

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

September/October 2017
Volume 96 • Number 5

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Looks Like**

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What Responsible Nationalism Looks Like

Andrew J. Bacevich

One of the privileges of power that Americans routinely abuse is to remember selectively. It was not surprising, then, that this year’s centennial of the United States’ entry into World War I attracted barely any official attention. A House resolution commending “the brave members of the United States Armed Forces for their efforts in ‘making the world safe for democracy’” never made it out of committee. And although the Senate did endorse a fatuous decree “expressing gratitude and appreciation” for the declaration of war passed back in April 1917, the White House ignored the anniversary altogether. As far as Washington is concerned, that conflict retains little or no political salience.

It was not always so, of course. For those who lived through it, the “war to end all wars” was a searing experience. In its wake came acute disillusionment, compounded by a sense of having been deceived about its origins and purposes. The horrific conflict seemed only to create new problems; President Woodrow Wilson’s insistence in a 1919 speech that the 116,000 American soldiers lost in that war had “saved the liberty of the world” rang hollow.

So 20 years later, when another European conflict presented Americans with a fresh opportunity to rescue liberty, many balked. A second war against Germany on behalf of France and the United Kingdom, they believed, was unlikely to produce more satisfactory results than the first. Those intent on keeping the United States out of that war organized a nationwide, grass-roots campaign led by the America First Committee. During its brief existence, the movement enlisted more supporters than the Tea Party, was better organized than Occupy Wall Street or Black Lives Matter, and wielded more political clout than the “resistance” to President Donald Trump.

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Yet despite drawing support from across the political spectrum, the movement failed. Well before the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt had embarked on a program of incremental intervention aimed at bringing the United States into the war as a full-fledged belligerent. When it came to Nazi Germany, Roosevelt believed that the putative lessons of World War I—above all, that France and the United Kingdom had played the United States for a sucker—did not apply. He castigated those who disagreed as “enemies of democracy” aligned with fascists, communists, and “every group devoted to bigotry and racial and religious intolerance.” In effect, Roosevelt painted anti-interventionism as anti-American, and the smear stuck. The phrase “America first” became a term of derision. To the extent that anti-interventionist sentiment survived, it did so as a fringe phenomenon, associated with the extreme right and the far left.

For decades, World War II remained at the forefront of the American historical consciousness, easily overshadowing World War I. Politicians and pundits regularly paid homage to World War II’s canonical lessons, warning against the dangers of appeasement and emphasizing the need to confront evil. As for “America first,” the slogan that had resonated with those reeling from World War I, it appeared irredeemable, retaining about as much political salience as the Free Silver and Prohibition movements. Then came Trump, and the irredeemable enjoyed sudden redemption.

THE MYOPIA OF UTOPIANISM

As long as the Cold War persisted and, with it, the perceived imperative of confronting international communism, America First remained an emblem of American irresponsibility, a reminder of a narrowly averted catastrophe. When the fall of the Soviet Union triggered a brief flurry of speculation that the United States might claim a “peace dividend” and tend to its own garden, elite opinion wasted no time in denouncing that prospect. With history’s future trajectory now readily apparent—the collapse of communism having cleared up any remaining confusion in that regard—it was incumbent on the United States to implement that future. U.S. leadership was therefore more important than ever, a line of thought giving rise to what the writer R. R. Reno has aptly termed “utopian globalism.”

Three large expectations informed this post-Cold war paradigm. According to the first, corporate capitalism of the type pioneered in the



Isolated: Lindbergh arriving at the White House to meet Roosevelt, 1939

United States, exploiting advanced technology and implemented globally, held the potential of creating wealth on a once unimaginable scale. According to the second, the possession of vast military might—displayed for all to see in the 1990–91 Gulf War—endowed the United States with an unprecedented ability to establish (and enforce) the terms of world order. And according to the third, the White House, no longer merely the official residence of the country's chief executive, was now to serve as a *de facto* global command post, the commander in chief's mandate extending to the far corners of the earth.

In policy circles, it was taken as a given that American power—wielded by the president and informed by the collective wisdom of the political, military, and corporate elite—was sufficient for the task ahead. Although a few outsiders questioned that assumption, such concerns never gained traction. The careful weighing of means and ends suggested timidity. It also risked indulging popular inclinations toward isolationism, kept under tight rein ever since the America First campaign met its demise at the hands of the imperial Japanese navy and Adolf Hitler.

Again and again during the 1990s, U.S. officials warned against the dangers of backsliding. The United States was “the indispensable nation,” they declared, a quasi-theological claim pressed into service as a basis for statecraft. After 9/11, policymakers saw the attacks not as a warning about the consequences of overreach but as a rationale for

redoubling U.S. efforts to fulfill the imperatives of utopian globalism. Thus, in 2005, in the midst of stalemated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, President George W. Bush summoned the spirit of Wilson and assured his fellow citizens that “the expansion of freedom in all the world” had become “the calling of our time.”

