

JUNE 5, 2018 | NUMBER 843

A World Imagined

Nostalgia and Liberal Order

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent political tumult and the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency have driven anxious commentators to lament the collapse of a post-1945 “liberal world order.” Nostalgic for the institution building and multilateral moment of the early postwar era, they counsel Washington to restore a battered tradition, uphold economic and security commitments, and promote liberal values. On closer inspection, while it is true that the postwar world was more prosperous and peaceful than what came before, the claim that a unitary “liberal order” prevailed and defined international relations is both ahistorical and harmful. It is ahistorical because it is blind to the process of “ordering” the world and erases the memory of violence, coercion, and compromise that also marked postwar diplomatic history. It loses sight of the realities and limits of the exercise of power abroad,

the multiplicity of orders that arose, and the conflicted and contradictory nature of liberalism itself. While liberalism and liberal projects existed, such “order” as existed rested on the imperial prerogatives of a superpower that attempted to impose order by stepping outside rules and accommodating illiberal forces. “Liberal order” also conflates intentions and outcomes: some of the most doctrinaire liberal projects produced illiberal results. This nostalgia is harmful because framing the world before Trump in absolute moral terms as a “liberal order” makes it harder to consider measures that are needed to adapt to change: the retrenchment of security commitments, the redistribution of burdens among allies, prudent war-avoidance, and the limitation of foreign policy ambitions. It also impedes the United States from performing an increasingly important task: to reappraise its grand strategy in order to bring its power and commitments into balance.

“The exaggerated notion of the ‘liberal order’ and its imminent collapse is a myth of the foreign policy establishment and leads America to overstretch.”

INTRODUCTION

According to a view popular in Washington, D.C., and other capitals around the world, the United States used its power and idealism for more than 70 years to create a security and economic order that transformed the world. This world order was liberal because the United States was liberal. “Liberal” in this context means the pursuit of security both through the spread of liberty, in the form of free markets and democratic constitutions, and the rule of law, in the form of rule-based international institutions. Today, defenders of that order fear that President Trump and a set of regressive forces are laying waste to it. They claim the consequences are grave: we are witnessing the “end of the West as we know it,”¹ the abandonment of “global leadership” by its “long-time champion,”² and a “coming Dark Age.”³ *Foreign Affairs*, the house organ of the foreign policy establishment, recently asked 32 experts whether the “liberal order is in peril.” Most agreed it is, with 26 respondents registering a confidence level of 7 out of 10.⁴ Alarmed by the political tumult of our time, nostalgists recall the post-1945 moment of institution building and benign internationalism and call for its reclamation.

They are, however, in the grip of a fiction. Liberalism and liberal projects abounded in the past 70 years. But the dream of a unitary, integrated global system organized around liberalism is ahistorical. In truth, the pre-Trump world was a more brutal and messy place than the nostalgia allows. To be sure, there was liberalism, and it did help define postwar international relations. Broadly speaking, the post-1945 period was, on many measures, more prosperous, less violent, and more collaborative than what came before. One defect of “liberal order” nostalgia is that it exaggerates these qualities and simply leaves out too many contrary historical realities. Other critics have already noted the gap between nostalgia and history and that the postwar world was never “whole.” At times the liberal order was neither very liberal nor very orderly. There may be “islands of liberal order,

but they are floating in a sea of something quite different.”⁵

Not only do nostalgists get the history wrong, they fail to confront what “world ordering” actually entails. The main critique in this paper is that the fetish for “liberal order” has obscured what is involved in the process of “ordering”—or attempting to order—the globe. The United States, as the leading actor in the orthodox narrative, emerges as a power that created order through a benign internationalist vision, consensus building, and institution creating. But the successes and failures of that order also flowed from coercion, compromise, and rougher power politics. As the ordering superpower, the United States did not bind itself with the rules of the system. It upended, stretched, or broke liberal rules to shape a putatively liberal order. Appeals to the myth of a liberal Camelot flow from a deeper myth, of power politics without coercion and empire without imperialism.

This fuller narrative is also a story of tragic limits. The world was not so easily subjugated. Efforts to spread liberalism often contained the seeds of illiberalism. Multiple orders collided and met the limits of their reach and power. Efforts to create a liberal order ended up accommodating illiberalism. Liberalism itself proved to be a conflicted thing. At times, projects to advance it had unexpected results. As it happens, the pursuit of “liberal order” is not just an antidote to the current difficulties suffered by the international system but a source of them.

Ideas about “order” matter and have weighty policy implications. Just as material power enables or forecloses certain choices, ideas condition and constrain a country’s grand strategic decisions. Those who lament the fall of the “liberal order” are saying, in effect, that some ideas are illegitimate and should be off the table. They worry that “populism” and “isolationism” endanger traditional ideas that were once dominant, leading America to abandon its manifold commitments overseas, in turn driving the world into disorder. When they call for the reclamation of the old order, they also call for the

perpetuation of American primacy. By contrast, this paper argues that the exaggerated notion of the “liberal order” and its imminent collapse is a myth of the foreign policy establishment and leads America to overstretch.

This analysis is divided into three parts. First, I examine the lamentations for a lost world, unpacking what such lamentations claim about how the world “was” before its dissolution allegedly began. Liberal order nostalgia performs two functions: by denying the violent coercion, resistance, and unintended consequences of “world ordering,” it sanitizes history into a morality tale and delegitimizes arguments for revision and retrenchment. The lamentations also give an alibi to American primacy, attributing its demise to forces external to it. By reducing the issue to one of inadequate political will, and by blaming either elites or the public at large for failing to keep the faith, “liberal order” lamentations dodge the painful question of how such an excellent order could produce unsustainable burdens, alienate its own citizenry, and provoke resistance.

In the second section, I demonstrate that “liberal order” rhetoric is ahistorical and therefore largely mythical. The claim that a single, internally consistent, and consensual order predominated for more than 70 years, with liberal projects producing liberal results, fares poorly when compared with the major patterns of international relations from 1945, in the spheres of both security and commerce. Conversely, the claim that American statecraft is now being turned upside down is hyperbolic, and blind to the quiet victories that orthodox U.S. grand strategy is winning under the Trump presidency.

Lastly, I argue that “world order” nostalgia is harmful. There is a prudent case for retrenchment, and a diplomacy of deterrence, power sharing, and accommodation, through which the United States could pursue security in a multipolar world. For an overstretched superpower to address the imbalance of power and commitments, it will have to look beyond ritual incantations.

THE CLAIM: THE LIBERAL ORDER IS UNDER ASSAULT

The prospect of major change in the international system is attracting a new wave of literature about “world order.” Recent crises and political revolts have prompted security experts on both sides of the Atlantic to announce the coming of end times. The rise of pernicious “isms”—economic protectionism, authoritarian nationalism, political tribalism, superpower unilateralism—has triggered these fears, along with the gauntlets being thrown down by revisionist powers threatening U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf, Eastern Europe, and Asia. In the United States, the focal point of this eschatology is the presidency of Donald Trump. After the election of an erratic, coarse demagogue to the nation’s highest office in November 2016, security experts lamented the passing of a postwar structure that civilized international life, presided over by a benign American hegemon.

