a continuing influence of Wilsonian thought on U.S. foreign policies, the halcyon days of the post-Cold War era, when American presidents organized their foreign policies around the principles of liberal internationalism, are unlikely to return anytime soon.

### **THE ORDER OF THINGS**

Wilsonianism is only one version of a rules-based world order among many. The Westphalian system, which emerged in Europe after the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648, and the Congress system, which

arose in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century, were both rules-based and even law-based; some of the foundational ideas of international law date from those eras. And the Holy Roman Empire—a transnational collection of territories that stretched from France into modern-day Poland and from Hamburg to Milan—was an international system that foreshadowed the European Union,

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*Wilsonianism suffers not from a naive faith in good intentions but from a simplistic view of the historical process.*

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with highly complex rules governing everything from trade to sovereign inheritance among princely houses.

As for human rights, by the early twentieth century, the pre-Wilsonian European system had been moving for a century in the direction of putting egregious violations of human rights onto the international agenda.

Then, as now, it was chiefly weak countries whose oppressive behavior attracted the most attention. The genocidal murder of Ottoman Christian minorities at the hands of Ottoman troops and irregular forces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries received substantially more attention than atrocities carried out around the same time by Russian forces against rebellious Muslim peoples in the Caucasus. No delegation of European powers came to Washington to discuss the treatment of Native Americans or to make representations concerning the status of African Americans. Nevertheless, the pre-Wilsonian European order had moved significantly in the direction of elevating human rights to the level of diplomacy.

Wilson, therefore, was not introducing the ideas of world order and human rights to a collection of previously anarchic states and unenlightened polities. Rather, his quest was to reform an existing international order whose defects had been conclusively demonstrated by the horrors of World War I. In the pre-Wilsonian order, established dynastic rulers were generally regarded as legitimate, and interventions such as the 1849 Russian invasion of Hungary, which restored Habsburg rule, were considered lawful. Except in the most glaring instances, states were more or less free to treat their citizens or subjects as they wished, and although governments were expected to observe the accepted principles of public international law, no supranational body was charged with the enforcement of these standards. The preservation of the balance of power was invoked as a goal to guide states; war,

although regrettable, was seen as a legitimate element of the system. From Wilson's standpoint, these were fatal flaws that made future conflagrations inevitable. To redress them, he sought to build an order in which states would accept enforceable legal restrictions on their behavior at home and their international conduct.

That never quite materialized, but until recent years, the U.S.-led postwar order resembled Wilson's vision in important respects. And, it should be noted, that vision is not equally dead everywhere. Although Wilson was an American, his view of world order was first and foremost developed as a method for managing international politics in Europe, and it is in Europe where Wilson's ideas have had their greatest success and where their prospects continue to look strongest. His ideas were treated with bitter and cynical contempt by most European statesmen when he first proposed them, but they later became the fundamental basis of the European order, enshrined in the laws and practices of the EU. Arguably, no ruler since Charlemagne has made as deep an impression on the European political order as the much-mocked Presbyterian from the Shenandoah Valley.

### **THE ARC OF HISTORY**

Beyond Europe, the prospects for the Wilsonian order are bleak. The reasons behind its demise, however, are different from what many assume. Critics of the Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs often decry what they see as its idealism. In fact, as Wilson demonstrated during the negotiations over the Treaty of Versailles, he was perfectly capable of the most cynical realpolitik when it suited him. The real problem of Wilsonianism is not a naive faith in good intentions but a simplistic view of the historical process, especially when it comes to the impact of technological progress on human social order. Wilson's problem was not that he was a prig but that he was a Whig.

Like early-twentieth-century progressives generally and many American intellectuals to this day, Wilson was a liberal determinist of the Anglo-Saxon school; he shared the optimism of what the scholar Herbert Butterfield called "the Whig historians," the Victorian-era British thinkers who saw human history as a narrative of inexorable progress and betterment. Wilson believed that the so-called ordered liberty that characterized the Anglo-American countries had opened a path to permanent prosperity and peace. This belief represents a sort of Anglo-Saxon Hegelianism and holds that the mix of free markets,

free government, and the rule of law that developed in the United Kingdom and the United States is inevitably transforming the rest of the world—and that as this process continues, the world will slowly and for the most part voluntarily converge on the values that made the Anglo-Saxon world as wealthy, attractive, and free as it has become.

Wilson was the devout son of a minister, deeply steeped in Calvinist teachings about predestination and the utter sovereignty of God, and he believed that the arc of progress was fated. The future would fulfill biblical prophecies of a coming millennium: a thousand-year reign of peace and prosperity before the final consummation of human existence, when a returning Christ would unite heaven and earth. (Today's Wilsonians have given this determinism a secular twist: in their eyes, liberalism will rule the future and bring humanity to “the end of history” as a result of human nature rather than divine purpose.)

Wilson believed that the defeat of imperial Germany in World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires meant that the hour of a universal League of Nations had finally arrived. In 1945, American leaders ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt and Henry Wallace on the left to Wendell Willkie and Thomas Dewey on the right would interpret the fall of Germany and Japan in much the same way. In the early 1990s, leading U.S. foreign policymakers and commentators saw the fall of the Soviet Union through the same deterministic prism: as a signal that the time had come for a truly global and truly liberal world order. On all three occasions, Wilsonian order builders seemed to be in sight of their goal. But each time, like Ulysses, they were blown off course by contrary winds.

## **TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES**

Today, those winds are gaining strength. Anyone hoping to reinvigorate the flagging Wilsonian project must contend with a number of obstacles. The most obvious is the return of ideology-fueled geopolitics. China, Russia, and a number of smaller powers aligned with them—Iran, for example—correctly see Wilsonian ideals as a deadly threat to their domestic arrangements. Earlier in the post-Cold War period, U.S. primacy was so thorough that those countries attempted to downplay or disguise their opposition to the prevailing pro-democracy consensus. Beginning in U.S. President Barack Obama's second term, however, and continuing through the Trump era, they have become less inhibited. Seeing Wilsonianism as a cover for American and, to some degree, EU ambi-

tions, Beijing and Moscow have grown increasingly bold about contesting Wilsonian ideas and initiatives inside international institutions such as the UN and on the ground in places from Syria to the South China Sea.

These powers' opposition to the Wilsonian order is corrosive in several ways. It raises the risks and costs for Wilsonian powers to intervene in conflicts beyond their own borders. Consider, for example, how Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria has helped prevent the United States and European countries from getting more directly involved in that country's civil war. The presence of great powers in the anti-Wilsonian coalition also provides shelter and assistance to smaller powers that otherwise might not choose to resist the status quo. Finally, the membership of countries such as China and Russia in international institutions makes it more difficult for those institutions to operate in support of Wilsonian norms: take, for example, Chinese and Russian vetoes in the UN Security Council, the election of anti-Wilsonian representatives to various UN bodies, and the opposition by countries such as Hungary and Poland to EU measures intended to promote the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the torrent of technological innovation and change known as "the information revolution" creates obstacles for Wilsonian goals within countries and in the international system. The irony is that Wilsonians often believe that technological progress will make the world more governable and politics more rational—even if it also adds to the danger of war by making it so much more destructive. Wilson himself believed just that, as did the postwar order builders and the liberals who sought to extend the U.S.-led order after the Cold War. Each time, however, this faith in technological change was misplaced. As seen most recently with the rise of the Internet, although new technologies often contribute to the spread of liberal ideas and practices, they can also undermine democratic systems and aid authoritarian regimes.

Today, as new technologies disrupt entire industries, and as social media upends the news media and election campaigning, politics is becoming more turbulent and polarized in many countries. That makes the victory of populist and antiestablishment candidates from both the left and the right more likely in many places. It also makes it harder for national leaders to pursue the compromises that international cooperation inevitably requires and increases the chances that incoming governments will refuse to be bound by the acts of their predecessors.

The information revolution is destabilizing international life in other ways that make it harder for rules-based international institutions to cope. Take, for example, the issue of arms control, a central concern of Wilsonian foreign policy since World War I and one that grew even more important following the development of nuclear weapons. Wilsonians prioritize arms control not just because nuclear warfare could destroy the human race but also because, even if unused, nuclear weapons or their equivalent put the Wilsonian dream of a completely rules-based, law-bound international order out of reach. Weapons of mass destruction guarantee exactly the kind of state sovereignty that Wilsonians think is incompatible with humanity's long-term security. One cannot easily stage a humanitarian intervention against a nuclear power.

The fight against proliferation has had its successes, and the spread of nuclear weapons has been delayed—but it has not stopped, and the fight is getting harder over time. In the 1940s, it took the world's richest nation and a consortium of leading scientists to assemble the first nuclear weapon. Today, second- and third-rate scientific establishments in low-income countries can manage the feat. That does not mean that the fight against proliferation should be abandoned. It is merely a reminder that not all diseases have cures.

What is more, the technological progress that underlies the information revolution significantly exacerbates the problem of arms control. The development of cyberweapons and the potential of biological agents to inflict strategic damage on adversaries—graphically demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic—serve as warnings that new tools of warfare will be significantly more difficult to monitor or control than nuclear technology. Effective arms control in these fields may well not be possible. The science is changing too quickly, the research behind them is too hard to detect, and too many of the key technologies cannot be banned outright because they also have beneficial civilian applications.

In addition, economic incentives that did not exist in the Cold War are now pushing arms races in new fields. Nuclear weapons and long-range missile technology were extremely expensive and brought few benefits to the civilian economy. Biological and technological research, by contrast, are critical for any country or company that hopes to remain competitive in the twenty-first century. An uncontrollable, multipolar arms race across a range of cutting-edge technologies is on the horizon, and it will undercut hopes for a revived Wilsonian order.



## **IT'S NOT FOR EVERYBODY**

One of the central assumptions behind the quest for a Wilsonian order is the belief that as countries develop, they become more similar to already developed countries and will eventually converge on the liberal capitalist model that shapes North America and western Europe. The Wilsonian project requires a high degree of convergence to succeed; the member states of a Wilsonian order must be democratic, and they must be willing and able to conduct their international relations within liberal multilateral institutions.

At least for the medium term, the belief in convergence can no longer be sustained. Today, China, India, Russia, and Turkey all seem less likely to converge on liberal democracy than they did in 1990. These countries and many others have developed economically and technologically not in order to become more like the West but rather to achieve a deeper independence from the West and to pursue civilizational and political goals of their own.

In truth, Wilsonianism is a particularly European solution to a particularly European set of problems. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe has been divided into peer and near-peer competitors. War was the constant condition of Europe for much of its history, and Europe's global dominance in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century can be attributed in no small part to the long contest for supremacy between France and the United Kingdom, which promoted developments in finance, state organization, industrial techniques, and the art of war that made European states fierce and ferocious competitors.

With the specter of great-power war constantly hanging over them, European states developed a more intricate system of diplomacy and international politics than did countries in other parts of the world. Well-developed international institutions and doctrines of legitimacy existed in Europe well before Wilson sailed across the Atlantic to pitch the League of Nations, which was in essence an upgraded version of preexisting European forms of international governance. Although it would take another devastating world war to ensure that Germany, as well as its Western neighbors, would adhere to the rules of a new system, Europe was already prepared for the establishment of a Wilsonian order.

But Europe's experience has not been the global norm. Although China has been periodically invaded by nomads, and there were periods in its history when several independent Chinese states struggled for

power, China has been a single entity for most of its history. The idea of a single legitimate state with no true international peers is as deeply embedded in the political culture of China as the idea of a multistate system grounded in mutual recognition is embedded in that of Europe. There have been clashes among Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, but until the late nineteenth century, interstate conflict was rare.

In human history as a whole, enduring civilizational states seem more typical than the European pattern of rivalry among peer states.

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*If the Wilsonian order has become so controversial in the West, what are its prospects in the rest of the world?*

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Early modern India was dominated by the Mughal Empire. Between the sixteenth century and the nineteenth century, the Ottoman and Persian Empires dominated what is now known as the Middle East. And the Incas and the Aztecs knew no true rivals in their regions. War seems universal or nearly so among human cultures, but the European pat-

tern, in which an escalating cycle of war forced a mobilization and the development of technological, political, and bureaucratic resources to ensure the survival of the state, does not seem to have characterized international life in the rest of the world.

For states and peoples in much of the world, the problem of modern history that needed to be solved was not the recurrence of great-power conflict. The problem, instead, was figuring out how to drive European powers away, which involved a wrenching cultural and economic adjustment in order to harness natural and industrial resources. Europe's internecine quarrels struck non-Europeans not as an existential civilizational challenge to be solved but as a welcome opportunity to achieve independence.

Postcolonial and non-Western states often joined international institutions as a way to recover and enhance their sovereignty, not to surrender it, and their chief interest in international law was to protect weak states from strong ones, not to limit the power of national leaders to consolidate their authority. Unlike their European counterparts, these states did not have formative political experiences of tyrannical regimes suppressing dissent and drafting helpless populations into the service of colonial conquest. Their experiences, instead, involved a humiliating consciousness of the inability of local authorities and elites to protect their subjects and citizens from the arrogant actions

and decrees of foreign powers. After colonialism formally ended and nascent countries began to assert control over their new territories, the classic problems of governance in the postcolonial world remained weak states and compromised sovereignty.

Even within Europe, differences in historical experiences help explain varying levels of commitment to Wilsonian ideals. Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands came to the EU understanding that they could meet their basic national goals only by pooling their sovereignty. For many former Warsaw Pact members, however, the motive for joining Western clubs such as the EU and NATO was to regain their lost sovereignty. They did not share the feelings of guilt and remorse over the colonial past—and, in Germany, over the Holocaust—that led many in western Europe to embrace the idea of a new approach to international affairs, and they felt no qualms about taking full advantage of the privileges of EU and NATO membership without feeling in any way bound by those organizations' stated tenets, which many regarded as hypocritical boilerplate.

### **EXPERT TEXPERT**

The recent rise of populist movements across the West has revealed another danger to the Wilsonian project. If the United States could elect Donald Trump as president in 2016, what might it do in the future? What might the electorates in other important countries do? And if the Wilsonian order has become so controversial in the West, what are its prospects in the rest of the world?

Wilson lived in an era when democratic governance faced problems that many feared were insurmountable. The Industrial Revolution had divided American society, creating unprecedented levels of inequality. Titanic corporations and trusts had acquired immense political power and were quite selfishly exploiting that power to resist all challenges to their economic interests. At that time, the richest man in the United States, John D. Rockefeller, had a fortune greater than the annual budget of the federal government. By contrast, in 2020, the wealthiest American, Jeff Bezos, had a net worth equal to about three percent of budgeted federal expenditures.

Yet from the standpoint of Wilson and his fellow progressives, the solution to these problems could not be simply to vest power in the voters. At the time, most Americans still had an eighth-grade education or less, and a wave of migration from Europe had filled

the country's burgeoning cities with millions of voters who could not speak English, were often illiterate, and routinely voted for corrupt urban machine politicians.

The progressives' answer to this problem was to support the creation of an apolitical expert class of managers and administrators. The

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*Fixating on past glories  
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progressives sought to build an administrative state that would curb the excessive power of the rich and redress the moral and political deficiencies of the poor. (Prohibition was an important part of Wilson's electoral program, and during World War I and afterward, he moved aggressively to arrest and in some cases deport socialists and other

radicals.) Through measures such as improved education, strict limits on immigration, and eugenic birth-control policies, the progressives hoped to create better-educated and more responsible voters who would reliably support the technocratic state.

A century later, elements of this progressive thinking remain critical to Wilsonian governance in the United States and elsewhere, but public support is less readily forthcoming than in the past. The Internet and social media have undermined respect for all forms of expertise. Ordinary citizens today are significantly better educated and feel less need to rely on expert guidance. And events including the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 2008 financial crisis, and the inept government responses during the 2020 pandemic have seriously reduced confidence in experts and technocrats, whom many people have come to see as forming a nefarious "deep state."

International institutions face an even greater crisis of confidence. Voters skeptical of the value of technocratic rule by fellow citizens are even more skeptical of foreign technocrats with suspiciously cosmopolitan views. Just as the inhabitants of European colonial territories preferred home rule (even when badly administered) to rule by colonial civil servants (even when competent), many people in the West and in the postcolonial world are likely to reject even the best-intentioned plans of global institutions.

Meanwhile, in developed countries, problems such as the loss of manufacturing jobs, the stagnation or decline of wages, persistent poverty among minority groups, and the opioid epidemic have re-

sisted technocratic solutions. And when it comes to international challenges such as climate change and mass migration, there is little evidence that the cumbersome institutions of global governance and the quarrelsome countries that run them will produce the kind of cheap, elegant solutions that could inspire public trust.

### **WHAT IT MEANS FOR BIDEN**

For all these reasons, the movement away from the Wilsonian order is likely to continue, and world politics will increasingly be carried out along non-Wilsonian and in some cases even anti-Wilsonian lines. Institutions such as NATO, the UN, and the World Trade Organization may well survive (bureaucratic tenacity should never be discounted), but they will be less able and perhaps less willing to fulfill even their original purposes, much less take on new challenges. Meanwhile, the international order will increasingly be shaped by states that are on diverging paths. This does not mean an inevitable future of civilizational clashes, but it does mean that global institutions will have to accommodate a much wider range of views and values than they have in the past.

There is hope that many of the gains of the Wilsonian order can be preserved and perhaps in a few areas even extended. But fixating on past glories will not help develop the ideas and policies needed in an increasingly dangerous time. Non-Wilsonian orders have existed both in Europe and in other parts of the world in the past, and the nations of the world will likely need to draw on these examples as they seek to cobble together some kind of framework for stability and, if possible, peace under contemporary conditions.

For U.S. policymakers, the developing crisis of the Wilsonian order worldwide presents vexing problems that are likely to preoccupy presidential administrations for decades to come. One problem is that many career officials and powerful voices in Congress, civil society organizations, and the press deeply believe not only that a Wilsonian foreign policy is a good and useful thing for the United States but also that it is the only path to peace and security and even to the survival of civilization and humanity. They will continue to fight for their cause, conducting trench warfare inside the bureaucracy and employing congressional oversight powers and steady leaks to sympathetic press outlets to keep the flame alive.

Those factions will be hemmed in by the fact that any internationalist coalition in American foreign policy must rely to a significant

degree on Wilsonian voters. But a generation of overreach and poor political judgment has significantly reduced the credibility of Wilsonian ideas among the American electorate. Neither President George W. Bush's nation-building disaster in Iraq nor Obama's humanitarian-intervention fiasco in Libya struck most Americans as successful, and there is little public enthusiasm for democracy building abroad.

But American foreign policy is always a coalition affair. As I wrote in my book *Special Providence*, Wilsonians are one of four schools that have contended to shape American foreign policy since the eight-

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*Biden can learn from  
Truman's example.*

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teenth century. Hamiltonians want to organize American foreign policy around a powerful national government closely linked to the worlds of finance and international trade. Wilso-

nians want to build a world order based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Jacksonian populists are suspicious of big business and of Wilsonian crusades but want a strong military and populist economic programs. Jeffersonians want to limit American commitments and engagement overseas. (A fifth school, of which Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, was a leading proponent, defined the U.S. national interest around the preservation of slavery.) Hamiltonians and Wilsonians largely dominated American foreign-policy making after the Cold War, but Obama began to reintroduce some Jeffersonian ideas about restraint, and after the Libyan misadventure, his preference for that approach clearly strengthened. Trump, who hung a portrait of President Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office, sought to build a nationalist coalition of Jacksonians and Jeffersonians against the globalist coalition of Hamiltonians and Wilsonians that had been ascendant since World War II.

Even as the Biden administration steers American foreign policy away from the nationalism of the Trump period, it will need to re-adjust the balance between the Wilsonian approach and the ideas of the other schools in light of changed political conditions at home and abroad. Similar adjustments have been made in the past. In the first hopeful years of the postwar era, Wilsonians such as Eleanor Roosevelt wanted the Truman administration to make support of the UN its highest priority. Harry Truman and his team soon saw that opposing the Soviet Union was most important and began to lay the foundations for the Cold War and containment. The shift was

wrenching, and Truman only just managed to extract a lukewarm endorsement from Roosevelt during the hard-fought 1948 election. But a critical mass of Wilsonian Democrats accepted the logic that defeating Stalinist communism was an end that justified the questionable means that fighting the Cold War would require. Biden can learn from this example. Saving the planet from a climate catastrophe and building a coalition to counter China are causes that many Wilsonians will agree both require and justify a certain lack of scrupulosity when it comes to the choice of both allies and tactics.