A decade later, with both of those wars still simmering and other emergencies erupting regularly, despite vast expenditures of blood and

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treasure, Trump denounced the entire post–Cold War project as a fraud. During his presidential campaign, he vowed to “make America great again” and recover the jobs lost to globalization.

He pledged to avoid needless armed conflicts and to win promptly any that could not be avoided.

Yet although he rejected the first two components of utopian globalism, he affirmed the third. As president, he and he alone would set things right. Once in office, he pledged to use his authority to the fullest, protecting ordinary Americans from further assault by the forces of globalization and ending the misuse of military power. Instead of embracing globalism, Trump promised to put “America first.”

Trump’s appropriation of that loaded phrase, which formed a central theme of his campaign and his inaugural address, was an affront to political correctness. Yet it was much more. At least implicitly, Trump was suggesting that the anti-interventionists who opposed Roosevelt had been right after all. By extension, he was declaring obsolete the lessons of World War II and the tradition of American statecraft derived from them.

The policy implications seemed clear. In a single stroke, the columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote, Trump’s inaugural “radically redefined the American national interest as understood since World War II.” Instead of exercising global leadership, the United States was now opting for “insularity and smallness.” Another columnist, William Kristol, lamented that hearing “an American president proclaim ‘America First’” was “profoundly depressing and vulgar.”

That Trump himself is not only vulgar but also narcissistic and dishonest is no doubt the case. Yet fears that his embrace of “America first” will lead the United States to turn its back on the world have already proved groundless. Ordering punitive air strikes against a regime that murders its own citizens while posing no threat to the

United States, as Trump did in Syria, is not isolationism. Nor is sending more U.S. troops to fight the campaign in Afghanistan, the very epitome of the endless wars that Trump once disparaged. And whatever one makes of Trump's backing of the Sunnis in their regional struggle with the Shiites, his vow to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, his threats against North Korea, and his evolving views on trade and the viability of NATO, they do not suggest disengagement.

What they do suggest is something much worse: an ill-informed, impulsive, and capricious approach to foreign policy. In fact, if "policy" implies a predictable pattern of behavior, U.S. foreign policy ceased to exist when Trump took office. The United States now acts or refrains from action according to presidential whim. Trump's critics have misread their man. Those who worry about the ghost of Charles Lindbergh, the aviator and America First backer, taking up residence in the Oval Office can rest easy. The real problem is that Trump is making his own decisions, and he thinks he has things under control.

Yet more important, unlike Trump himself, Trump's critics have misread the moment. However oblivious he was to the finer points of diplomacy, candidate Trump correctly intuited that establishment views about the United States' proper role in the world had not worked. In the eyes of ordinary citizens, policies conceived under the direction of George H. W. Bush or George W. Bush, Bill Clinton or Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice or Susan Rice no longer command automatic assent. *America über alles* has proved to be a bust—hence, the appeal of "America first" as an alternative. That the phrase itself causes conniptions among elites in both political parties only adds to its allure in the eyes of the Trump supporters whom the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton dismissed during the campaign as "deplorable."

Whatever the consequences of Trump's own fumbling, that allure is likely to persist. So, too, will the opportunity awaiting any would-be political leader with the gumption to articulate a foreign policy that promises to achieve the aim of the original America First movement: to ensure the safety and well-being of the United States without engaging in needless wars. The challenge is to do what Trump himself is almost certainly incapable of doing, converting "America first" from a slogan burdened with an ugly history—including the taint of anti-Semitism—into a concrete program of enlightened action. To put it another way, the challenge is to save "America first" from Trump.

THINKING ABOUT TOMORROW

The problem with utopian globalism, according to Reno, is that it “disenfranchises the vast majority and empowers a technocratic elite.” This is good news for the elite, but not for the disenfranchised. True, since the end of the Cold War, globalization has created enormous wealth. But it has also exacerbated inequality. Much the same can be said of U.S. military policy: those presiding over and equipping American wars have made out quite handsomely; those actually sent to fight have fared less well. The 2016 presidential election made plain to all the depth of the resulting divisions.

Reno’s proposed solution to those divisions is to promote “patriotic solidarity, or a renewed national covenant.” He’s right. Yet the term “covenant,” given its religious connotation, won’t fly in secular quarters. What’s needed is a statement of purpose capable of binding Americans together as Americans (as opposed to citizens of the world), while also providing a basis for engaging with the world as it is, not as it might once have been.