What is being threatened? The objects of anxiety are a “liberal world order,” which allegedly held sway for 70 years, and even the end of “the West” itself. The life of this order is normally periodized from the end of World War II in 1945 to the recent past. As the storyline goes, the United States as benevolent hegemon designed and underwrote a “global, rules-based” economic and security order that transformed the world.⁶

After its chief competitor, the Soviet Union, collapsed in 1989–1991, it extended this strategy globally. Proponents of liberal order draw on the logic of hegemonic stability theory.⁷ According to that theory, one dominant state exercises such a preponderance of power that it lessens the insecurities that lead to arms races and spirals of alarm, enabling other states to ease their security competitions with neighbors and rivals, relax their arms programs, and focus on economic growth. More ambitiously, it not only reshapes institutions and markets but remakes the preferences of other states. To its admirers, this order, for all its imperfections, achieved unprecedented general peace and prosperity. It was based on

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a harmony of interests between the United States and the rest of the world. It made the world a single system or “whole,” as Council on Foreign Relations president Richard Haass claims.⁸ Revision of the order, and retreats by the hegemon, will lead to increased disorder.

On the campaign trail Donald Trump explicitly threatened the status quo. He denounced allies as delinquent and threatened to shred alliances, tolerate nuclear proliferation, re-erect tariff walls, and abandon international agreements. To security traditionalists who oppose Trump, his revisionist challenge accelerates the collapse of a “liberal order” under a transnational assault by authoritarian forces. In a state of shock, they seek orientation in an ahistorical myth about the world before this dark age. As Princeton’s Aaron Friedberg tweeted, “After WWII US built a system of democratic states, tied together by trade, institutions and common values—a liberal order. Now it needs to defend that order against the illiberal powers it tried to incorporate after the Cold War.”⁹ Historian Jeremy Suri charges that Trump is plunging the world into a great regression by “launching a direct attack on the liberal international order that really made America great.” The elements of this order include “a system of multilateral trade and alliances that we built to serve our interests and attract others to our way of life.” Suri explains:

Through the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (now the World Trade Organization), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, among other institutions, the United States led a postwar capitalist system that raised global standards of living, defeated Soviet communism, and converted China to a market economy. Through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe and a web of alliances in Asia and the Middle East, the United States contained aggressive states, nurtured stable allies, and promoted democratic reforms when possible.¹⁰

This sunny “highlights package” offers a strangely bloodless retelling of history. It is a euphemistic rendering of the Cold War and the actual practice of anti-Soviet containment by the superpower and its proxies. The Bay of Pigs, napalm, East Timor, the shah of Iran, and the Contras fade into the background. That this pristine retelling should come from distinguished historians of American diplomacy like Friedberg and Suri suggests how seductive the vision of an earlier and better order has become. Trump, too, is complicit in this mythmaking. Like his opponents, he frames his own election in stark terms. Trump speaks of a dark prehistory of “globalism,” of open borders, predatory capitalism, futile wars, and general American victimhood, and a return to wholesome nationalism, industrial regeneration, civilizational rebirth, and, of course, making America “great.”¹¹

What was the liberal order, as its defenders define it? If an “order” is a coming together of power with social purpose, a “world order” is an international design of institutions, norms, and patterned relationships that defines the global balance of power.¹² Some commentators argue that for a viable world order to emerge in a time of turbulence, the United States may have to compromise. Amitav Acharya, Michael Mazarr, and Henry Kissinger seek to revive the concept of world order, but unlike those of other “world order” visionaries, their proposed designs are pluralistic and require the United States to temper its universalism for the sake of stability and negotiated coexistence in a polycentric world.¹³

By contrast, the liberal order is a missionary project that looks to extirpate rival orders and demands the perpetuation of American dominance. As an ideal type, the “liberal order” entails a copious number of norms and institutions, suggesting that good things go together. In accounts of the postwar liberal order, many or all of the following features appear, though with varying emphasis: the rule of law and the supremacy of “rules,” humanist globalism and humanitarian development, free trade, multilateral cooperation, the security provision of

the United States (principally through its permanent alliances), and a commitment to liberal progress through the advocacy of democratic and market reforms. Its institutions span the United Nations, NATO, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (followed by the World Trade Organization), the IMF, and the World Bank. A commitment to protocols and the bridging of divides figure centrally. Hence phrases like “open, rule-based international economy” abound.¹⁴ The “order,” proponents argue, embodied also a pattern of behavior, or, as Jake Sullivan at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace explains, a “system of norms, institutions, and partnerships” whereby, under the hegemon’s stewardship, collective cooperation trumped competition for relative advantage, significant shares of sovereignty were ceded for the benefits of collective action, and a global consensus spread.¹⁵ An “illiberal order” would presumably be the opposite of these things: politically and economically divided and closed, authoritarian, uncooperative, coercive, and disrespectful of rules and norms.

The liberal order is necessarily hierarchical. To speak of liberal order is to speak also of American primacy, with the former depending on the exercise of the latter. Nostalgists do not deny that the American superpower upheld it partly through overwhelming military strength. However, they emphasize the nonbloody uses of force, for example, deterring and dissuading adversaries, reassuring and uniting allies, and preventing conflict. And they stress the consensual, attractive quality of American hegemony. Postwar continental Europe therefore stands out as a favorite area of emphasis, as an “empire by invitation.”¹⁶

Most anxious observers agree that a significant “fall” is occurring.¹⁷ To explain it, they weigh heavily an alleged loss of political will within the West. Leading theorists of liberal order, such as Princeton’s G. John Ikenberry, have long warned that “the hallmarks of liberal internationalism—openness and rule-based relations enshrined in institutions

such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism—could give way to a more contested and fragmented system of blocs, spheres of influence, mercantilist networks, and regional rivalries.”¹⁸ Once optimistic that the order would withstand geopolitical challenges and prove resilient, Ikenberry now fears a different kind of insurgent threat, flowing not from hostile subversive states but from within. Working- and middle-class populations, he suggests, may lose faith in the order as democracy degenerates.¹⁹

Similar complaints have arisen across the Atlantic. Warnings against U.S. disengagement are a staple of rhetoric from security thinkers in allied countries.²⁰ For Robin Niblett, director of the internationalist Chatham House, Trump replicates and feeds on the destructive forces that powered “Brexit,” forcing liberalism into retreat.²¹ For the University of Exeter’s Doug Stokes, as for Ikenberry and Niblett, domestic discontent may unravel the worldwide arrangements that best served America’s “globalized” interests. For the old order to reproduce itself, it must make a new settlement with the American working class.²²