The Biden administration can also make use of other techniques that past presidents have used to gain the support of Wilsonians. One is to pressure weak countries well within Washington's sphere of influence to introduce various hot-button reforms. Another is to offer at least the appearance of support for inspiring initiatives that have little prospect of success. As a group, Wilsonians are accustomed to honorable failure and will often support politicians based on their (presumed) noble intentions without demanding too much in the way of success.

There are other, less Machiavellian ways to keep Wilsonians engaged. Even as the ultimate goals of Wilsonian policy become less achievable, there are particular issues on which intelligent and focused American policy can produce results that Wilsonians will like. International cooperation to make money laundering more difficult and to eliminate tax havens is one area where progress is possible. Concern for international public health will likely stay strong for some years after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. Promoting education for underserved groups in foreign countries—women, ethnic and religious minorities, the poor—is one of the best ways to build a better world, and many governments that reject the overall Wilsonian ideal can accept outside support for such efforts in their territory as long as these are not linked to an explicit political agenda.

For now, the United States and the world are in something of a Wilsonian recession. But nothing in politics lasts forever, and hope is a hard thing to kill. The Wilsonian vision is too deeply implanted in American political culture, and the values to which it speaks have too much global appeal, to write its obituary just yet. 🌐

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# Latin America's Lost Decades

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## The Toll of Inequality in the Age of COVID-19

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*Luis Alberto Moreno*

**D**uring the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, in March 2020, Guayaquil, Ecuador's business capital of some three million people, was in trouble. By a twist of fate, more than 20,000 Ecuadorians had just returned home from their seasonal vacations. Many had come from Italy and Spain, two coronavirus hot spots, with the earliest and most deadly outbreaks of COVID-19. President Lenín Moreno understood that the threat was serious but opted, at first, not to close the country's airports, instead asking the returning travelers to self-isolate at home. "If people do their part, I think we can control this," he told me at the time.

But the travelers, many of whom were members of the city's elite and middle class, mostly ignored the government's request. Some attended a large wedding, which turned into a superspreader event. When the travelers and their families developed fevers and other symptoms, many sought and received treatment in the city's generally good private health clinics. But by that point, they had already spread the virus to their maids, to taxi drivers, to the corner grocer—members of the city's working class.

Many who were part of this "second wave" of the pandemic that struck Guayaquil's working class had access only to the city's overburdened public health system. Most did not have the option of doing their jobs from home and were more likely to suffer from preexisting conditions, such as obesity. By early April, hospitals and other city services were so

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overwhelmed that bodies began piling up on the sidewalks of Guayaquil, rotting in the tropical heat, covered only by a sheet or a blanket, for as long as six days before they were finally picked up. These sickening images circulated on television and social media all over the world.

In the ensuing weeks and months, variations of this story were repeated again and again throughout Latin America: Mexicans returned from ski vacations in Colorado, Brazilians from Italy, Colombians from Miami and beyond. The outcome was almost always the same. Even in countries where governments initially ordered strict lockdowns and quarantines, such as Argentina and Peru, severe outbreaks took hold. According to Johns Hopkins University's coronavirus database, by the end of October, Latin America was home to seven of the world's 12 deadliest outbreaks as measured by confirmed deaths per capita. Despite containing just eight percent of the world's population, the region has accounted for about one-third of known COVID-19 deaths globally.

The economic and social fallout has also been among the world's most severe. Latin America's economies are expected to have shrunk by more than eight percent, on average, in 2020, worse than any other major region in the world except the eurozone. Joblessness and hunger have soared. Almost all the progress the region made in reducing poverty over the previous 20 years is at risk of coming undone. Investors and ordinary citizens alike worry that the region is on the verge of a "lost decade" similar to the 1980s, when Latin America suffered from inflation, debt defaults, soaring crime, and a crippling long-term decline in per capita income.

This succession of horrors has already led to considerable soul-searching to identify what made the region so vulnerable. Economists and researchers at institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Washington, D.C.-based lender where I served as president for 15 years, have published a flurry of analyses and reports. Many have highlighted the region's low investment in health care; others have pointed to long-standing problems such as insufficient taxation and the lack of access to social safety nets for the high numbers of workers in the black-market economy. Some studies have even focused on Latin Americans' affinity for personal contact. Still others have emphasized the role of today's populist leaders, from Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro on the ideological right to Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on the left, who have repeatedly downplayed the virus's severity and the need to wear masks.

All these arguments are important. But they risk missing the bigger picture. The story of how the pandemic unfolded throughout Latin America, with the relatively affluent spreading the virus to a working class that has suffered deaths and economic hardship in far greater numbers, points to an unavoidable truth: Latin America's COVID-19 crisis is, above all, a crisis of inequality. All over the world, the virus has fallen hardest on vulnerable racial and socioeconomic groups, revealing vast inequalities in access to education, health care, and other resources. It is perhaps little surprise, then, that Latin America, the region with the world's biggest gap between the rich and the poor, would also be ground zero for the pandemic.

This is a crisis that has been decades in the making, one that therapeutics or a vaccine will not solve. High inequality helped make Latin

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*Latin America's  
COVID-19 crisis is  
a crisis of inequality.*

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America the world's "sick man" even before COVID-19 struck—it is the region with the world's highest rate of violence and worst-performing economies, and social unrest there is rising. Given these preexisting conditions, the Inter-

national Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected that per capita incomes in Latin America won't return to their pre-pandemic levels until 2025, later than in any other part of the world. This has brought to light what everyone in the region should already know: the status quo is unsustainable. The onus is now on the region's political and business leaders to stop sheltering in walled-off houses and private hospitals and work instead to share their privileges—to pass a new generation of audacious reforms that will, over time, help create more egalitarian, modern, and resilient societies.

My conversations with leaders throughout the hemisphere in recent months have suggested that most realize the gravity of the current moment. Many are ready to embrace profound change—provided it takes place firmly within the bounds of capitalism and democracy and avoids anything resembling the catastrophes in Cuba and Venezuela, where misguided quests for a classless society culminated in even greater poverty and economic ruin. If a different path is possible, it will require a degree of both technocratic skill and political consensus that has sadly been elusive in recent years. But if nothing is done, Latin America will become an even greater source of instability, from which no one—neither its elites nor the United States—



*Left behind: in a Rio de Janeiro favela, May 2020*

will be immune. The idea of a stagnant region awash in street protests, political instability, and organized crime is not some nightmarish vision of a lost decade ahead; it is the reality many Latin American countries are now confronting.

### **REWRITING HISTORY**

Talk to many Latin Americans (and quite a few outsiders) about the vast challenges the region faces today, and you'll hear a fatalistic view that Latin Americans are somehow incapable of reform or progress, much less the wholesale reinvention the moment demands. This view is not only self-defeating but also factually incorrect. It runs contrary to much of the region's experience over the last half century.

As recently as the late 1970s, Latin America was overwhelmingly a region of dictators and military juntas. But today, more than 90 percent of Latin Americans live in burgeoning, if imperfect, democracies. The average life expectancy across the region has soared by more than two decades, and at 75, it is higher than the regional average in Asia (73) and just behind those of Europe (78) and North America (79). A half century ago, one in three adults in Latin America didn't know how to read, and automobiles and airline travel were

considered luxuries. Today, the region enjoys over a literacy rate of over 90 percent, almost half its citizens ride on a plane at least once a year, and cars are widely accessible (as anyone who has been stuck in traffic in a Latin American city can attest). The percentage of young Latin Americans enrolled in higher education has more than doubled since 1990, a breakthrough no other region of the world has experienced. And in hopeful signs for societies still infamous for their machismo, women now outnumber men enrolled in Latin American universities and account for about a third of the members of the region's national legislatures.

The first decade of this century saw particular progress, as prices spiked for oil, iron ore, and many other Latin American commodities, thanks primarily to demand from China. Countries including Brazil, Mexico, and Peru reaped the benefits of important pro-market reforms made in the 1990s, which allowed millions of Latin Americans to save, invest, and access credit for the first time. Innovative social programs, such as Brazil's Bolsa Família, helped distribute the windfall equitably, providing the poor with a small monthly stipend and contributing to the rise of a new, more confident class of consumers. The net result: Latin American economies enjoyed robust growth, and poverty fell sharply, with approximately 50 million people, or about ten percent of the region's population, joining the middle class.

Unfortunately, talking about these successes today feels a bit like listening to a "greatest hits" album from a band that hasn't had a breakthrough song in years. The optimism that reigned at the dawn of the 2010s—I was one of several observers talking about the possibility of a "Latin American decade" of even greater prosperity ahead—soon dissipated as a cloud of fiscal mismanagement, corruption scandals, and political dysfunction took hold. The region's economies grew at an average pace of just 2.2 percent in the decade, well behind the global average of about 3.5 percent and slower than any other major region tracked by the IMF. Today, the boom of the early years of the twenty-first century looks like an exception, a brief spring in a prolonged season of economic underperformance. Consider the following: from 1960 to 2017, Latin America's real income per capita compared with that of the United States remained practically stagnant, rising from 20 percent of the U.S. level to just 24 percent. In "emerging Asia," in contrast, a group of countries including China, Indonesia, South Korea, and others, the equivalent number rose from

11 percent to 58 percent. Throughout the world, per capita incomes converged with that of the United States more than three times as fast as they did in Latin America over that nearly 60-year period. In that light, the region's relative progress looks much less impressive.

Inequality is by no means the only explanation for this long-term malaise. But it does underlie many of Latin America's worst shortcomings, from its high crime rate to its penchant for populist leaders to its inadequate rate of investment as a percentage of GDP, which is among the lowest in the world. Before the pandemic, the richest ten percent of Latin Americans were estimated to hold approximately 70 percent of the region's wealth. In recent years, as inequality rose in the United States and Europe and those societies began to more closely resemble Latin America, numerous studies explored the corrosive, long-term effects of such large wealth gaps on politics and economic growth. Some of the academic literature has also focused on how inequality takes a particular toll on trust in societies, which can in turn depress everything from foreign investment to innovation to entrepreneurship. People in Latin American countries, unsurprisingly, express some of the world's lowest levels of confidence in one another, with just four percent of Colombians, seven percent of Brazilians, and 12 percent of Mexicans agreeing with the statement "Most people can be trusted."

### **ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN**

By the fall of 2019, public anger over years of stagnation had reached a boiling point. Widespread street protests broke out everywhere from Chile to Colombia to Ecuador and beyond. The demonstrators were mostly peaceful, but numerous episodes of violence and property damage, including arson—an 18-story building and several subway stations in downtown Santiago, Chile, were set on fire—made headlines all over the world. The reasons for the unrest varied, including the deeply existential and the very local. In Chile, for example, the immediate trigger was an increase in the standard bus fare of 30 Chilean pesos, or about four U.S. cents, which raised the cost to about \$1.17 per ride. This may not sound like a sufficient reason for such dramatic unrest, but the demonstrations led to an airing of numerous other grievances. In interviews, the protesters repeatedly cited substandard health care and pensions and, above all, a familiar issue: the gap between the rich and the poor and the feeling that

much of Chilean society was trapped on the outside looking in, unable to get to the promised land of middle-class prosperity. “It’s not about 30 pesos; it’s about 30 years,” one slogan went, referring to the policies Chile had adopted since the 1980s.

This rhetoric prompted an extraordinary backlash, especially among business elites across Latin America. Chile had long been regarded as the region’s great success story. In many respects, it was—and not just in ways that pleased so-called neoliberals. During the 1990s and the first decade of this century, Chile’s economy often grew at a rate of more than six percent annually, and poverty fell sharply, from 39 percent to eight percent. Life expectancy rose to the highest in South America, 80 years, and the number of students enrolled in higher education soared from 250,000 to 1.2 million. In this context, the protests initially seemed almost impossible to understand from the outside. As the demonstrations grew larger, virtually everyone in the region—whether Argentine, Brazilian, Guatemalan, or Mexican—had a strong opinion about the unrest in Chile. Many believed the protesters were a bunch of spoiled brats, millennials who had spent too much time on Instagram and harbored delusional expectations about turning Chile into a Scandinavian-style welfare state.

At the IDB, we, like many observers, were caught off-guard by the protests. But the data revealed that the demonstrators’ grievances had genuine substance. Chile’s life expectancy, for example, was a classic case of “the tyranny of averages,” hiding tremendous disparities. For example, in Santiago, Chile’s capital, a poor woman born in a low-income area was expected to live a far shorter life—by a staggering 17.7 years—than a wealthy woman from another part of the city, according to a *Lancet* study published in 2019. It also became clear that despite the tremendous growth of higher education in Chile and other countries over the previous 20 years, social mobility remained extremely elusive. A study published in 2018 by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development looked at dozens of countries around the world to estimate how long it usually took a poor person to rise into the middle class. In Nordic countries such as Denmark and Sweden, it typically took two or three generations, the study estimated. The average among OECD members was four and a half generations. But in Chile, it took six generations; in Brazil, it took nine; and in Colombia, it took 11—the worst of all the countries surveyed.

These studies, plus many others, pointed to younger generations

across Latin America who often tried to “do the right thing”—that is, they studied much longer than their parents had and worked hard—but they still found it difficult or impossible to break into the middle class. Many would retort that this isn't surprising; the region has suffered from high inequality for decades, if not centuries. But two new factors have roiled Latin American societies. One is social media, which has opened a bigger window into what a real middle-class

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*In Chile, the country's power brokers saw that defending the status quo was impossible.*

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existence looks like at home and around the world. And the other, perhaps perversely, is the prosperity of the first decade of this century. The tens of millions of Latin Americans who rose out of poverty during that period are absolutely determined to see their lives continue to improve, and they are willing to fight for it.

Ultimately, in the case of Chile, the country's power brokers saw that defending the status quo was impossible. The first lady of Chile, Cecilia Morel, spoke for many when she said in a private audio message to a friend that was later leaked to the Chilean press, “We're going to have to diminish our privileges and share with everyone else.” Her husband, President Sebastián Piñera, soon came around to this view. He apologized to Chileans and declared a 20 percent increase in the baseline pension and a higher minimum wage. Most dramatic of all, Piñera announced that Chile would hold a referendum on whether to write a new constitution that would attempt to provide better guarantees for public services and social mobility. A year later, in October 2020, 78 percent of Chileans voted yes. A new charter is scheduled to be put to a popular vote in 2022.

Such a process carries risks. There is a chance that Chile, in trying to address its inequalities, will end up promising citizens more than it can afford and kill the very engine that made its economy so dynamic in previous years. And guaranteeing rights and privileges in constitutions does not necessarily conjure them into existence, as the progressive charters of Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela prove.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming result of the referendum speaks to the strong desire for change and the willingness of Chile's establishment to meet the current moment. In other countries, the protests have died down, but most observers believe that is mainly because of the need for social distancing due to COVID-19. Indeed, the pandemic

may have cooled the protests in the short term, but observers expect that over time, it will make the underlying grievances, and the pervasive inequality itself, dramatically worse. Not every country will need full-fledged constitutional reform. But without change, Latin Americans will go right back to where they were—trapped in the same spiral of unrest, political dysfunction, and economic malaise.

### **ALL ELSE EQUAL**

Discussions of inequality and efforts to address it generate tremendous skepticism and fear in Latin America—and not just among elites. It is easy to understand why. Guerrilla groups and armed movements such as the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Shining Path in Peru, to name just two examples, committed some of the worst atrocities in the region over the last 100 years in the name of eliminating the gap between the rich and the poor. More recently, Venezuela's disastrous efforts under Presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro to pursue a classless society through expropriations and unsustainable spending ultimately chased away businesses, private investment, and most of the middle class. The result has been one of the biggest economic collapses in the history of the modern world outside wartime. Any viable efforts going forward will have to keep history from repeating itself and combine the best ideas from the democratic left, center, and right. In some countries, that will mean higher taxes for the most well-off members of society. The idea is far from a socialist solution, as even the IMF has recently embraced the need for higher income taxes and corporate taxes in many countries. Many Latin American countries were already struggling with insufficient resources prior to the pandemic. The average tax take in the region was 23.1 percent of GDP in 2018, compared with an average of 34.3 percent among the members of the OECD, a group of mostly wealthy countries. Countries such as Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru had tax-to-GDP ratios in just the midteens. Meanwhile, the average tax rate on the highest income bracket in Latin America that same year was just 26.7 percent, with no country taxing its highest earners above 35 percent.

Raising taxes will be politically challenging, but there is precedent for Latin American elites willingly contributing when they believe a crisis demands it and when they trust that the money will be used for a worthwhile end. In 2002, when Colombia's government faced a severe security and budget crisis, President Álvaro Uribe built a con-



sensus around a one-time 1.2 percent tax on liquid assets for the highest-income individuals. Uribe accomplished this by meeting on numerous occasions with business leaders to explain the need for the tax, explicitly earmarking the income for a specific cause, and allowing those taxed to monitor how it was being spent nearly in real time. This is a model many countries could pursue today. In countries where taxes are already high, such as Argentina and Brazil, budget reform will be necessary to ensure that the resources are directed toward health care, education, and investment instead of bloated government payrolls or unsustainable pensions. Brazil's 2019 pension reform, which slashed what had been some of the world's most generous retirement benefits, was a positive step in that direction.

Another option worth considering is an expansion of the social programs that proliferated during the first decade of this century. During the pandemic, Brazil has again turned out to be a leader in this area. Bolsonaro's right-wing government provided many citizens with a stipend of 600 reais, or about \$115, a month through August (the amount has since been reduced). This was transformative for millions of people, and extreme poverty actually fell in Brazil in the early months of the pandemic. The payments also buoyed consumer spending and thus helped shield Brazil's overall economy, which likely contracted less than the economies of other large countries in Latin America in 2020. Making such a program permanent for a fifth of Brazil's population would cost approximately \$70 billion a year, a hefty price tag. But it is worth noting that prior to the pandemic, Latin American countries were spending, on average, just 1.6 percent of their GDPs on cash transfers and noncontributory pensions, about one-third as much as the average OECD country spends. In other words, there may be room to expand the safety net in a way that protects the most vulnerable and still supports economies as a whole.

But ultimately, reducing inequality and putting an end to Latin American crises will need more than redistributive policies. They will necessitate getting economies to grow—and to grow more quickly than in the mediocre 2010s. A recent study found that the single most important factor behind the slight drop in inequality in the region during the first decade of this century was not social welfare programs, pension increases, or changing demographics but growth in people's salaries. Just as interesting was what caused salaries to rise and what didn't. The study found that government efforts to mandate minimum-wage increases

helped salaries across the board grow in some places, such as Brazil, but not in others, such as Peru. Instead, the study found that what most effectively caused salaries to rise was plain old economic growth.

Achieving economic growth will mean enacting a long, varied, and often unglamorous list of reforms—including cutting red tape and boosting investment in clean energy and other green infrastructure. Concrete steps to engage more women and members of marginalized racial groups in Latin American economies would also boost growth; a recent McKinsey study estimated that closing the gender gap in Latin America would yield an economic dividend of some \$1.1 trillion by 2025. Trade is another major area for improvement. Latin America accounts for just five percent of global commerce, and Argentina and Brazil rank among the world's most closed economies. In the age of Brexit and other nationalist currents, many Latin American countries are reaching out their hands at precisely the moment the developed world is pulling theirs away. But Latin America should still try to promote trade, in part because the region's citizens demand it. A recent IDB study showed that despite loud protests by labor unions and other entrenched interests, 73 percent of people in Latin America want more trade with the rest of the world. Although the results in individual countries varied, support in every country surpassed 50 percent.

Indeed, for many countries, recovery will also mean deepening their partnerships with the United States. The pandemic called attention to the dangers of depending too heavily on faraway suppliers in Asia for medical supplies and other goods. There is a clear bipartisan appetite in Washington and in corporate America for shifting many supply chains back to the Western Hemisphere, raising the prospect of a shared economic recovery that is “made in the Americas.” Washington might also consider providing some of Latin America's most vulnerable countries, namely, the Central American states of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with direct economic aid. But first, the United States will need to ensure that those countries' governments are prepared to spend the funds responsibly. And most of Latin America will have to pick itself up on its own.

