

This Too Shall Pass

Remarks to the Camden Conference on The New World Disorder and America's Future

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The United States declared its independence two hundred and forty-two years ago. We did so on a planet in which China was one-third of the world economy but geopolitics were dominated by Britain, the world's greatest naval power, and France, which had the finest army and the most brilliant culture on the Eurasian landmass. After a struggle, in which our war for independence played a role, Britain emerged as the global superpower. As a well-known [map](#) shows, it is easier to depict the countries Britain did not invade¹ than to identify those it did.

After 1815, the rules of the world order were written in English. The United States prospered in the British-led international system. By about 1875, we had become the world's largest economy.

In the early 20th century, the United States began to displace Britain's global dominion. Initially reluctant to lead, Americans' belated but successful engagement in World War II made us the dominant power in every corner of the globe other than those within the Soviet empire. Our Establishment rose to the challenge. Since 1945, the world has been regulated by norms, obligations, and conventions mostly made in the USA. As the Cold War unfolded, American diplomacy became a form of imperial administration, designed to secure the frontiers of our sphere of influence and keep order within what we called "the free world."

U.S. allies, partners, and client states relied on the United States to provide the bulk of their collective defense against Soviet predation. We supplied security, regime support, and reconstruction and development aid. In return, they tolerated the "exorbitant privilege" of dollar

¹ Andorra, Belarus, Bolivia, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Republic of, Guatemala, Ivory Coast, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Mali, Marshall Islands, Monaco, Mongolia, Paraguay, Sao Tome and Principe, Sweden, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Vatican City.

supremacy and let Americans exempt ourselves from the rules we insisted on applying to them and everyone else.

In foreign lands, the United States preached that “all men are created equal.” At home, we practiced racial segregation. Abroad, we declined to ratify multilateral treaties we had proposed even as we held others to the standards in these treaties. Americans demanded international courts but made ourselves immune from their jurisdiction. We ignored and fell far short of the targets for development aid we ourselves had proclaimed.

Since 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded and the Cold War ended, the United States has continued to expect the same deference and exemptions from the standards we apply to other countries as before. American military power remains uniquely formidable. The U.S. military bestrides the globe. But American power no longer serves to defend allies, partners, and friends against a common enemy on behalf of jointly defined interests.

In the 21st century, the U.S. armed forces turned to unilateral American agendas. Washington replaced its previous emphasis on supporting cooperative regimes – regardless of their character or ideology – with a fixation on regime change in the name of democratization and other ideologically or special interest-driven causes. Americans greatly reduced our development assistance. We turned our energies to the maintenance of our global military primacy, while cutting our investment in all other aspects of foreign affairs.

For more than two centuries, American exceptionalism had appealed to the angels of humanity’s better nature. But, as the 21st century advanced, foreigners began to see American claims to political privilege and demands for legal immunity as instances of assertive irresponsibility. The result is steadily reduced foreign support for the hegemonic privileges and double standards to which Americans had come to feel entitled. Today, the American conviction that other countries should be grateful to us and supportive of our continuing global primacy clashes with the preference of every other great power for a multipolar world order in which there is no single world policeman.

We Americans can and should be proud of what we accomplished when we led the world. Our leadership institutionalized international norms that helped expand human liberty, foster unity to

deter aggression, deal with the causes and consequences of conflict, retard the spread of nuclear weapons, and share the burdens of doing all this among like-minded nations. American initiatives created institutions that enabled the world to harmonize the rules governing international transactions, lower barriers to trade and investment, promote economic growth and efficiency, lift billions of people out of poverty, improve corporate governance, facilitate the peaceful resolution of commercial disputes, and respond to systemic shocks that threatened global prosperity. We will not be alone in missing these fruits of the Pax Americana.

In February 2018, given the thirteen-month-long festival of unintended consequences that is the Trump administration, few still see the challenge to global order as managing the consequences of the steady expansion of other nations' power in relation to the United States. The world is now concerned to mitigate and offset the knock-on effects of the rapid contraction of American global influence. The 20th century was rightly called "the American century." The United States has turned its back on it and is in a messy transition to something else.

As the Canadian-American band, Buffalo Springfield, put it at another troubled moment of transition, in 1966:

"There's something happening here.

"What it is ain't exactly clear.

"There's a man with a gun over there,

"tellin' me I got to beware.

"It's time we stop. Hey, what's that sound?

"Everybody look what's going down."