Most of these diagnoses have a common premise. All offer an upbeat, potted history of the world created in and after 1945. Many then blame the crumbling of that world on agents or forces that are separate from it.²³ If the order is perishing, they argue, it is being assassinated rather than dying from its internal failures. They have little to say about the significant reverses that occurred while the order reigned. These included some of America’s most disastrous wars, geopolitical chaos in the Persian Gulf from the Iran-Iraq War to the present sectarian breakdown, resurgent jihadi Islamism, the greatest act of urban terrorism committed by a nonstate actor in history, the eurozone crisis, the economic regression of Russia under “shock therapy,” mounting and unsustainable debt, the global financial crisis, the entrenchment and immobility of wealth, and the growing underclass of working poor. Rather than attributing to the old order the failures that occurred on its watch, nostalgists

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blame mismanagement, or popular fatigue, or “populism” and demagogues that whipped up mass discontent. They give credit to the order and U.S. primacy for benign developments, discounting other possible contributors such as the deterrent effects of nuclear weapons or the memory of World War II. That the order may have been complicit in its own undoing is hardly considered.

Nostalgia for a lost order is not just the complaint of self-styled liberal internationalists of any particular faction. It has a wider provenance among those who believe today’s choice lies between continuing American primacy and chaos. The strength of the consensus is reflected in a Brookings Institution paper, coauthored by former high-ranking officials in the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, urging the White House to revert to a traditional posture, upholding an order favoring openness, human rights, and peace, and claiming that this is the only viable grand strategy for the United States.²⁴ The hawkish intellectual Robert Kagan argues that the order established after World War II was a “liberal enlightenment project” that is now “challenged by forces from within and without,” not only because of popular fatigue with the burdens of international leadership but because Americans have forgotten the reasons their country adopted the role as the world’s guarantor and stabilizer.²⁵ Primacists such as Robert Lieber, Thomas Wright, and Eliot Cohen issue similar warnings.²⁶

The prominence of neoconservatives among this chorus is ironic. Critics once accused neoconservatives of violating the principles of liberal order with their bellicose unilateralism, by agitating for preventive war in Iraq in March 2003 without an explicit UN mandate, and by justifying torture. But this reflects the paradoxical problem at the heart of liberal “world ordering.” On the one hand, under most popular visions of liberal order, the hegemon creates a world based on deference to institutions and rules. But actual international life includes hostile, noncooperative forces that refuse to defer. Thus the liberal

order includes conflicting rather than complementary rules and principles. It contains “veto players” like Russia or China with different conceptions of order. The protection and enforcement of such an order, and the enforcer’s own preponderance, rests upon selection and the exercise of a hegemon’s privilege.

Liberal world orders typically involve several impulses, namely, internationalism, integration, and imperialism.²⁷ That last, imperialism, is the most contentious. Historically, world orders, with their trading protocols and monetary regimes, and control of sea lanes, commercial routes, and access to raw materials, are designed and imposed by the strong. The opening of Asian markets, a celebrated feature of liberal order, was also a pre-1945 byproduct of violent and imperial coercion, imposed on China by Great Britain through the Opium Wars and on Japan by American Commodore Matthew Perry with the threat of naval bombardment in 1853–1854.

Proponents of liberal order occasionally admit that what is sometimes framed straightforwardly as a rule-bound order is in fact a system of imperial power (and vigilante privilege) exercised by a hegemon. Robert Cooper, the former diplomat and adviser to Prime Minister Tony Blair, argued that if the world had a civilized core that deserved lawful conduct, there was also a barbarous periphery that warranted “rougher methods of an earlier era.”²⁸ “Among themselves,” he wrote, “the postmodern states operate on the basis of laws and open co-operative security” but “in the jungle, one must use the laws of the jungle.”²⁹ One-time advocate of American empire Michael Ignatieff admitted that being an imperial power “means enforcing such order as there is in the world and doing so in the American interest. It means laying down the rules America wants (on everything from markets to weapons of mass destruction) while exempting itself from other rules (the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the International Criminal Court) that go against its interest.”³⁰ At the height of the war on terror, jurists advising the George W. Bush administration used

a similar logic to justify the suspension of the rule of law and Geneva conventions.³¹ One can defend these inconsistencies as necessary, or not. That they continually recur suggests that liberal “world ordering” is an inescapably compromised process.

The United States is an imperial power, even if it is distinct from former empires. It may lack the land hunger of empires past and look different from European or Asian imperialisms. It was averse to formal annexation, refused to claim the mantle of empire, and made a succession of retreats, from Vietnam, Lebanon, and Iraq. But it still throws its weight around in imperial ways: through coercion, subversion, or patronage, it penetrates the sovereign autonomy of other states to constrain their choices. The political economy underlying American interventions was at times coercive, as in the structural-adjustment programs visited on developing countries from Eastern Europe to Latin America. Leading primacists who speak up for liberal world ordering have earlier acknowledged that the American project overseas must be necessarily imperial, albeit in this case of a distinctively informal “American” kind, involving the forceful suppression of revolt, hard-nosed enforcement of parameters around other states’ policies, and the exercise of unequal bargaining influence.³² But for the most part, today’s lamentations for a dying liberal order do not acknowledge the necessarily imperial component. This is the imperialism that does not know itself.

Invocations of the liberal world order have become the ritualized language of the foreign policy establishment. In the academy, there is a well-established scholarly study of “world orders.”³³ But too often, especially among think-tank specialists and the foreign policy commentariat, the liberal order’s admirers assert what they ought to prove. In that respect, President Trump’s former deputy assistant for strategic communications at the National Security Council, Michael Anton, was right to argue that the foreign policy establishment has become a “priesthood,” fonder of recantation than argumentation.³⁴ It repeats

its axioms but neglects to ground its vision in a careful reading of history or the present. A good example is an article by Edward Luce in June 2017, mourning the internal defeat of Western liberalism and a new world “disorder.” To demonstrate the imminence of disorder under Trump, Luce did not examine what Trump was actually doing beyond the decision to withdraw from the Paris climate change agreement, which is not an unprecedented pullback. The many Trump administration moves that have affronted Moscow go unmentioned: for example, the reinforcement of NATO through increased funding of the European Reassurance Initiative; and the bombing of the Assad regime, Putin’s ally, in April 2017. Instead, Luce cited the statements of two allies who were wondering where Trump’s behavior would lead, gossip about personality clashes in Trump’s court, and corroborating statements from other figures in the foreign policy establishment who take the “liberal order” as an article of faith, betraying a confirmation bias. Without evidence, he then accused President Obama of “global retrenchment.”³⁵ Typical of the genre, Luce contrasted these recent failures with the postwar internationalism and institution building of President Harry Truman.

