

A Time of Domestic Reckoning and Renewal

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For much of my career I have been labeled a “liberal interventionist” or even a “liberal hawk.” I have strongly supported military interventions in places like Kosovo, East Timor, Libya, and Syria on what we would now call Responsibility to Protect (R2P) grounds. Indeed, when the original International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty issued its report first defining sovereignty as including a “responsibility to protect” citizens from genocide, crimes against humanity, and serious and sustained war crimes, I wrote that it was a landmark comparable to the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that it would help define sovereignty in the twenty-first century.

Today, I am chastened. I would be far less inclined to support U.S. military intervention abroad these days for many reasons, some of which arise from the experience of interventions intended to help civilians that have instead helped engulf their countries into seemingly endless conflict, as in Libya. I still believe that force intended and designed to protect is sometimes the only way to counter force intended to murder and oppress, but only if that force is one element of a far larger and sustained multilateral plan for achieving both justice and peace.

The principal reason that I have changed my views, however, is that the United States is so deeply broken at home. We have no business spending blood and treasure trying to fix the problems of other countries unless and until we can keep our own people safe and ensure that they are educated, employed, healthy, self-governing, resilient, and hopeful.

Bad domestic policy imperils our people. But it also has foreign policy consequences. It saps our power, both hard and soft. It shreds our purpose. It undermines our own and the world’s confidence in the democratic experiment.

As I write, it is unclear whether American democracy will survive the election of 2020. Even a few months ago that sentence would have seemed hysterical or alarmist. But the failure of the president to announce in advance that he will accept the results of the election, his reported efforts to manipulate the outcome, his delegitimization of mail-in ballots during a pandemic, and his contempt for both a free press and the rule of law have convinced millions of Americans that they have to prepare to take to the streets in the way of so many pro-democracy movements around the world that we have watched. It *can* happen here.

The global consequences of an authoritarian triumph in the world’s oldest continuous democracy would be devastating for democracies everywhere. But for the rest of this brief essay, I will write on the assumption that our citizenry and our institutions will hold, that we are approaching the nadir but also the turning point of a long national descent into a period of brutal political bullying and division, steadily widening economic inequality, and systemic racial injustice.

Competence

In their new book *The Wake-Up Call*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge argue that the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic “was like an examination of state capacity. ... Most Western countries, particularly America and Britain, failed the test, humiliatingly so when compared with countries in Asia.”¹ Good government has meant the difference between living and dying. Susan Rice warned Americans back in March 2020 that our health “depends on the competence of the president and his team to confront this deadly global threat.”² Six months later, 200,000 Americans were dead and caseloads in over twenty-six states were still growing, with no national pandemic strategy in sight.

Other countries are watching. The faith of the Chinese in American competence took a huge knock in 2008 when they watched the over-leveraged U.S. economy collapse like a house of cards, bringing many economies tied to the U.S. financial system down with it. China rode out the financial crisis relatively quickly, underlining to its people and watchers from around the world the relative merits of state capitalism compared to Western capitalism.

In 2020, after a decade of China's steady courting of governments in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, the contrast between American dysfunction and Chinese competence is starker than ever. Although China kept the world in the dark and allowed the virus to escape its borders in November and December 2019, by June 2020 two U.S. public health experts pointed out that the U.S. death toll from the virus was 100 times that of China's. In the following months the world has been treated to the spectacle of Americans refusing even to wear masks, on the grounds of both libertarian ideology and partisan politics.

The contrast is not just with China, of course. The United States has performed far worse in managing the pandemic than its peer liberal democracies, to the point that Americans cannot travel to the EU.³ It has the fourth highest death rate per 100,000 people in the world, behind the United Kingdom, Peru, and Chile.⁴ Nor is the perception of dysfunction and incompetence just about COVID-19. Even many of Donald Trump's supporters agree that his tweets and behavior are "un-presidential"; who can forget the video of leaders at the 2019 NATO summit in London—the leaders of America's closest allies—rolling their eyes at Trump's ego and antics? The "leader of the free world" has become a laughingstock.

Trump could and did push back against other countries—allies and adversaries alike—by wielding American economic power through trade wars and sanctions. And he could point to a steady record of economic growth and increased employment. But his government's failure to check or control the pandemic means the destruction of lives and livelihoods, neither of which were necessary. As of this writing, the Congressional Budget Office projects that the U.S. GDP will fall by 5.6 percent in 2020; the unemployment rate is 8.4 percent, only a percentage lower than the unemployment rate in 2009.

Foreign perceptions of U.S. decay and decline have also been fed by crumbling U.S. infrastructure; the contrast between major U.S. airports in cities like New York and Los Angeles and airports in Asia, the Middle East, and many European countries are shocking to first-time visitors. The U.S. health care system is one of the most expensive in the world but routinely delivers outcomes at the bottom of the liberal democratic league tables, with distressingly high rates of maternal mortality. The U.S. ranks eighteenth overall in global PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] scores and a disgraceful fortieth in mathematics.⁵ China ranks first in all categories: math, science, and readings.