Now, as American global dominion recedes into history, we can begin to see some elements of what is to come. If the 20th century was America's, the 21st will be nobody's. We are witnessing a return to a world based on regional, not global, balances of power. "America First" invites "China first," "India first," "Japan first," "Pakistan first," "Russia first." Maybe "Europe first," if there is a Europe. Great power rivalries are back, some of them between nations with nuclear weapons. None wants to shoulder the burdens of global hegemony on the American model. None seeks to impose its own model on the world. But all are arming to preserve their sovereignty, often against the perceived threat of American attempts at regime change.

War is back as an accepted means of adjusting the policies, borders, and international alignments of nations. Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria have been thrust into anarchy by foreign intervention. Israel is swallowing all of Palestine. Serbia has lost Kosovo; Ukraine has lost the Crimea. A Saudi-led Arab coalition is devastating Yemen. International law has been reduced to an instrument of accusatory diatribe. It no longer regulates national behavior.

The reversion to the lawlessness of the premodern era is now well advanced. The armed forces of the United States are directly or indirectly engaged in combat with Muslim militants in seventy-six countries,² often without regard for their sovereignty. Nations like China, India, Russia, and Turkey are joining Americans and the ex-imperial powers of Europe in establishing bases abroad from which they can project their military power to regions remote from them. Once quiescent client states – like Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.A.E. – are on their own warpaths, without regard to the policies of their American patrons or once-respected principles of international law. The new world disorder is one in which all fights are local, might commonly makes right, refugees are plentiful, and American charitable responses to human misery are newly wanting.

Meanwhile, the central institutions of transnational cooperation – like the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization – are atrophying under the impact of American disinterest, disengagement, and disinvestment. As Washington's abdication of its previous role in global governance has become ever more obvious, China and others have begun to create organizations to complement and parallel those Americans set up after World War II. Thus were born the "BRICS bank," the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and a host of special funds directed at supporting connectivity on the Eurasian landmass under China's "Belt and Road Initiative."

The continuing U.S. retreat from forming, leading, or supporting multilateral structures and arrangements is taking a toll on American prestige and abetting stagnation in legacy institutions. It invites their replacement or sidelining by groupings from which the United States is absent. And, as we all know, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

The so-called “liberal rule-bound international order” is not dying, as some claim. It is evolving through a process that is not being managed or led by the United States or any other Western power. Influence within the current international state system is proportional to the investment, effort, and input made by its members, not the past credentials or status of any single nation or grouping of nations. Increasingly, the crucial investments, efforts, and inputs come from China, India, and other rising powers outside the North Atlantic region.

This is a break from the pattern of the last five centuries, in which various Western nations, including, latterly, the United States, ran things pretty much everywhere. It raises the question of how much of the old order will be incorporated into the international state system of the future. For, like all instances of entropy in human affairs, the current world disorder will, in due course, yield to organization. Who organizes the new system and how great a role Americans have in doing so will depend in part on the quality of our vision, statecraft, and diplomatic engagement. We can command our fate, if we put our minds, skills, money, and other resources to shaping it.

The United States has not lost our natural endowment, which remains unmatched. We still have everything it takes to shape the world to our advantage. We are remarkably diverse. As Herman Melville observed, “if you kill an American, you shed the blood of the whole world.” Our universities are widely considered the world’s best. We have a heritage of freedom and a record of resilience and invention. We are again the world’s greatest producer of energy. Americans make up at most 1/24 of the world’s people but possess about 1/8 of its cropland and water supplies. To our East and West, we are sheltered by two great oceans. Until recently, we enjoyed untroubled relationships with our neighbors to the North and South, who saw no reason to consider turning against us. We have been able to call on allies everywhere to add their strength to ours in pursuit of common objectives.

But, on every level other than the promiscuous use of force, we are now underperforming. One wag has suggested that, in some admittedly superficial ways, we have come to resemble Haiti in the 1920s. We have a populist president surrounded by plutocrats and our country is run by the U.S. Marines. We do not deserve the boorish epithet our president recently applied to Haiti any more than it does. But, sadly, we are no longer a society that others seek to emulate. We are in the midst of an American version of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution -- the Great Plutocratic Cultural Reaction.

