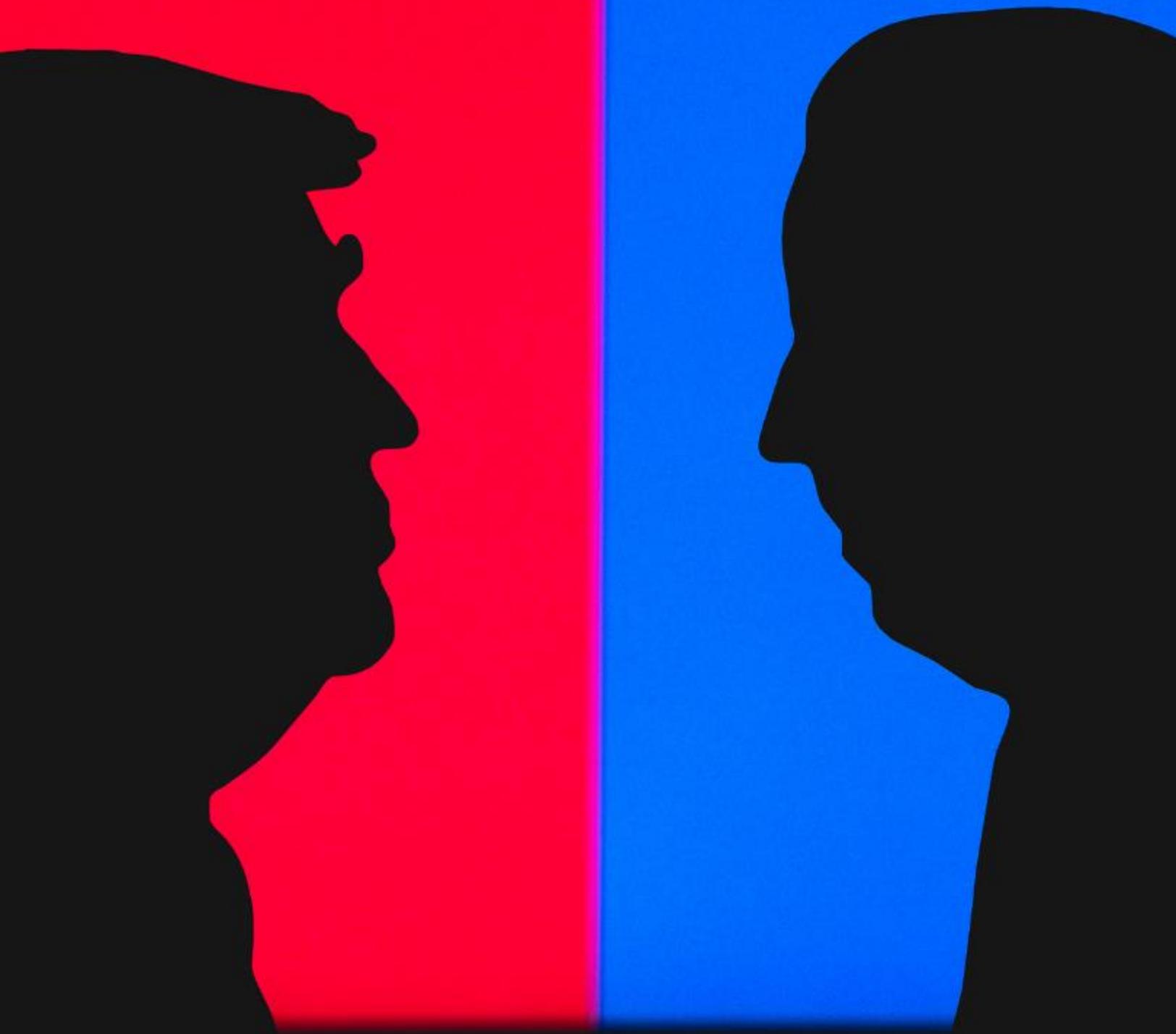


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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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A Young American's Impressions of India

Steven Elleman
October 1, 2020

Steven Elleman provides an in-depth account of traveling through India.

The brief time between UC Berkeley and full-time employment as a software engineer would be the only moment to nourish a sense of moral curiosity that had been bruised and underfed in university. Commitment to a structure and its rules and a dedication from coding illiteracy to a CS degree from UC Berkeley had left me spiritually drained. It was time to rekindle the fire that had been weakly sustained through my anthropology coursework, conversation and daydreams.

Living in Japan and Australia had taught me that travel was one of the most time-effective ways of exploring unknown unknowns. In the process of observing others and gleaning their moral universe, there was a double insight: recognition of new values and recognition of your own values. The new world you find provides a reference point to the world you came from, and the deeper you dig into others the deeper you drill into yourself. That is why I went to India.

I had initially considered Iran, Israel and Turkey, much to my parents' dismay. When Fair Observer's Atul Singh — who was teaching in India — graciously offered me a place to stay in Gujarat, I immediately expressed interest. Anchored to my earlier and more anxiety-inducing proposals, this offer was met by immediate approval and an audible sigh of relief from my parents.

Several months earlier, I had met Atul through a mutual friend, Alexander Coward. Quite quickly it became clear that Atul held and lived values that I admired and wanted to strive for in

my own life: discipline, self-reliance and a sense of cultural memory interwoven with a deep appreciation for story. At a gathering of students, he invited us to exercise with him in the evening. I jumped on the offer. Several times a week, we would exercise at twilight and he would teach stretches and exercises, answer my questions and routinely show that a 46-year-old could be in better shape than someone in their 20s.

Stumbling Up the Learning Curve

I skipped graduation to fly to India and, within six hours, was scammed. My initial plan had been to travel from New Delhi to the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IIT) by bus, Ahmedabad by train to stay with a school friend, and a flight back to New Delhi where I would leave the country. I wanted to immediately make my way south. Impatience and total lack of experience proved to be a recipe for disaster.

I arrived at 2 am by plane and then at the bus station at 4:30 am for the earliest bus to Agra. Little did I know that the New Delhi fog was so bad that all buses had been grounded to minimize the risk of highway pileups. I was dropped off in an urban jungle of creeping power-lines and dumpster fires to search for a bus that wasn't coming. Within minutes, two men began harassing me and it dawned on me how completely out of depth I was. I flagged the first tuk-tuk driver and asked for the nearest tourist agency — time for plan B and to check personal drivers.

The agent was passed out at his desk. He woke up with a start and instantaneously sized me up. This must have been a scenario that had played out a number of times before me. He offered a personal driver from New Delhi to Jaipur, then via train from Jaipur to Ahmedabad, with accommodations and stops on the way. When he quoted a price, I knew there was a hefty tourist tax but I had no reference point for how much. Without this information, I weakly attempted to bargain down the price, but the agent deftly justified the cost and listed the services that would go along with the package.

The power of information asymmetry was in full effect. The idea of a personal driver offered an appealing sense of security. My biggest concern was not the price, but whether I could trust the package or not.

By 5 am, I was leaving New Delhi by car amidst fog so heavy that the surroundings dissolved into gray within a meter. A massive pileup resulting in a high-profile footballer's death occurred on the same highway an hour after we cleared it. I was less concerned about the fog and more concerned about falling asleep. I was deathly afraid that I could be the target of an elaborate scam — or worse. My fears subsided as time passed and I made small talk with my Nepali driver, Rahul.

In true tourist fashion, our very first stop was the Taj Mahal. That morning and the Taj Mahal were the lowest points of my trip. The Taj Mahal was surreal and dissonant. As a white tourist, I cut in front of massive lines of Indians waiting for what must have been hours. This felt like a little act of neo-colonization by the global tourist. Rather than seeing the stunning architecture in its proper context of memory and story, the space was filled with gabbing tourists snapping an obscene number of photos, committing the sights to digital memory and social media before even seeing it themselves.

There was a second line to cut around the Taj Mahal itself — the white tourists could directly enter the complex while numerous Indians waited in a line that wrapped a full 360 degrees around the ivory structure. Inside, we were shepherded through a metal guard that resembled livestock pens. There was no time or space to appreciate the fine, inlaid stone panels showing tens of varieties of flowers.

Throughout the rest of my trip, I was the first person into tourist destinations and typically one of the first to leave. Thick fog and smoke enclosed the Agra Fort. In total silence, I imagined the princes and courtiers who walked in the very corridors and chambers that I walked. It felt like the location itself encapsulated memory and, for the most fleeting of moments, my

imagination resuscitated it. I imagined these little connections to be ghosts that inhabited my mind. Silence and imagination evoked the spirits, and as quickly as they came they disappeared into oblivion again. As the morning fog burned off, we left Agra.

On the road to Jaipur, rural living met 4G service. Looking out the window, I was shocked to see the ubiquitous presence of cellphones and a horizon punctured by cell towers and Airtel advertisements. I was seeing a world that had skipped directly to the computer revolution. I reflected on how they had the same access to Wikipedia, Stack Overflow and the Project Gutenberg that I did. The only remaining barriers to entry to these sources of knowledge were English and an electrical outlet. The veil of geographic isolation was falling.