To be reprimanded for violating established norms of American “global leadership,” against the exalted standards of Truman, is an occupational burden that comes with the presidency. Before Trump, critics had accused presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama of retreating from a long-standing commitment to a liberal world order. The charge that Washington is abandoning a noble Trumanite diplomatic past is less an observation than a political predisposition, substantively shallow yet part of the framework within which debate is conducted. International history after 1945 is more fraught.

MYTHOLOGIZING THE POSTWAR ORDER

Accusations that U.S. presidents are flouting a long-standing postwar liberal order

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rely upon a mythologized account of history. When presidents wage war unilaterally, topple governments, coerce allies, threaten abandonment, disregard the demands of international institutions, practice economic protectionism, or cultivate illiberal allies and clients, they may or may not be practicing prudent statecraft. Either way, their behavior is unexceptional. They are not departing from tradition.

Let us revisit history first in the area of trade and political economy. President Trump disturbs defenders of the liberal order partly through his economic nationalism, his promise to rebuild American manufacturing industries by erecting protective tariff walls, and his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The extent to which U.S. membership in the TPP represented a long-standing commitment to liberal order is doubtful, given that the United States signed the agreement in February 2016 and withdrew in January 2017, and given that the agreement's intent was to exclude and contain China as much as to integrate other Asian economies. Nonetheless, nostalgists assert that Washington's commitment to free trade was a central pillar of liberal order. Identifying the marketing precepts of the Washington consensus with liberal order, they present Washington's various “Open Door” policies as both a cause and symptom of the world's liberalization.

Without question, the United States in the postwar period dismantled the economic architecture of the British Empire. It strove to reshape the international economic environment on its terms, to establish and exploit the dollar as the reserve currency, to promote open markets, and to make a world safe for the penetration of American capital. How far did that process, that long-standing commitment to the “Open Door,” represent a liberal drive for free trade?

In reality, there was not one but several postwar economic orders. As Michael Lind cautions:

Globalization on a large scale, characterized by the emergence of transnational

corporations and supply chains, got underway only in the 1990s and 2000s. Mass immigration to the United States and Europe is also largely a post-Cold War phenomenon. The euro and the Eurozone date back only to 1999. Labor mobility within Europe is also a relatively recent policy. Controversial “megaregional” trade pacts like NAFTA, the TPP, and TTIP [Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership], which go beyond old-fashioned tariff reductions to rewrite much domestic legislation, go back only to the 1990s.³⁶

Niall Ferguson, too, observes that “truly free trade, truly free capital flows and large-scale migration across borders did not begin until the 1990s.”³⁷ Earlier decades saw capital controls, fixed exchange rates, and periodic returns to tariff barriers. One major pillar of the postwar order was U.S. ally, democratic Japan. Under U.S. military protection, that same country instituted, in the words of Claremont McKenna College's Leon Hollerman, “the most restrictive foreign trade and foreign-exchange control system ever devised by a major free nation.”³⁸ The long-running competition with the Soviet Union moved the United States to deliberately encourage the economic growth of its Asian allies, but under the shield of a neomercantilist state. In other words, in identifying the U.S.-led order with market and trade liberalization, nostalgists historicize what are in fact a quite recent set of post-1989 international arrangements. From this perspective, a liberal order did arrive, only it came later, in the age of post-1989 unipolarity.

A Less-Than-Completely Liberal Trading Order

There is a more basic defect in recollections of the liberal order. During the postwar era, the United States persistently flouted liberal economic principles and imposed restrictive measures when it suited. Indeed, major powers have not historically risen through free trade and passive governments. Ascending powers

have typically risen partly through the deliberate, visible, and intervening hand of an activist state.³⁹ So too with America. All U.S. presidents have had to manage the tension between the commitment to the “Open Door” and the demand for industrial protection at home. The subsidy, the tariff, the quota, and the bilateral voluntary-restriction agreement have remained part of America’s repertoire. As a recent study of global data by Gowling WLG reveals, the United States is a “long-term and prolific proponent of protectionist policies,” and the world order it presides over is notably protectionist.⁴⁰ Since the 2008 financial crisis, the United States has imposed tariffs worth \$39 billion, while the world’s top 60 economies have adopted more than 7,000 protectionist trade measures worth more than \$400 billion. The United States and the European Union both accounted for the highest number of protectionist measures, each exercising more than 1,000, with India a distant third at 400.⁴¹ America’s trade protectionism has the highest impact on other countries. Foreign farmers would be baffled by the claim that the old order embodied free trade, when the United States persistently granted agricultural subsidies and other mechanisms limiting foreign governments’ access to U.S. consumers.⁴²

The reversion to protectionism has precedents from before the global financial crisis. Some of the most strident advocates of open markets and the dismantling of trade barriers have in practice done the opposite. One was President Ronald Reagan. Reagan had championed the cause of free trade as a foundation of progress and peace. Yet as president, he increased the proportion of imports subject to restrictions by 100 percent from 1980, as well as tightened quotas, introduced “voluntary restraint agreements” and new duties, raised tariffs, and strengthened the Export-Import Bank in order to protect the recovery of U.S. industries, especially automotive, computer-chip, and steel.⁴³ Reagan justified these steps on the grounds that he was forcing economic competitors to trade freely. Regardless, his policies were a long way from Adam Smith.

President Clinton also championed free trade, in words and deeds. He drove through NAFTA, a free trade zone uniting North America’s three largest economies, and pushed for China’s admission to the WTO under “most favored nation” status. Yet under Clinton, rice subsidies that continued during his administration enabled U.S. growers to dump their product onto the markets of vulnerable rural countries such as Haiti, Ghana, and Indonesia at depressed prices. Clinton has since apologized to Haiti for the devastation that these arrangements inflicted on the country.⁴⁴

President George W. Bush emulated Reagan rhetorically, invoking the principles of free trade and unfettered markets. Yet in 2002, he increased steel tariffs by 30 percent, only to back down 20 months later under threat of punitive countertariffs by the European Union, a protectionist bloc in its relations with many countries beyond its borders. Confronted with the prospect of economic meltdown in the crisis of 2008, Bush intervened in the market with strongly protectionist measures, including bailouts of major firms, claiming, “I have abandoned free-market principles to save the free-market system.”⁴⁵ The reintroduction of protectionist measures today, then, is not such a sudden or radical departure as is sometimes claimed, though Trump’s open enthusiasm for a “trade war” does mark a difference. There is a defensible logic to the position that in order to practice free trade a country needs a viable economy to practice it with. Reagan and Bush’s contortions on the issue reflect the inherent difficulty of liberal projects, whose architects often feel impelled to compromise with illiberal pressures. A world where even the most avowed exponents of free trade continually resorted to protectionism, though arguably more free and liberal than what had gone before or than what might have prevailed otherwise, was still not the “flat” free-market capitalist world we are being invited to be nostalgic for.