Incompetence surely decreases American soft power; dysfunctional countries are not attractive models for others to emulate. But it undermines U.S. hard power as well—the president or secretary of state's ability to put together coalitions of allies to push for a set of advantageous global norms on subjects like intellectual property or governance of the internet or to push against a country violating existing international norms, like Iran or North Korea. It is hard here to disentangle the effects of Trump's deliberate alienation of allies and flouting of global norms from the impact of U.S. domestic decline. But governments that are not attracted to the U.S. as an economic, medical, social, environmental, or educational model have less reason to curry favor with the U.S. and more reason to question presumed American competence in anything.

It is thus not surprising that Jennifer Harris and Jake Sullivan argue that "foreign-policy experts need not, indeed they should not, stay on the sidelines in emerging economic policy debates."⁶ They should instead contribute a geopolitical perspective to domestic economic debates, beginning with the recognition that "underinvestment is a bigger threat to national security than the U.S. national debt." We must invest in "infrastructure, technology, innovation, and education" to be able to compete with China and other nations. I would add equity to this list, as explained below. But the overriding point is that a country that is falling behind at home cannot lead abroad.

Inspiration

Even beyond soft power—the power to attract—is the power to inspire. The Puritans saw themselves as beacons to the world, the city on the hill that John Winthrop imagined “with the eyes of all people ... upon us.” Thomas Jefferson wrote that the United States had set in motion a “ball of liberty” that would “roll round the globe,” inspiring other revolutions.⁸ These convictions gave rise to a long and contested history of American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States was a special nation, unlike other nations.

The debates about whether and in what ways the United States is exceptional and whether it is exceptional in a way that is different from the ways other nations think they are exceptional continue. But we need not be exceptional—in the sense of different or *above* other nations—to be inspirational. Our professed ideology of universalism, expressed through the claim that *all* human beings, not just all Americans, are created equal, has inspired leaders and movements from other countries, from Lafayette to Václav Havel.

Just as important, those ideals have inspired our own crusaders for the rights of the many Americans left out of our founding documents and left behind in our self-proclaimed march of progress. And when Americans march and protest and make demands in the name of those ideals, like the continuing racial justice protests that started in the summer of 2020, they inspire marches around the world, igniting demands for justice in many countries.

To grow and flourish, countries, like people, have to believe that they contain *something* good. Whether the United States has a deep kernel of goodness somewhere lies at the heart of the raging debates over U.S. history: Whom should we honor and how? What stories can we honestly tell about ourselves? Who are *we*?

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo recited the traditional answers to these questions in a speech he gave at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia in the summer of 2020. He acknowledged that “at our nation’s founding our country fell far short of securing the rights of all. The evil institution of slavery was our nation’s gravest departure from these founding principles.”⁹ He also referenced the expulsion of Native Americans from their ancestral lands and various departures in U.S. foreign policy from “the idea of sovereignty embedded in the core of our founding.”

However, he continued, “the nation’s founding principles gave us a standard by which we could see the gravity of our failings and a political framework that gave us the tools to ultimately abolish slavery and enshrine into our law equality without regard to race.” (This is an argument that I have made in *The Idea That Is America*, that Barack Obama made in his parting speech as president, and that many others have embraced.) “From Seneca Falls, to Brown vs. Board of Education, to the peaceful marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Americans have always laid claims to their promised inheritance of unalienable rights.”

Pompeo then turned on those Americans he claimed are departing from this tradition by accusing “leading voices” of promulgating “hatred of our founding principles.” He singled out *The New York Times*’ 1619 Project, curated by Nikole Hannah-Jones, for arguing “that our country was founded for human bondage” and that our “institutions continue to reflect the country’s acceptance of slavery at our founding.” Pompeo’s attack has since been repeated frequently by President Trump, who accuses critics of “hating our country.”

At issue is the nature of patriotism itself. My favorite framing of patriotism comes from Carl Schurz, a German immigrant who became a Union Civil War general and later a senator from Missouri. “My country right or wrong,” he said, “if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.”¹⁰

That is easy enough to say. And easy enough to see just how much is wrong with America that needs to be set right, that *must* be set right if we are to move forward as one country. As former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick writes, “Racism is at the root of the wealth and income gaps between Blacks and whites, of disparities in health outcomes and wellness, of persistent housing segregation, of the deterioration of our public schools, of food deserts, of environmental impacts, and of criminal sentencing discrepancies.”¹¹ The standard of justice we must reach is a country in which all those disparities are both narrowed and equally distributed throughout the population, regardless of race, creed, or national origin.

Easy to see and say; very hard to do. Yet on what do we stand while we're working to make things right? In his 1993 inaugural address, President Bill Clinton insisted: "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."¹² But what if there is nothing "right with America"? What if our history is an unrelieved tableau of slavery, genocide, racism, exclusion, and oppression of multiple minorities? If we have to face our own caste system?

It's a serious question, no less serious for being caricatured by those on the right who insist on describing protesters of deep injustice as America-haters. The standard progress narrative offered by Pompeo—that we are marching steadily toward the attainment of our ideals, acknowledging and overcoming our past failings—is not enough. American patriots must embrace a much deeper and harder reckoning.