In Jaipur, there were experiences that offered a glimpse into the past and the future. The miniature art in the artist quarter of the City Palace and its mix of Persian and Indian styles expressed a pocket universe of aesthetics and values. The warm hospitality of pashmina vendors and young chaiwalas offering masala chai was poignant and memorable. One could reach restricted locations via unrestricted routes through the tunnels of Amer Fort. Mothers and aunties in vibrant block-print saris, their daughters in jeans and sons in football jerseys sporting smartphones were a curious combination of tradition and modernity. A mother in a burka with her young daughter in a dress with Disney princess prints and high-heels several sizes too large was another example of the same phenomenon. Being asked to take a photo of a couple, only to realize that, in fact, the man wanted to take a selfie with me and not his girlfriend was strange

From Rahul's interactions with restaurant and shop owners, it was clear that India was an economy of goodwill. The restaurant owner won from a white tourist coming to their place in terms of money and the possibility of citations in travel guides and future tourists. Rahul won because the restaurant owners would make

doubly sure that the food was good, and he consistently received free food. And, finally, I got excellent, cheap and safe food.

Compared to previous food prices, it seemed as if the tourist tax was significantly lower and the food was always tasty. Not once did I get sick in India. Instead of trust being enforced by the Indian state, it was self-contained in the set of relationships. I made a promise to Rahul that if I ever traveled to India or Nepal again, I would go directly to him. It was a relationship that I wanted to preserve.

It was in Jaipur that I first recognized a very unexpected and pronounced white worship. I must have been asked for 20 selfies by Indian tourists. It was shocking, flattering and quickly sour. Rahul recounted that his 7-year old son in New Delhi had wished that he was lighter-skinned because he had been bullied and excluded by the other children for being of a darker complexion. After describing his son's situation, with tears in his eyes he told me that he didn't know what to tell his son. Rahul felt the same way and wished he could be white like me. Here was a devoted father and tender husband feeling lesser because of the color of his skin. I told him that the first woman I had fallen in love with was Nepali, so I personally disagreed with his assessment. Visible shock gave way to a quiet pride. I gently nudged him and asked him to tell his son that.

In Jodhpur, I was on my own again, but my time and conversations with Rahul had helped a great deal. Solitude gave way to reflection and self-awareness. I realized how immersed I was in my senses. In America, things feel alienated from the sensory. So many needs, drives and thoughts exist in the abstract. In public spaces, Americans have an uncanny ability to optimally maximize the distance between each other. If a newcomer moves into an occupied space, their neighbors dynamically adjust themselves in relation to others, scooting over their belongings by a smidge. "Politeness" in the US back-handedly indicates territoriality. Colors conform to a band of pleasant dullness. Music playing too loud,

even with headphones, is met by stabbing stares signaling an offense to public propriety. There is cool order and subjugation of space and the senses.

Subjugation of the senses was simply impossible in India. My senses overflowed. I had to use all my sight to track and trace oncoming tuk-tuks, side-coming bicycles and under-coming children, as opposed to total focus on reading, coding and writing. On the first evening I spent in Jodhpur, I snuck around the backstairs of my haveli to find a way onto the roof for the sunset. That's when the Muslim evening prayers began. I felt the sound. Wave after wave, culminating in a sonic ecstasy. Indian Muslims turned the entire sky into their place of worship. In the US, there was a sense of control, but in India, there was a sense of flow. There was simply too much reality to process — and reality just swept you away.

In this overflowing and frenetic energy, there was a kind of order. This order felt organic in the same sense the body or an ecosystem is ordered: its structures are growing, coalescing and reacting to itself continually. The concept that best labeled this order to me was jugaad, a word combining on-the-fly inventiveness with a faith that things would fall into place. It just felt like everyone in the massive flows of crowds and tuk-tuks was guided by jugaad. This was in direct conflict with the attitudes in the US where there was an attempt to control reality through various forms of definition: money, data, measurement.

From Jodhpur to Gandhinagar, I shared Jodhpur Sweets with a Cambridge computer science PhD whose parents lived in Jodhpur, and we discussed politics and computer science. Arriving well past midnight, the drive from the train station to IIT Gandhinagar turned into two hours of driving around the town, until we finally arrived at the university campus and I collapsed at Atul's apartment.

A New Contender

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed were two full-growth men, presumably professors, playing cricket in the apartment across the

complex. At 2 pm, Atul introduced me to Raj Jaswa in the faculty dining room at IIT, at 2:15 pm, we found that my area of study was directly related to one of his classes, and by 7 pm, I was giving a presentation to his students. Minutes after finishing the presentation, Atul strode into the classroom in his full military attire, pointed to me and signaled for me to follow him and join his world history lecture.

No time was wasted. There, he jumped into the Mughal Empire, interweaving history and humor, bravado and banter, broad strokes and tantalizing minutiae. I was impressed with how Atul enraptured his audience and engaged them in the lecture process. The class concluded at 9:30 pm and the students looked more exhausted than their professor — which was a good thing as Atul switched gears for his political economy lecture that was beginning in minutes.

In the three days I spent at IIT Gandhinagar, an undercurrent of youthful possibility pervaded the faculty. There was the optimism and energy of an open frontier, unconquered by brick and mortar but brimming with an idea of what it could be. The campus was surrounded by open fields on all sides, space ripe for the imagination and evidence of continuous development was everywhere — from newly-constructed facilities to unwrapped light posts and the occasional slag heap. The perimeter of the campus was broken earth ready to be built upon. This university was a work in progress and it was moving along rapidly.

Two weeks earlier, I had graduated from UC Berkeley with a computer science degree, and on the banks of the Sabarmati river, I found an unfinished campus where I met more spirited faculty members in three days than I had met in my last six months at Berkeley. This wasn't a tired patriarch retelling old victories — this felt like a new competitor, hungry for its place.

In the evenings, the professors would eat in the main dining hall alongside students. This institution had first-rate minds but all eccentrics, independents and idealists. It occurred to me that this must be how brain drain starts. First, offer

freedom and stability to the independent minds, and after reaching critical mass, you can attract the next generation of minds, now of a more conventional fare.

I had seen at UC Berkeley how a brilliant and beloved math professor had been whacked for refusing to use specific teaching methods mandated by the math department, despite published student data showing that his methods were superior. When “great” institutions begin rejecting great minds, they are on a well-trodden path to suicide — and IIT was the kind of hungry institution that took them.

Heritage and Havelis

At sunrise, I joined Atul and the main administrator, Santosh Raut, for breathing exercises. There was a gentle discipline to Santosh, and he pointed out tiny adjustments to improve our posture and technique. It felt like he had access to a deep well of knowledge that would not be appreciated in the US, largely because it had not gone through the trust brokers we recognized: government and research institutions. It felt like this knowledge had been accumulated over generations. There was a kind of lineage of thought in all of this, and I was being included. Atul's attitude was the same as Santosh's. There was an unwritten and unspoken obligation, one united with the motivation for the knowledge itself: If the knowledge is valuable, it is essential to pass it on. My thanks to them would be to pass it as well.

There was magic in this approach to learning — theory and practice of knowledge were united into a single living body. Knowledge was not a book in a library, a theorem on a chalkboard or anything objective for that matter. Knowledge was a mode of living. A book or theorem could only be understood embedded in a matrix of active and living understanding.

In the institutional world, I had recently felt theory was deeply divorced from practice. Theorems were beat into students through a pretense of self-evident meaning — only an idiot wouldn't understand. This pretense of objectivity

was brandished as a moral club by professors and graduate student instructors, either to redirect blame for abysmal instruction or to externalize angst from their own academic insecurity onto students already filled with self-doubt.

Three general types of students emerged in this environment. The first type had come into university with a fully-developed matrix of understanding and they succeeded because they were already a finished product. At the center of their understanding was faith in their own ability to digest their experiences of reality and fit them into their matrix of understanding. The second type “succeeded” by channeling fear into academic productivity. Intense neuroticism produced understanding bereft of confidence and trust in the world. If the first group of students was a sun whose enormity of trust brought more and more matter into its orbit, the second group was a black hole. The third group of students, which was easily the majority, had lost their spiritual center. It had been too damaged by the barrage of blame and negative reinforcement.

The first group became entrepreneurs. The second went to graduate school, succumbing to a perverse Stockholm Syndrome with academia playing the part of the abuser. The third group desperately sought social and economic security in a corporate job.

My own experience was a mix. My parents are historians with a deep appreciation of the humanities. In the humanities and the arts, I was in the first group. After taking my first computer science class in university, I realized I had to be literate in programming to have agency in the 21st century. I knew university would be the easiest time to jump into a new discipline even if it was initially excruciating. For three years, I struggled in the third group in my computer science classes. During that time, I anchored myself from being part of the first group in the humanities. It allowed me to weather the storm in computer science, and I began succeeding in my final year at university.

Coming from this world, these two mentors — Atul and Santosh — were a godsend. The

contrast between university and this was night and day, and this was so clearly the better way of passing knowledge. It is difficult to describe the depth of gratitude I felt. I felt affirmed. The sputtering sun at the center of my understanding burned brighter.

Immediately after exercise, I was off to Ahmedabad to meet Vishesh at the Gandhi Ashram. Unlike the other sights, there were very few pictures or selfies being taken. In crowds of people, there was no sound. Here, Mahatma Gandhi had innovated and practiced his methods for living, along with his disciples. The location emanated a spiritual gravity, a central star in the cosmology of story that was India. There was a quiet pride in the crowd: this was our man. Where previous locations had to be resuscitated with imagination, the Ashram felt alive and was overflowing with belief.