Nostalgists claim that one dividend of American hegemony has been the economic liberalization of the globe, or large parts of it. They could point, for example, to the

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“A review of the actual experience of the past 70 years suggests that the process of ‘world ordering’ must at times be coercive. For all the attractions of American hegemony abroad, there has also been resistance and imposition.”

transformation of China into a wealthy capitalist economy that has lifted its population out of “a dollar a day” poverty. But this liberalizing process is more conflicted than potted histories suggest. Beijing achieved rapid industrial revolution and the movement of its workforce from the field into the factory through authoritarian and illiberal measures: involuntary-resettlement urbanization schemes, population control through forced abortion and compulsory sterilization, severe working conditions, repression of civil society, including trade unions, labor, and human-rights activists, and internet surveillance, among other measures. The People’s Republic has consistently ranked low on the Freedom Index.⁴⁶

A more direct application of U.S.-backed liberalism happened in Russia. After communist rule collapsed in 1991, at the urging and advice of the United States’ government and economists, Moscow embarked on a program of “shock therapy” to restructure Russia around the principle of market exchange, adopting accelerated privatization of state industries, deregulation, fiscal discipline, and the shedding of price controls. This experiment was a major effort in the project to enlarge the global liberal order at a rapid clip. It had the support of the leading institutions of global capitalism, the IMF, World Bank, and U.S. Treasury Department. Harvard academic Jeffrey Sachs, one of Russian liberalization’s architects from 1991 to 1993, set out the program’s logic in *The Economist*, a journal that champions the cause of the liberal world order. “To clean up the shambles left by communist mismanagement, Eastern Europe must take a swift, dramatic leap to private ownership and a market system. West Europeans must help it do so.”⁴⁷ “Swift, dramatic leap,” a vast program grounded in classical liberal economics, took on the tempo and zeal of the revolutionary communism it aimed to replace. These rapid reforms replaced an oppressive and failed communist system. They did so at Washington’s continual insistence that Russia reform itself on “our conditions.” But the results on many measures were disastrous:

capital flight and deep recession; slumping industrial production; malnutrition; the rise of criminality—a criminalized economy, in fact—intertwined with a corrupt oligarchy enjoying a concentration of wealth; and the decline of health care and an increased rate of premature deaths.⁴⁸ As Nobel laureate and former World Bank chief economist Joseph Stiglitz observed, by eschewing the more gradualist path of Poland or China, the consequences of the program were profoundly illiberal.⁴⁹ “Liberal order” visionaries are quick to give their ideas credit for the prosperity of nations from Western Europe to the Pacific Rim, finding causation in correlation. They deny such a direct link between their ideas and the problems of post-Soviet Russia.⁵⁰ Yet it is hard to accept that measures like sudden privatization and the rise of monopolies in a corrupt country were not related to asset stripping and capital flight or that “eliminating the housing and utilities subsidies that sustained tens of millions of impoverished families” did not play a major part in the social ruin that followed.⁵¹ Western technocrats, diplomats, and politicians were deeply implicated in the new order’s design.

The Hard Edge of the Liberal World Order

Lamentations for the end of the liberal order are also heard in the realm of “hard” security. The U.S. hegemon, nostalgists warn, is losing (or has lost) the political will to underwrite the international system through a commitment to permanent alliances and to intervene to bring order out of chaos. Part of the current intellectual confusion flows from the conflation of liberalism, which is supposedly peaceable, consensual, and benign, with the process of “world ordering.” It is here that defenders of the old order present their most misleadingly anodyne account of history. A review of the actual experience of the past 70 years suggests that the process of “world ordering” must at times be coercive. For all the attractions of American hegemony abroad, there has also been resistance and imposition.

To understand how the superpower met

that resistance and imposed itself, we must go beyond the romanticized postwar moment of Trumanite internationalism in the late 1940s. Consider both ends of the chronology as it is usually presented, from 1945 until the recent past. Admirers trace the restructuring of international life in that first year to the visionary institution building that President Truman oversaw amid World War II, such as the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco and its main creation, the UN Charter. In this rendering, the founders conceived the liberal order through a collaborative process of institution building. The narrative is strikingly nonviolent.

In fact, to create the conditions for that visionary world making, the liberal order was conceived in blood. Only months later, the same U.S. president launched two atomic strikes on Imperial Japan, immolating and irradiating two of its cities after blockade, fire-bombing, and starvation had not broken its will. He did so to put down an adversary that had been brutally pursuing a rival vision for an Asian order of its own. In order to create an order, Washington swept aside a competitor by introducing a genocidal weapon into the world. There are powerful arguments that this was the “least bad” choice available.⁵² Tellingly, though, in panegyrics for a dying liberalism, the words “Hiroshima” and “Nagasaki” hardly appear.

If there were liberal principles that underpinned the UN as it was founded in 1945, they were at first self-determination and sovereignty rather than democracy and human rights. The world order was hardly born “liberal” in the sense implied today: recall that two of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council were totalitarian communist states, and two of the democracies were managing colonial empires that they would not relinquish for decades. Then and now, modern liberalism is antithetical to the grave exertion of state power still practiced in 58 countries, the death penalty. To be sure, the birth of the post-1945 world order did advance some liberal ideas broadly. The general norm against imperial aggression was one. This,

however, was not strong enough to prevent or dislodge China’s seizure of Tibet, the bids of Turkey and Greece to grab Cyprus, Israel’s occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, India’s occupation of Kashmir and annexation of Goa, Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, or indeed the Soviet Union’s occupation of Eastern Europe.

At the other end of the chronology, the present moment, consider that the U.S. hegemon has been waging a “war on terror” against Islamist jihadi groups since the 9/11 attacks of 2001. In pursuing the liberal cause of democratization as an antidote to terror, Washington entered the age of “enhanced interrogation” and preventive war. Now, with new weapons (drones) at hand, Washington conducts a sustained campaign of extrajudicial assassinations, often without the consent of host countries and without seeking formal permission or mandates. It has conducted renditions of suspected terrorists without trial. Reluctant to deal with live captives in indefinite detention, a more liberal president from 2009 increasingly avoided the dilemma by killing them. Meanwhile, whatever benefits it has wrought, American unipolarity was not peaceful or liberalizing for the unipolar power. The first two decades of the unipolar *Pax Americana* after 1989, which made up less than 10 percent of America’s history, generated 25 percent of the nation’s total time at war. That period is more bellicose by an order of magnitude than the preceding eras of bipolarity and multipolarity, in terms of frequency if not intensity.⁵³ Whether in Iraq and Libya, or now with U.S. assistance to Saudi Arabia’s indiscriminate bombardment of Yemen, this proclivity to continuous war making has not created a “liberal” condition of peaceful order. At home, there is a continuous state of alarm and vigilance, whereby “normality” is permanently suspended by an unending state of exception. This, combined with an encouraged state of paternalism where citizens are encouraged to be passive consumers of events, has helped weaken the checks and balances of the republican Constitution.⁵⁴ Detention without trial,

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“The coups that were sponsored or supported by Washington during the Cold War violated one of the claimed core principles of ‘liberal,’ ‘rules-based’ order, that of self-determination.”

secret, warrantless surveillance, unauthorized wars, torture, covert “black sites”—these are not the obvious features of a robust liberal constitutional order. If large parts of the world have not accepted liberalism in major areas of civic life, neither has the United States.