### **THE ALTERNATIVE PATH**

The most important change of all is a change in mentality. Recent years have revealed that the status quo isn't working for anyone: not for the poor, certainly, but also not for the wealthy. Many Latin Americans

from all walks of life are interested in leaving, in emigrating to Miami, New York, or wherever they feel they can live in peace. A 2018 Gallup poll showed that 27 percent of people in Latin America and the Caribbean would leave their home country if given the choice, a percentage nearly double the global average. The alternative path to mass emigration—and the far better path—is dialogue, consensus, and, ultimately, reform. But even in the best case scenario, Latin Americans will have to be patient and realize that even the most rapid change will take years to fully bear fruit. Latin Americans don't have to make every change tomorrow, but they need to get started today.

The region is not alone in facing these challenges. The world has been shaken by COVID-19, revealing deep global inequalities. But other countries that faced deep structural problems in the past, from Spain and the United Kingdom in the 1970s to Germany in the 1990s, rose to meet the moment and are in some ways unrecognizable today. Perhaps it is now Latin America's time to lead and show the world that a better, more equal path is possible. The pandemic will leave a painful legacy of death and suffering. But if it helps compel Latin America to meaningfully address challenges the region has faced for centuries and ultimately produce fairer societies, that will help atone for some of the pain. 🌍

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# Protection Without Protectionism

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## Getting Industrial Policy Right

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*Shannon K. O’Neil*

**F**or two decades, the free movement of goods, services, and capital was the world’s guiding principle, crystallized in the so-called Washington consensus. Although countries didn’t always live up to these ideals or implement laissez-faire policies, most aspired to do so. They had to explain, justify, and limit their deviations from this consensus, at least in theory. The vast majority of the world’s countries signed on to multilateral institutions that promoted and enforced this view—such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Yet the era of the Washington consensus is now over—and despite what some commentators have argued, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the cause of its demise. Developing countries started pushing back against the consensus in the early years of this century. Mature economies began to sour on its tenets after the 2008 global financial crisis. Today, advanced countries and developing ones alike are embracing “industrial policy,” a catchall term for government interventions in certain industries and in the broader economy. This shift is apparent even in the United States. The Trump administration ignored and attacked the liberal world order that the United States has led for decades. But its approach partly reflected a new conventional wisdom in Washington in favor of an economic path that relies much more on active government involvement.

The policies of the Washington consensus spurred growth and development all over the world. But they had clear downsides, as well. Free trade disadvantaged workers in many developed countries, in-

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cluding the United States, and market-based approaches proved inadequate in tackling global crises such as climate change. Redressing the faults of the Washington consensus, however, does not mean the United States should embrace protectionism, which would spell economic disaster. Global supply chains are here to stay, and U.S. workers will be left behind if American companies can't take advantage of them. A U.S. industrial policy built on more global cooperation and competition, better U.S. access to international markets, and public investments at home can mitigate the shortcomings of the Washington consensus and avoid the pitfalls of protectionism.

### **THE END OF AN ERA**

The Washington consensus grew out of the volatility of the 1970s and 1980s. Mainstream economic thinking shifted as traditional, Keynesian economists fumbled through recessions and stagflation and more market-friendly, neoliberal thinkers gained currency in academic departments. Their intellectual godfather, Milton Friedman, won the 1976 Nobel Prize in Economics. By the 1980s, his acolytes were populating finance ministries and multilateral institutions around the world, ready to put his teachings into practice. As they did, debt crises were spreading throughout emerging markets, spurring a backlash against fiscal deficits and populist spending. Meanwhile, central economic planning lost its luster with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Under the Washington consensus, trade agreements brought down tariffs, eliminated quotas and government licenses for imported goods, and protected intellectual and other property rights. International money flows surged as capital markets opened up. Governments deregulated industries and privatized state-owned enterprises. At the same time, multilateral institutions enforced the rules; the WTO, for example, adjudicated disputes and punished rule breakers. The IMF encouraged countries to open up to foreign investment and prescribed spending cuts and other austerity measures to get debtor countries back on track.

In retrospect, this faith in the consensus was misplaced. Emerging markets that followed the prescribed path often didn't thrive. Despite bursts in trade and investment, many economies didn't expand or diversify. Meanwhile, places that bent (or even broke) the rules, such as China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, made much more progress. Opening up to global capital proved not to be the blessing that was promised. Money came in, but it also flowed out quickly, intensifying boom-

and-bust cycles. In Asia, many countries blamed the IMF and its austerity measures for deepening and extending the economic and social losses from the 1997 financial crisis.

The consensus eventually wore thin in wealthier countries, as well, where neoliberal policies offered little to address the harm done to workers by falling or stagnating wages, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and the decline of labor unions. Meanwhile, after the 2008 financial crisis, social safety nets began to fray, owing to the prolonged economic downturn and austerity measures—implemented even at a time when servicing public debt cost very little, with interest rates falling close to zero.

Economists tried to save the model by supplementing its basic menu with reforms such as anticorruption regulations and targeted antipov-erty measures, for example, conditional cash transfers to the needy. But it was too late; the sheen had faded. In finance ministries, at central banks, and even in conversations among elites in snowy Davos, the site of the annual conference of the World Economic Forum, critiques of the Washington consensus spread. As global policy attitudes shifted, so did the actions of the consensus's institutional enforcers. Starting in 2015, the WTO relinquished its role as a promoter of freer trade when, after years of stalemate, negotiators finally gave up on the Doha Round of international trade negotiations, which would have further lowered trade barriers on agricultural goods and other products. In 2019, the WTO lost its ability to referee disputes when the United States refused to approve new judges to its appellate court. Meanwhile, the IMF has done an about-face: after years of preaching austerity, the fund has determined that fiscal restraint is out and spending is in. This past fall, IMF economists officially blessed more government largess, designating it a necessary catalyst in spurring private-sector investment.

Of course, even in the heyday of the consensus, industrial policy had not disappeared. Governments continued to intervene in markets, using a mix of trade rules, tax incentives, low interest rates, and public contracts to protect domestic businesses, create jobs, and attract and direct investment. States built critical infrastructure, funded research labs, trained workers, and enticed immigrants—or tried to woo back their own citizens who had emigrated elsewhere and acquired new skills.

Asian countries, in particular, took this more hands-on approach. Although China professed a belief in market-based reforms at crucial moments, such as when it was applying for WTO membership, it never played by the *laissez-faire* rules. Instead, Beijing expanded public fi-



*Back to work: steel mill employees in Granite City, Illinois, May 2018*

nancing and subsidies, strengthened protections for domestic industries, and forced foreign companies that wanted to do business in China to share their proprietary technology with Chinese partners. Japan also protected and supported certain sectors, keeping out rice imports through quotas and tariffs and barring foreign-made autos through strict environmental and safety standards.

In Europe, the European Economic Community and its successor, the European Union, played an important role in national economies, as well, most notably by stitching together over two dozen countries into one market. EU regulations covered everything from labor laws to environmental standards, and Brussels spent tens of billions of dollars to build roads and rails, deepen ports, and connect rivers. It provided public funding for research and development and temporary loans to many companies. More recently, the EU has stepped up subsidies for local industries and allowed national governments to intervene in order to keep major European firms from coming under the control of foreign investors.

Support for more active state intervention in the economy has grown in the United States, too. States already routinely offer carrots, such as tax breaks, worker training, and cheap electricity, to attract new

plants or corporate headquarters. The federal government also mandates that U.S. highways and airports be built with steel and iron made in the United States, that publicly funded school lunch programs use only American-grown foods, and that many defense contracts include “Buy American” clauses. More recently, the Trump administration raised and expanded tariffs, and President Donald Trump used his bully pulpit to name and shame U.S. companies operating abroad.

## **THE NEED TO INTERVENE**

Even governments that oversee market-based economies sometimes must intervene to overcome market failures and deal with problems that individual companies or whole industrial sectors choose to ignore. And when it comes to research and development, governments are the only actors that can invest in ways that ignite innovation again and again, as they have far more resources and a longer time frame than any private enterprise. In the United States, federal funding spurred the science behind the Internet, global positioning systems, touch screens, solar panels, LED lights, fracking, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and the sequencing of the human genome. The federal government has backed hundreds of university research labs, private contractors, and businesses, and those investments have paid off many times over by seeding new industries, boosting tax revenues, improving public health, and securing U.S. technological dominance. The case for an active role for government has only grown stronger in recent years as the effects of climate change—perhaps the clearest example of a market failure—have become more apparent. In the United States, even professed libertarians have warmed to state activism to ward off the threat.

More traditional national security issues present additional reasons to expand the public sector’s role in the economy. Some of the newfound enthusiasm for industrial policy stems from a growing realization about the vulnerabilities that come with global supply chains. International manufacturing enhances efficiency by allowing companies to shave costs, but it also exposes production to faraway natural disasters, targeted attacks, or aggression by other states. In 2011, for example, floods in Thailand submerged factories that made auto components for days, halting work on Honda and Toyota assembly lines all over the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the risks posed by the global concentration of production sites for even relatively mundane goods such as ventilators, personal protective equip-



ment, and pharmaceutical ingredients; last March, the United Kingdom had just a few weeks' worth of aspirin left within its borders.

Countries increasingly worry that international supply chains could be weaponized for geopolitical gain—for example, if China denied adversaries access to the rare-earth minerals that power everyday electronics. The United States has already taken steps in this direction, using its central role in global finance to force European companies to divest from Iran and Indian refiners to turn away Venezuelan oil. The United States has also banned semiconductor companies that use U.S. equipment or software, no matter where they are based, from selling their products in China. In 2019, Japan stopped exporting essential chemicals for semiconductor manufacturing to South Korea because of ongoing tensions between the two countries over reparations for war crimes committed during World War II.

As technology becomes ever more embedded in people's lives, policymakers worry that foreign hardware and software could expose citizens and governments to surveillance and espionage. Technological backdoors into phones could reveal sensitive information; car computers could be hacked and vehicles remotely hijacked; and malware could bring down power plants, electricity grids, or banking systems. One way states can address these national security vulnerabilities is to entice companies to move back home—or convince them not to leave in the first place.

### **THE PITFALLS OF PROTECTIONISM**

History, however, provides many examples of industrial policy gone wrong. Supposedly temporary protections for infant industries or struggling economic sectors often become permanent, encouraging the development of monopolies or oligopolies. Over time, such measures impede national competitiveness, as protected corporations and sectors are less inclined to innovate. Governments are rarely wise or nimble enough to figure out the right amount of protection.

Latin America's experience in the postwar period highlights these potential downsides. Several countries introduced a mix of tariffs, quotas, licenses, industrial subsidies, and credits to spur domestic manufacturing. There were initial economic gains: GDP surged ahead in many countries, as did local manufacturing of steel, chemicals, cars, and all sorts of consumer goods. In Brazil, the aerospace corporation Embraer made inroads into the international jet market, and the min-

ing company Vale became one of the world's biggest miners of iron ore. In Mexico, lucrative government contracts and control of the domestic retail cement market helped fund the building materials company Cemex's successful global expansion. But more often, governments weren't particularly good at choosing winners and were even worse

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*History provides many examples of industrial policy gone wrong.*

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at weeding out unproductive but politically connected companies. Indigenous innovation stalled, as monopolies and oligopolies captured the benefits of government protections and created a bevy of multimillionaires and

billionaires. Consumers paid higher prices for inferior goods, and taxpayers shouldered the burden as country after country faced public debt crises and economic stagnation.

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the importance of striking the right balance. The United States has long maintained stockpiles of crude oil, essential medical supplies, copper, zinc, and a number of other essential commodities. Now, Washington is broadening the list to include personal protective gear, ventilators, and pharmaceutical ingredients. Owing to geopolitical concerns, another nearly three dozen commodities are likely to be put on the list, including rare-earth minerals.

Filling shelves with supplies or paying to make sure they are available if and when the country needs them can create an important buffer during catastrophes. But reserves should be selective. It isn't cheap to maintain backup supplies indefinitely. And it is hard to guess what will be needed the next time a catastrophe strikes: the U.S. government has had medical stockpiles for years, but they either weren't replenished or weren't relevant for taking on COVID-19. Moreover, for many products, privately managed international supply chains have proved to be resilient, surviving the shock of lockdowns and huge swings in demand, as the market for suits and dresses collapsed, for example, and customers clamored instead for hand sanitizer and toilet paper. Within a few months, most goods were again widely available.

The pandemic and recent natural disasters have also demonstrated the limits of "reshoring" production—that is, abandoning overseas manufacturing facilities in favor of domestic ones. Put simply, moving production from Wuhan to Wichita does not reduce a company's vulnerability to the risks of geographic concentration. A case in point: in the months after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in 2017, hospitals

across the United States ran low on iv bags, surgical scalpels, and a number of common drugs as dozens of factories on the island struggled to reopen. It made no difference that these facilities were on U.S. soil and not in another country. The lesson was clear: it's best when production isn't dominated by any single company or country. Indeed, Washington may find that strengthening access to critical goods means more, rather than less, international collaboration. Industrial policy works even less well when its goals are explicitly protectionist, aiming to punish others or "bring jobs home." These interventions tend to make the United States less productive and secure. They hurt local industry by raising costs and incentivizing other countries to retaliate. Take the case of Trump's tariffs. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the tariffs his administration placed on foreign steel and aluminum in March 2018 created some 4,500 jobs in U.S. foundries and mills, but at the cost to the United States of nearly \$900,000 per job created—a cost that took the form of higher prices for U.S. consumers. Those higher prices also increased expenses for the many domestic industries that use these metals and that employ 80 workers for every one worker employed by the steel industry. That dynamic explains why a study published by the U.S. Federal Reserve in 2019 estimated that, on balance, the tariffs led to the loss of 75,000 U.S. manufacturing jobs.

### **GETTING BACK IN THE GAME**

A smarter U.S. industrial policy would eschew narrow, protectionist measures and would instead open global markets to U.S. goods and services and strengthen the ability of U.S.-based companies and their workers to take advantage of these opportunities. Rather than too much free trade, the United States has too little: U.S. companies have preferential access to less than ten percent of the world's consumers. Mexico and Canada, in contrast, maintain such access to over 50 percent of global markets. To make the United States more competitive, Washington's industrial policy should incorporate free-trade agreements, lowering the barriers U.S. enterprises still face when selling abroad. That means rejoining finished deals such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and reviving dormant trade negotiations with Europe. Together, these agreements would give U.S. companies better access to markets with some one billion people. Recent trade negotiations have also gone beyond tariffs: they have opened up bidding for lucrative foreign gov-

ernment contracts, strengthened labor and environmental standards, protected intellectual property, and taken on state subsidies (often called “behind the border” protections). These measures, too, can help U.S.-based businesses compete.

The United States must stop taking a back seat when it comes to shaping global standards. In the past, U.S. leadership and participation often meant that American ways of doing things became the global standard. This happened when it came to criteria for auto-

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*A smarter U.S.  
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mobile fuel efficiency, Internet protocols, and international payment systems, for example. Yet in recent years, U.S. influence has diminished. China, Germany, Russia, and over a dozen other countries now send more representatives to international meet-

ings on technical standards than the United States does. In its fiscal year 2021 budget proposal, the Trump administration cut federal funding for the labs that produce studies and expert analyses for the discussions around setting international standards. And U.S. rules against interacting with the Chinese technology company Huawei have barred many U.S. companies from meetings where international telecommunications standards are discussed and decided. Rather than scoffing at such forms of cooperation, the U.S. government should step up its efforts to set the rules. This will benefit U.S. companies and make sure U.S. technologies and processes are more broadly accepted.

Climate change is another area in which the United States should rejoin the global conversation and actively take part in setting rules. Europe is already leaning hard into green industrial policy. It is implementing carbon taxes, funding regional supply chains for clean technologies, and investing in renewable energy and emission-free transportation. The United States should create incentives for American companies to shift away from dirtier energy sources and catalyze the arrival of cleaner ones. This would mean undoing tax policies that subsidize fossil fuel production and tariffs that raise the costs of solar panels, subsidizing renewable energy sources, funding the research and development of clean energy technology, creating environmentally friendly urban planning and building codes, and setting a price on carbon emissions.

## **TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL**

The U.S. government should also invest more in its citizens. To date, the United States has addressed the costs of globalization on the cheap. Today's unemployment benefits are temporary and modest, and they mostly leave out tens of millions of independent contractors and workers in the so-called gig economy. What is more, health insurance, retirement plans, paid parental leave, and life insurance are linked to a job market of the past, in which more workers received such benefits from their employers. And when tens of millions of Americans lost their jobs at the start of the pandemic, it was a brutal reminder of just how vulnerable even those with employer-provided protections remain: without their jobs, their safety nets vanished. The United States needs to catch up with other developed countries and build a true support system that shields workers and their families from the shocks produced by globalization.

Educational curricula also need to shift in order to better prepare Americans for the kinds of work the future is likely to offer. This means more science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs. But tomorrow's workforce will also have to move beyond such fields as intelligent machines increasingly take over calculations and coding. In the future, the most valuable and highly compensated workers will be those who can think creatively, solve problems, communicate across cultural divides, and define new ethical frameworks. That means that the federal and local governments need to not only expand education in the sciences but also invest in the liberal arts. And Washington should get back in the business of funding basic science. The United States still outspends the world on research and development, but the private sector invests much more than the government. Since companies focus on their bottom lines, they tend to avoid the kinds of ambitious, long-term development projects that have historically led to the biggest breakthroughs. For the United States to retain its technological dominance, the government needs to get back to funding invention.

## **THE PATH AHEAD**

To fully reap the rewards of a smart industrial policy, Washington will have to get over its new habit of going it alone by reengaging with the world, reaching out to others, and leveraging differences in skills, labor costs, natural resources, patents, and access to capital. The

United States should start with its neighbors, Canada and Mexico. In July 2020, the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement replaced the quarter-century-old North American Free Trade Agreement, protecting deep-rooted regional supply chains and potentially signaling the dawn of a more united economic front among the three countries. Washington should complement the new agreement with better coordination around border infrastructure, customs procedures, and other regulations. Such efforts would expand opportunities for companies and employees in all three places, tie together a continental market of nearly 500 million consumers, and make North American products and services more globally competitive.

Blocking or slowing the advancement of other countries will never be as effective as outpacing them. An industrial policy that tries to preserve the past through protectionism and isolation will only weigh down the United States. Americans would be better served by a government that opens up more of the world to their goods and services, makes U.S. companies and workers more competitive, and reaches out to the United States' neighbors. That is the only approach to industrial policy that holds the promise of a more prosperous future for the country. 🌐

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# The World China Wants

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## How Power Will—and Won't—Reshape Chinese Ambitions

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*Rana Mitter*

**D**oes China want to transform the global order to advance its own interests and to reflect its own image? That may be the most important question in geopolitics today, yet the answers it elicits tend to reveal more about modern biases than they do about what a future Chinese superpower would look like. Those who want to project forward to a malevolent, expansionist China point to evidence of aggression in Beijing's posture today. Those with a less apocalyptic view highlight more accommodating features in Chinese policy or note that China will face plenty of challenges that will keep it from reshaping the world even if it wants to. Many Western observers see a burgeoning new Cold War, with China serving as a twenty-first-century version of the Soviet Union.

Such projections are far too rigid and sweeping to usefully describe the complexity of China's rise—either to capture the inherent uncertainty in China's future aims or to recognize the essential elements that have shaped its aspirations. Chinese power today is a protean, dynamic force formed by the nexus of authoritarianism, consumerism, global ambitions, and technology. Call it the ACGT model: with the same initials as the nucleotides in DNA, these strands of Chinese power combine and recombine to form China's modern political identity and approach to the rest of the world. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to firm up its grip on Chinese society, encourage consumerism at home and abroad, expand its global influence, and develop and export China's own advanced technology. China's current standing and future prospects cannot be understood without seeing all four of those goals together.

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The strongman leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping is important in understanding China today and its likely trajectory, as is the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the four ACGT forces have a significance that extends beyond any one leader or crisis. They shape Beijing's idea of its place in a reconstituted world order, in which China would take a preeminent role in Asia and export its model of economic investment, which draws on communitarian ideas of development and is indifferent to liberal norms (although not always actively hostile to them). To legitimize its approach, China often turns to history, invoking its premodern past, for example, or reinterpreting the events of World War II. China's increasingly authoritarian direction under Xi offers only one possible future for the country. To understand where China could be headed, observers must pay attention to the major elements of Chinese power and the frameworks through which that power is both expressed and imagined.