In Old Ahmedabad, Vishesh had a surprise for me. We drove through one of the main arteries of Ahmedabad and walked to the Jama Masjid, one of the oldest and largest mosques in the city. When we walked into the stunning structure, I slung my camera out of respect only to have the imam encourage me to take photos with a massive grin on his face. He was clearly proud of his mosque.

I followed Vishesh as we continued to his mysterious destination. On the way, he insisted we stop for sweets. The Indian state of Gujarat, of which Ahmedabad is the capital, is known for its delectable desserts. At a tiny shop, we tried several samples of delicious saffron and honey-infused sweets. I wiggled around like a child out of sheer pleasure. When I attempted to pay, the shopkeepers refused to take my money. They were proud of their sweets and insisted it was a gift. I took note of the kindness and reminded myself to pass it on to some future traveler.

Vishesh had taken me to his favorite place in the entire city: a fully restored haveli, complete with stunning traditional woodwork on the wall panels, window shades and the inner courtyard. With an immense sense of pride, he explained the process of his family restoring several havelis in

the old town to their former glory. It was immensely heart-warming to listen to the labor of love of restoring relics of a beloved heritage and history.

We returned to his home where I was treated to superb family hospitality. Vishesh's affectionate mother fed me unbelievable homemade food until I was at bursting point. We talked the entire night and, at 4 am, I left for my flight to New Delhi.

The Godfather, Indian-Style

In New Delhi, I was treated to hospitality by another school friend. When I came out of the airport, he was waiting with his driver, sunglasses on despite the smog that clung to the city. We caught up and when I jokingly mentioned my driver scam story, he replied immediately, "We're going to fix that for you." I didn't quite know what he meant. We continued to his house in New Delhi where I was introduced to his warm and affectionate family: his parents, his sister and her Indian-American husband, and the two house servants. "In India, we say that the guest is god," his mother said with her eyes beaming.

After 15 minutes, several other young men came in. Along with my school friend and his brother-and-law, they were co-founders of a startup and were preparing a pitch for a big investor that evening. I was surprised when they asked if I could help with the pitch.

In California, I had been giving weekly lectures on blockchain technology at university. I found the technology genuinely interesting, despite a majority of blockchain entrepreneurs being unabashed scam artists and the bouts of "tulip fever." hilariously, none of the co-founders had actually studied the technology. Clearly, they had caught the fever. I told them I would be happy to explain the technology but would not pitch directly for their company. "I don't have enough understanding of your company to pitch it," I said.

I prepared a presentation and, at around 8 pm, we went to one of the most expensive hotel restaurants in New Delhi — apparently the meal

cost over \$1,500, which easily made it the most expensive and absurd culinary spectacles I had ever participated in. I remember the investor's bushy ear hair and massive gold rings most clearly. He constantly talked about money and the cost of the meal and other purchases. My lectures were played up and I had to restrain some snorted giggles.

Rather than intervening, I allowed the sycophancy to continue. I was enthralled by the spectacle of the evening. It was all so absurd. The meal was at least five or six courses, each was more grotesquely complex than the last but none particularly good. The meals were an exercise in vanity more than taste.

The investor's son was far sharper and suspicious of my classmates, as he should have been. I genuinely enjoyed his company. When I mentioned that I loved spicy food, he requested the hottest pepper from the kitchen. He was sizing me up. Without hesitation, I ate the peppers and was surprised that they were not that spicy — I had lucked out. I ate half and turned to the investor's son and, with a big grin, looked him in the eye and asked if he wanted to finish them. It was hilarious to watch him momentarily break eye contact and bow out. "In a previous lifetime, you must have been an Indian," he exclaimed to uproarious laughter from the others.

After dinner, I gave a short, semi-technical presentation to the investors, answered the son's varied and excellent questions, and then bowed out to allow the co-founders to present their company. Everyone seemed very happy with the outcome of the evening. On the way out, my classmate asked if I wanted to join them as a co-founder. I told them I couldn't because I didn't know enough about business, but I would be happy to offer strictly technical advice.

I began the next and final full day in India by returning to the tourist agency I had started at. "Go to the agency with my driver and give them my dad's card — that should sort things out," my friend said.

We went to the tourist agency and I politely explained that it seemed like I was overcharged

for the otherwise excellent package I had received. Before letting the manager respond, my driver went up to him, gave him the card and began speaking aggressively to the manager in Hindi while pointing at the card. Threats were being made. I waved at my driver to chill out and let the manager speak. Immediately, the manager claimed that my agent had deviated from company policy and had overcharged me on his own accord. He asked if a half refund sounded reasonable. I thought it was more than reasonable and assented. Here was corruption in action, but this time it was on my side.

That evening, I was invited to a party at a “Delhi Ranch,” one of the large estates on the outskirts of the city. The party was fascinating. I felt like I was an extra in an Indian version of “The Godfather.” It was positively mafioso. My classmate’s father joked around with his lawyer about “that time he helped me out,” publicly guffawing and winking about evading the law from some unstated crime.

In the group of people, there was a clear generational divide. The middle-aged people at the party were clearly self-made. They all wore jeans and simple coats and polo shirts. Their wives wore tasteful designer clothes and small and expensive golden jewelry, studded with emeralds and rubies. Among the men, there was a feeling of calm power and confidence. The next generation was different. Inherited wealth had clearly gone to their children’s heads. The younger men wore alligator-skin shoes, gold chains, expensive designer clothes and leather jackets. The women wore stunning, tight-fitting dresses, low-cut and voluptuous.

As the evening progressed, a drunk cricket game got more and more out of hand among the younger generation. They had been educated in the US or the UK, and my classmate’s American brother-in-law was clearly a status symbol in that particular crowd. My classmate’s mother left early to drop me off home to pack. She emphasized again how the “guest is god” and how they “saw me like a new son.” While the mother was unbelievably kind, these statements

began to take on a sinister, mafioso feeling by the time I left.

The driver asked me for a favor before I exited the car for the airport. He wanted an American dollar to put on his wall. I assented, it was the least I could do. This reverence was unexpected. Halfway around the world, the dollar represented some flavor of hope.

Just 24 hours and three nearly-missed flights later, I started my new software engineer job in San Francisco. No time was wasted.

***Steven Elleman** is a software engineer working for Okta in San Francisco.

“Defund the Police”: A Simple Slogan for a Complex Problem

Ryan Skinnell
October 9, 2020

“Defund the police” is a controversial slogan, and for good reason.

As Black Lives Matter protests continue to flare across the country and the presidential election looms, and with a Supreme Court seat suddenly in contention, law and order is front and center in American politics. The slogan “defund the police” in particular has become a lightning rod since gaining prominence following the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor earlier this year.

In North Carolina, the Republican speaker of the House recently tried to tie state Democrats to proposals to defund the police. In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott proposed legislation to freeze tax revenues for cities that vote to defund. And both Joe Biden and Donald Trump have accused each other of supporting defunding. Police reform has already come up in the first presidential and vice-presidential debates, and it

will surely remain in the public eye between now and the election.

Simple Slogan

Politicians using the idea of defunding the police against their opponents is hardly surprising, especially given the emotional charge surrounding the slogan and the events that brought it to mainstream attention. But it's also a gross misrepresentation of the slogan and the movement, which is inexcusable for anyone claiming to support police reform. Anyone who wants to be involved with an issue should at least make a good-faith effort to understand it. In the case of defunding the police, anyone motivated to learn more can turn to dozens of explainers in respected journalistic and academic outlets about the meaning of the phrase, its history and its implications.

Arguments for defunding the police are complicated and, in some cases, contradictory. But despite gaining recent notoriety, they are neither novel nor unusual. "Defund the police" did not magically appear this year. Discussions of abolishing law enforcement are more than a century old and build on the work of respected scholars, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Bertrand Russell. Police abolition gained steam alongside prison abolition movements in the 1960s under the guidance of activists and scholars such as Angela Davis. The defund the police movement built on those earlier campaigns.

There is also data. Some cities defunded their police years ago and have information about the results. Unsurprisingly, the results are complicated. They depend on local circumstances as much as scholarly research. They represent varied implementations and are hard to compare. In short, they don't easily conform to a given political perspective. The point, however, is that anyone who wants to understand what defunding the police entails has plenty of accessible resources.

Not everyone needs to know a social movement's complexities, of course, but even this brief history illustrates that "defund the

police" has complex influences and evolving objectives despite the oversimplification of the slogan. Dismissing a movement because of its slogan may be good politics, but it's bad policy. Slogans are powerful because they are simple, and they attract attention and motivate supporters. But simplification complicates meaning and leaves slogans open to critique.

This has been a significant problem for "defund the police," even among people who support the movement's broader goals. The biggest misunderstandings of the slogan include the suggestions that it means that "there should be no police to protect the innocent," that calls for defunding distract from meaningful reform or that defunding "invites anarchy." It doesn't mean any of these things.

Good Controversy

Oversimplification is a problem with all slogans. No matter how simple, however, they don't erase an issue's complexity. Simple slogans like "defund the police" still represent complicated contexts, histories and goals. And the complexity behind the "defund the police" slogan is a mere shadow of the complexity of the larger issues under discussion. Real efforts at police reform — reducing militarization, reducing shootings, funding social services, providing training and introducing accountability measures — are wrapped up with complicated municipal funding models, deeply-ingrained attitudes and beliefs, and entrenched incentive structures.