Instead of a full reckoning with diplomatic history, nostalgists frame history around the positive creation of new architectures and schemes. Thus the Marshall Plan (1948–1961) figures centrally in America’s postwar historic mission, based on, as Benn Steil puts it, “the moral primacy of democratic government and free economic exchange.”⁵⁵ This absolute, almost platonian account of the past has little room for other, less-celebrated events from the same era, such as the British- and U.S.-backed overthrow of Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953, deposed despite his commitment to national independence and secular democracy. In this picture, the violence and compromises of hegemony, moral and strategic, almost vanish.

Nostalgia for the liberal order also overlooks the reality that it was enforced through coercion. In the same era, a defining episode in the postwar assertion of American hegemony was the Suez crisis of 1956. In that hinge event of the Anglo-American relationship, the U.S. Sixth Fleet stalked and harassed British ships in the Mediterranean, fouling their radar and sonar, menacing them with aircraft and lighting them up at night with searchlights.⁵⁶ With the British pound and oil supplies under pressure, President Dwight Eisenhower threatened Britain with the simple formula of “no ceasefire: no loans.” Patronage could be rapidly withdrawn, regardless of recent history, blood ties, or shared visions of Western-enforced order. The United States enforced its interpretation of that order by targeting its ally’s vitals.⁵⁷

Between those two moments in time, the United States practiced geopolitics ruthlessly. It partly did so in the course of its long security competition with the Soviet Union. Strikingly, the Cold War as it was actually conducted and lived—where two superpowers did not allow rules, sovereignty, multilateralism, and

institutions to constrain them when the stakes were high—does not occupy a prominent place in the mytho-history. Hardly anywhere in nostalgic reminiscences do there appear the numerous coups that were sponsored or supported by Washington. These interventions linked to the United States since 1945 may or may not have been defensible. They certainly violated one of the claimed core principles of “liberal,” “rules-based” order, that of self-determination.

The United States not only overthrew governments (sometimes democratically elected ones)—or attempted to—in Albania, Ghana, Guatemala, Greece, Cuba, Chile, Iran, El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Vietnam, Argentina, and Grenada. It also supported violently illiberal forces, from Islamist mujahideen in Afghanistan-Pakistan and President Hosni Mubarak’s oppressive state in Egypt to the Indonesian Suharto regime and its death squads. A mainstay of U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf is its partnership with Saudi Arabia, an absolutist state that beheads apostates and survives by making concessions to Wahhabi theocrats. It is currently waging a brutal campaign against rebels in Yemen that, according to Amnesty International, includes attacks that are “indiscriminate, disproportionate or directed against civilians and civilian objects, including funeral gatherings, schools, markets, residential areas and civilian boats.”⁵⁸ NATO allies on the European continent for decades included authoritarian Portugal and Greece. West Germany, the poster child of the liberal order, did not have elections during its first four years, and its proud social democracy retained officials who had been security elites in the Third Reich.⁵⁹ Former Nazi mandarins stuffed the highest levels of government, including the Foreign Office and the Interior and Justice Ministries. Several former Nazi generals would later become senior commanders in the Bundeswehr. And in the 1948 Italian elections, the CIA helped ensure the electoral defeat of communists by funding anti-communist parties, forging documents to discredit the Communist Party, and

warning Italians that if they publicly supported the party they would be barred from entering the United States. For the sake of liberalism in the long term, the United States exercised its privileges. If the deliberate subversion of a democratic election abroad with “fake news,” bribes, and coercion represents the antithesis of liberal world order, as Trump’s critics now suggest, then Washington attacked that order in the period of its creation. Coups, partisan electoral interventions, the cooptation of illiberal actors, and the flouting of international law made American hegemony unexceptional.

In dismantling the power of old European colonial empires, the United States erected a form of domination that had an imperial quality of its own. Consider one of its more ambitious ventures in liberal ordering: the invasion and remaking of Iraq. The occupiers of Iraq regarded themselves as liberators. After invasion, though, the United States also projected power over Iraq’s interior governance in imperial fashion and with a liberal program, with all the tensions this implies. Director of the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer applied a program of rapid liberalization not only through the well-known de-Ba’athification and disbanding of the Iraqi Army, but through the order for “the full privatization of public enterprises, full ownership rights by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, full repatriation of foreign profits . . . the opening of Iraq’s banks to foreign control, national treatment for foreign companies and . . . the elimination of nearly all trade barriers.”⁶⁰ The United States continued to impose itself on Iraqi politics when it wanted, demanding and receiving the resignation of elected prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari in May 2007. Intended to implant market democracy, these measures infringed the country’s sovereign democratic will. In other words, the liberators were freeing the Iraqis to conform with the occupier’s preferences.

It remains hard to have an empire without imperialism. Yet many visions of liberal order erase the historical process of imperialism, decentering, as Jeanne Morefield

argues, “imperial violence while simultaneously positing the necessity of imperial action.”⁶¹ If liberalism at a basic level is an enlightenment project committed to liberty, equality, and limitations on state power, and if “world ordering” requires imperialist power projection, it is hard to fuse them without friction. Some may conclude from this historical record that, in the history of American hegemonic “world ordering,” liberalism was missing in action. On each occasion, critics have accused the United States of betraying its own liberal traditions in the pursuit of power. But it is hard to believe that a republic whose leaders so often and so intensely enunciate liberal principles is really driven by secret, amoral cynicism. A more troubling possibility should be considered. Liberalism is a powerful engine of American statecraft, but that statecraft often violates liberal principles. As a dogma of foreign policy, liberalism is jealous, intolerant, and messianic. Applied unchecked, it leads to its own illiberal opposite.⁶² The practitioners of rough geopolitics were not necessarily hypocrites. They often believed they were serving the ultimate cause of forging a liberal peace under American oversight but that to do so they had to accommodate illiberal allies and pitilessly destroy liberalism’s enemies. In this way, a superpower attempting to create a liberal order permits itself to employ unsentimental methods.