### **THE NEXUS OF CHINESE POWER**

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, China's leaders have explicitly presented their authoritarian system of governance as an end in and of itself, not a steppingstone to a liberal state. The CCP insists that it is a meritocracy: the benefit that Chinese society derives from the party's effective leaders more than makes up for the lack of popular participation in their selection. At least in the short term, the COVID-19 crisis has boosted authoritarianism at home. In early 2020, China touted its suppression of the virus as a function of its top-down, coercive system of government. (It has been less keen to concede that its initial poor response was due to the party-state's inability to process unwelcome information.) The CCP's newly confident and antagonistic character marks a significant departure from the more hesitant version of authoritarianism that preceded Xi, when Chinese leaders even looked at democracies such as Singapore—however imperfect and illiberal—as potential models. No longer.

Chinese leaders don't simply want to consolidate their rule at home. Their ambitions are global. This is not wholly new: the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and his Communist counterpart, Mao Zedong, both had visions of a major international role for their country in the 1940s and 1960s, respectively. Xi's China, however, has combined international ambitions with economic, military, and technological power to achieve a genuinely global reach, from port facilities in Athens to a





*Onward and upward: astronauts in Jiuquan, China, October 2016*

naval base in Djibouti to the rollout of 5G technology across the world. Xi declared in a 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress that China would move unerringly closer to the “center stage” of world affairs.

To take that position, China has sought to boost the consumption of material goods at home. Since 1978, the CCP has worked to address one of the most notable flaws of the Soviet Union: the failure to cater to the needs and desires of domestic consumers. China’s revolution has become a consumer revolution in the past four decades, building an increasingly cashless society where online purchasing inspires occasions such as the e-commerce platform Alibaba’s Singles’ Day—the biggest consumer event in the world, in which \$38 billion worth of goods were sold in 2019. Rising standards of living have fostered an expectation that the CCP will continue to deliver on its economic promises even after the Chinese economy contracted severely in early 2020 in the wake of the pandemic. Growing prosperity in China has also benefited

countries in the West and in Asia that have welcomed millions of Chinese buyers of luxury goods, touristic services, and higher education.

It is in the realm of technology where China has truly taken a new direction in its global engagement. The combination of economic growth and massive spending on research in the past two decades has created one of the most innovative environments on earth. New Chinese-developed technologies boost the country's military and produce new goods for consumers, while also contributing to the establishment of a big-data surveillance state. China's impressive technological capacity forms the most potent and attractive part of its offer to the world.

### **PRESENT AT THE CREATION**

The various strands of Chinese power emerged not from whole cloth but from a set of historical frameworks that continue to weigh heavily on all Chinese decision-making. Chinese leaders draw from the past in understanding the country's growing role in the world. They now make a revisionist claim to a founding role in the post-1945 international order, espouse traditional Chinese norms of governance, seek leadership of the global South, and make use of explicitly Marxist-Leninist language and symbols.

China sat on the sidelines for much of the Cold War after 1960, neither in the Western camp nor in the Soviet one. In the past two decades, however, China has cast itself not just as a participant in but also as a pivotal founder of the international order that emerged in the wake of World War II. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi reminded listeners that China was the first signatory of the UN Charter in 1945, a fact repeatedly mentioned in recent years by Chinese leaders. But to embrace that moment—when representatives of the ruling Nationalists (Kuomintang) dominated the delegation from China that helped establish the UN—the CCP had to reframe the very twentieth-century history that underpins its right to rule China. Since the 1980s, the party has acknowledged that its old enemies, the Nationalists and their Western allies, were crucial partners in winning the war against Japan between 1937 and 1945; previously, CCP leaders had taken sole credit for fending off the Japanese invasion of mainland China. That recognition has allowed the party to make a larger reinterpretation of Chinese history that sees the founding of modern China not just in the 1949 communist revolution—as originally imagined—but also in World War II itself.

This shift is not a matter of historical trivia; instead, it reflects how China imagines itself and wants to be understood. China now places itself centrally in the Allied victory and the creation of the post-1945 order. It played a crucial role in defending Asia and pinning down over half a million Japanese troops until the arrival of the Americans and the British after Pearl Harbor, at the cost of as many as 14 million Chinese lives.

This immense contribution underlies Beijing's insistence that China was "present at the creation" of the postwar world. Its expanding international role in the twenty-first century rests on this assumed centrality in the twentieth century. Under Xi, China is now the second-biggest financial contributor to the UN and is in the top ten of contributors of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations. U.S. President Donald Trump's perceived retreat from the obligations and norms of the liberal international order further bolstered China's position that it is now the most worthy inheritor of the legacy of 1945. Evocations of World War II continue to be central in Chinese public life. For instance, CCP officials have described China's supposed victory over the novel coronavirus last spring as the result of a "people's war," echoing the language Mao used during the war against Japan.

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*China's expanding role in the twenty-first century rests on a reimagining of the twentieth.*

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An even older history undergirds China's sense of its global role. In recent years, influential Chinese scholars, such as Yan Xuetong and Bai Tongdong, have argued for an understanding of international order informed by premodern, Confucian views. Western observers often interpret China's behavior in international relations as purely realist. But the use of rhetoric that draws on traditional thought suggests that China, like all states, would prefer its choices to be understood as moral and not just realist ones. When Chinese leaders use terms such as *ren* (meaning "benevolence"), they ground the state's interests and actions in ethical, idealistic language. These invocations of tradition will become more frequent as China's influence grows. Chinese leaders will expound a modernized form of Confucianism that fits with globalized values, stressing "morality" and "a common future" while playing down more illiberal Confucian values, such as the belief in social hierarchy.

That vision of a fundamentally moral China supports another ambition: China's wish to position itself as the leader of the global South.

That vision of a fundamentally moral China supports another ambition: China's wish to position itself as the leader of the global South.

This aim is not original; during the Cold War, China sought to portray itself as a champion of what was then called the Third World, in contrast to a viciously capitalist West and a sclerotic Soviet Union. China regards itself not only as the new guardian of the post-1945 order but also as the inheritor of the non-Western anti-imperialism of the postcolonial world—an improbable double act that Beijing seems to be pulling off.

China today does not seek to spark revolutions across the global South. Instead, it sees poorer countries as proving grounds for a policy that emphasizes both economic development and the principle of national sovereignty. This form of Chinese engagement doesn't necessarily lead to outright authoritarianism; countries such as Ethiopia and Myanmar are examples of how ostensible democracies (albeit illiberal ones) can gain from the Chinese development model. But China's efforts overseas also dispense with any encouragement of liberalization or democratic reform. China's supporters argue that its model of fostering development is more flexible than any model that would enshrine liberal democracy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's vast, if inchoate, international infrastructure investment program, is the principal vehicle through which it seeks to project its leadership abroad.

As China spends capital abroad, it has more firmly embraced the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism at home. Chinese officials don't yet use this language in statements tailored to an international audience, largely because China is at pains to present itself as a nonrevolutionary state in the global order and wants to avoid recalling the ghosts of Maoism. But at home, the party peppers its communications with terms such as *douzhen* (struggle), which reflects the Hegelian notion that conflict has to precede an ultimate synthesis. The CCP also refers frequently to *maodun* (contradiction), the notion that tensions within society may produce constructive outcomes, an idea also frequently referenced by Mao and very much endorsed by Xi, who used the phrase in his 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress to describe the new "contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life." This phrasing suggests that although many aspects of traditional Marxist-Leninist thought, including class struggle, are rarely heard in contemporary Chinese rhetoric, that ideology is not entirely absent. In the speech, Xi nodded to the fact that inequality between classes is still a reality in China and that the party sees that inequality as a blemish on the overall narrative of success it wishes to present.

## **AUTHORITARIAN DILEMMAS**

How Chinese leaders frame their vision of China's power and place in the world is, of course, no guide to how outsiders will perceive China. Under Xi, Beijing has made it more difficult for other countries to ignore the authoritarianism at the heart of the ACGT model. In 2013, for instance, Chinese leaders pitched the BRI in terms of the commercial and technological boon it would bring to recipient countries. Some Western observers even referred to the BRI approvingly as "China's Marshall Plan" (to the chagrin of many Chinese commentators who did not want to be associated with an American Cold Warrior). Seven years later, however, China's authoritarianism has come into fuller view thanks to both Beijing's actions and its rhetoric. During the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Chinese officials pointed to their ability to mobilize resources and gather data faster than their counterparts in democratic governments and declared that China would create a vaccine for the world.

But whatever its potential benefits, Chinese authoritarianism will not easily win hearts and minds around the world. As BRI programs spread, so, too, will concerns about Chinese economic and political influence. In nondemocratic client states, such as Cambodia, China may meet less pushback, but resistance is more likely in countries such as Kenya and Zambia, where parliaments and the media can debate Chinese involvement and where public attitudes toward China and its system are mixed or even overtly hostile.

That hostility may become all the more acute if the confrontational aspects of Chinese global power become more apparent. As China's overseas interests grow, Beijing will not be able to continue taking advantage of existing security umbrellas—as it did, for instance, in Afghanistan in the first decade of this century, when NATO in effect helped protect Chinese assets. China's growing range of economic and diplomatic interests increasingly demands an expanded global Chinese security presence. The Indian Ocean, in particular, may see greater Chinese activity, as China seeks to boost its trading interests in the geographic triangle formed by crucial ports in Greece, Djibouti, and Pakistan. Responding to this possibility, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (collectively known as "the Quad") held joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean this past November.

Although many countries are content with Chinese investment, the arrival of People's Liberation Army troops would likely be a

rather less welcome development. Chinese diplomacy can be very skilled, but its current often shrill and charmless tone is enough to put off many potential partners; China has an immensely long way to go to develop the necessary soft-power abilities to portray any future PLA expansion as providing common security rather than simply enforcing Beijing's desires.

China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis has irked many countries that had previously been courting Beijing. In the late 2010s, China achieved

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*China cannot be expected to participate in the global order solely on the terms of its rivals.*

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some success among wealthy countries in endowing its consumer products (such as the hugely popular TikTok app) with the kind of high-tech glamour previously associated with Japan. Yet China adopted a highly confrontational style of diplomacy after the outbreak of the

COVID-19 epidemic and in the process shifted public attention in the West toward the authoritarian possibilities of Chinese technology. Western observers are alarmed by the use of surveillance technology to enable the repression of the Uighur minority group in Xinjiang and the potential use of this technology in Hong Kong to trace and prosecute nonviolent protesters.

The new global attention on China's authoritarianism will complicate the country's quest to project its model overseas. Consider, for example, China's struggle to get other major countries to firmly commit to adopting the 5G technology developed by the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei. Some countries in the global North—Australia, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States—have made it clear that they will not use Huawei's 5G technology because of concerns about the security of the 5G equipment and about being associated with China's authoritarian regime. The United Kingdom at first agreed to allow Huawei limited access to its 5G market but reversed that decision in July 2020. Shortly after the clash between Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayan border area in June, the government of India announced that it would avoid the future use of Huawei products in its 5G network.

Still, countries in much of Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia have been more willing to accept Chinese 5G, and there remains a large group of countries that might still take it on because it is cheap and effective; for them, the economic advantages of embracing the

technology outweigh any security concerns. This broad adoption of Chinese 5G would not usher in China's global dominance, but it would form a vast footprint. The implications of such a 5G bloc are considerable, as Beijing would have the capacity to control a key element in the economic development of many major states, as well as potentially the ability to gain access to huge quantities of data.

## **CHINA'S WORLD**

Achieving even that kind of partial hegemony may be difficult if Chinese leaders continue to ruffle the feathers of their counterparts elsewhere. Beijing's initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak suggested that under pressure, China's authoritarian tendencies trump its desire to engage with the world. Various countries, notably Australia, proposed that there should be an international inquiry into the origins of the virus. Rather than welcome that idea, as a nimble power would have done, China immediately boycotted barley sales from Australia. When the British government hinted that it might reverse its decision to allow Huawei into the United Kingdom's 5G network, Chinese diplomats threatened "consequences," sending a clear signal that investment from China was not simply a commercial transaction but also a political one—and bringing about exactly the ban they did not want. China's cantankerous reactions in the wake of the outbreak have made it easier for its critics to highlight what they consider its untrustworthy behavior, including the militarization of the South China Sea, probable cyberattacks against countries including the United States, and the exploitation of loopholes in World Trade Organization rules.

But even as many Western countries seek to define the ways in which China's current behavior is illegitimate, they avoid a more difficult question. What are legitimate aims for China in its own region and the wider world? China is a large, powerful state that has the world's second-biggest economy. A state of that size cannot be expected to participate in the global order solely on the terms of its rivals—not least because some of China's recent success owes much to Western failure. Criticism of Huawei may well be justified, but Chinese 5G technology is attractive to many countries because there is no obvious Western alternative. It is entirely appropriate to criticize China for expanding its influence in the UN in ways that degrade the importance of individual human rights, but China did not force the United States to reduce its funding to UN agencies and thus weaken them.

At the moment, China is hurting itself by arguing that any criticism of its internal politics is out of bounds. The United States found itself at a similar juncture during the 1950s. Its appalling record of discrimination at home against its Black population tarnished its international image and offered its rivals an easy target; Mao's government invited Black intellectuals and activists, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Panther leader Huey Newton, to Beijing. U.S. politicians argued strongly that the rest of the world had no right to criticize the United States' internal race politics. This position was unsustainable, and domestic resistance combined with external shaming changed laws in the United States.

As a rising power, China now also faces external criticism of its domestic politics. Joining the global economy has made it more vulnerable to scrutiny of its authoritarianism at home. But it can do something more creative than complain about Western scorn: China can draw on its recent history of reinventing itself. After China under Mao had become economically and politically moribund, in the 1980s, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, adapted an idea from former Premier Zhou Enlai termed "the Four Modernizations" (of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology) to reshape China. Deng allowed farmers to sell parts of their harvest on the free market, gave scholars academic freedoms that had disappeared under Mao, and set up "special economic zones," with governance and tax incentives designed to bring in foreign investment.

Much as Deng managed in the wake of Mao's passing, China will have to recalibrate in the coming decade to better incorporate—rather than reject—criticism from abroad. Despite the country's authoritarian reputation, internal debate has played an important part in China's rise. Until recently, liberal political thinkers and writers had space within the Chinese system to offer constructive criticism of their more hard-line colleagues; engagement with some critics abroad also helped test China's own ideas and policies. The shutting down of such debate in recent years may not have held the country back in the very short term, but is likely to do so in future years when the rigidity of political thought prevents Chinese political elites from reevaluating policies. Granting more space to disagreement would not necessarily require the democratization of China. It would, however, mean a commitment to letting civil society flourish (reversing the alarming number of dismissals and detentions of lawyers, activ-



ists, and scholars in recent years) and to creating genuine transparency of government both at home and abroad.

China will need to do better than reduce its many minority groups to quaint exemplars of folk tradition. Instead, it should seek to convince these groups—including the Uighurs of Xinjiang—that participation in the Chinese project would affirm their sense of dignity and identity. When it comes to dissent in Hong Kong—another test of the CCP’s ability to build an inclusive polity—the new security law that outlaws so-called hatred of the government suggests an inability to hear and learn from a governing tradition that is authentically Chinese but different from that of Beijing. The CCP also lacks the willingness to present Taiwan with any vision of a joint future that the island might find a reasonable starting point for discussion. China does not claim to be liberal, but it does purport to be a meritocracy that values the frank debate of differing views (*shi shi qiu shi*: “seek truth from facts”). The party’s current actions are failing to win over the Chinese who live at the country’s borders, never mind managing to set China as an exemplar of successful development for the wider world.

### **ITS OWN GREATEST ADVERSARY**

The biggest obstacle China will face is not the hostility of the United States or other adversaries. It is instead China’s own authoritarian turn. Beijing’s commitment to that aspect of China’s core identity will make it far harder for the other three nucleotides—consumerism, global ambitions, and technology—of its DNA to recombine successfully, stoking hostility abroad and raising barriers between China and the world it strives to remake.

The increasing belligerence of Chinese foreign policy since the beginning of 2020 does not bode well. But it is not impossible to imagine a less antagonistic version of Chinese authoritarianism: in the first decade of this century, China boasted a burgeoning culture of investigative journalism, growing civil society, and very lively social media—together, an expanding public sphere even in the absence of full democracy. There may be no chance that the CCP will turn into a liberal democratic party, but that doesn’t mean that it couldn’t return to this earlier trajectory. The authoritarianism of a China of this variety—the China visible before 2012—would be less glaring to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Beijing is not seeking to impose a replica of its own system on other states. It is committed to burnishing its ideological prestige at home as a successful nationalist—and socialist—state, but it does not require other states to follow in its footsteps. China feels no obligation to maintain the liberal international order because of any principled belief in liberalism. Instead, an order based on Chinese preferences would likely contain the following elements: a commitment to very strong national sovereignty; economic development, quite possibly stressing renewable energy (a subject on which Chinese rhetoric currently outstrips Chinese action); the expansion and integration of a BRI system that would be strongly oriented toward Chinese economic needs; and a global technology landscape dominated by Chinese norms. This amalgam would have few attractions for committed democrats, to be sure, but it could form a sustainable alternative proposition to at least part of the existing liberal order.

China's growing stature in Asia might lead to the strengthening of the authoritarian tendencies among the region's democracies. With Chinese influence, the thumb would fall on the nondemocratic side of the scale in countries with fragile democratic structures, such as Myanmar and Thailand. Countries such as the Philippines have already become more vulnerable to Chinese norms as their politics have become more authoritarian; South Korea, much more liberal in its politics, would become vulnerable to a form of Cold War-era Finlandization—that is, the bending of a democracy to the influence of a powerful authoritarian neighbor—because of its proximity to China in the event of the retreat of the United States from East Asia.

China benefits from the fact that no other actor in the world can channel its unique ACGT nucleotide combination. India, Japan, Russia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations cannot replace China's influence in Asia, let alone the world. China is by far the largest actor in the region, which gives it the heft to dominate. But the opacity of China's current system and its assertive, sometimes confrontational posture generate regional and global mistrust. The United States is tolerable to most in Asia (except China and North Korea) because its presence in countries such as Japan and South Korea has won democratic consent. In an era of largely democratic and highly nationalist states, China must make its international ambitions palatable to others, even if they will never be fully embraced. The states in South America dominated by the United States in the 1950s, or in Eastern

Europe by the Soviet Union in the same period, were poor and undemocratic. It will be much harder for China, over time, to maintain popular acceptance of its growing involvement in wealthy Asian states with lively public spheres, even if it can use its military might to pressure its neighbors and try to influence their practices.

The political structures of China will also change considerably in the next few decades and will reveal the divergence between the open and closed elements of its society. The CCP has encouraged young Chinese professionals in academia, business, and law to study overseas. But in the ranks of the party itself, overseas experience has far less value and can even hurt one's prospects for advancement. Few among the next generation of China's political leaders seem to have significant international experience, although they are no doubt advised by people who do. China will likely develop a political elite that is inward-looking alongside a professional elite that is globally connected and outward-facing. That contrast will present a major challenge, because it suggests a contradiction, to use a Marxist term, between two key goals, internationalization and the maintenance of party power.

In addition, seismic demographic change is around the corner. Beginning in 2029, China's population will contract by around five million people per year, making China a much older society before it reaches high-income status. China will need to pay for the welfare of millions of older people without having the same resources of an aging rich society such as Japan. The unexpected economic shock of the coronavirus has made it more difficult for China to expand its commercial ties with neighbors in the region, although its control of the virus seems to be leading to a steady recovery. Chinese officials now speak of a "dual circulation" economy that is global in reach while maintaining a protected domestic market. But this balancing act is unsustainable in the long term. A better approach would see China be much more sensitive to the needs and desires of its partners, displaying a tact that it has not exhibited in recent years in its relations with neighbors.

An ACGT-based bid to reshape the international order demands a more concerted Chinese diplomatic effort overall. Chinese officials now often invoke saccharine platitudes before veering at breakneck speed toward more coercive and confrontational broadsides. Instead, China needs to better understand that global leadership requires concessions, generosity, and a willingness to entertain criticism: a hard realization to achieve in a country where the domestic political culture

encourages the suppression, rather than the celebration, of dissent. The major obstacle to China's rise on the international stage is not U.S. hostility or internal foes. Rather, it is the authoritarian strand of the CCP's core identity. That authoritarianism and at times confrontational expansionism has the effect of tarnishing the other components of China's model—the emphasis on consumerism and improvements in material lifestyles, the flawed but sincere commitment to global development and poverty reduction, and China's truly astonishing capacity for technological innovation.