In short, law enforcement reform is intensely complicated. It demands research, careful study and tough decisions. And the people who want to be involved in meaningful reform — politicians, law enforcement groups and citizens — need to be willing to evaluate the complications and make tough decisions. And here, people's reactions to the slogan give us some insight.

If a person can't be trusted to learn about the "defund" slogan, how can they be trusted with the exceedingly complicated task of reforming law enforcement? Or if a person understands the slogan and still refuses to represent its

complexities because it is politically or personally expedient, how can citizens, activists and voters trust their motives? Refusing to learn about the slogan or weigh its complications carefully is a warning sign that a person cannot be counted on to invest the time and energy necessary to address the actual problems at hand.

To be sure, “defund the police” is a controversial slogan, and for good reason. It blatantly contradicts what many Americans believe about law and order. And it is certainly possible that defunding law enforcement is a flawed idea. Nevertheless, police reform has gained momentum around the country. Many cities and states are already pursuing it in different ways. No doubt it will be complicated. But since law enforcement reform affects every American, we should all be deeply invested in ensuring that the people involved in it are well-equipped to do the hard work and willing to do it in good faith.

***Ryan Skinnell** is an associate professor of rhetoric at San José State University.

The Role of Foreign Policy in the US Election

Gary Grappo
October 13, 2020

Foreign policy may not figure highly as voters choose their next president, but the dramatic changes to America’s traditional approach to international relations are contributing to the people’s much-elevated anxiety over their current president.

It has become cliché to assert that unless their country is at war, Americans pay scant attention to foreign policy in their presidential elections. On the whole — and assuming a

candidate isn’t seen as a warmonger, an accusation made of Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in his loss to incumbent President Lyndon Johnson in 1964 — this has been largely true. A corollary may be that when the US is at war, the incumbent usually wins, (George W. Bush being the most recent example in 2004).

The US isn’t technically at war now, though it has military forces deployed to high-threat areas and combat zones in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Those deployed numbers are pretty modest compared to recent years and have been trending downward since the Obama administration.

So, will foreign policy matter to American voters when they vote in this election cycle? (November 3 is the official voting day, but millions have already begun voting by mail and are expected to continue in increasing numbers as Election Day approaches.)

Foreign Policy May Matter to Voters...

We won’t know the answer to that question until after the election when exit polls and surveys can more accurately measure voters’ attitudes and reasons for voting. It is probably true to say, however, that foreign policy won’t be at the top of most Americans’ agendas when they fill out their ballots. More important domestic issues will undoubtedly prevail. Those include the president’s response (or lack of) to the coronavirus outbreak, which has taken the lives of more than 215,000 Americans; the consequent devastating impact of the pandemic on the US economy; health care; racial justice and equality; and climate change.

There is another concern of voters and it is unprecedented in modern times. That is the heightened level of Americans’ anxiety over Donald Trump’s crisis-a-day presidency and an uncontrollable addiction to Twitter, which often only serves to exacerbate that anxiety. A return to a less apprehension-provoking presidency would be welcomed by many Americans.

Part of that anxiety, one could argue, might stem from Trump’s dramatic departure from the foreign policy supported by every US president

since Harry Truman following World War II. This was generally characterized as an alliance-based approach in which the US enlisted nations throughout the world in some form of alliance, partnership or understanding. It's what drove the US to lead the effort to form — or support the formation of — multilateral organizations like the United Nations, NATO, the European Union and a myriad of UN-affiliated or regional organizations, from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank to the International Monetary Fund and the Latin American Development Bank. It was also responsible in part for America's successful emergence from the Cold War.

Spoiled by Peace?

This level of stability and security is taken for granted by far too many Americans. The enormous prosperity and development they have enjoyed since the end of World War II were possible because Americans did not need to worry as much as other nations about threats or invaders from abroad. The Cold War and the prospect of a nuclear Armageddon hung over Americans for decades. But most people understood that their leaders as well as those of the Soviet Union did not want — and most often sought to avoid through diplomacy — such confrontations from which neither would have emerged victorious. Through its far-sighted policy of alliance-based relations, America could also count on the support and partnership of other nations, including most of the world's most advanced industrial nations.

Today, Americans need not fear threats from abroad because their nation has maintained a foreign policy intended to ensure their security and promote their welfare. It has been the blessing that has allowed all other blessings of America to flourish virtually without hindrance from abroad.

President Trump has cast this approach into doubt. Furthermore, he's been challenged at times to lay out a cogent foreign policy alternative. What may best describe his approach

is anti-multilateral and “America First.” That has meant directing harsh criticism at NATO and the EU as well as the UN, the WTO and the World Health Organization.

Additionally, he has developed an unseemly and uncharacteristic (for American presidents) liking for autocrats, including Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un (among others). More shockingly, he has insulted and degraded some of America's closest friends and allies, including Canada, Mexico, the UK, Germany, France, Japan, Australia and South Korea.

Active International Engagement

These actions by their president disturb many Americans. How many exactly we can't be sure of. But the previous alliance-based foreign policy is supported by a significant majority of Americans of nearly all political persuasions. Though far from perfect at times, it has permitted the country to avoid major wars. Even in America's wars of choice like Vietnam and Iraq, the US could still count on the backing of many of our friends and allies, at least at the outset.

Recent polling bears this out. Majorities of Americans support their country's alliances and ties to such stalwart allies such as NATO, Germany, South Korea and Japan. Majorities also believe that maintaining America's military superiority is important, and they even accept stationing US troops in allied countries. According to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 69% of Americans want the US to play an active role in international affairs but not dominate.

Americans also believe that international trade, another hallmark of previous US foreign policy, is good for the country and its economy. According to a survey conducted by the Chicago Council, 83% think international trade is good for US companies and nearly 90% believe it is good for the US economy. More than three-quarters support compliance with rulings of the WTO.

None of this would appear to comport with Trump's foreign policy. In fact, his approach has

flown in the face of what Americans believe, support and want.

Other decisions affecting America's standing in the world also weigh on their emotions and sentiments. For example, Trump's unwillingness to cooperate with other nations to develop and distribute a vaccine for the novel coronavirus and his precipitous announcement to withdraw from the WHO sound out of character, if not ominous, to a nation that has historically led the global fight against viral threats and has been seen as a global leader in medical science.

These actions detract from the country's image and reputation in the world and contrast with Americans' strong penchant for humanitarian action, especially in a crisis. Polling by the Pew Research Center indicates that as badly as foreigners evaluate China's response to the coronavirus pandemic (61% negative), more people (84%) viewed the response of the US as poor.

American Anxiety

American attitudes about foreign policy are certainly shaped by interests. But interests in the US are as diverse as Americans themselves. So, very often, American values tend to play an outsized role in what citizens think their country's foreign policy ought to be. Those values revolve around the same values that shape attitudes about their own government — i.e., democracy, freedom, equality, human rights, rule of law, and free and fair elections.

Donald Trump's affinity for demagogues, populists, illiberal autocrats and out-and-out dictators undercuts those values. And his administration's failures to defend Hong Kong, stand up for the 1 million persecuted Uighurs in China, condemn Saudi Arabia's execution of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, or to speak out against the many cases of Saudi human rights abuse against women and bloggers fall short of American values. His administration expresses occasional support for Venezuelans and Nicaraguans opposing the Nicolas Maduro and Daniel Ortega governments, respectively, but

only when such support coincides with the Trump administration's political self-interests in those countries, whose governments the US opposes.

Nevertheless, it's probably safe to say that not one of these issues will figure prominently on the minds of many American voters when they cast their ballots for either President Trump or his Democratic opponent, former Vice President Joe Biden. But they do contribute to their heightened anxiety over Trump's leadership. That anxiety is driven by concerns about his judgment and temperament. Virtually every American is asking how comfortable and confident they feel with one or the other of these men in the White House for the next four years. The candidates' positions on US foreign policy will directly impact that question.

For most Americans, the candidate whose temperament and judgment on foreign policy — as well as the many other key domestic issues — gives them the predictability, reliability and comfortability they've missed these last four years is the one likely to get their vote.

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The Rise and Fall of US Democracy

Peter Isackson
October 14, 2020

The chaos of this year's election may well be enough to dispel all remaining illusions about American democracy.

A functioning democracy requires an educated, informed population that understands its role in the processes that define how the democratic nation is governed.

Ordinary citizens have two opportunities for actively participating in those processes. They can run for office or help those who are running for office get elected. And they can vote. Most people settle for voting. Actually, in the best of years, only slightly more than the majority of eligible voters actually vote. American democracy has never fired on all its cylinders.

The failure of half of Americans to participate is surprising because America has sedulously made the effort to educate its future voters. From day one, every schoolchild in the United States learns not only that the form of government they live under is a democracy but also that it is a regime defined by its commitment to freedom. Teachers, seconded by the media and the politicians who appear in the media, relentlessly drill into them the idea that the US is uniquely free, in ways that no other nation can claim. Americans possess unbridled freedom to speak out and to act, even in socially eccentric ways. For some, it even includes the freedom to shoot.