Thus in February 2017, David Petraeus could recall sincerely that “to protect freedom here at home, we adopted a foreign policy that sought to protect and, where possible, promote freedom abroad, along with human rights and rule of law,” invoking American values such as “political pluralism” and “a free and open society.”⁶³ Yet as commander in Iraq, Petraeus sought to reverse that country’s implosion and salvage victory by compromising these standards. To that fight, he brought pragmatic, byzantine divide-and-exploit methods, paying for the defection of former Iraqi insurgents and working with Shia paramilitary units not known for their commitment to the Hague conventions. As director of the CIA, Petraeus

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advocated and implemented a campaign of “signature” drone strikes, whereby the assailant knowingly targets a group gathering—at a funeral for an al Qaeda member, for instance—because of their suspicious behavior and association, rather than through verified identification of the presence of individual persons. Such strikes, therefore, can also threaten non-combatants and the innocent.⁶⁴ To bolster the struggling rebellion in Syria, Petraeus later in 2015 advocated luring away and recruiting “opportunistic” members of the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra, then formally affiliated with al Qaeda.⁶⁵ This is not the place to arbitrate the wisdom and legitimacy of such measures. Dealing with conflicts in such places is a choice of agonies, and no doubt Petraeus and his peers regard themselves as guarding Americans while they sleep and trafficking with lesser evils to keep greater ones at bay. But note that a senior advocate of liberal order can also advocate measures that risk “crowd killing” and that involve enlistment of members of jihadi terrorist organizations and collaboration with sectarian governments. Champions of liberalism must somehow navigate their ideals through the illiberal demands of warfare.

Nostalgists for the liberal order also betray a shallow conception of their central idea, liberalism. They conflate liberalism with other desirable phenomena, like capitalism and democracy. They neglect the possibility of illiberal democracy, and illiberal capitalism. Majority democratic rule does not equate with, or necessarily produce, a liberal protection of individual rights such as the presumption of innocence or trial by jury, a liberal tolerance for opposition and dissent, or a constitutional order that separates powers and constrains government through an independent judiciary or a free press. Capitalism can also be illiberal, as the Chinese Communist Party demonstrates. One of America’s long-term allies, Singapore, evolved as a supervised market democracy that curtailed the right to dissent. South Korea, an ally and protectorate within America’s Asian system, evolved first as a dictatorship under authoritarian founding fathers who were

also modernizers, Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee. These authoritarians nurtured the *chaebol* business groups, Hyundai, Daewoo, and Samsung. Free markets took root first as highly protected markets under unfree political conditions. Such contradictions are absent from liberal-order panegyrics.

As it is recalled, the “liberal order” embodies the permanent commitment of the United States to alliances and institutions without coercion. A broader historical perspective suggests, however, that Trump’s coercive treatment of allies is less of a break with the past than is often thought. In reality, the United States has often coerced allies with threats of abandonment and punishment.⁶⁶ In 1954, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles threatened Europe with an “agonizing reappraisal” of alliances. In 1973 and 1974, President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger suspended intelligence and nuclear cooperation with Britain to punish noncooperation over a U.S.-initiated declaration of principles and the privacy of bilateral and UK-European Economic Community discussions. The United States has used the threat of abandonment to persuade allies and clients to cancel their nuclear programs, including West Germany, Japan, and Taiwan, while threatening adversaries with sanctions or preventive war. The demand that European allies shoulder more of the burden of military expenditure has been a staple of U.S. diplomacy, from President Eisenhower to former secretary of defense Robert Gates. Despite Britain spending blood and treasure in Afghanistan and Iraq to support the war on terror and cement its standing in Washington, President Obama made a blunt threat that departing from the European Union would place the UK at the “back of the queue” when seeking a bilateral free trade agreement. Assured commitment to institutions and allies through only positive solidarity is a false memory. This underlines the pattern whereby Washington underwrites a liberal world order not by adhering to its principles but by stepping outside them, practicing punishment,

threats, and bribes that it would not accept if directed at itself.

In “liberal order” litanies, another persistent claim is that the order was “rules-based.” It was not. Rules exist, and flouting them can have costs. But at critical moments for strong states such as the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, rules proved to be slippery; they were invoked, stretched, arbitrarily altered, or ignored, as interest permitted. The unreality of nostalgic legalism was illustrated in the summer of 2016 by two adversaries who both at different times have appealed to “rules” as the arbiter of international order. China defied the unanimous ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which found against its territorial claims, and continued to expand into the South China Sea and seize disputed waters, islands, and shoals. At the same time, the United States appealed to China to respect the “legally binding” verdict yet had not even ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that it urged China to observe. From ignoring the International Court of Justice over the mining of Nicaraguan harbors in 1986 to bombing Serbia in 1999 without a UN mandate, the United States has infringed on the letter of international law when it has found that other interests or values were compelling. It exercised a vigilante’s privilege. So too did other major powers. For less powerful and emerging states, the writ of liberal order was often remote, as they “routed around” rules to pursue their interests. In this century, Africa, from the Great Lakes region to the Sudan, has seen millions butchered, displaced, and unavenged. The era may have involved greater degrees of “rule following” than earlier eras. But it was not “based” on the observation of rules, at least not for the major powers. To rebrand this fraught history of power politics as an era of rule-bound civility is perverse. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in calling for the conservation, or restoration, of an order on the basis that it represents something better. In this case, though, the nostalgia rests on delusion—about what the world was and what it can be.

THE BURDEN OF LIBERAL NOSTALGIA

The debate around “liberal order” is consequential. Memories of what went before will condition the ability of the United States and its allies to navigate their way ahead. At issue here is neither the legitimacy of American power in the world nor many of its benefits. If there was to be a superpower emerging from the rubble of world war in midcentury, we should be grateful it was the United States, given the totalitarian alternatives on offer. Under America’s aegis, there were islands of liberty where prosperous markets and democracies grew. U.S. internationalism rebuilt Western Europe and East Asia and successfully contained Soviet communism. The central issue is whether this created a wider “liberal” system, and whether the actual historic process of world ordering can even be achieved by liberal means. The answer, in both cases, is no. Even at its zenith, America did not have the power to reorder the world so fundamentally. Its more ambitious efforts to do so generated illiberal as well as liberal results. The limits on power and knowledge are too strong for any world ordering to be so straightforward and benign.

How do we best explain these contradictions? The most accurate answer is not that the United States cynically preached liberalism while practicing *realpolitik*. Liberalism is an authentic and powerful engine of U.S. diplomacy. It is a pillar of the American diplomatic mind. But it was never all-conquering. Long before Trump, large swaths of the globe (and of American statecraft) were unsubjugated by it. Today’s lamentations confuse two phenomena, liberal ideals and institutions on one hand and a hegemon’s world ordering on the other. To underwrite the order it promoted, the superpower exercised prerogatives in ways that cannot adequately be labelled “liberal,” implicitly claiming a privilege to do so. Except in atypical circumstances, large liberal projects require murky bargains. At worst they contain the seeds of their own unraveling, especially in the countries that become laboratories for the most doctrinaire attempts.

“America’s more ambitious efforts to reorder the world generated illiberal as well as liberal results.”

“Endless recall of the ‘liberal order’ damages the intellectual capacity to diagnose the failures of the recent past and harms the effort to construct a workable design for the future.”