The key elements of China's ideological mixture—Marxism-Leninism, traditional thought, historical analogy, and economic success—have largely eclipsed the always limited power of Western liberalism to influence how the CCP sees the world. But China's global future depends on how it can successfully recombine the other aspects of its ACGT model. At the moment, Chinese authoritarianism threatens to limit Beijing's ability to create a plausible new form of global order. 🌐

## REVIEWS & RESPONSES

*Putin might have some doubts  
about just how successful Russia's  
election interference really was.*  
– Angela Stent



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# The Meddlers

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## Moscow's and Washington's Covert Campaigns

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*Angela Stent*

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*Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*

BY THOMAS RID. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, 528 pp.

*The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare, 1945–2020*

BY TIM WEINER. Henry Holt, 2020, 336 pp.

**I**n 1864, the Russian poet Fyodor Tyutchev wrote that “Russia’s only natural policy toward the West must be to seek not an alliance with the Western powers but their disunity and division.” In the decades that followed, Russian and Soviet leaders heeded that advice. A century and a half later, the United States is still grappling with the aftermath of Russia’s attempts to amplify and benefit from divisions within American society during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign. As a result of that interference, which Moscow reprised to a lesser extent in the 2020 campaign, Russia has become a toxic issue in

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American politics, to a degree not seen since the McCarthy era.

Unlike Chinese election meddling, which appears designed to influence U.S. policy toward Beijing, the Kremlin’s schemes have a more diffuse aim: to sap Americans’ trust in their democracy and to magnify the already dramatic polarization of U.S. society. It is an ambitious mission, but it has produced mixed results for the Russians. In 2016, the most significant effort involved hacking the email accounts of senior members of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign, gaining access to a number of computer servers belonging to the Democratic National Committee, and providing the stolen contents to WikiLeaks, which then released them. The Kremlin also took advantage of the anonymity offered by social media by deploying Russians to pose as Americans and spread disinformation that would help Moscow’s favored candidate, Donald Trump. The Russians used more advanced cybertools to penetrate harder targets, including voter registration databases and networks used by state and local governments.

Of course, the Kremlin claimed to have nothing to do with any of these crimes. But U.S. intelligence agencies, U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of Russian meddling, and a separate investigation carried out by the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee all made clear that in each instance, the hackers were connected to Russian intelligence services, particularly the military intelligence agency known as GRU.

One reason these schemes succeeded in sowing so much discord and confusion was that the Kremlin was pushing on an open door: thanks to deep political

polarization and protracted culture wars, the United States is a country divided, vulnerable to all kinds of malign influences. Why, however, did Washington seem so unaware of the risk? Why were critical systems, both public and private, so insufficiently protected? And has the country learned anything from what happened that will make it less vulnerable to future meddling?

Two recent books tackle those questions by delving into the long history of political warfare between Moscow and Washington. The political scientist Thomas Rid's *Active Measures* is the more comprehensive and analytic of the two, using extensive archival research and interviews with former and current intelligence professionals to tell a gripping story of intrigue, deception, and murder. The journalist Tim Weiner's *The Folly and the Glory* offers a somewhat more familiar portrait of the covert struggle between Moscow and Washington and goes on to argue that U.S. policies increased Russian President Vladimir Putin's suspicions about Washington's intentions—which in turn reinforced his determination to forge a state dominated by veterans of the Soviet intelligence services.

Putin built that state, but it is unclear whether his use of it has always worked to Moscow's advantage, at least when it comes to U.S.-Russian relations. Indeed, the Russians might feel some buyer's remorse about their interference in the 2016 election. Their preferred candidate won, but the Trump administration pursued a contradictory policy toward Russia: Trump wanted to make a deal with Putin, but the rest of the executive branch took a more hawkish stance. Meanwhile, bipartisan

anger over Russia's meddling led the U.S. Congress to impose a raft of sanctions on Moscow that will remain on the books for many years. The Kremlin's more limited covert efforts to influence U.S. politics in recent years suggest that Putin himself might have some doubts about just how successful these schemes really were.

### TRUE LIES

In Russia, the term *aktivnyye meropriyatiya*, or "active measures," refers to forms of informational warfare designed to weaken an adversary. The Russian practice of weaponizing disinformation began over a century ago, before the Bolshevik Revolution. An early instance was the notorious tract *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which first appeared in 1903 and purports to unmask a nefarious Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world. In 1921, *The Times* of London revealed that the book was a forgery. Although its exact authorship remains disputed, the tsarist regime enthusiastically distributed it, and the Soviet Union was still disseminating it well into the 1950s. More than a hundred years after its initial appearance, it continues to sell well in some parts of the world because it reinforces the beliefs of people who are less interested in knowing the truth than in bolstering their own version of reality.

That dynamic is a theme that runs throughout Rid's book. Over the past century, the technology of disinformation has changed as the digital revolution has profoundly altered the means of delivery, with hacking and leaking now enabling a far larger group of propagandists to penetrate Western societies. But for Russia and other authoritarian states,

the aim remains the same: to attack the “liberal epistemic order, or a political system that places its trust in essential custodians of factual authority,” and to erode the foundations of open societies. Over time, Rid concludes, active measures have become more active and less measured, helping usher in a post-truth world in which more and more people seem willing to accept “alternative facts.”

Of course, the United States has also played a role in creating such conditions. After World War II, the Truman administration established an office of “special projects” to coordinate secret offensive operations against the Soviet Union and its satellite states. In the decade that followed, U.S. political warfare was centered in Berlin. There, the legendary intelligence operative Frank Wisner and his colleagues led a team they called the *Kampfgruppe*, German for “battle unit,” which sought to “harass and weaken the Soviet administration of East Germany,” as Rid writes. One tactic the team deployed was to distribute glossy magazines to convey subversive, pro-Western messages to the East German population: *Der Kämpfer* (The Fighter) was aimed at the East German armed forces, and *Der Parteiarbeiter* (The Party Worker) targeted Communist functionaries; other magazines were distributed to religious organizations that the East German government had suppressed.

These disinformation operations ceased when the Berlin Wall went up in 1961 and it became much harder for U.S. intelligence operatives to access East Berlin. Rid argues that when it comes to information warfare, “moral and operational equivalence” between democracies and nondemocracies existed only during

the first decade or so of the Cold War. Thereafter, “U.S. intelligence retreated from the disinformation battlefield almost completely.” But the Soviets and their satellites never did.

### A HALL OF MIRRORS

Rid’s account is full of fascinating details about the Kremlin’s active measures, stretching all the way back to the Bolshevik era. In 1922, under orders from the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet secret police created the Trust, a faux-monarchist organization. Lenin was worried that domestic opponents of the Bolsheviks would link up with émigré organizations that sought the restoration of tsarist rule. The Trust’s disinformation activities slowly reduced that threat by sowing chaos within the émigré groups. Over time, Rid writes, the Trust “became more and more like a Russian matryoshka doll, with several layers of disinformation nested and stacked into one another.” In 1923, the Kremlin fully committed to disinformation and established an even larger organization, which began to churn out volumes of deceptive material that portrayed the Soviet Union as a strong military power whose population generally supported the new government.

The Soviets also found ways to meddle in the politics of Western democracies, sometimes with the assistance of proxies in other communist countries, such as East Germany. At its height in the late 1980s, the East German state security organization known as the Stasi—which conducted both internal and external espionage—boasted more than 90,000 full-time employees (out of a population of 16



million) and 175,000 “informal collaborators,” who reported on their neighbors, coworkers, and even spouses. The Stasi’s most successful operation was carried out in 1972 on orders from Moscow and involved bribing two members of the Christian Democratic Union, the opposition party in West Germany. In exchange for payments equivalent to around \$90,000 today, both members agreed to break with their party and abstain from a no-confidence vote in the West German parliament that would have led to the removal from office of Chancellor Willy Brandt. The Kremlin wanted Brandt to stay in power because he supported improving ties with the Soviet Union and the communist bloc. Thanks to the two abstentions, the vote narrowly failed, and Brandt kept his position. (The victory was short-lived, however: soon after, Brandt resigned after one of his closest advisers was discovered to be a Stasi agent.)

During the 1980s, the KGB, the Stasi, and other communist-bloc intelligence services teamed up to exploit divisions in Western countries over the issue of nuclear weapons. As the Soviet Union built its vast nuclear arsenal, it fed disinformation about its policies and intentions to credulous antinuclear campaigners in the West and the developing world, secretly funding activists who called for a “nuclear freeze” and who opposed the development of the neutron bomb and the deployment of intermediate-range U.S. missiles in Europe. In this way, even as Soviet nuclear stockpiles grew, the Kremlin was able to convince significant numbers of Westerners that the real danger of war came from the United States.



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After the Soviet Union collapsed, U.S. officials hoped that Moscow's active measures would fade away. But Russian President Boris Yeltsin declined to dismantle or reform the intelligence services. "The KGB is the only organized state structure left by the old regime that works," Yeltsin remarked in the early 1990s. "Of course, it was criminal, like everything else, but if we destroyed it, we would have risked unleashing total chaos." And so Russian purveyors of disinformation regrouped and reemerged in full strength when the former KGB case officer Putin took over.

Rid describes in vivid detail the rebirth of Russian active measures made possible by the dawn of the Internet age, such as the Kremlin cyberattack that crippled the Estonian government in 2007 and the disinformation campaign that Moscow launched in the wake of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, when the West sought to isolate Russia. Rid also delves into the story of Edward Snowden, the disgruntled U.S. National Security Agency contractor who arrived in Moscow in 2013 after having leaked millions of highly classified documents that revealed that the United States had carried out far more intrusive and extensive surveillance than was publicly known. Snowden received political asylum and eventually applied for Russian citizenship. Some American commentators believe that Snowden was a Russian asset all along. But according to Rid, "viewed from Russia, the Snowden leaks looked like a spectacularly successful American active measure targeted against America itself."

## SPIES LIKE US

For Russia, war and peace are not binaries; they merely sit at opposite ends of a continuum. Somewhere in between lie active measures and "political warfare," which Weiner defines as "the way in which nations project their power and work their will against an enemy, short of launching missiles or sending in the marines." In his lively account of the rivalry between Moscow and Washington during and after the Cold War, Weiner dates the origins of Russian political warfare to Ivan the Terrible, the tsar who in 1565 created the *oprichnina*, a kind of state within a state that employed a network of spies and unleashed a reign of terror against Ivan's purported enemies. In recent years, Weiner shows, Putin has built on this long tradition, using cutting-edge techniques in his quest to weaken the United States and cause its citizens to question the fundamentals of their political system—all while creating an image of Russia as a bulwark against political disorder, a bastion of traditional values, and a stable alternative to chaotic democracies. Despite Russia's economic and demographic problems and its limited resources, it appears to be much better at political warfare than the more powerful United States.

Nevertheless, compared to Rid, Weiner places more emphasis on Washington's role in the story of how modern-day political warfare developed. Indeed, one of the most prominent figures in Weiner's account is the storied U.S. diplomat George Kennan. In 1948, Kennan, then serving as director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, persuaded the Truman administration to create a

special directorate for covert operations against the Soviet Union and its satellites. At Kennan's recommendation, Wisner was put in charge of the new unit, which launched a number of bold yet ultimately unsuccessful operations—many of which relied on disinformation—to dislodge the Soviets from Eastern Europe.

In the 1960s, as many European colonies won their independence, political warfare spread to the so-called Third World, and Moscow and Washington fought for the hearts and minds of Africans. Weiner devotes a considerable part of his narrative to Congo and the civil war that broke out there after the Belgians hastily withdrew in 1960. The United States supported Joseph Mobutu (later known as Mobutu Sese Seko) against the Soviet-backed Patrice Lumumba. Eventually, Mobutu prevailed, with assistance from the CIA, and went on to rule the country for three decades in what Weiner describes as a “carnival of corruption.” It is not altogether clear why Weiner thinks that this particular case is so significant, however. And in indicting Washington for supporting Mobutu and other corrupt dictators in Africa, he neglects to identify better alternative policies and fails to address whether the Soviet-backed leaders were any less corrupt. Political warfare in the developing world during the Cold War was often, to borrow a phrase from U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, a case of Moscow and Washington both choosing to back what their policymakers considered “our son of a bitch.”

Weiner argues that the Kremlin's continued reliance on political warfare after the Soviet era stems from Russian

resentment over what happened in the years that followed. In the eyes of many Russians, the country was humiliated in the 1990s by an arrogant United States that did not take Russian interests into account. This is the narrative that Putin has used to justify his quest to make Russia great again—and Weiner implicitly endorses elements of it. He faults the United States for inviting former Soviet states to join NATO, contrary to promises that U.S. Secretary of State James Baker allegedly made to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990. According to Weiner, this betrayal convinced the Russian leadership that it could not trust the Americans. The problem with this argument is that historical facts do not support it. The U.S. government made no such promises to Gorbachev about NATO enlargement because that prospect was not on the agenda in 1990. As Gorbachev himself wrote in 2014, “The topic of ‘NATO expansion’ was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility.” At the time, the only question regarding NATO's posture was whether any troops under its command would be deployed in the former East Germany after German reunification—and they were not.

### **SITTING DUCKS**

These books raise a larger question that neither answers adequately: How can the United States and other democratic societies make themselves less vulnerable to disinformation? U.S. President Barack Obama and his administration were slow to grasp the full scale of what Russian hackers, leakers, and Internet trolls were doing in 2016, and they arguably did not

do enough to push back. To shore up U.S. defenses, the Biden administration should work to secure public and private networks in the United States and work with social media companies to limit the spread of disinformation on their platforms. Retaliating against cyberattacks—going on the offensive, in other words—is also an important part of the toolkit, but it must be used judiciously, so as not to lead to escalation. It is worth noting that Russia has on several occasions offered to begin talks with the United States about a pact on mutual noninterference. There is, naturally, considerable skepticism about whether Washington could trust Moscow to honor the terms of any such agreement. But it might be worth exploring what Russia is proposing before dismissing the offer out of hand.

In the meantime, perhaps the most important things the United States can do to protect itself from foreign meddling are to address its own social and political divisions and better communicate with Americans about the difference between genuine news and propaganda. Russia did not create the polarization that is dividing the country; it merely exploits it. Russia did not invent the conspiracy theories that pervade social media; it merely amplifies them. And the Kremlin did not elect Trump in 2016; it merely provided him with ammunition as he sought to erode Americans' trust in the integrity of their country's political system and party establishments.

It is also worth considering whether the benefits Russia enjoyed from its 2016 interference actually outweighed the costs. The knowledge of Russian interference—and the belief by some of Trump's opponents that he did not win the election legitimately—made Russia a

toxic domestic subject for Trump's four years in office and made it impossible for him to fulfill his campaign promise to improve relations with Moscow. Despite the trollish pleasure that Putin clearly took as Trump cast doubt on the judgments of U.S. intelligence agencies and instead accepted Putin's denials of responsibility, the Russian leader could point to precious little evidence that the interference had actually served his country's interests.

Nevertheless, the United States has remained divided and politically fractured since 2016, and this is no doubt a source of deep satisfaction for the Kremlin. Washington's international prestige has diminished, and Moscow's domestic and international state-run media have relished in describing the United States as a declining, shabby ex-superpower. Yet Russia left fewer fingerprints on the election in 2020 than it did in 2016; toward the end of the campaign, Putin seemed to be hedging his bets between the two candidates. Perhaps the Kremlin realized that it might be preferable to have a more predictable president in the White House, one committed to more traditional diplomacy with Russia.

One hopes that the end of the Trump presidency will lead to a revival of a more reasoned discussion about where Washington should cooperate with Moscow and where the two sides will inevitably compete. Putin's ability to undermine U.S. democracy has been exaggerated, but Russian active measures will not disappear, and Americans would do well to make their country a less inviting target. 🌐

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# The Spanish Miracle

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## Democracy's Triumph Over Tyranny and Corruption

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Omar G. Encarnación

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*A People Betrayed: A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence, and Social Division in Modern Spain*

BY PAUL PRESTON. Liveright, 2020, 768 pp.

Nearly three decades have passed since the 1991 publication of the political scientist Samuel Huntington's *The Third Wave*, the most important scholarly take on the global democratic transformation that took place in the late twentieth century. The book traced democratic openings around the world, beginning with the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which ended the West's longest dictatorship, and concluding with the democratization of eastern Europe following the collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Between those two landmark events, nearly 30 new democracies emerged.

According to Huntington, this was the third time such a wave had washed over the world; the first arrived in the nineteenth century, with the advent of

mass democracy in the United Kingdom and the United States, and the second came in the immediate aftermath of World War II, ushered in by the democratization of West Germany and Japan. He attributed the third wave to a number of factors, including the economic expansion of the postwar years, the liberalizing reforms undertaken by the Vatican, the embrace of democracy promotion as a foreign policy tool by the United States and European countries, and the phenomenon of "snowballing," or countries copying one another's democratic transitions. Huntington also emphasized the important role that domestic elites played in democratization. "Democracies are created not by causes but by causers," he wrote, and although grassroots movements often catalyzed change, democracy could consolidate only when elites embraced it.

But in the years since Huntington observed the third wave, the tide has turned. Many young democracies have witnessed what political scientists call "democratic backsliding": a reversion to the illiberalism of an earlier era and the deterioration of democratic norms, practices, and institutions. In some cases, most notably Hungary and Poland, once promising democracies are now breaking down. Others, such as Russia, have long since passed that point and have settled into authoritarianism. And the phenomenon is not exclusive to the postcommunist world. Across Latin America, backsliding has taken a heavy toll on countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela.

One third-wave country that has notably avoided such backsliding is Spain, which began to transition to democracy in 1975 with the passing of Francisco

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Franco, the dictator who had ruled since the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939. Surveys by organizations such as Freedom House and *The Economist* regularly reveal that Spaniards enjoy among the best protections of civil, political, and human rights in the world. And in some respects, Spain has led the way in expanding rights, freedoms, and citizenship. The country legalized same-sex marriage in 2005, years before France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States did so. Spain has also distinguished itself with its relatively enlightened treatment of its Roma population and by being one of the most welcoming countries in all of western Europe to immigrants from many parts of the world—not only from former Spanish colonial outposts in Latin America and Asia but also from North Africa and central and eastern Europe.

And yet, in at least one way, Spain is arguably less of an exemplar than a cautionary tale. For all its success at consolidating democracy, the country has often been held back by the staggering corruption of its political class. This affliction is exhaustively detailed in the eminent historian Paul Preston's latest book, *A People Betrayed*, which offers an unvarnished indictment of Spanish elites, including those who have shaped the current democratic regime. "Starting with the monarchy and moving on to the Church," Preston approvingly quotes the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, "no national authority has thought of anything but itself."

Anyone versed in Spanish politics will find this to be a familiar argument. But despite the mountain of evidence that supports his thesis, Preston overreaches in assessing the political damage

that corruption has caused in Spain. Still, the book should give pause to those mindful of Huntington's parting thoughts about the future of the third wave. He pointedly warned leaders in new democracies to avoid even the perception of being "arrogant, incompetent, or corrupt, or some combination of all three."

For Huntington and other scholars, democracy hinges not only on expert political craftsmanship at the time of the democratic transition but also on the capacity of the political class to generate trust in the system. As the political scientist Robert Putnam has argued, public trust greases the wheels of democracy, and almost nothing is more harmful to that trust than corruption. In recent years, the erosion of trust in Spanish political institutions has made it harder for the country to govern itself and to confront the challenges it currently faces, from separatism to the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, just because corruption has not hobbled democracy in Spain, as Preston implies, that does not mean it has not exacted a high price on the country. Nor does it mean that in the years to come, corruption will not lead to much-dreaded democratic backsliding, as pressure mounts on the system and on an increasingly discredited establishment.

### **SOMETHING IS ROTTEN**

*A People Betrayed* opens in the late nineteenth century, which witnessed Spain's collapse as a global power after its defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898. "The disaster of '98," as Spaniards call it, was followed by decades of rot in the country's politics, as bribes, malfeasance, nepotism, and unspeakable greed pervaded the establishment. Preston



plows through this sad story with the aplomb of a first-rate historian and wisely keeps the narrative alive by reminding the reader of the absurd, almost comical quality of much of the corruption that has flourished in Spain. A case in point is Juan March, who became the country's wealthiest businessman during the run-up to World War I by smuggling tobacco and who later helped fund the 1936 military coup led by Franco, which set off the civil war. "So successful was March's smuggling operation," Preston writes, "that government revenue from tobacco duty was plummeting to such an extent that it was decided to grant him the official monopoly for a fee."