To fill this tall order, Americans should go back to their beginnings and consult the Constitution. Its concise, 52-word preamble, summarizing the purpose of the union, concludes with a pledge to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Put the emphasis on “ourselves,” and this passage suggests a narrow, even selfish orientation. Put the emphasis on “our Posterity,” however, and it invites a more generous response. Here is the basis for a capacious and forward-looking alternative to utopian globalism.

Taking seriously an obligation to convey the blessings of liberty to Americans’ posterity brings to the fore a different set of foreign policy questions. First, what do Americans owe future generations if they are to enjoy the freedoms to which they are entitled? At a minimum, posterity deserves a livable planet, reasonable assurances of security, and a national household in decent working order, the three together permitting the individual and the collective pursuit of happiness.

Second, what are the threats to these prerequisites of liberty? Several loom large: the possibility of large-scale environmental collapse, the danger of global conflict brought about by the rapidly changing roster of great powers, and the prospect of a citizenry so divided and demoralized that it can neither identify nor effectively pursue the common good. Taken separately, each of these threats poses a serious danger to the American way of life. Should more than one materialize, that way

of life will likely become unsustainable. The simultaneous realization of all three would jeopardize the very existence of the United States as an independent republic. Therefore, the overarching purpose of U.S. policy should be to forestall these eventualities.

How best to respond to these threats? Proponents of utopian globalism will argue for the United States to keep doing what it has been doing, even though since the end of the Cold War, their approach has exacerbated, rather than alleviated, problems. A broad conception of "America first" offers an alternative more likely to produce positive results and command popular support.

An "America first" response to environmental deterioration should seek to retard global warming while emphasizing the preservation of the United States' own resources—its air, water, and soil; its flora and fauna; and its coastlines and inland waterways. The pursuit of mere economic growth should take a back seat to repairing the damage caused by reckless exploitation and industrial abuse. To effect those repairs, Congress should provide the requisite resources with the kind of openhandedness currently reserved for the Pentagon. On all matters related to safeguarding the planet, the United States would serve as an exemplar, benefiting future generations everywhere.

An "America first" response to ongoing changes in the international order should begin with a recognition that the unipolar moment has passed. Ours is a multipolar era. Some countries, such as China and India, are just now moving into the first rank. Others long accustomed to playing a leading role, such as France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, are in decline while still retaining residual importance. Occupying a third category are countries whose place in the emerging order remains to be determined, a group that includes Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, and Turkey.

As for the United States, although it is likely to remain preeminent for the foreseeable future, preeminence does not imply hegemony. Washington's calling should be not to impose a Pax Americana but to promote mutual coexistence. Compared with perpetual peace and universal brotherhood, stability and the avoidance of cataclysmic war may seem like modest goals, but achieve that much, and future generations will be grateful.

Similar reasoning applies to the question of nuclear weapons. Whatever advantage a ready-to-launch strike force once conferred on the United States will almost surely disappear in the coming years. As

the Pentagon continues to develop ever more discriminate and exotic ways of killing people and disabling adversaries, strategic deterrence will no longer depend on maintaining a capability to retaliate with

*Let marines be marines,
and help do-gooders do good.*

nuclear weapons. Even as the actual use of U.S. nuclear weapons becomes increasingly unimaginable, however, the United States' own vulnerability to these weapons will persist. As a first step toward eliminating the scourge of nuclear weapons altogether, Washington should pay more than lip service to its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which requires signatories "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures" leading to the abolition of nuclear arms. Taking that obligation seriously would exemplify enlightened self-interest: the very essence of what it means to put America first.

As for the societal fissures that gave rise to Trump, Americans are likely to find that restoring a common understanding of the common good will be a long time coming. The era of utopian globalism coincided with a period of upheaval in which traditional norms related to gender, sexuality, family, and identity fell from favor among many. The resulting rifts run deep. In one camp are those waging a fierce rear-guard action in favor of a social order now in tatters; in the other are those intent on mandating compliance with precepts such as diversity and multiculturalism. Both sides manifest intolerance. Neither gives much evidence of empathy or willingness to compromise.

A reimagined "America first" approach to statecraft would seek to insulate U.S. foreign policy from this ongoing domestic Kulturkampf as much as possible. It would remain agnostic as to which blessings of liberty the United States views as ready for export until Americans themselves reach a consensus on what liberty should actually entail.

This need not imply turning a blind eye to human rights abuses. Yet an "America first" foreign policy would acknowledge that on an array of hot-button issues, as varied as gun ownership and the status of transgender people, the definition of rights is in a state of flux. In that regard, the warning against "passionate attachments" that President George Washington issued in his Farewell Address should apply not only to countries but also to causes. In either case, those responsible for the formulation of foreign policy should avoid taking positions that threaten to undermine the nation's fragile domestic

cohesion. It may be naive to expect politics to stop at the water's edge. That said, diplomacy is not an appropriate venue for scoring points on matters on which Americans themselves remain deeply at odds. That's what elections are for. What the present generation of Americans owes to posterity is the opportunity to sort these things out for themselves.