Although democracy and freedom are not synonymous, every schoolchild is taught to believe that they are. This has created a curious phenomenon in US culture: the idea that what they have is less the freedom to speak out, act and influence their community than the freedom from interference by other people — and especially by the government. In other words, many Americans understand that the most fundamental freedom is the freedom to be left alone. Instead of defining the individual's field of possible action and participation, in their minds, democracy defines the right to avoid all action and participation.

The Art of Democratic Identity

Children who enter first grade and learn for the first time that they live in a free country may be left wondering what an unfree country is. A literal-minded 6-year-old — such as this writer who entered first grade during the Cold War — may naively wonder why, in a country that our teacher insisted is free, we have to pay for the things we consume. After all, any child who had

ever been to a restaurant, a movie theater or a hotdog stand could sense what Milton Friedman would later affirm: There's no such thing as a free lunch.

My teacher's message, of course, had nothing to do with the price of things. We would learn about price, cost and value later. Like our parents, one day we would have a job, a house and a dog and be saddled with the task of fending for ourselves in a competitive world. We weren't quite prepared to understand that our teacher's riffing on the fact that we were a "free country" was, at the time, simply about the fact that another country with nuclear capacity, the Soviet Union, wasn't free. We children knew nothing about Russia, the Iron Curtain, communism, capitalism and everything else that was talked about on the news, mainly because we watched cartoons on television. Our exposure to Cold War propaganda was only just beginning.

On that first day of school, we began the task of memorizing the secular prayer that would kickstart the learning process every day of our schooling for the following 12 years: the pledge of allegiance. Its syntax was incomprehensible, but it sounded comfortingly patriotic. The abstract idea of allegiance was too much for our young minds to deal with. But the key words, beginning with "the flag," offered something concrete and allowed us to begin to understand that our job was to learn to comply with a system we couldn't yet begin to understand.

"The flag" had meaning because we could see it in front of us, whereas "the Republic for which it stands" remained a mystery. Even "one nation" failed to make much sense to any of us since we hadn't yet studied the Civil War — a moment in history when there were briefly two — but clearly one seemed to be the right number of nations to belong to. "Under God" confirmed what most of our parents had already told us, though the idea of who that being was differed from family to family.

It was the last six words of the pledge that held some meaning and still resonate in people's minds: "with liberty and justice for all." That's

when we began to learn what it meant to be a democracy. This became reinforced later, when we began studying the salient facts of history, including the importance of the first three words of the Constitution: “We the people.” The picture of a democratic society where people, on the one hand, are free (both to vote and to be left alone) and, on the other, treated fairly and equally, combined with our belief in the goodness of the complete system, had begun to fall into place.

Every official text we would subsequently discover, starting with the Declaration of Independence’s proclamation that “all men are created equal,” delivered the message that we, the citizens (or at least those who could vote), collectively controlled the form of a government that would protect us from various kinds of evil forces. Among those evil forces were, historically speaking, the European monarchies to the east against whom we revolted, and the rampaging Native Americans to the west.

The first group, the European kings, defined the enemy in our battle for freedom in the 18th century. The second group, the Indians on horseback, defined the 19th-century enemy. Once those two had been neutralized, all that was left in the 20th century, following our victory over the Germans and Japanese in World War II, was the Soviet Union.

Things had now become remarkably simple. We were a democracy that thrived thanks to our freedom, and especially the freedom of our markets. The Soviet Union was a communist dictatorship with a five-year plan. We were consumers with the widest possible range of choice who knew we would be left alone to consume whatever we chose. Moreover, they were atheists, and we, despite our freedom to believe or not believe, were “under God.” They had the mission of spreading across the globe their elaborate system of government interference in every aspect of everyone’s lives. In contrast, we knew, as President Woodrow Wilson had clearly established decades earlier, that our mission was to “make the world safe for democracy.”

Reconciling Democracy

Unlike the Soviets, we had the power to elect our leaders. They had a single party, the Communist Party. We had two, a consumer’s choice. We understood the principles of democracy. The first of those principles consists of having a constitution with a bill of rights. The second is to have regularly planned elections permitting to choose which of the two parties we wanted to be governed by. Any wonderful and wild idea was possible, so long as one of the two parties embraced that idea.

Communism, of course, or its twin sister, socialism, represented impossible ideas, not only because they made no sense in a consumer society, but because neither of the parties would embrace such ideas. Nevertheless, some feared that the Democrats might be tempted by socialism or even communism. And so, enterprising politicians committed to the idea of democratic choice invented the House of Un-American Activities, making it clear to political consumers — i.e. voters — that some choices, deemed political heresy, would not be available in the political marketplace. Heresy can, after all, happen in a free country that is also “under God.”

Throughout our schooling, our teachers and textbooks led us to assume that the nation’s founders, like Woodrow Wilson more than a century later, had one mission in mind, though with a more local focus: making North America safe for democracy. According to the narrative we received, it was in the name of democracy that the Founding Fathers decided to break away from the despotism of the British monarchy. This created the enduring belief that the founders were visionaries intent on creating what would later become known as the “world’s greatest democracy.”

It’s a trope US politicians today never tire of repeating. The Democrat, President Harry Truman, may have been the first when he uttered the phrase in 1952, just as the Cold War was picking up steam. He cited America’s “responsibilities as the greatest nation in the history of the world.” Like George W. Bush, Mitt

Romney and any Republican, President Donald Trump deems the US to be not only “the single greatest nation in the history of the world” but also “the greatest economy in the history of the world.” In contrast, this year’s Democratic candidate for the presidency, former Vice President Joe Biden, more modestly characterizes it as merely “the greatest nation on earth.” Perhaps he hasn’t studied history as carefully as Truman and Trump have.

It isn’t clear whether Cassius Clay, before becoming Muhammad Ali — who famously boasted he was “the greatest” — was inspired by patriotic politicians at the time vaunting the economic power and military prowess of the nation or whether today’s politicians who keep insisting on greatness are inspired by Ali. Donald Trump is not the only American to resonate to the idea of greatness. In every domain, Americans seek to determine who is the GOAT, the Greatest of All Time. There must always be a winner, someone who is totally exceptional.

American exceptionalism is not just an idea. It has become a dogma that leaders must embrace. Violating it or even trying to nuance it can prove disastrous. At a press conference in Europe in April 2009, fielding a question from a Financial Times reporter, newly installed President Barack Obama tried to limit his patriotic hubris when he said, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” This was too much for many Americans, such as Republican Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and Fox News, who saw this as proof that Obama wasn’t a true believer in American exceptionalism. How could he dare to reduce the nation’s prestige to that of has-been countries like the UK and Greece?

The Historical Truth

At the nation’s very beginning, the founders sought and fought simply to create a nation that was no longer attached to Britain. It was a first step in the direction of just wanting to be left alone. They grappled first with the idea of how

whatever emerged might define itself as a political entity. After that came the question of how it should be governed. Because of the diversity of the colonies, the founders could agree on the idea of dispersed authority, leading to the idea of a federation that could be thought of as a single federal state. They also, and nearly as emphatically, agreed that it was not about democracy.

In 1814, John Adams, a revolutionary leader and the second president of the United States, famously responded with this court judgment to one of his critics who berated him for maligning democracy: “Democracy never lasts long.” Lambasting what he referred to as the “ideology” of democracy, Adams expressed his horror at “democratic rage and popular fury” and insisted that democracy “soon wastes exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide.” The chaos of the French Revolution, which they considered an exercise in democracy, had left a bad impression on the minds of the Founding Fathers.

Alexander Hamilton, who died prematurely in a duel 10 years before Adams drafted his letter to John Tyler (but who miraculously came back to life on Broadway in a rap-based musical comedy exactly two hundred years later) emphatically agreed with Adams: “We are a Republican Government. Real liberty is never found in despotism or in the extremes of Democracy.” Both men had studied ancient history and witnessed the chaos of the French Revolution. Hamilton concluded: “The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity.”

The idea of democracy got off to a bad start in the young republic. And yet, most Americans today assume that US democracy was born with the drafting of the US Constitution. Even if the Founding Fathers clearly stated their preference for the idea of a republic ruled by a patrician elite and sought to define the young nation as fundamentally the opposite of a democracy, for

generations, Americans have tended to believe that the Constitution embodied and validated democratic principles.

Obsessed by the attribute of greatness, Americans also continue to believe that the US deserves the title of “the world’s greatest democracy.” This is a notion that has the potential to irritate people who are not American. Last year, Dutch blogger Moshe-Mordechai Van Zuiden, writing for The Times of Israel, bitterly contested the insistence on American greatness. He lists 10 reasons why the US electoral system in no way reflects the ideal or even the messy reality of effective national democracies.

After excoriating a two-party system offering “only a choice between two people widely despised,” as happened in 2016 and may even be the case in 2020, he makes a more fundamental complaint: “Top Dog Wins is not democracy. It’s a dictatorship of the majority.” All of the 10 points made by this brash Dutchman are well taken. Despite their national pride, more and more Americans are ready to agree.

The Last Election

Americans are clearly unaware of the fact that the revered founders believed that if democracy were to take hold, it would lead to the collapse of a fragile nation. The president who successfully marketed the idea of democracy for the first time, changing the course of America’s political culture, was Andrew Jackson, the president Donald Trump most admires (after himself). It was during Jackson’s presidency that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote and published “Democracy in America.” Thanks to the French aristocrat’s writing and Jackson’s deeds, including displacing and sometimes massacring native tribes, the label stuck.