Preston expertly demonstrates how in recent years, corruption in Spain has steadily grown bigger, more brazen, and ever closer to the centers of political power. Nothing illustrates that better than the so-called Gürtel case, a kickbacks-for-contracts scheme that operated between 1999 and 2005 and led to the

conviction of 29 people in 2018. Many of those convicted were leaders in the conservative (and then ruling) Popular Party (PP), including the party's treasurer, Luis Bárcenas, who was sentenced to 29 years in prison. The scandal also ended the political career of Mariano Rajoy, who in 2017 earned the distinction of becoming the first sitting Spanish prime minister to ever testify in a criminal trial. He was ousted the following year after opposition parties passed a motion of no confidence in his government.

Preston also delves into the corruption scandals of Spain's royal family, which was once one of the most trusted institutions in the country. Ironically, that trust grew out of a famous act of betrayal. In 1976, King Juan Carlos I helped usher in democracy by boldly violating a commitment he had made to a dying Franco to uphold the authoritarian regime, or "Francoism without Franco." In breaking that promise, Juan Carlos ensured a role for the monarchy in the

new democratic system. He also stood up to military rebels who attempted a coup in 1981, disavowing the plotters in a late-night broadcast to the nation and effectively ending the crisis. But in 2020, this hero of Spanish democracy was laid low, as Spain's Supreme Court investigated whether he had received improper payments relating to a construction project in Saudi Arabia. With scandal swirling around him, the 82-year-old former monarch went missing, unleashing a guessing game in the Spanish media regarding his whereabouts. Ultimately, the royal household confirmed that Juan Carlos had fled the country and gone to the United Arab Emirates. His disgraceful exit underscored Preston's point that the king "had exhausted the enormous political capital he had built up between 1975 and 1982."

### THE REIGN IN SPAIN

Given Spain's long history of illiberal rule, Preston's tales of corruption and incompetence should hardly come as a surprise. Prior to enacting its current constitution, in 1978, the country's only significant experience with democracy was the short-lived Second Republic, which lasted from 1931 until its tragic demise in 1939. With that brief exception, until 1978, Spain's history since the late nineteenth century was a catalog of virtually every form of authoritarian rule imaginable, including an absolutist monarchy from 1886 to 1931 (a period that also incorporated a fascist regime between 1923 and 1930), a virtual theocracy during the early Franco period (1939–59), and a technocratic dictatorship during the late Franco period (1959–75). Spain also endured the bloodiest of the many civil wars that erupted in interwar

Europe. Hundreds of thousands of Spaniards—perhaps as many as one million—lost their lives during the fighting and its aftermath, and 500,000 were forced into exile. Mass starvation, political repression, and international isolation persisted through the 1950s.

For this reason, the grip of corruption on Spanish life is far less surprising than the emergence and survival of democracy—a phenomenon on which Preston's book sheds hardly any light. Indeed, in his zeal to condemn the country's elites, Preston ignores or minimizes significant moments in Spanish history that seriously upset his narrative, especially the success of the late phase of the Franco dictatorship in promoting economic growth and lifting living standards, the skillful transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and the vigorous prosecution of corruption in recent years.

The Franco regime's second phase, which immediately preceded Spain's democratic awakening, was in fact shaped by remarkable bureaucratic competence, and that competence is critical to understanding the transformation that followed Franco. After a disastrous experiment with autarky from 1939 to 1959 that nearly brought about the end of Franco's rule, the regime was rescued by a group of talented and pragmatic economists, some of them affiliated with the Catholic organization *Opus Dei*. They persuaded a skeptical Franco that the only way to rescue the economy and prevent the collapse of his regime was to open Spain up to foreign tourism and investment, to seek help from the International Monetary Fund, and to ease up on the repression of dissidence and criticism.



Within a decade, this technocratic approach had produced the so-called Spanish miracle, which made Spain one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Between 1963 and 1971, per capita income more than doubled. By 1975, when Franco died—peacefully, in his bed—Spain had become a prosperous middle-class country in possession of a viable civil society and a relatively well-developed welfare state. By pushing relentlessly for social and economic modernization, the late Franco regime unintentionally paved the way for the advent of democracy, the outcome that Franco had feared the most.

After Franco's death, Adolfo Suárez, the former head of the National Movement (the closest thing to a political party in Franco's Spain) and the first prime minister of the democratic era, engineered a democratic transition that political scientists hold as a masterpiece of political craftsmanship. Never before had an authoritarian regime peacefully reinvented itself as a democracy by employing the authoritarian state's institutions. But that is precisely what Suárez accomplished in Spain, in response to pressure from the public and with the support of the king. After the Francoist parliament voted itself out of existence in 1976, political parties and trade unions were legalized, democratic elections were held, and one of western Europe's most liberal constitutions was drafted and approved by means of a national referendum. All of this was accomplished in less than two years.

Preston's implication that corruption goes ignored by Spain's government and citizens is also belied by the fact that few other countries have been as zealous in prosecuting graft. As a *Politico* report

noted in 2017, Spain has tried and convicted “top business people, ministers, regional presidents, mayors and even Princess Cristina.” The report added that between July 2015 and the end of 2016, almost 1,500 people in Spain faced trial for corruption and that around 70 percent of them were found guilty, including Iñaki Urdangarin (Cristina's husband and King Felipe VI's brother-in-law) and Rodrigo Rato, a former managing director of the International Monetary Fund. These prosecutions were prodded by the Indignados (Indignant Ones), a massive anticorruption movement that rocked Spanish politics in 2011. Indeed, viewed through a comparative perspective, which Preston eschews, corruption in Spain is nowhere near as bad as one would imagine from just reading his book. In 2019, Spain scored 62 out of 100 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index—well behind the least corrupt countries, such as Denmark and New Zealand, but in the vicinity of France and the United States and well ahead of Italy, Greece, and Hungary.

#### **A MATTER OF TRUST**

For all its flaws, Preston's book represents a major contribution to the field. It is a peerless account of the many ways, both big and small, that politicians have failed and disappointed the Spanish people. And although it is not the case that corruption and incompetence have hobbled Spanish democracy, as Preston implies, this is not to say that there is nothing wrong with the country—far from it. The impact of the erosion of trust in political institutions brought about by corruption is undeniable, far-reaching, and very worrisome.

One need look no further than the state of Spain's two leading political parties, the PP and the social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), both of which have been battered by corruption scandals in recent years. A 2019 poll cited by the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia* reported that Spaniards rank the political parties last in terms of their trustworthiness—behind the universities, the army, the media, judges, the police, and the trade unions. As a result of their cratering appeal, the PP and the PSOE have splintered into at least five parties in recent years—a major factor in the political gridlock that has paralyzed Spanish politics in the past decade. Between 2015 and 2019, no single party was able to garner and sustain a clear parliamentary majority, forcing Spain to hold four general elections.

Prominent among the new political parties is Vox, the first viable far-right party of the post-Franco era. Vox stormed into parliament in 2019, winning the third-highest number of seats on a starkly conservative, Euroskeptical, anti-immigrant platform and ending Spain's status as one of the handful of Western democracies without a right-wing populist party in its legislature. Vox has fanned the flames of Spanish nationalism, posing a significant obstacle to solving the constitutional crisis unleashed when the region of Catalonia attempted to break away from Spain in 2017.

The erosion of trust in established political institutions has presented a major challenge to the government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, of the PSOE, as it battles the pandemic, which so far has claimed the lives of some

35,000 Spaniards. But it is worth remembering that this is not the first time that Spain's young democracy has been severely tested. Since the transition to democracy, Spain has experienced the attempted coup in 1981; terrorist violence, including the al Qaeda bombings in Madrid in 2004, just three days before a general election, which killed 193 people (the deadliest terrorist attack carried out on European soil since World War II); a severe economic downturn after the 2008 global financial crisis that left nearly a quarter of the working-age population jobless; and separatist conflicts in Catalonia and the Basque region.

Nevertheless, Spanish democracy has persisted, becoming a beacon of hope for other young democracies and an example for more mature ones. Despite its corruption and incompetence, the Spanish political class has often met the challenges of the day and delivered for the people. One must hope that continues to be the case—not just for Spain's sake but also for the sake of democracy everywhere. 🌐

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## Recent Books

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### Political and Legal

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G. John Ikenberry

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*Ethics and International Relations:  
A Tragic Perspective*

BY RICHARD NED LEBOW.  
Cambridge University Press, 2020,  
270 pp.

*Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign  
Policy From FDR to Trump*

BY JOSEPH S. NYE, JR. Oxford  
University Press, 2020, 272 pp.

One of the oldest divides in the study of foreign policy is between realism (the pursuit of power) and idealism (the pursuit of moral or legal ideals). These thoughtful books by distinguished scholars argue that the two traditions actually have much in common. Lebow makes the case that leaders who tell the truth and root their foreign policies in widely shared conceptions of justice tend to be more successful than those who premise their actions on the cynical calculations of power politics. Surveying 26 military interventions in the decades after World War II, Lebow finds that wars and military actions not authorized by regional or international organizations weakened, rather than advanced, the interests of the aggressor states. By contrast, ethically informed policies—such as the United States’ efforts to rebuild the economies of postwar Europe, Mao Zedong’s policy of settling

border disputes with China’s neighbors, and Germany’s postwar actions to transform itself into a peace-oriented great power—achieved better results. The book is intriguing in its unabashedly instrumental view of ethics, arguing simply that an ethical foreign policy will be more restrained and better guarantee the long-term advancement of the national interest through the cultivation of friends and influence.

Nye, like Lebow, does not seek to evaluate foreign policy in terms of its faithfulness to timeless universal values or moral ideals. Instead, he examines the quality of presidential decision-making in very specific contexts. For Nye, moralism is the single-minded pursuit of some overarching ideal, whereas what he terms “moral reasoning” is a more sophisticated, three-dimensional exercise in making foreign policy choices that balances ends, means, and long-term consequences. Nye explores the foreign policy successes and failures of U.S. presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Donald Trump, searching their records for indications of moral reasoning and situational awareness. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower come off particularly well, building partnerships and institutions that laid the foundations for generations of peace and security. The Vietnam-era presidents, particularly Richard Nixon, were less aware of the limits of U.S. power. Ronald Reagan gets credit for having a moral vision that helped end the Cold War. Trump receives poor marks for the needless damage he has inflicted on the United States’ institutions and reputation. For both Lebow and Nye, the essential insight is that even in the realist world of anarchy and power politics, it is possible to “do well by doing good.”

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*Bland Fanatics: Liberals, Race, and Empire*

BY PANKAJ MISHRA. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020, 224 pp.

In this collection of essays, Mishra unfurls his signature narrative of the delusions and failings of Western capitalism and liberalism. The overarching storyline is simple. During the long struggle against communism, Anglo-American elites presented Western liberal democracy as the vanguard of human progress. In the post-Cold War decades that followed, the United States picked up where the British left off to build a “universal liberal empire,” premised on unipolar power, military interventionism, and free-market economics. Across this Anglo-American era, Mishra argues, African, Asian, and Latin American voices were shunted aside in favor of the authority of liberal, Western technocrats and intellectuals. Much of the book is devoted to portraits of Western public intellectuals whom Mishra paints as “cheerleaders” for globalization and neoliberalism. For example, Mishra takes aim at the historian Niall Ferguson for whitewashing the oppression and violence of Western racism and imperialism. For Mishra, the crisis of Western liberalism rests on its inflated pretensions as a model for social advancement, claiming too much and delivering too little. But Mishra does not provide an alternative theory of political change that would take the world to a better place. The naive grandiosity and moral smugness that Mishra sees in the Western liberal democratic experience tends to be mirrored in his own sweeping narrative.

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*Democracy Against Liberalism: Its Rise and Fall*

BY AVIEZER TUCKER. Polity, 2020, 200 pp.

Amid a flood of books that seek to explain the rise of populist and authoritarian challenges to liberal democracy, Tucker usefully reminds the reader that liberalism and democracy can exist quite independent of each other. Their coupling in the modern era is a bit of a historical quirk. He argues that regime types vary across three binaries: democracy versus authoritarianism, liberalism versus illiberalism, and technocracy versus populism. Revolutionary dictatorships, such as fascist and communist regimes, often start out as populist authoritarian movements that grow technocratic over time. The East Asian tigers, such as South Korea and Taiwan, began as authoritarian liberal technocracies and only later moved toward democracy. Tucker is particularly interested in illiberal democracies, where populist movements rise through elections and harness state power to undermine democratic checks and balances. Tucker finds these tendencies now in Brazil, Hungary, India, and Poland and in the outlook of right-wing parties in Israel, the United States, and western Europe. He argues that a revolt of middle classes against perceived economic and cultural elites lies behind the surge of illiberal democracy. The book offers some good news: illiberal populist regimes tend to be unstable, and when liberal political rule returns, leaders have opportunities to safeguard against future upheaval by redistributing wealth, rebuilding the social safety net, and expanding educational opportunity.

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## Military, Scientific, and Technological

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*Lawrence D. Freedman*

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*Prisoners of History: What Monuments to World War II Tell Us About Our History and Ourselves*

BY KEITH LOWE. St. Martin's Press, 2020, 368 pp.

**I**n this fascinating and thoughtful book, Lowe studies 25 memorials related to World War II. He traces their origins, how they were received, and what they suggest not only about the war but also about the societies that created them. Russia's many large monuments to the war, for example, reveal much about that country's insecurities as a declining power. Japan's Yasukuni Shrine, dedicated to its fallen soldiers, betrays a reluctance to reckon with its crimes during the war. China commemorates the infamous 1937 Japanese massacre in Nanjing with a statue of a mother and a dead child. South Koreans placed opposite Japan's embassy in Seoul a representation of the so-called comfort women abused by Japanese soldiers during the war. The most moving memorials preserve the physical remains of earlier structures, such as the concentration camp at Auschwitz, the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima, and the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane, whose inhabitants were slaughtered by the Nazis. Some memorials to the war have risen far from its battlegrounds; Polish Americans in Jersey City remember the Katyn

massacre of Polish officers by the Soviets with a striking statue set against the skyline of New York City.

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*You Don't Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War*

BY ELIZABETH BECKER.

PublicAffairs, 2021, 320 pp.

Becker, who made her name reporting on war in Cambodia and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, delivers an enthralling biography of three female war correspondents who preceded her in Southeast Asia, reporting on the Vietnam War. The photographer Catherine Leroy produced some of the most searing images of the war (including a famous one of a distraught U.S. marine cradling a dead comrade). The journalist Frances FitzGerald's determination to understand the Vietnamese perspective led to one of the most perceptive early books on the war (*Fire in the Lake*), and the war correspondent Kate Webb's insistence on getting close to the action resulted in her eventual capture by North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia. Becker blends their individual stories with wider history, setting the unfolding tragedy in Vietnam in the background as her protagonists develop doubts about the logic and legitimacy of the war. She provides vivid accounts of their journalistic exploits and tales of how they suffered in their work—their injuries, traumas, excessive drinking, and complicated affairs.

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*The Dragons and the Snakes: How the Rest Learned to Fight the West*

BY DAVID KILCULLEN. Oxford University Press, 2020, 336 pp.

*To Rule Eurasia's Waves: The New Great Power Competition at Sea*

BY GEOFFREY F. GRESH. Yale University Press, 2020, 376 pp.

These two books explore the most striking features of contemporary international conflict. Thanks to Kilcullen's serious military experience, access to policymakers, thorough research, and eclectic academic interests, this Australian scholar has become one of the sharpest commentators on modern conflicts. He has shown how Western countries have struggled to cope with new, more agile enemies. In his latest book, Kilcullen draws on James Woolsey's 1993 confirmation hearings to be director of the CIA, in which he divided U.S. opponents into dragons (major powers such as China and Russia) and snakes (terrorists and insurgents). Kilcullen credits the Russians with developing what he calls "liminal warfare," making use of unconventional aggressive tactics, such as disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks, without triggering a military response. But the most important innovations come from China, including forming new artificial islands in the South China Sea, with its long-term strategy geared to ambitious, revisionist objectives.

China's growing strength is most apparent in the maritime sphere. Gresh provides a detailed account of the growing importance of the Chinese, Indian, and Russian navies and how this competition is playing out in waters

stretching from the Indo-Pacific area to the Arctic and the Mediterranean. Gresh largely neglects Western navies, but his analysis of the Chinese, Indian, and Russian navies is thorough and exceptional. Russia seeks to exploit the natural resources of the warming Arctic, and India is boosting its naval capabilities to protect its vital maritime trade. Meanwhile, the sheer scale of Chinese efforts both impresses and alarms. Through its various overseas commercial and investment initiatives, Beijing is acquiring access and assets around the world, including a naval base in Djibouti. But with expansion comes great risks: China spars with neighbors over contested waters, encourages potential adversaries to work together to limit its influence, and generates resentment among supposed benefactors it pushes into debt.

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*Assassins' Deeds: A History of Assassination From Ancient Egypt to the Present Day*

BY JOHN WITHINGTON. Reaktion Books, 2020, 368 pp.

In this fast-paced survey, Withington catalogs recorded assassinations from ancient times to the present day. He covers all the best-known cases, including the killings of the Roman leader Julius Caesar, the Bohemian duke Wenceslas, the English archbishop Thomas Becket, the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, the American president John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, and the al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The early motives behind these murders included dynastic succession and fear of tyranny. Later on, the imperatives of religion, ideology, and rebellion spurred many assassinations. Daggers and

poisons have been the favored tools of assassins, and they remain popular despite the greater efficiency of bombs and bullets. Withington meticulously describes the background, motivation, and method of each killing, which keeps the book interesting. He raises provocative questions—without quite answering them—about whether assassinations make much of a political difference and about the morality of eliminating leaders as an alternative to wider, bloodier conflicts.

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## The United States

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*Jessica T. Mathews*

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*The Securitarian Personality: What Really Motivates Trump's Base and Why It Matters for the Post-Trump Era*  
BY JOHN R. HIBBING. Oxford University Press, 2020, 304 pp.

**H**arking back to *The Authoritarian Personality*, a 1950 study of the personality traits that make someone susceptible to authoritarian rule, this volume joins the growing library of attempts to understand supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump. Hibbing draws on focus groups and extensive surveys to argue that such individuals differ from their counterparts in the 1950s. They are not searching for an all-powerful authority figure; instead, they feel a mission to protect their families and culture from an expansive, shifting group of “outsiders.” In the Trump era, these grew to include religious minorities, immigrants, supposed welfare cheats, athletes who

knelt during the national anthem, and, more broadly, non-Americans and nonwhites. Hibbing dubs these avid Trump supporters “securitarian personalities,” who don’t fear external attack so much as this unending flow of domestic threats. They see the world not as “us versus them” but as the even more sweeping “us versus not-us.” The purpose of Hibbing’s inquiry is undeniably important, since Trump’s voter base will long outlast him. But as with so many other efforts to comprehend Trump’s base, Hibbing sheds some light without providing a fully satisfying set of answers.

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*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*  
BY ISABEL WILKERSON. Random House, 2020, 496 pp.

Caste, as Wilkerson sees it, is the bones beneath the superficial skin we call “race.” It is the obdurate set of assumptions and expectations buried so deeply in human experience that it is all but impossible to excise. Wilkerson identifies the shared features of the caste systems in three countries—Nazi Germany, India, and the United States—exploring their basis in divine will or natural law, the ways in which caste is inherited, the limits on marriage between caste groups, and the rigid occupational boundaries that caste imposes. Nazi Germany is a poor fit for her thesis, but the argument rests solidly on the other two. Admirers of her earlier book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which dealt with the migration of Black Americans to northern cities during the twentieth century, will recognize her passionate prose, laced with gasp-inducing stories. Readers may not ultimately be convinced that caste

and racism are different, but they will come away with a new understanding of systemic racism in the United States, a deeper appreciation of the banal but no less painful wounds it inflicts daily, and a grasp of what it will take to loosen its grip on American society.

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*Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*

BY STEPHEN WERTHEIM. Harvard University Press, 2020, 272 pp.