We must come to love the questioning itself, the effort to be radically honest about all the ways in which many of us have used that narrative to avoid the hard work of facing history and ourselves. We can love the moral courage of all those Americans, past and present, who have dared to take our ideals seriously and demand that they be achieved not at some misty future date that we can amble toward at a comfortable and nondisruptive pace, but *now*. We can decide that being an American means actively refusing complacency.

Harvard historian Jill Lepore embeds this idea in democracy itself. "It's a paradox of democracy," she writes, "that the best way to defend it is to attack it, to ask more of it, by way of criticism, protest, and dissent." Her one-volume history of the United States, *These Truths*, tries to tell the whole truth of our history, laying the stories we like to hear and the ones we are ashamed of side-by-side. She begins from the proposition that "the United States rests on a dedication to equality, which is chiefly a moral idea, rooted in Christianity, but it rests, too, on a dedication to inquiry, fearless and unflinching."¹³

For role models in how to both love and question our country simultaneously, white Americans can look to Black Americans. In her introductory essay for *The 1619 Project*, Hannah-Jones begins: "My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard."¹⁴

Hannah-Jones' father went into the military to escape poverty but "for another reason as well, a reason common to black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American." The army didn't treat him well, nor did his country, so how to explain his patriotism? Hannah-Jones writes that when she was young it embarrassed her, that her father's pride "in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination."

Over time, however, she comes to see that her father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. "He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us." She also comes to see African-Americans as the custodians of the American creed. "Our founding ideals were false when they were written," she writes. "Black people have fought to make them true."

Theodore Roosevelt Johnson, a twenty-year Navy veteran and White House fellow, writes on race, national solidarity, and the future of America. He sees racism as an "existential threat to America" because, "if the idea that we are all created equal with certain unalienable rights dies, it will not make much difference what the shell of a nation left behind is called—America will be dead, too."¹⁵

Johnson sees African-Americans as "superlative citizens," practiced at "taking on all the responsibilities required of the citizenry even when the nation does not deliver on its promises." They have also learned to support and stand for one another, developing the solidarity that the entire nation now needs.

How Americans of every color and creed come to grips with our past is an essential underpinning of the United States' role in the world in the decades to come. How we understand ourselves as a country, how we tell our history, how we combine humility, honesty, love, inclusion, idealism, and purpose into a uniquely twenty-first century brand of patriotism will all determine how we engage with the world. It will also determine whether we retain the capacity to inspire ourselves and others, even as we recognize the ability of others to inspire and teach us.

A New Narrative

The stakes for American renewal are very high. The role that the United States can play in the world—for the good of Americans and of human beings the world over—depends deeply on how effectively we can use the multiple crises—health, economic, social, and moral—that we find ourselves in as catalysts for sweeping change. A resurgence by the American people demanding better of our government and ourselves will chart a path forward that is all the more exhilarating and inspiring because of the depths to which we have sunk.

The example the United States must strive to set, however, is no longer just of a successful liberal democracy. It is of a successful pluralist democracy in which no one racial or ethnic group has a majority. In 2026, the U.S. will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the beginning of the struggle of the United States for independent nationhood. It is an anniversary that falls on the cusp of the transition from a majority white nation to a plurality nation. Indeed, by 2027, just a year later, Americans under thirty will no longer be majority white. And by 2045, or perhaps as early as 2040, the entire population will follow suit.

No country in the world has ever made that transition, although many current liberal democracies may face it in the future. If the United States succeeds in embracing and valuing its deep diversity and insisting that its power structures reflect the actual demography of the nation, then it will have a new national story to tell the world. A story of honesty, humility, and reconciliation as the bedrock of renewed strength and pride.

That America will be a country that reflects and connects the world. I grew up going back and forth to Europe because my mother was Belgian; her family—my family—lives in Brussels. Middle-class and upper-middle-class Americans who are first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants from South, East, and Central Asia; Africa; and Latin America are now connected to their families in their origin country through the internet and through far cheaper flights than when I was growing up. African-Americans who are far removed from the African roots of their enslaved ancestors are nevertheless often much more interested in traveling to Ghana or other African countries that played an active role in the slave trade. They are American, not African, just as Asian-Americans or Latinx Americans whose families have been in the United States for a century or more are American, but they may nevertheless feel more connected to the countries or continents from which their families come.

These ties—cultural, commercial, civic, educational, governmental—are a huge well of national capital. A United States that can renew and rebuild itself domestically, investing in the physical, digital, educational, and care infrastructure that the country so badly needs, can once again project competence and confidence in its foreign relations. A United States that can repair its politics to update a creaky and obstructive eighteenth century electoral system can demonstrate the flexibility and adaptability of democracy versus the entrenched control of autocracy. A United States that can actually live its founding premise, that all human beings are created equal and are thus not locked into lives determined by the circumstances of their birth, can counter the cynicism and corruption that threatens to engulf our world.

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