It subsequently became dogma that the United States not only is a democracy but exemplifies the ideal of what democracy should be. Abraham Lincoln went on to provide the concept of democracy with a permanent advertising slogan when he called it a “government of the people, by the people and for the people.” By the time of

Lincoln and the imminent Emancipation Proclamation, the idea of “people” had taken on a much broader meaning than at the time of the drafting of the Constitution.

As Van Zuiden and others have pointed out, the electoral system in the US was never designed to function as a true democracy. Nevertheless, the belief was solidly instilled that democracy was in the nation’s DNA. It has withstood numerous assaults along the way and only recently begun to reveal some serious flaws that risk undermining Americans’ unquestioning belief in its virtues. For future observers of US history, the illusion of democracy as the basis of government may technically have expired in December 2000 when nine Supreme Court justices, and not the people or even the states, elected George W. Bush as president. At the time and amid such confusion, few had the courage to acknowledge that Bush’s election reflected a permanent change in their perception of democracy.

The chaos of this year’s election, characterized by the twin evils of a persistent pandemic and the personality of Donald Trump, may well be the election that dispels all remaining illusions. In 2021, a new approach to understanding the relationship between the people and the nation’s institutions will most likely begin to emerge. The rupture with past traditions has been too great for the old dogmas to survive intact.

It’s impossible to predict what form that seismic shift in the political culture will take. It now looks more than likely — though prudence is still required — that if democratic processes play out according to recognized rules, Joe Biden will be the 46th president of the United States. But there is no guarantee that democratic processes will play out in any recognizably legitimate way, partly because the COVID-19 pandemic has created a physical barrier to the already troublingly chaotic conduct of traditional elections whose results pass through the archaic Electoral College, and partly because President Donald Trump will be highly motivated to

disturb, delay and possibly cancel whatever validated outcome emerges. But further complications and a practically infinite series of complementary risks are lying in the offing. The risk of uncontrollable civil unrest, if not civil war, is real.

Whatever the official result of the presidential election, whether it becomes known in the immediate aftermath of November 3 or sometime in January, it will be the object of contestation and possibly unpredictable forms of revolt by the citizens themselves. Like any episode of social upheaval, there is a strong chance that it will be quelled.

Biden's Dilemma

But even if quashed and silenced, it certainly will not be resolved. The most favorable scenario for neutralizing the revolt of the Trumpian right would be a landslide victory for Biden, with the Democrats retaking control of the Senate while maintaining and increasing their majority in the House. But even so, the losers will certainly cry foul.

A resounding majority for Biden and the Democrats would nevertheless buttress what remains of the population's belief in democracy, legitimizing Biden's claim to govern the nation. But even in the best of scenarios, a landslide would still leave Biden in a fragile, if not precarious position. Biden has done next to nothing to unite his own party. A Democratic victory will incite the young progressives to contest his legitimate control over an aged and aging party establishment. Gallup reports that "Americans' frustration with the parties is evident in the 57% of Americans saying a third party is needed."

That figure has been stable for at least the past 10 years, but the level of frustration has been magnified by the presence of uninspiring candidates in both parties. As governing structures, both dominant parties have been seriously fragilized in the past two elections, the Republicans by Trump's successful assault on their traditions and the Democrats by the nearly

successful challenge of Bernie Sanders and the party establishment's resistance to change.

If elected, Biden will be challenged on the right by the combined force of fanatical believers in Trump as the messiah and hordes of libertarians appalled by the prospect of more "big government." He will be challenged on the left by the progressives who not only oppose his tepid policies but no longer believe in the integrity of the Democratic Party. If it was just a question of managing the personal rivalries within his party, as it was for Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, all might be fine. But with a prolonged pandemic, an out-of-control economic crisis, increasingly lucid and effective racial unrest and a growing anti-establishment sentiment across much of the right and the left, reinstalling the establishment that preceded Trump and restoring faith in its ability to govern will be a task logically beyond the capacity of 78-year-old Biden.

The End of an Era

And those issues only begin to define the challenges Biden will be facing. In an essay in *The New Criterion* earlier this year, James Pierson observed the very real potential for social collapse: "Yet today the United States seems headed in a different direction: toward pluralism without consensus — a nation-state without a national idea — and towards animus among racial, religious, regional, and national groups." In his article, Pierson deftly summarizes the history of the nation from the convergence of disparate colonies into a "union" and its need for imperial expansion to maintain its unity. Historically speaking, both convergence and expansion are no longer what they used to be.

Pierson claims that before the Civil War and the victory of the Union forces, the US had not really decided what it was. He asks the question, "what was it: union, republic, or empire — or a combination of all three? Whatever it was, it was not yet a nation." He claims it only became a nation-state "over a ninety-year period from 1860 to 1950, an era bookended by the Civil War and World War II, two great wars for liberal

democracy, with World War I sandwiched in between.”

Pierson credits Abraham Lincoln with creating the democracy that eventually came to dominate the world in the 20th century. Although assassinated by John Wilkes Booth before he could begin to implement his plan, Lincoln effectively created a political culture or system of belief that has only begun to fray in the last few decades. Pierson describes Honest Abe’s ideological triumph. “Lincoln envisioned a nation held together by a ‘political religion’ based upon reverence for the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence.” It was a nation “held together by loyalty to political institutions and abstract ideals.”

Pierson believes that that stable system began to dissolve after 1950, when what had been clearly a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture began to lose its capacity to impose its norms. He concludes, somewhat nostalgically: “It is no longer possible for the United States to go forward as a ‘cultural’ nation in the form by which it developed between 1860 and 1950. Whether or not this is a good thing is beside the point: it has happened, is happening, and will continue to happen.” And then, fatalistically, he adds: “These developments leave the United States without any strong foundations to keep itself together as a political enterprise — in a circumstance when its increasing diversity requires some kind of unifying thread. What will that be? No one now knows.”

Pierson’s description of cultural decline echoes the thesis of Samuel Huntington’s book, “Who Are We?” It expresses a sentiment that Trump exploited with his slogan “Make American Great Again.” Pierson seems to recognize that a return to the good old WASP order, wished for by Huntington and Trump (and perhaps Pierson himself), is simply not going to happen.

Joe Biden has promised to provide the thread that will unify the nation. Pierson believes that’s an impossible task. Others, focused on the

possibilities of the future rather than a nostalgia for the past, claim it can be done. But Biden, though more conciliatory than Trump, clearly lacks the vision and the personality required to achieve it. And, of course, another Trump victory would only fragment the culture further and faster.

The obvious conclusion should be that there is little choice for a politician who wishes to survive intact other than to move forward boldly and accept to resolve some serious historical ambiguities and overturn a number of institutions that have created a situation of political sclerosis and accelerated cultural decline. There are plenty of ideas to work with. Some of the younger members of the Democratic Party have demonstrated the kind of energy needed to achieve success. And the population will not be averse to change if they see it is intended to cure the disease and not just temporarily relieve the pain. The opioid crisis has at least taught them that mere pain relief is a dead end.

The problem is that there will be resistance, though it will not come from the people. They know what they want. A majority wants to see expanded choice and at the very minimum a third party, simply because they no longer trust the two parties that have been running the show. An even clearer majority supports single-payer health insurance. A majority among the younger generations and possibly the entire population expects a serious and thorough response to climate change. But as the actions of past presidents have demonstrated, changing the way of life of a society of consumers appears to be too much to ask of politicians.

Once the dust has settled from the election — unless that dust becomes radioactive while waiting for definitive results — 2021 is likely to be a year of confused political maneuvering and deep social instability. It will undoubtedly be a period of crisis. In a best case scenario, it will be the type of crisis that enables the nation to focus on a serious project of transformation. Those who see a Biden victory as a chance to return to the

former status quo will attempt to manage the crisis, but they will inevitably be disappointed.

That includes traditional donors, Wall Street, Hollywood and the vast majority of the political class. The two-dimensional chessboard with its 64 squares that they have been playing on for decades has now acquired a third dimension. Their expertise in pushing around the same pieces, according to the same rules on the same traditional chessboard, has lost its validity.

Fragile Simulacrum

History has already overtaken the political potential of a fragile simulacrum of a democracy that was never meant to be a democracy. No historian tracing the events as they played out over more than two centuries should be surprised that, while maintaining the illusion of democracy, the system evolved to function essentially as an elaborate, well-armed oligarchy. The oligarchy will use every power it has in its high-tech arsenal, including new forms of apparent generosity, to stabilize those institutions that best resist the seismic forces that have already begun cracking the entire system's foundations.

Even if it achieves some form of success and reaches what appears to be a state of relative stability, the world it believes it still controls will be very different and will begin evolving in highly unpredictable ways.

Many are predicting collapse. Given the degree to which an individualistic and corporatist culture has undermined most of the principles of human solidarity, collapse may well be the inevitable outcome. But collapse of what? Will it be the supposedly democratic political structures, traditions or ideologies? Will it be the economy? Or, as the coronavirus pandemic has shown, will it be human health, to say nothing of the health of the planet?

Voters in the November 3 election should be asking themselves not just whom they want to vote for, but a much more immediate question that is nevertheless difficult to answer. What do Biden and his future team think about all the above questions? Are they prepared? What do

they seriously think they might do about them as soon as the cracks start appearing, many of which are already visible?