²<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers>

The 21st century has subverted our republic and corroded our democracy. The shock and awe of 9/11 panicked us into curtailing American liberties in the name of preserving them. The Congress supinely surrendered to the president its constitutionally exclusive power to authorize wars of choice. Successive presidents have launched an unending series of military campaigns under the heading of the “global war on terrorism.” They have financed – and continue to finance – these consistently unsuccessful interventions through what amount to credit rollovers. This practice has eroded the general welfare. The uncontrolled expansion of public debt threatens an ultimate systemic collapse of the American economy and the society it sustains.

We look to everyone else to deal with the refugees our botched military interventions have displaced. Then we disparage those who respond for their foolish generosity. Few Americans realize that, over the past quarter century, the United States has been responsible, directly or indirectly, for the premature deaths of some four million Muslims. This is a major reason for the metastasis of anti-American terrorism with global reach. Blowback from the havoc we are imposing abroad now disturbs our domestic tranquility. This has led to the serious further impairment of due process and civil liberty in the United States and elsewhere.

We Americans now seem to be entering one of our periodic “Red Scares,” recalling the xenophobia and hysteria of the Palmer raids of 1919 - 1920 and the McCarthy era of 1947 - 1957. As a nation, we are in a whiny, belligerent frame of mind. We blame Russia for the way we vote. We are working ourselves into a frenzy of machismo about China. We blame everybody but ourselves for the mess in the Middle East, for our trade and balance of payments deficits, and for the de-industrialization of our job market.

We are dismissive of expertise, especially that of economists, the majority of whom tell us that our problems derive from our pathetically inadequate national savings rate, our disinvestment in our human and physical infrastructure, a dysfunctional relationship between labor and management that favors outsourcing to countries with cheap labor as a reaction to competition, shortcomings in the way we retrain and find employment for workers displaced by automation, rising income inequality, irrational immigration policies, the rake-offs and misdirection of investment by a tax code designed to nurture and protect vested interests, and gridlocked government. It’s far easier to blame foreigners in China, Mexico, Canada, Germany, Korea, or

Japan for our underachievement than to examine and change our own policies and practices.

But successful foreigners are not the ones with the savings, trade, and investment shortfalls. We are. Insisting that foreigners do things our way might infect them with our problems. It will not fix those problems. Nor will declaring China or others “adversaries,” and hence active candidates to become enemies in future wars make us safer. “Taking names” is no substitute for cogent and persuasive argumentation on international issues on which we have become isolated. The answer to Chinese mercantilism, protectionism, and techno-nationalism cannot be a petty-minded American obsession with bilateral trade balances, beggar-thy-neighbor economic nationalism, or xenophobic investment controls. We Americans need to pull up our socks and show that we can compete on our own terms. And what are those terms?

As part of preparing ourselves for the future, we must decide what elements of the so-called “liberal rule-bound international order” we consider it worth making a serious effort to restore or perpetuate. What instruments of statecraft might enable us to make these principles and practices part of the future as well as the past? How should we comport ourselves to accomplish this? What must we be prepared to propose and oppose?

The most precious elements of the world we are exiting were its predictability, the sense of personal and collective safety this supported, and the openings for the realization of individual and societal potential that this afforded. The international state system promoted comity -- respect by one country for the sovereignty, laws, judicial decisions, and institutions of others -- as well as cooperation between states. It was risk averse. It applied a facsimile of the rule of law to its international participants. Even those who, like the Chinese and Russians, came late to the rule-bound order American leadership had built, prospered in it and saw their opportunities for the pursuit of happiness expand.

This was the result of an array of rules that set standards for acceptable international behavior. In ancient times, it was said that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” The evolution of international law that we Americans led in the 20th century offered reassurance of protection to the weak as well as a warning to the strong. It helped damp down arms races and limit the risk of aggression by larger states against their smaller neighbors. As the post-Cold War era began, Iraq attempted to annex its smaller neighbor, Kuwait. Under U.S.

leadership, the international community rallied to Kuwait's defense. It did so as a matter of principle as well as strategic interest.

The United States now routinely denounces others for not observing rules we ourselves no longer obey. This is weakening constraints on the coercive behavior of states. The precedents we have set through our use of assassination, drones, cyber warfare, overt encouragement of insurrection in other countries, and the imposition of unilateral controls on trade and investment are encouraging other states to pursue their interests without regard to the rules we once championed. This is not in our interest, and not just because others, once they can, are likely to feel justified doing to us what we are doing to them. We cannot be sure that we will always have the upper hand in all circumstances. Properly understood, the golden rule is a security measure not to be lightly cast aside.