Wertheim delves into an important bit of history to try to pinpoint exactly when and why the United States embraced the global military supremacy that Americans have taken for granted for decades. The galvanizing event was not the attack on Pearl Harbor but the swift collapse of France in 1940, which made real the likelihood of a Europe wholly dominated by Nazi Germany. At the time, a small foreign policy elite began to debate whether the United States should take a more active part in world affairs after the war and how they might build public support for such an expanded role. True isolationism, Wertheim claims, was something of a boogeyman, used to distract attention from the fact that the country could pursue other, less militarized forms of internationalism. The United Nations, in this telling, was designed as an institution that would provide cover for U.S. hegemony, without interfering with U.S. freedom of military action. Internationalism and military dominance were thereby conflated, and isolationism came to be seen as “the most grievous sin.” In asserting that the choices made were recognized at the time as “tragic,” Wertheim seemingly ignores the enor-

mous threats the United States faced during World War II and the Cold War. He is on firmer ground in arguing that today U.S. global military dominance has outlived its original purpose.

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*The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*

BY ROBERT D. PUTNAM WITH SHAYLYN ROMNEY GARRETT. Simon & Schuster, 2020, 480 pp.

Perhaps Putnam’s most important book, this one begins with the observation that the United States today closely mirrors the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century—a time of deep political divisions, mistrust and cynicism, enormous economic inequality, racial segregation, corporate monopolies, and cultural narcissism. Spurred by the Progressive movement, the country then embarked on momentous reforms that in the seven decades that followed pushed American society in a more communitarian and less individualistic direction. In the middle of the 1960s, these economic, political, and social trends suddenly reversed, setting in motion a steep societal decline that continues today. The authors call the arc of this history the “I-we-I” curve and hope for another upswing now. There are countless stirring insights in this book. Putnam and Romney Garrett range with ease across history, political science, economics, and social science, distilling masses of complex data into simple graphs that are integrated seamlessly into the fluid prose. The authors do disappoint a little in finding only weak lessons from this history that might spark a second communitarian upswing today.



*The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III*

BY PETER BAKER AND SUSAN GLASSER. Doubleday, 2020, 720 pp.

The book's title does not overstate the case. As chief of staff to two presidents, secretary of state, secretary of the treasury, and a five-time presidential campaign manager, James Baker was at the center of power in Washington for more than 25 years. A famously reserved individual, he took the risk of opening up to two talented journalists and scholars—granting 70 hours of personal interviews and full access to his papers, his family, and former aides and colleagues—and it has paid off handsomely. This is no hagiography, but with so much firsthand information to work with, the husband-and-wife team of authors gives Baker full rein to tell his own story, even when it is less than admirable. A sweeping history as well as an intimate biography, the book is also a fascinating study of how to acquire power in Washington and how to use it to maximum effect. Baker was a master of compromise and negotiation, crafting deals that left something for the loser while keeping a watchful eye on his personal ambition. The chapters covering Baker's years at the State Department as the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed, Germany reunified, and Iraq invaded Kuwait are particularly rich and a badly needed reminder of how much skilled diplomacy can achieve.



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## Western Europe

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*Andrew Moravcsik*

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*Boris Johnson: The Gambler*

BY TOM BOWER. WH Allen, 2020, 592 pp.

**I**n today's media-obsessed world, many politicians publicly flaunt narcissistic personal habits, lie openly about important issues, shift their fundamental principles to fit the moment, tailor their actions to build a personal brand rather than a political legacy, and hire subordinates more for loyalty than expertise. This book illustrates these trends by tracing the life of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The author, an investigative journalist, churned out nearly 600 pages within a year, so perhaps it would be unfair to expect the most accurate, scrupulously documented, nuanced, or well-written biography of Johnson in print. It is none of those things. But it is the newest recounting of the prime minister's life, taking the reader all the way up through July 2020—well into the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the book's sometimes compulsive effort to document both sides of every judgment, Johnson emerges as the stereotypical rich boy from a privileged background. He is a compulsive gambler who repeatedly jeopardizes his jobs, marriages, and future prospects through sloppy, lazy, and risky behavior—and each time is saved by his charm, luck, ambition, and connections. His is a life for our times.

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*Collateral Damage: Britain, America, and Europe in the Age of Trump*

BY KIM DARROCH. William Collins, 2020, 400 pp.

Darroch was the most successful British diplomat of his generation. A middling graduate in zoology from a regional university, he entered the Foreign Office with no special promise. Yet he rose to serve as a top adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair, permanent representative to the European Union, national security adviser to Prime Minister David Cameron, and, finally, the British ambassador in Washington. But in 2019, his 40-year career ended abruptly when someone (probably a colleague in London) leaked one of his top-secret reports. It described U.S. President Donald Trump as “dysfunctional . . . clumsy and inept.” Trump responded by tweeting, “We will no longer deal with him,” and the Conservative politician Boris Johnson—at the time in a fight for leadership of his party and likely seeking to distinguish himself from other aspirants—refused to support Darroch. This book confirms what many in the foreign policy community know from personal experience: the author is reasonable, generous, and discreet. These are laudable qualities in a diplomat but lamentable in a writer of memoirs. Beyond a short accounting of his time in Washington, amusing depictions of the demeaning ways in which diplomats scramble for access, and a brief description of how inequality, immigration, and identity fueled the parallel rises of Trump and Johnson, one searches in vain in these pages for fresh insights or inside information about this tumultuous period.

*The Neoliberal Republic: Corporate Lawyer, Statecraft, and the Making of Public-Private France*

BY ANTOINE VAUCHEZ AND PIERRE FRANCE. Cornell University Press, 2021, 204 pp.

French President Emmanuel Macron rose to prominence in politics quickly by moving back and forth between the public and the private sector. A graduate of the prestigious civil service training school known as the ENA, he worked first in the French Finance Ministry and then for Rothschild & Co., before becoming a government official, a minister, and then president in 2017. The authors argue that this is a career imaginable in France only in the last few decades, as the country has lowered barriers between the state and business. This shift has led to a flourishing of “in-and-outers”: top officials—few in number but high in prestige—who leave state service to work for private companies and corporate law firms as lobbyists, experts, and arbiters. Vauchez and France document who these people are and criticize their role in undermining effective democratic control. Their analysis, however, lacks concrete examples of how exactly in-and-outers have harmed the public interest. The authors nonetheless close by recommending greater transparency and stronger conflict-of-interest laws, as one finds in other advanced democracies faced with the same phenomenon.

*Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces*

BY LAURA TUNBRIDGE. Yale University Press, 2020, 288 pp.

Were it not for COVID-19, audiences in concert halls across the globe would have spent 2020 celebrating the 250th birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven—the most famous composer in the Western canon. Over the nearly two centuries since his death, many great books on the man and his music have appeared, telling readers nearly everything that can be known. This short, popular introduction takes a fresh approach. It portrays the man’s life through nine of his compositions. They span from his Septet, an early work with engaging and popular tunes, to the gnarly *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet, a late work that lay unrecognized as a masterpiece for a generation. Tunbridge highlights Beethoven’s genius by contrasting it with the prosaic details of an everyday life beset with financial worries, family crises, political squabbles, and loneliness. Her portrait is in no way original or comprehensive, but she succeeds in stripping Beethoven of the romantic exaggerations of him as a penurious, entirely deaf, politically revolutionary, curmudgeonly misanthrope. As a result, this biography leads readers back to Beethoven’s timeless music.

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## Western Hemisphere

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*Richard Feinberg*

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*South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*  
BY ALICE L. BAUMGARTNER. Basic Books, 2020, 384 pp.

**B**aumgartner is a rising star in an emerging generation of historians who focus on the social forces underlying political conflict. Their narratives tend to be less interested in conquering generals than in humble rebels, and their analyses transcend national borders to reveal wider dramas. Baumgartner links the antebellum conflicts between Mexico and Texas—and eventually the United States—to the question of slavery. She reverses the contemporary narrative that assumes U.S. norms and institutions are superior: in the mid-nineteenth century, Mexico was a safe haven for fugitives fleeing oppression, and the Mexican constitution was more consistent in defending universal rights than were U.S. laws. Mexico destabilized the American South when it outlawed slavery in 1829, encouraging runaway slaves to flee southward. New antislavery “free-soil” states in the American Southwest carved out of Mexico after the Mexican-American War threatened southern power in the U.S. Congress. Baumgartner points out that the Texan defenders of the Alamo were at least as intent on protecting their right to own slaves from Mexican abolitionists as they were on safeguarding their own liberty. As ideologies transcended bor-

ders, the great secular, liberal Mexican reformer and eventual president Benito Juárez and U.S. President Abraham Lincoln negotiated an extradition treaty in 1861 that explicitly prohibited the return of fugitive slaves.

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*Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil*  
BY JOHN D. FRENCH. University of North Carolina Press, 2020, 520 pp.

A longtime observer of Brazilian labor organizations, French delivers an immersive and broadly laudatory biography of former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whom U.S. President Barack Obama once hailed as “the most popular politician on earth.” French adroitly traces Lula’s beginnings as an impoverished rural migrant in industrializing São Paulo, where he became a skilled metalworker, and then his evolution into a determined trade union leader, a savvy negotiator, and, ultimately, a powerful orator and dominant politician. Lula is a genuinely self-made man, gregarious and hard-working, at once studious and intuitive. As a politician, he retained his authenticity as the plain-speaking, fearless voice of Brazilian workers seeking upward social mobility. French attributes Lula’s charisma to his embodiment of the collective identity of organized workers. He defines Lula’s cunning as the underdog’s crafty manipulation of social hierarchies. But French notes approvingly that Lula kept his distance from the intellectual Marxist left; a pragmatic Lula sought simply to make capitalism more egalitarian. French mocks the politically motivated post-presidency imprisonment of Lula, and he bemoans the ouster in 2016 of Lula’s

handpicked successor, Dilma Rousseff, by an unscrupulous parliamentary coup organized by the old-line establishment, which paved the way for the presidency of the reactionary Jair Bolsonaro.

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*Legacies of the Left Turn in Latin America: The Promise of Inclusive Citizenship*

EDITED BY MANUEL BALÁN AND FRANÇOISE MONTAMBEAULT.  
University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, 472 pp.

*Indigenous Revolution in Ecuador and Bolivia, 1990–2005*

BY JEFFERY M. PAIGE. University of Arizona Press, 2020, 352 pp.

Two books examine the recent history of movements for social change in Latin America. From the late 1990s until around 2015, voters in Latin America swept social democratic and national populist candidates into government—a trend known as “the pink tide.” More recently, voters in many countries have returned conservatives to power. In Balán and Montambeault’s timely collection, political scientists and sociologists (but no economists) seek to determine the extent to which left-leaning governments met their stated goals of economic redistribution, popular participation, and social inclusion. The record tends, not surprisingly, to be mixed in this increasingly heterogeneous region. The differences in performance between center-right and center-left governments in some areas are less pronounced than their mutual distance from more radical, populist governments (such as those that have ruled Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela). Given the inflated expectations and the many constraints that reformers

faced (powerful vested interests, weak state capacity, and punishing global markets), these governments would seem to have been preordained to disappoint the authors. But the contributors pay insufficient attention to why voters abandoned the left. When the pendulum swings back again (as has already occurred in Bolivia), social reformers will want to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Paige’s noteworthy book gathers original interviews of the key figures who have driven contemporary indigenous social uprisings in the Andes. He struggles mightily to impose some coherence on a wide range of intellectual currents. Some Andean leaders rejected outright almost anything European or Western (notably opposing mining operations for disrupting local communities and hurting the environment). Others articulated vague utopian visions of small-farm collectives or precolonial communal agriculture. More moderate leaders were willing to forge coalitions with mestizos (people of mixed European and indigenous descent) to achieve reformist redistributive gains. Unlike the Shining Path rebels in Peru, the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador overwhelmingly rejected armed struggle in favor of grassroots protests and electoral politics; they advocated not separatism but a plural nationalism that respected both indigenous cultures and local authorities. But the portraits Paige presents reveal the internal intellectual contradictions and confusions that contributed to the eventual collapse of indigenous-backed governments in both countries. Paige sees one possible future synthesis: an indigenous democratic socialism in which ethnicity and culture play as central a role as social class.

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## Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

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*Maria Lipman*

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*Moscow Monumental: Soviet Skyscrapers and Urban Life in Stalin's Capital*

BY KATHERINE ZUBOVICH.

Princeton University Press, 2021, 288 pp.

**A**fter World War II, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered Moscow to be reinvented as “the capital of all capitals.” Zubovich’s fascinating history of skyscrapers in Moscow goes far beyond architectural design and looks at the social and political ramifications of Stalin’s monument building. These structures were conceived as symbols of the Soviet Union’s postwar might and self-confidence. In order to clear sites for the construction of the skyscrapers, authorities resettled tens of thousands of Muscovites in hastily built housing in the city’s barren outskirts. The labor force mobilized to erect the *vysotki* (high-rises) included construction workers from across the Soviet Union, as well as many thousands of prisoners from the gulag. Once completed, the *vysotki* laid bare late-Stalinist social hierarchies: in a city of acute housing shortages, the comfortable apartments in the skyscrapers were reserved exclusively for artistic, academic, and government elites. After Stalin’s death, the *vysotki* became a target of his successor Nikita Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization efforts. The new Soviet leader, who soon launched a nationwide housing program,

harshly criticized Stalin’s monumental building efforts for their disregard for building costs, their complete neglect of the population’s urgent housing needs, and the excessive embellishments of the skyscrapers themselves.

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*Politics for Profit: Business, Elections, and Policymaking in Russia*

BY DAVID SZAKONYI. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 350 pp.

Businesspeople commonly rely on lobbying or making campaign contributions to win favorable policies from governments. But in states with weaker political institutions, politicians tend to renege on their promises. This may drive businesspeople to run for office themselves, despite the high costs required for winning and holding elected offices and the risk of unwanted public attention. Szakonyi’s work of political economy studies Russian businesspeople who seek elected positions in regional legislatures. Only larger and wealthier firms can afford the high costs of winning elections. Competition motivates some businesspeople; if an executive from a firm’s rival runs for office, then that firm must also seek to place its own “in-house lobbyist” in the legislature. Szakonyi identifies the advantages companies gain by participating in local politics: firms connected to winning candidates significantly increase their revenue and profit margins. Not surprisingly, these businesspeople turned legislators pursue pro-business policies that evince little concern for the needs of ordinary citizens, such as health care or education. The author draws on a broad range of data, including numer-

ous interviews with regional business-people. His rigorous scientific methods complement an enjoyable and convincing narrative.

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*The Lenin Plot: The Unknown Story of America's War Against Russia*

BY BARNES CARR. Pegasus Books, 2020, 400 pp.

Soon after the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin made peace with Germany and in so doing turned Russia into an existential enemy of Western powers and a traitor to the World War I anti-German alliance. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States intervened with the intention of overthrowing the Bolshevik government and plotted to kill Lenin and his main associates. Carr's account reads like a thriller—as Western spies conspire with reckless adventurers and professional Russian terrorists—set against the backdrop of a tumultuous period, with Russia racked by civil war, violence, starvation, and epidemics. Leftist radicals assassinated the German ambassador inside his Moscow embassy in 1918, the same year Bolsheviks murdered the tsar's family in the Urals. Lenin survived an attempt on his life, an attack that was probably unrelated to Western plans to kill him. The Western plot came to an end after the Cheka, the Bolshevik security police, infiltrated the ranks of the plotters and arrested many of its members. In 1921, in return for U.S. aid, the Bolshevik government handed over 100 Americans who were involved in this futile bid to snuff out the Soviet Union in its infancy.

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*The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Émigrés, and Agents Abroad*

BY ANDREI SOLDATOV AND IRINA BOROGAN. PublicAffairs, 2019, 384 pp.

The early Soviet government sent its agents abroad to trace and murder Russian political fugitives, including prominent figures of the anti-Bolshevik White movement defeated in the civil war and revolutionaries who fell afoul of the Bolsheviks—most notably Leon Trotsky, who was killed in Mexico City in 1940. But some émigrés served Soviet interests. For instance, many Russian Jews who had fled pogroms in tsarist Russia often sympathized with communist ideas and were easily recruited to become Soviet spies. The authors, both journalists, draw on historical material and their own extensive reporting to show how governments in Moscow from the early Bolsheviks to Russian President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin have treated Russian emigration as both a threat and an opportunity. They chronicle Putin's efforts to build a patriotic diaspora that would advance his government's interests in the West. Political émigrés who engage in anti-Kremlin lobbying abroad, the authors argue, may risk an attack on their lives, similar to the earlier Bolshevik ones. The authors' emphasis on the sinister continuity of the methods used by the Russian secret police may seem a bit overdone, but the poisoning (less than a year after the book's publication) of the Kremlin's most vocal and fearless critic, Alexei Navalny, provides strong backing for their argument.

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## Middle East

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*Lisa Anderson*

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*The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia*

BY MADAWI AL-RASHEED. Hurst, 2020, 416 pp.

**T**his book heralds the emergence of an organized political opposition in the growing Saudi Arabian diaspora. An anthropologist and activist based in London, al-Rasheed sketches a somewhat diffident revisionist history of the creation of Saudi Arabia—the only country in the world named after its ruling family. She offers a far more astringent appraisal, however, of what she calls “apostles and apologists” in the West, those leaders and public figures who have naively seen the potential for reform with the arrival of each new Saudi king. She saves her bitterest critique for the current Saudi government, calling it “one of the most secretive and treacherous regimes in the Arab world” and accusing the country’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, of “relentless repression.” Al-Rasheed’s recounting of the 2018 murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi is familiar, but she places it in a novel and intriguing context: his killing by Saudi agents in Istanbul both reflected and further encouraged political activism among new communities of Saudi exiles in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. It’s not yet clear if this disparate collection of Islamists, feminists, democrats, members of disaffected

tribes, and other dissidents will actually find common cause outside the kingdom. But the diaspora’s growth is a story worth following, and al-Rasheed provides a serviceable introduction.

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*Genocide in Libya: Shar, a Hidden Colonial History*

BY ALI ABDULLATIF AHMIDA. Routledge, 2021, 213 pp.

Ahmida, a political scientist, was born and raised in eastern Libya, and he draws on a wealth of sources for this examination of the extraordinary history of attempted ethnic cleansing during Italy’s colonial rule of the country, which lasted from 1911 to 1943. He succeeds in revealing a long-observed and gruesome past through the reminiscences of his own elderly relatives, the disciplined excavation of suppressed official archives, the interpretation of long-recited epic poetry, and the creative deployment of comparative histories of genocide, war, and imperialism. The Libyans referred to the traumatic experience of dispossession and detention in Italian concentration camps with the term *shar*, or “evil.” Ahmida evokes the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt in his discussion of the varied facets of this evil, including the great powers’ indifference to Italy’s conduct in Libya and the callous appropriation of this history by the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi. This slim, painful, and at times polemic volume is not for the faint of heart. Ahmida’s account is important, however, and should provoke consequential debates about the long, dark shadow of history in North Africa.



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*Losing the Long Game: The False Promise of Regime Change in the Middle East*

BY PHILIP H. GORDON. St. Martin's Press, 2020, 368 pp.

Gordon, a former White House coordinator for the Middle East, has written a book whose depiction of policymakers' cheerful and carefree ignorance will have his readers wincing at virtually every page. Seven briskly told case studies—including the toppling of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the more recent indecisive opposition to the rule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria—brilliantly illustrate how repeated U.S. attempts at regime change in the Middle East have produced “no case of clear success, some catastrophic failures, and universally high costs and unintended consequences.” He attributes the inability to resist the temptation to meddle in the Middle East to Americans' sunny, extraordinarily naive can-do optimism, and his list of lessons doesn't feature many surprises: yes, clients do typically have their own interests, and regional spoilers do often thwart success. Readers would be well served if, in his future work, Gordon were to train his sights on the equally obtuse relationship the United States has had with its so-called clients in the region, many of whom show up repeatedly as the spoilers in these stories. After all, the U.S. record of backing regimes in the region—such as that in Saudi Arabia—does not seem to have been a rousing success, either.

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*Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality*

BY IAN S. LUSTICK. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 232 pp.