In the run-up to an election, politicians are unlikely to blurt out the truth, especially if it involves taking on serious problems whose solutions will inevitably cause pain in certain quarters. They will typically try to deal with three somewhat contradictory concerns. Keep the people happy. Reassure the donors. Prepare the next round of unholy alliances just to be certain they will be able to get something done. And then the big question arises: When it comes to taking hold of the reins of power, who will they accept to disappoint? But the real question is this, who can they afford to disappoint?

We are left asking ourselves whether John Adams was right when he wrote that democracy never lasts long. If Biden is elected and serves two terms (reaching the age of 88 at the end of his second term), the kind of democracy the US has created will have lasted exactly two hundred years. John Adams probably would consider that a long time.

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The Trump Administration Targets Critical Race Theory

Haley McEwen
October 20, 2020

The Trump administration's blitz on critical race theory comes amidst a trend of growing attacks on the academic freedom of scholars in many other parts of the world.

In his latest attack on democratic values and principles, US President Donald Trump issued executive orders purging critical race theory (CRT) from diversity training in US federal agencies. According to the first order issued on September 4, “The divisive, false, and demeaning propaganda of the critical race theory movement is contrary to all we stand for as Americans and should have no place in the Federal government.” The order refers to diversity training that involves discussions of white privilege and the systemic forms of racism that are embedded within US history and institutions. According to the president’s most recent Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping issued on September 22, the so-called “destructive ideology” of white privilege is “grounded in misrepresentations of our country’s history and its role in the world.”

It is significant that these directives follow months of nationwide protests against racism in policing and the criminal justice system. The interdisciplinary field of critical race theory occupies an important position in the ideological basis of the Black Lives Matter movement. Activists protesting against systemic racism have made a point of acknowledging the many important critical race theorists and philosophers of the past and present who have advanced struggles for racial justice. The radical right has taken note of the relationship between CRT and Black Lives Matter. Breitbart News, for example, defines CRT as “the leftist, racist doctrine that forms the intellectual underpinnings of Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and other radical organizations currently engaged in unrest on America’s streets.”

Context and Reaction

The Trump administration’s censorship of CRT is an effort to counter the scholarly and intellectual critique that has been integral within advocacy and policy change to advance racial, sex and gender justice. It is the ability of CRT to name and challenge systemic racism that makes it confrontational to the ability of white and male

privilege and power to remain unmarked, unnamed and unchallenged. In their response to Trump’s directive, the deans of all five California’s law schools stated that “CRT invites us to confront with unflinching honesty how race has operated in our history and our present, and to recognize the deep and ongoing operation of ‘structural racism,’ through which racial inequality is reproduced within our economic, political, and educational systems even without individual racist intent.”

Critical race theory has been put into practice through diversity education and training, showing how racism and sexism are not merely beliefs held and perpetuated by individuals, but that these and other forms of discrimination and exclusion are institutional and systemic. To eliminate CRT is to censor words and concepts like intersectionality, implicit bias, stereotyping, stigma, whiteness, white privilege and systemic and institutional racism, which effectively closes down processes of naming and unlearning unearned privileges associated with one’s race and gender.

CRT and cognate forms of diversity training have become important means of advancing the equal recognition and rights of those who have been historically excluded and victimized on the basis of their race, gender, disability or sexual orientation not only in the United States but in many parts of the world. In South Africa (the main context in which this author conducts research and teaching), CRT has been integral within efforts to name and challenge the persistence of white supremacy and white privilege in public and private sectors. Critical diversity studies has also emerged as a recognized academic field and area of professional development and training in South Africa.

While diversity training within US federal agencies is the immediate target of President Trump’s executive orders, scholars have raised alarm about implications for CRT as an area of scholarship. The Association of American University Professors issued a statement

highlighting this concern, arguing that the order “denies and dismisses the efforts of experts across a wide variety of disciplines — such as law, history, social sciences, and humanities — to help us better understand and reckon with our legacy of slavery and persistent institutional racism.”

Right-Wing Hostility

Radical-right hostility toward the intellectual left is nothing new. In the United States, a right-wing intelligentsia has taken shape over the past 40 years, largely funded by conservative corporate philanthropic organizations. As Donna Nicol reports, conservative American critics have accused race and ethnic studies, as well as women’s studies, of being anti-Western and anti-American, arguing that these disciplines radicalize students toward “social anarchy” and undermined the American “free enterprise system.” The September 22 executive order, which accuses CRT of being a form of “propaganda” that amounts to “offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating,” grants this hostility new levels of power, influence and acceptability.

The recent orders that ban CRT in diversity training for US federal agencies is a warning that US-based critical academics are joining the ranks of critical scholars internationally who are facing repression by radical-right populist leaders. Trump’s blitz on critical race theory comes amidst a trend of growing attacks on academic freedom in many other parts of the world. Censorship of CRT also comes amidst the president’s refusal to condemn white supremacist organizations. His comments during a recent debate for these groups to “stand back and stand by” was lauded by the self-described “Western chauvinist” Proud Boys as a call to arms.

On the one hand, then, the Trump administration and other populist regimes’ agendas against the naming and interrogation of white supremacy may be indicative of their awareness that they are losing ground against anti-racist and anti-colonial movements for social

justice and are feeling a threat to their hegemony. On the other hand, the banning of critical race theory in US federal agencies is indicative that academic freedom is the next democratic principle at stake and that critical scholars, especially those in publicly-funded institutions of higher learning, have good cause to be alarmed.

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Does Beijing Prefer Biden or Trump?

Daniel Wagner
October 20, 2020

What is at stake for Beijing is an unfortunate choice: endure four more years of Trump’s tirades or a US administration that values America’s alliances and intends to reinvigorate them.

Few major events occur in the world now occur without China having a stake, directly or indirectly, in their outcome. That is because Beijing has become a force to be reckoned with, and its influence has grown to rival or even surpass that of the US in many parts of the world. Just as elections throughout the world have historically implied some sort of impact on Washington, now the world is becoming accustomed to the same being true for Beijing.

The US presidential election is certainly no exception. At least part of the reason that matters to Washington is because, for the first time since America became a global superpower, it now has a proper peer. The former Soviet Union may have been a military peer, but it was not a peer on any other level. That is not true with China, which now rivals the US in some arenas or is on its way to doing so. In some aspects of science,

technology, the global economy, diplomacy and political influence, Beijing is already more consequential to much of the rest of the world than America is.

Given its single-minded focus on creating an alternative world order crafted in Beijing's image, as well as the tremendous resources it is devoting to that task, there is little reason to believe that China's trajectory will change in the coming decade and beyond. One could argue, in fact, that the outcome of the election matters almost as much to Beijing as it does to America, for it will define the type and scope of headwind Beijing faces for at least the next four years.

A second Trump term of course implies more of the same: trade war, challenging Beijing at every opportunity, the war of words, and not giving an inch on anything. But it also implies four more years of discord and disarray between America and its many allies. Both America and China have paid a serious price for having Donald Trump in the White House, but Beijing has certainly benefitted while Washington has suffered from the fractious nature of America's relationship with its allies.

Under a Biden presidency, that is likely to be greatly reduced, which should concern Beijing a lot, for it has enabled the Communist Party of China (CPP) to act with virtual impunity on the global stage while America and its allies passively look on. That is what has enabled Beijing to expropriate and militarize the Spratly and Paracel Islands, bulldoze its way into more than 70 countries without opposition via the Belt and Road Initiative, and significantly increase its influence in the world's multilateral organizations, among other things. That damage has already been done and, in truth, there is relatively little Joe Biden or any subsequent US administration may be able to do about it.

What Biden can do in response is repair those alliances and lead an effort to coordinate and unify the West's future responses to Beijing's actions. It is by acting in unison that the West will not only get Beijing's attention, but begin to reverse the tide. Beijing has few real allies, and

some of its "allies" have dual allegiances between Beijing and Washington. When push comes to shove in a time of crisis, Saudi Arabia, for example, is not likely to pivot in Beijing's direction, despite China's growing economic ties with the kingdom. The same is true with a variety of other allies that China believes are in its camp but which Washington has cultivated over the decades. Beijing is a new arrival to the party.

So, what is at stake for Beijing is an unfortunate choice: endure four more years of Trump's tirades or (at least) four years of a US administration that values America's alliances and intends to reinvigorate them. Biden is not likely to try to reverse the course Trump has embarked upon with Beijing. That ship has sailed. US Congress is on board with Trump's contention that Xi Jinping and the CCP are bad actors and that the Chinese government is America's greatest adversary. Biden's foreign policy is unlikely to be substantively differently oriented.

In that regard, while this is undoubtedly the most important election of most Americans' lifetimes, it is also crucially important for Beijing. The gloves are off on both sides and they are not going to be put back on. The question is, does Beijing prefer Trump or Biden? While the answer is probably neither, knowing that bilateral relations are not going to revert to where they were under Barack Obama, Beijing may actually prefer Trump over Biden in the hope that the damage done to America's alliances may become permanent. In the meantime, the CCP will continue to use Trump to whip up nationalism at home, which of course suits its ultimate objective of strengthening Xi's and the CCP's grip on power.

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Does Saad Hariri Really Believe He Can Save Lebanon?