Something similar applies to U.S. military policy. Future generations deserve their own chance to choose. Unfortunately, military actions undertaken under the auspices of utopian globalism have narrowed the range of available choices and squandered vast resources. The duration of the post-9/11 wars tells the tale: Afghanistan is the longest in U.S. history, and Iraq is the second longest. The countless sums of money wasted—few in Washington evince interest in tallying up how much—have contributed to the exploding size of the U.S. national debt. It stood at approximately \$4 trillion when the Cold War ended, has risen to \$20 trillion today, and is projected to exceed \$25 trillion by the end of this decade. The United States has become a country that does not finish what it starts and then borrows exorbitantly to conceal its failures.

From an "America first" perspective, the antidote is twofold: first, curb Washington's appetite for armed intervention except when genuinely vital U.S. interests are immediately at risk, and second, pay for wars as they occur, rather than saddling future generations with their cost. Posterity deserves books that balance.

Critics will contend that a nation that fights only when vital interests are at stake will become oblivious to the suffering of those unfortunate people living in such hellholes as Syria. Yet fighting is neither the sole nor necessarily the best way to respond to suffering. Indeed, Washington's scorecard when it comes to sending U.S. troops to liberate or protect is mixed at best. Consider the present-day conditions in Somalia, Iraq, and Libya, each the subject of U.S. military action justified entirely or in large part by humanitarian concerns. In all three countries, armed intervention only made life worse for ordinary people.

Does this mean that Americans should simply avert their eyes from horrors abroad? Not at all. But when it comes to aiding the distressed, they should not look to U.S. bombs or troops to fix things. The armed forces of the United States may occasionally engage in charitable works, but that should not be their purpose. Far better to incentivize concerned

citizens to open their own wallets, thereby expanding the capacity of relief organizations to help. In comparison to bureaucratically engineered programs, voluntary efforts are likely to be more effective, both in making a difference on the ground and in winning hearts and minds. In short, let marines be marines, and help do-gooders do good.

POTUS ON NOTICE

All these suggestions amount to little more than common sense. Yet given the state of U.S. politics, defined above all by the outsize role of the president, none of it is likely to happen. In that regard, the most immediate goal of an “America first” policy must be to restore some semblance of constitutional balance. That means curtailing presidential power, an aim that is all the more urgent with Trump in the White House.

In utopian globalist circles, however, the thought of constraining executive authority is anathema. The entire national security apparatus is invested in the proposition that the president should function as a sort of quasi deity, wielding life-and-death authority. Disagree, and you’ve rendered yourself ineligible for employment on the seventh floor of the State Department, in the E Ring of the Pentagon, at CIA headquarters, or anywhere within a half mile of the Oval Office.

This line of thinking dates back to the debate over whether to enter World War II. Roosevelt won that fight and, as a result, endowed his successors with extraordinary latitude on issues of national security. Ever since, in moments of uncertainty or perceived peril, Americans have deferred to presidents making the case, as Roosevelt did, that military action is necessary to keep them safe.

Yet Trump, to put it mildly, is no Roosevelt. More to the point, both the world and the United States have changed in innumerable ways. Although the lessons of World War II may still retain some legitimacy, in today’s radically different circumstances, they do not suffice. So although the risks of ill-considered appeasement persist, other dangers are at least as worrisome—among them, recklessness, hubris, and self-deception. In 1940, the original America First movement warned against such tendencies, which had in recent memory produced the catastrophe of World War I and which would lay the basis for even worse things to come. Today, those warnings deserve attention, especially given the recklessness, hubris, and self-deception that Trump displays daily.

The point is not to relitigate the arguments over whether the United States should have entered World War II: in that instance, Roosevelt got it right and those who thought Nazi Germany posed no threat to the United States got it wrong. Yet the latter were not wrong to insist that the previous war against Germany and all that it had wreaked remained relevant. Nor were they wrong to decry the chicanery and demagoguery that Roosevelt was employing to maneuver the United States toward war.

Americans today need to do a better job of remembering. To remember with an open mind is to consider the possibility that those on the losing end of old arguments might be worth listening to. The imperative now, amid the wreckage created by utopian globalism and the follies of Trump, is to think creatively about the predicaments that the United States faces. Stripped of their unfortunate historical associations and understood properly, many of the concerns and convictions that animated the original America First movement provide a sound point of departure for doing just that. 🌐