Once a supporter of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lustick now deems that goal a deceptively Solomonic, and often disingenuous, approach to avoiding a “one-state reality.” In a series of connected essays, he examines the forces in Israeli history and politics that have contributed to the failure of the two-state solution, including the long-standing Zionist expectation that defeat would force Arab hands but require no concessions by Israel, a culture of profound mistrust of adversaries shaped by the legacy of the Holocaust, and U.S. indulgence of Israeli anxieties, which encouraged belligerence and discouraged compromise. Lustick argues that a paradigm shift—a change in the conceptual framework that guides policymakers and activists—is necessary, and he puts forward his case concisely, vigorously, and candidly. His argument is compelling: whatever promise it once held, the two-state solution is now dead. But in light of the continuing expansive ambitions of Israeli leadership and the simultaneous decay of vision and dynamism among the Palestinians, it is hard to know what exactly should replace the old paradigm.

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*When Blame Backfires: Syrian Refugees and Citizen Grievances in Jordan and Lebanon*

BY ANNE MARIE BAYLOUNY.

Cornell University Press, 2020, 231 pp.

The plight of refugees from Syria has received much attention since the country descended into civil war in 2011. Although many western Europeans have taken a humanitarian interest in the refugees, their governments have been less keen to accept large inflows of people fleeing the war. As a result, Syria's neighbors Jordan and Lebanon host the highest number of Syrian refugees—and indeed, per capita, they host the most refugees in the world. Both Amman and Beirut have received substantial international aid in support of these refugees; cynics suggest that the refugees serve as yet another source of government rent. Baylouny delves into how ordinary Jordanian and Lebanese citizens perceive the influx, as they face more competition over already scarce water, housing, electricity, and jobs. She provides a revealing and at times counterintuitive portrait of the nuanced ways that locals have responded to the newcomers. Resentment quickly overtook sympathy as the demand on local resources grew. But Jordanian and Lebanese citizens didn't buy government efforts to shirk responsibility and blame the scarcity on the refugees themselves. On the contrary, in both Jordan and Lebanon, protests over the right of citizens to be served effectively by their governments undermined local regional and sectarian identities in favor of a more broadly national collective focused on making demands on the government. This shift may have far-reaching consequences for governments long accustomed to ruling by dividing diverse populations.

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## Asia and Pacific

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*Andrew J. Nathan*

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*How China Loses: The Pushback Against Chinese Global Ambitions*

BY LUKE PATEY. Oxford University Press, 2021, 400 pp.

*The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*

BY JONATHAN E. HILLMAN. Yale University Press, 2020, 304 pp.

China's expanding global influence is spearheaded by what Beijing claims is \$1 trillion worth of investments in roads, railways, cyber-infrastructure, oil fields, mines, and more, in an estimated 1,700 projects in at least 130 countries. Most of the projects are clustered under the imposing strategic vision known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to tie other economies more closely to China's. Pushing in behind the investment beachheads are Chinese diplomats, peacekeepers, security contractors, shopkeepers, media enterprises, training and exchange programs, and many other forms of influence. These valuable books focus on the many forms of resistance that China is encountering as its influence expands. China had to renegotiate the terms of construction contracts when power flipped between rival parties in Argentina, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, among other countries. In Kenya and Malaysia, politicians who signed loan contracts were later prosecuted for corruption. In South Sudan,

weapons China sold to the government found their way into the hands of rebels who attacked Chinese oil installations. Europeans have accused Chinese dealmakers of unfair competition and highhanded diplomacy. African governments complained of listening devices planted in Chinese-donated buildings. Many countries have played China off against rival donors, including India, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Governments elsewhere have griped about the low quality of Chinese construction work and the high debt incurred through contracts with Beijing.

Patey argues that pushback against China stems from the stifling effect of Chinese competition on local businesses and the fear of Chinese leverage over host countries' foreign and defense policies. Hillman emphasizes that big infrastructure projects are hard to build on time and on budget, tend to cause environmental damage, spur local corruption, and often fail to make money. Patey's book is more wide-ranging geographically, whereas Hillman's usefully compares the BRI to historic empires and other countries' development aid programs. Both authors note the lack of coordination among Chinese agencies and firms involved in the BRI, and the failure of these disparate projects scattered around the world to fuse into a cohesive network that links back to China. Still, money talks, and for the time being, no other country offers as much of it as China does. If China learns from its mistakes, it could become what Hillman calls "the most central node in the global flows of goods, data, and people," with the power to set technical

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standards for everything from railways to wireless technology and to export its political values around the world. Patey's view of China's long-term goals is even more expansive: he warns that China seeks to "displace the United States as the world's superpower."

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*The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided*

BY THEODORE JUN YOO. University of California Press, 2020, 360 pp.

Yoo brings both clarity and nuance to the complex, interwoven histories of the two Koreas since 1945. He places individual stories against the backdrop of economic, social, political, business, and cultural trends. As Yoo traces North Korea's path from wartime devastation in the 1950s to industrialization and then to famine, stagnation, and its current diplomatic isolation, he also explores the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's amateur filmmaking, a North Korean-born sumo wrestler who hides his identity to avoid discrimination in Japan, and a North Korean spy successfully masquerading in South Korea as an Arab of Filipino Lebanese descent. The book is especially strong on South Korea, covering not only political and economic developments but also the outflow of children for adoption in the 1950s and 1960s, the sociology of sex workers catering to American troops and Japanese tourists, urban planning, the feminist movement, movies, and fiction. Yoo introduces better-known figures, such as the artist Nam June Paik and the religious leader Sun Myung Moon, as well as lesser-known but equally vivid characters. South

Korea has become the most wired society in the world, Asia's dominant cultural influencer, and surely one of the most stressed-out developed countries, with the most cosmetic surgeries and suicides per capita. Although the main lines of contemporary Korean history are familiar, even specialists will learn a lot from this book.

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*Prisoners of the Empire: Inside Japanese POW Camps*

BY SARAH KOVNER. Harvard University Press, 2020, 336 pp.

This innovative study of Japanese prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Singapore during World War II explores how they were administered and what the prisoners experienced. Many prisoners were transported thousands of miles in crowded ships to work in construction, factories, and mines. The horror stories about camp conditions, forced labor, soaring death rates, and "hell ships" are painful to read. But Kovner attributes these gruesome events not to some inherent inhumanity in Japanese culture (a stereotype that remains influential) but to Japan's lack of material resources and administrative capacity as it struggled to defend a vast new empire. Japanese administrators often tried to apply the provisions of the 1929 Geneva Convention regarding POWs to Americans, Australians, and Europeans, although they did not consider Asian captives to be protected by POW status. Kovner's vivid, detailed inquiry throws light on a host of subjects, including the racial and gender attitudes of the many cultures that encountered one another in wartime Asia.

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*Anti-Christian Violence in India*

BY CHAD M. BAUMAN. Cornell University Press, 2020, 320 pp.

Bauman enters deeply into the thinking of Hindu nationalists to show that their acts of violence against Christians are motivated not by disputes over doctrine but by an even more basic clash over the role of religion. In the eyes of Hindu nationalists, Hinduism is not a universal creed but a particularistic identity and way of life. They see Christians as the bearers of a foreign, individualistic culture who seek to undermine Indian identity by converting nonbelievers to their faith. Bauman acknowledges that material and political interests also help motivate the violence. For example, most Christian converts are Dalits who are looking for a way out of their disadvantaged status in the caste system. But a major driver of the violence is the scapegoating of Christians for the damage that globalization is doing to traditional values. One wishes that Bauman had considered whether his analysis could also help explain anti-Muslim violence in India and anti-Christian violence in other parts of the world.

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*China Goes Green: Coercive**Environmentalism for a Troubled Planet*  
BY YIFEI LI AND JUDITH SHAPIRO. Polity, 2020, 240 pp.

It is tempting to hold out China's environmental record as a reason for optimism. The country is expanding its use of renewable energy, creating state parks, planting massive numbers of trees, and curbing the global trade in endangered species. But Li and Shapiro

ring some alarm bells. The government pursues its environmental goals with the authoritarian tools it has available: mandatory targets, mass campaigns, top-down bans, factory closures, forced relocations, and even household trash inspectors who can ticket offenders. These efforts sometimes produce counterproductive results, such as desertification and ecosystem disruption. China's overseas projects often damage the environment as well. The authors argue that coercive enforcement makes the system even more authoritarian than it already is, stifling the cooperation with civil society that alone can make environmentalism effective. But they acknowledge that so far, Western capitalist systems are not doing any better.

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*Mao Zedong: A Biography*. Vol. 1, 1893–1949

EDITED BY PANG XIANZHI AND JIN CHONGJI. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 1,018 pp.

One wonders why a prestigious university press decided to publish a three-volume work on the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong by official Chinese historians. The respected scholar Timothy Cheek validates the project in reserved terms in his thoughtful introduction, acknowledging, "For most scholars, Jin Chongji's unrelentingly positive assessment of Mao is unlikely to convince." By tracing Mao's movements in numbing detail up to the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, this first volume does provide many fresh facts from China's closed archives, as Cheek says. And for what it's worth, it faithfully reflects the current official Chi-

nese interpretation of Mao's life, which no longer treats him as a god but does not delve into his humanity. Episodes of factional strife are described as Mao's patient, infallible rectification of internal discord. The violence against critics between 1942 and 1945, during the Yan'an period, is attributed not to Mao but to Kang Sheng, the chief of Mao's secret police. Mao's complex love-hate relationship with Stalin fades into rote formality. Mao's affair with his eventual fourth wife, Jiang Qing, merits a mere three sentences. Only specialists will have the patience to pan for the specks of gold that this first volume contains, and they might as well consult the Chinese edition.

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## Africa

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*Nicolas van de Walle*

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*Idi Amin: The Story of Africa's Icon of Evil*  
BY MARK LEOPOLD. Yale University Press, 2021, 368 pp.

**T**his biography of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin sifts through the many myths and fictitious claims that have long shaped public understanding of his early life and his later rule as president of Uganda from 1971 to 1979. In so doing, it reaches a more nuanced assessment of the man than previously available. Born around 1925 in Koboko, in the northwestern hinterlands of British-controlled Uganda, Amin rose through the ranks of the British colonial army despite possessing only a rudimentary formal

education. He proved adept enough at navigating complex ethnic politics to end up as head of the Ugandan army in 1965, just three years after the country won its independence from the United Kingdom. When his alliance with President Milton Obote soured, he orchestrated a coup. Amin's rule saw significant political repression and the ruthless assassination of political opponents, as well as disastrous economic policies and erratic swings in international diplomacy that would lead the United Kingdom and the United States to terminate diplomatic relations with Uganda. Amin was deposed following the mutiny of his army and a Tanzanian invasion. Leopold's narrative is sometimes repetitive but well informed and suitably skeptical of the entirely monstrous image that has long surrounded the dictator. After all, Leopold points out, the dour Obote, who is today mostly unknown in the West, would return to power in 1980 and be responsible for even greater political repression and more civilian deaths.

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*Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes*  
BY ANNE MENG. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 256 pp.

Some authoritarian regimes are personalistic, organized around a single dictator and with few strong formal checks on executive power. Others are institutional: power is embedded in a set of institutions that makes the executive accountable to other top political elites. In this innovative and informative book, Meng asks why some regimes manage to become more

institutionalized and how this shift affects their political stability. She defines institutions as political procedures and rules that explicitly limit executive authority and give at least some power to other figures within the regime. Such procedures include term limits, succession rules, and influential offices such as the vice presidency. Meng draws on data from 46 countries in Africa to show that, counterintuitively, authoritarian regimes in which the ruler's power is constrained by institutions in fact last longer and that those rulers are more likely to die a natural death (rather than at the hands of a political rival). By contrast, the regimes of less constrained dictators rarely survive them, plunging their countries back into instability.

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*Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*

BY LINA BENABDALLAH. University of Michigan Press, 2020, 204 pp.

Benabdallah argues that Chinese policy toward Africa reveals a new approach to international relations that emphasizes the construction of social networks and knowledge production as means to build close bilateral ties. She provides impressive evidence of the multiple ways China has developed these networks, including through thousands of workshops for Africans in China and a large number of high-level visits by Chinese officials to the African continent. Readers will no doubt be skeptical of the book's contention that China's diplomatic outreach is truly novel, but they will be intrigued by the numerous examples of

Chinese efforts to forge complex networks of influence throughout the region to advance Beijing's own version of soft power, including through the establishment of Confucius Institutes at universities across Africa. Benabdallah also provides a useful corrective to the common tendency in the West to view Chinese diplomacy in Africa exclusively through the prism of commercial ambitions and natural resource extraction.

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*Digital Entrepreneurship in Africa: How a Continent Is Escaping Silicon Valley's Long Shadow*

BY NICOLAS FRIEDERICI, MICHEL WAHOME, AND MARK GRAHAM. MIT Press, 2020, 336 pp.

This comprehensive and carefully argued review of digital entrepreneurship in Africa provides an eye-opening assessment of the possibilities for and limits of this sector's future in the region. Based on interviews with some 143 Internet entrepreneurs and careful case-study work in 11 African cities in as many countries, the book suggests that African countries are a long way away from playing a major role in digital technology. As the authors point out, Africa's share of the world's population is about 13 percent, and the continent has about eight percent of the world's Internet users, but it still accounts for only 0.7 percent of domain registrations and is actually further behind in digital production than in more traditional forms of knowledge production. Moreover, just three countries (Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa) provide most of the continent's digital entrepreneurship. The book

underscores the fact that although the digital revolution has benefited some African firms, investment and market opportunities remain limited by long-standing constraints and economic realities, such as tiny and poor local markets. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the firms they examine have succeeded not by attempting to compete in the global digital marketplace but by adapting international technologies to local realities.

science and instability, although they also claim that that identity is performative, shaped by how the Toubous interpret and act on the reputation they think they have in the outside world. The authors additionally contend that the central state's long-standing inability to exercise power and control over Toubou territory stems in large part from the Toubous' view that the government has no legitimacy. 🌐

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*The Value of Disorder: Autonomy, Prosperity, and Plunder in the Chadian Sahara*

BY JULIEN BRACHET AND JUDITH STEELE. Cambridge University Press, 2019, 371 pp.

Faya-Largeau is an oasis town in northern Chad of maybe 25,000 inhabitants, around 700 miles from the capital, N'Djamena. But it has played an outside role in the country's turbulent past. It was the site of repeated fighting between Chad and Libya from 1975 to 1987, and the last three presidents of the country have all had familial links to either the town or its dominant ethnic group, the Toubous. Brachet and Steele spent a year in Faya-Largeau and have produced a careful ethnography of its people. Northern Chad is both desperately poor and an area of long-standing commerce, as well as banditry and violence. The authors argue that Toubou identity has been shaped by this context of tran-

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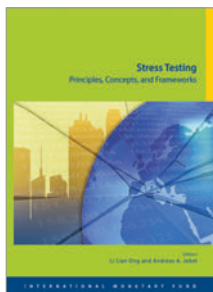
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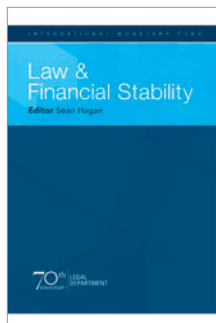
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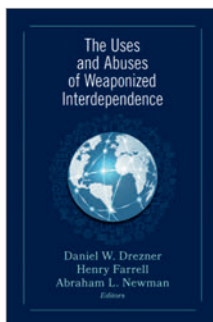
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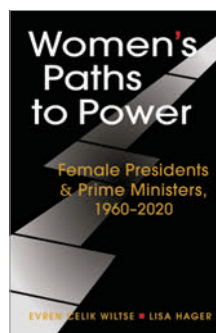
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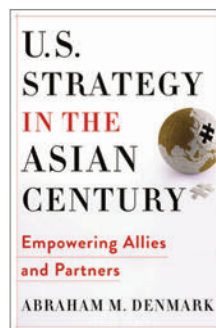
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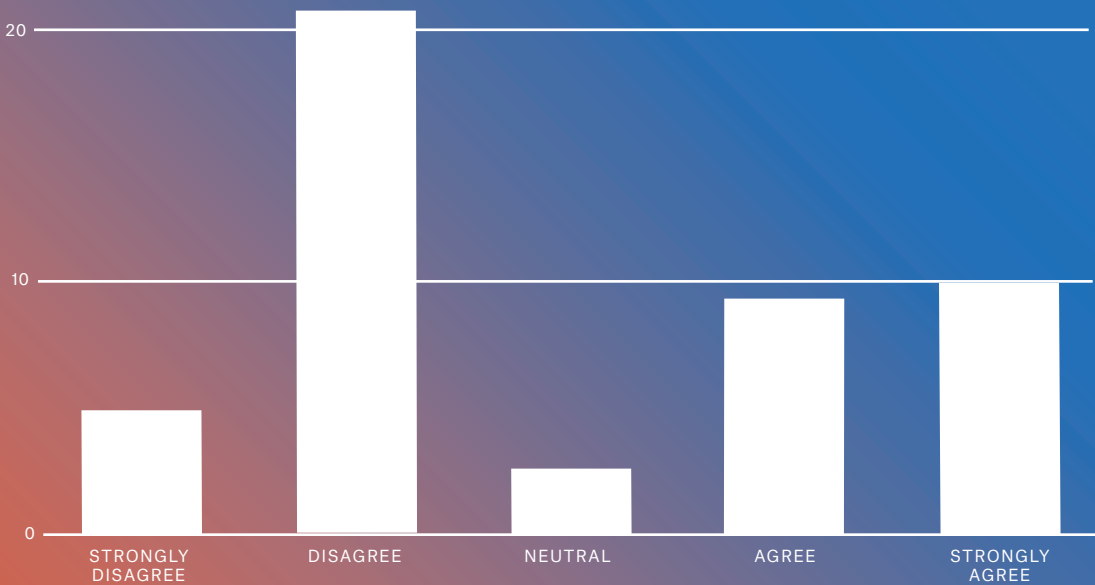
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## *Foreign Affairs* Brain Trust

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**DISAGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 8**

### Lois Quam

CEO and President, Pathfinder International

“The world should build on CEPI (the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations) and the World Health Organization, as well as Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance. Central to a more effective global system is providing better tools to women, who are the central health-care givers at the household and the community level. Our effort should be placed on this rather than on creating a new institution.”



**STRONGLY AGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 10**

### Tom Frieden

Senior Fellow for Global Health, Council on Foreign Relations

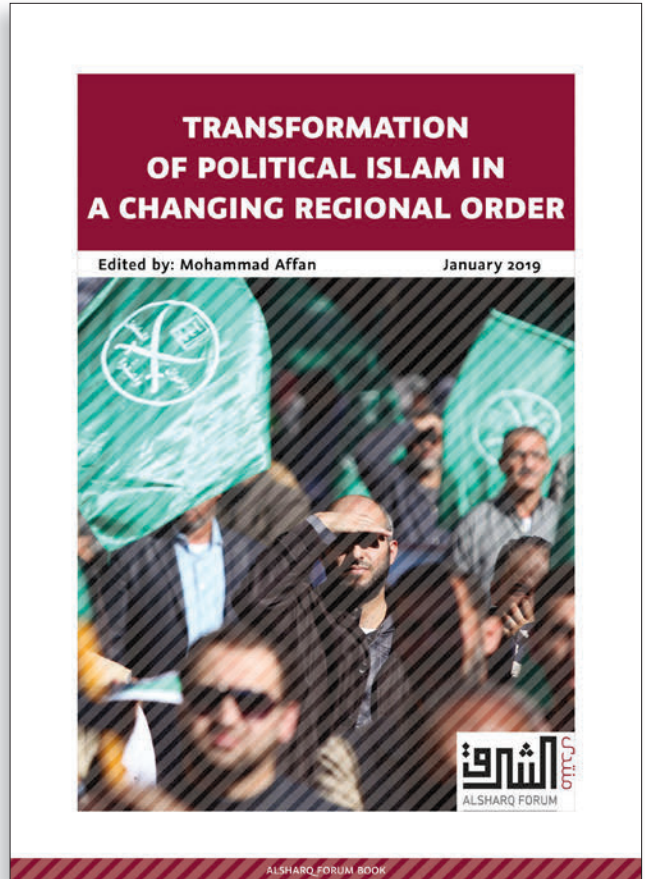
“Although the WHO is necessary for improved global preparedness, it is not sufficient. Substantial resources (as much as \$10 billion a year), technical assistance, and operational support will be needed for at least a decade. It is inevitable that there will be another global health emergency. What’s not inevitable is that we will continue to be so woefully underprepared.”

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