The rule of law is Euro-American civilization's greatest contribution to world affairs. Its value is widely appreciated outside the Atlantic region but, in a world in which other traditions and values are growing in influence, its survival is not assured. Can societies that do not practice the rule of law at home really feel bound by it abroad?

The notion of a rule-bound international order will surely not endure, still less prosper, if the United States and Europe are not united in supporting it. But for Europeans and others, Guantánamo symbolizes contemporary American contempt for due process and international law. The West will remain divided as long as the United States persists in our unilateral suspensions of the rules governing prisoners of war, kidnapping, interrogation through torture, and detention without charge, not to mention disregard for the legality of wars of choice under both the United States constitution and international law. American reaffirmation of the traditional values of Western civilization is both essential and urgent. Absent appropriate engagement, other values may well displace ours.

Consider China's "Belt and Road Initiative" in this context. China has put forward a grand strategy to apply its economic-commercial, financial, and diplomatic power to transform all of the Eurasian landmass into a single geoeconomic zone. This will involve trillions of dollars in investment in roads, railroads, pipelines, fiber-optic cables, ports, airports, and industrial estates from the Azores to the Bering Strait and from Archangelsk to Colombo. It entails agreements on

free trade, customs clearance, transport standards, and other harmonizations of law and regulations between sixty-five countries. China is setting up specialized courts to apply the standards embodied in these agreements to the resolution of commercial disputes in the new, Eurasian geoeconomic zone.

What law – what rules – will these courts apply? We are talking about an area that embraces about two-thirds of the world's population and already accounts for two-fifths of its GDP. That's enough to determine much of the future world order. Will the United States be a participant or a bystander as this order is forged? Will we or will we not work with Europe and others to ensure that the legacy of Atlantic civilization is consolidated in Eurasia as it reforms, opens up, and peacefully develops into a single great region?

This brings me to a delicate point: an intelligence establishment that tells our leaders what they want to hear is worse than none at all. It enables delusional reasoning that misdirects policy planning to deal with the very real challenges our country faces. The American body politic has a bad habit of projecting our ambitions and fears onto others rather than seeing them as they are. This can lead to premature and counterproductive uses of force. Consider the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, with its confident but bogus assertions about weapons of mass destruction, al Qaeda, and the inadequacy of intrusive UN inspections, as well as its attribution to Iraq's neighbors of a sense of threat from it they did not feel. Consider the politicians who still ceaselessly rant about Iranian nuclear weapons programs while every professional intelligence agency says these do not yet exist. "Fake news" now creates as well as repeats fake intelligence. The world is suffering from hypocrisy fatigue.

Our bloated defense budget has ceased to be a response to any realistic challenge to the United States or its interests. It is a jobs program in which more is always better and justifications for spending inflate to absorb the funds available. Contrary to political rhetoric, our military is not undernourished. But every civilian element of our government is experiencing politicization and deprofessionalization. The deterioration in our foreign affairs capabilities stands out for its severity.

We are in a period of transition to some sort of new world order. We can influence what it is, or just accept what comes. Bravado backed by whiz-bang weaponry and an empty wallet will not

shape events to our advantage. There are no military solutions to most of the challenges we face. But we are creating conditions in which diplomatic incompetence makes it ever more likely that we will have to put our military in play. We will have failed to explore, let alone exhaust, the diplomatic alternatives to doing so.

The “old days’ were not as wonderful as we would like to believe. But, with the right leadership and effort on our part, the days to come need not be as bad as we now imagine. It is up to us to provide that leadership and mount that effort.

I believe that thinking Americans know what must be done. Raise the national savings rate. Boost investment in human and physical infrastructure. Elevate educational standards and revamp vocational training. Unclog and remarketize investment decisions by simplifying federal taxes and state and local regulations. Reform labor-management relations to incentivize raising productivity and retraining redundant employees as an alternative to firing them and outsourcing their work to foreigners. Study and adopt foreign best practices, including for medical insurance and services. Sharpen our wits, ramp up our game, and strive for excellence in statecraft and diplomacy as an alternative to counterproductive efforts at military coercion of our rivals as well as our allies, partners, and friends.

Somewhere in the cold, dark of Maine in this season or elsewhere in our vast country, there is someone who sees what we need and can lead us to do it. Americans await this leadership. We know it is out there. It is sorely needed. It is what is required to make America great again. And that is an objective we all share.

“It's time we stop. Hey, what's that sound?”

“Everybody look what's going down.”