Endless recall of the “liberal order” is not only ahistorical. It is harmful. It damages the intellectual capacity to diagnose the failures of the recent past. It harms the effort to construct a workable design for the future. It impedes Washington from undertaking a needed reassessment of its grand strategy that has put the United States where it now is: struggling under the weight of spiraling debt, confronting multiplying foreign conflicts and domestic discord, and set on a collision course with rivals. Appeals to take up the burden, again, of spreading liberalism overseas presupposes the worldview of idealistic technocrats, confident in their capacity to reprogram the world despite growing evidence to the contrary. At a time when a sober reappraisal and some retrenchment is needed, both Trump and his critics undermine that task by peddling ahistorical reductionism. There is a better, non-Trumpian critique to be made of a failing foreign policy consensus, and on behalf of an alternative order based on a wiser combination of restraint, deterrence, and power sharing.

A review of the United States’ current grand strategic situation suggests that a clear-eyed stock taking is in order. Trump’s presidency doesn’t signify a general retrenchment of the United States and a retreat from international commitments. Under Trump, Washington’s growing commitments still exceed its power. The United States feels its capacity to impose order strained, even with the significant investments it already makes. As Richard Betts once suggested of the annual defense budget, half a trillion dollars is more than enough.⁶⁷ It is in the size of the policy ambition relative to capabilities, rather than merely the size of those capabilities, where the dangerous imbalance lies. Despite his threats to overturn the old order, the power of the foreign policy establishment and its habitual ideas have steered Trump to quickly conform to the fundamentals of traditional U.S. grand strategy.⁶⁸ He now aggressively reasserts U.S. primacy. If he poses a danger, it is not from abandonment but overreach. On its current course, the United States is prone to two forms of self-inflicted wounds:

self-encirclement, whereby a state undermines its own security by provoking resistance and counterpower; and imperial overextension, whereby a state expands to the point where the costs outstrip the benefits.⁶⁹

The United States is accumulating record deficits and growing, unsustainable debts. According to the Congressional Budget Office, federal debt will reach 150 percent of GDP by 2047.⁷⁰ Because repayment obligations are the first, compulsory items in expenditure and because heavy fiscal burdens beyond a certain proportion of debt-to-GDP tend to choke economic growth,⁷¹ a growing debt load directly impedes the country’s ability to sustain its way of life alongside its extensive international commitments. U.S. grand strategy also gives Washington a proclivity to continuous wars that it chooses to fund through deficits. According to one estimate, U.S. wars from 2001 to 2016 had a budgetary cost of approximately \$4.79 trillion, taking into account indirect costs such as interest on borrowing and through-life care for veterans.⁷² Those wars have led to further geopolitical crises and demand for further commitment. Conflict-induced anarchy in Iraq and Libya created footholds for the Islamic State and, by upsetting the balance of power in the Persian Gulf, opened the way to a Saudi-Iran cold war that now implicates the United States.

The Trump administration has not reversed this imbalance but aggravated it. It has significantly increased the defense budget, while significantly reducing taxes. It has embarked on a deficit-financed military buildup, a pattern that historically increases imbalances in the economy and triggers a “boom-bust” cycle, and where overreaching wars (like Iraq) and financial meltdowns (like the global financial crisis) are linked.⁷³ The final 2018 defense budget is expected to be 13 percent higher than that of 2017.⁷⁴ The United States’ grand strategy of primacy saddles it with defense and national security expenditures that amount to over 68 percent of discretionary spending, taking into account the base budget and overseas contingency operations and support for veterans

affairs, homeland security, and the nuclear weapons program.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the overall direction so far of President Trump's foreign policy has been to multiply America's security commitments and entanglements. The United States has implicated itself more deeply in the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf. Trump has intensified America's confrontation with Iran by abandoning the multiparty settlement on Iran's nuclear program. He has reinforced U.S. patronage of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, while hardening Washington's alignment with Israel by recognizing Jerusalem as its capital. By November 2017, Trump had increased the number of troops and civilians working for the Department of Defense in the Middle East by 33 percent.⁷⁶ At the time of writing, the status of America's commitment in Syria is not clear, with the administration both promising to withdraw yet indicating it would stay to defeat the remnants of the Islamic State, and threatening to continue to punish Syria for chemical weapons use. He increased the U.S. commitment to the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater. Lastly, the Trump administration's *National Security Strategy* openly acknowledges competition against "revisionist" powers Russia and China.⁷⁷ And its *Nuclear Posture Review* expands the conditions under which the United States would threaten nuclear use and plans an increased arsenal of low-yield nuclear bombs.⁷⁸ Escalating rivalries are the likely result. Not only is this imbalance between power and commitments financially difficult to service. It also makes the country harder to govern. Recurrent clashes over federal budgets and the increasing tradeoffs between consumption, investment, and defense lead to periods of paralysis. We see a dangerous interaction between domestic discord and foreign policy failure.

These deteriorating circumstances make it imperative for Washington to conduct a cold reassessment of its grand strategy. It needs to ask what works and what doesn't, to rank its interests into a hierarchy and distinguish what is vital from what is desirable, to assess what

is achievable, and what costs and sacrifices it can bear. The growing demand on already scarce resources, from the mounting costs of defense to the current and future burdens of entitlements, means that it will be difficult for the superpower to increase its extraction of resources from its population base. For a reassessment to be realistic, the country must be able to consider retrenchment, burden shifting, the accommodation of potential rivals, and the limitation of commitments. History suggests strategies that bring a state's power and commitments into balance and that can successfully prevent overstretch, insolvency, or exhaustion.⁷⁹ To do this, decisionmakers can draw on an American tradition of prudential, realist thinking about aligning resources and goals. As Samuel P. Huntington summarized it, to address the gap between ambitions and capabilities, states can attempt

to redefine their interests and so reduce their commitments to a level which they can sustain with their existing capabilities; to reduce the threats to their interests through diplomacy; to enhance the contribution of allies to the protection of their interests; to increase their own resources, usually meaning larger military forces and military budgets; to substitute cheaper forms of power for more expensive ones, thus using the same resources to produce more power; to devise more effective strategies for the use of their capabilities, thereby securing also greater output in terms of power for the same input in terms of resources.⁸⁰

If, however, Washington is held to a fictitious and demanding historical standard, this exercise will be impossible. If "liberal order" visions prevail, it will be deemed immoral even to consider an alternative of restraint. A pernicious byproduct of such nostalgia is its reductionism, whereby traditionalists assert a false choice between primacy or "global leadership" on one hand

“Washington needs to ask what works and what doesn't, to distinguish what is vital from what is desirable, to assess what is achievable, and what costs and sacrifices it can bear.”

and inward-looking isolation on the other. Accordingly, advocates of primacy brand today's realists who call for retrenchment as Trumpian.⁸¹ By contrast, if Washington can be liberated from the burdensome historical fantasy that hegemonic nostalgists impose upon it, then it can gain a clearer-sighted appreciation of the choices now before it.

NOTES:

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