Jean AbiNader
October 23, 2020

The three-time former prime minister has been appointed to lead the latest iteration of Lebanon's government, with no assurances that the power brokers will cede him the authority for desperately needed reforms.

My parents used to say, “Eat with your mouth and not your eyes.” This may be good advice for newly-minted Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri. He is clearly unable to resist trying once again to raise Lebanon from its deathbed, and this time the consequences may be more disastrous than just a bit of heartburn. Yes, I’m sure his supporters see this as the ultimate act of patriotism, and hopefully, he will be successful, but the odds are against him.

First of all, Hariri is a well-known figure who understands the political calculus of his supporters and opponents. Yet this is not similar to his deal that brought the presidency to Michel Aoun in 2016. The reforms called for, and that Hariri has said he supports, are literally aimed at dismantling the edifice of economic and political corruption that has led to the erosion of Lebanon’s well-being.

Secondly, there is the matter of the timeframe called for under the French plan for change that serves as Hariri’s point of reference. It calls for significant reforms underway in six months as well as capital controls, anti-corruption measures, a robust social safety net and radical changes to how the government and banking system operate. Hariri, a three-time prime minister, has said that he will accept a government with a shelf life of six months and focus on the political and economic reforms to refresh and reinvigorate the country.

Will the oligarchy, of which he is a member, yield to his office the necessary executive authority to bypass parliament to enact laws and regulations? There is no brotherly bond or even public tolerance between Hariri and Gebran Bassil, leader of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement. So, will the prime minister’s reliance on Hezbollah’s support bring him into the cross-hairs of US sanctions?

A major sticking point will be the composition of the Hariri cabinet, which he promised will be made up of “nonpolitically aligned experts with the mission of economic, financial, and administrative reforms contained in the French initiative road map.” The downfall of the most recent prime minister, Mustapha Adib, was over this exact point, and it is a road too far for many of the political elites.

Finally, how much longer will the Lebanese people put up with leaders who are more concerned with their patrimony and their constituents rather than the health, safety and well-being of the country? Hariri may have the best of intentions, but we know which way that road can lead. As Al Jazeera reports, “Hariri’s return marks the biggest challenge yet for activists involved in the nationwide uprising against the country’s corrupt political class that had led to the resignation of Hariri and his coalition government last year.”

The economic realities are well known, ranging from extensive corruption to government mismanagement and a failed government model built on cronyism. Soon, more than 70% of the people could be below the poverty line as the Lebanese pound has lost 80% of its value, unemployment is around 35% and people struggle with restrictions limiting access to their funds in banks. According to journalist Souad Lazkani, as many as 1 million will be unemployed by 2021 unless, by some miracle, reforms are urgently implemented by the new government.

Hariri’s restart as prime minister is dreaded by many in the street who feel a sense of déjà vu from the last decade. “Hariri’s return is the peak

of the counter-revolution,” Nizar Hassan, a political activist told Al Jazeera. “A pillar of the political establishment, a multi-millionaire who represents the banks and foreign interests, and a symbol of inefficient governance and widespread corruption: He represents everything we revolted against.”

So, the demonstrators who have been protesting for several months have to decide whether to publicly oppose these latest steps to maintain the status quo or come up with an alternative that, hopefully, will be nonviolent. With the hyperinflation that has caused shortages of basic goods like medicine and foods, the growing instability and dwindling prospects for change, Lebanon faces a very difficult winter.

This is Hariri’s multilayered and multifaceted challenge. As he assembles his cabinet and prepares his ministerial statement of his government’s vision, he will be watched closely by people hoping that he can rise above the sectarian politics of the past, as well as by those who are most threatened by reforms. It is a difficult road ahead indeed.

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The Importance of the US-South Korea Relationship

Steve Westly & James Bang
October 26, 2020

Presidential leadership needs to be even-handed and sensitive to the concerns of US allies.

There are many things we look for in a president. We look for leadership and the ability to manage grave challenges like a pandemic. While most people are focused on

avoiding COVID-19 and keeping their jobs, we would be wise to remember that one of the most important roles for any president is to build a set of global allies who will stand with us when inevitable conflicts occur.

Today, America faces unprecedented challenges from foreign powers, especially China and North Korea. To meet the challenges, we must build a coherent foreign policy that the world — especially our allies — can understand and support. We are witnessing China increasingly flexing its muscles on the Indian border, in Hong Kong, in the South China Sea and with Taiwan. America puts itself at risk to not realize that China is investing much of its resources into a growing, multifaceted military.

The US needs to build alliances throughout Asia to ensure our stability for the next century. We need to be doubling down on our relationships with India, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan and especially South Korea. South Korea is the world’s 12th-largest economic power and one of America’s strongest allies for the last 60 years. It has been a bastion of democracy housing one of the largest US military bases in Asia. It also houses an essential element of the West’s global supply chain for technology, transportation and telecommunications. This supply chain is more important than ever if relations with China continue to deteriorate.

While the importance of a strong South Korea policy is at an all-time high, US President Donald Trump managed to stick his finger in the eye of our Korean allies. In 2019, Trump demanded “out of thin air” that the Koreans pay \$4.7 billion per year to station US military forces on the Korean Peninsula, according to CNN.

There is no question that our allies have to pay their fair share for defense. However, cost-sharing negotiations must be based on rationale and data. At precisely the time we need strong allies in Asia, President Trump is burning bridges. This is a major political gaffe that America needs to correct before our relationship suffers long-term damage. If the South Koreans cannot count on reasonable and predictable US

foreign policy, they will have little choice but to abandon Washington and to seek out other alliances.

The South Koreans weren't the only ones taken by surprise. Even Republican Senators Cory Gardner and Marco Rubio were unprepared to discuss the president's comments. Senator Ed Markey, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, said, "If South Korea decides that it is better off without the United States, President Trump will have undermined an over 60-year shared commitment to peace, stability, and rule of law."

The United States can do better. We need to deepen our relationship with South Korea as an essential partner for dealing with North Korea and China. We should be doing the same with other Asian countries and continue to promote the policies that Democratic and Republican secretaries of state have built over decades. A president needs to communicate a consistent game plan that the American people — and our allies — can understand and count on.

Presidential leadership needs to be even-handed and sensitive to the concerns of our allies. Demands should be replaced by reasonable requests and ample explanations. Insisting that allies vastly increase payments to the United States might make good domestic election-year politics at the cost of American safety in the world.

If we do not rethink the importance of our allies soon, we may be left to fight the next war alone.

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Macron Claims Islam Is in "Crisis." Erdogan Disagrees

Ishtiaq Ahmed & Atul Singh
October 27, 2020

Minorities are fleeing Muslim countries and radical Islamists are taking to the sword, raising a critical question about Islam's ability to secularize.

In France, Samuel Paty was beheaded on October 16 near Paris. He was a history teacher who had shown caricatures of Prophet Muhammad to his students in a lesson on freedom of speech and freedom of conscience.

Paty's killer, Abdullakh Anzorov, is an 18-year-old of Chechen origin. He arrived in France at the age of 6 as a refugee and was granted asylum. In an audio message in Russian, Anzorov claimed to have "avenged the prophet" whom Paty had portrayed "in an insulting way." Before he was murdered, Paty was the victim of an online hate campaign orchestrated by the father of a student who reportedly might not even have been in the class.

As Agnès Poirier wrote in *The Guardian*, since the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, the French seem to be "living [their] lives between terrorist assaults." Since then, she writes, "Islamists in France have targeted and murdered journalists, cartoonists, policemen and women, soldiers, Jews, young people at a concert, football fans, families at a Bastille Day fireworks show, an 86-year-old priest celebrating mass in his little Normandy church, tourists at a Christmas market... the list goes on."

Yet Paty's killing has touched a chord. Arguably, no country venerates its history teachers more than France. After defeat against Prince Otto von Bismarck's Prussia in 1870, the Third Republic emerged. In the 1880s, it took away education from the Catholic Church, making it free, mandatory and secular. Poirier

observes that the “peaceful infantry of teachers” has since “been the bedrock of the French republic.”

She poignantly points out that the first generations of teachers were nicknamed “the Black Hussars of the Republic” because they had to battle the local priest for influence. Thanks to these teachers, as per Poirier, “religion was eventually relegated to the spiritual realm.” More than others, history teachers are the keepers of the revolutionary and republican flame, exposing young minds to Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot et al and emancipating their thinking.

French President Emmanuel Macron called the brutal beheading an “Islamist terrorist attack.” At a ceremony at Sorbonne University, he conferred the Légion d’honneur on Paty. Macron awarded France’s highest honor posthumously to the late history teacher because he died for trying to explain freedom of speech.

Macron has since defended the right of French citizens to publish anything, howsoever offensive others might find that to be. Earlier this month, he claimed, “Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our country.” His comments enraged many Muslims inside and outside France.

Paty’s killing has shaken France to the core. After more than a century, religion is back to the forefront in the country. This time, it is not Catholicism but Islam.

A History of Blood and Gore

At the heart of the matter is a simple question: Does Islam lead to violence and terrorism? Many Islamic scholars and political analysts argue in the negative. After all, the Catholic Church burned Giordano Bruno and launched the Inquisition. Jews fled Spain to find refuge in Ottoman lands. These authors take the contrarian view that Islam can only be a religion of peace after it conquers the world and establishes a supremacy of sharia.

Writing about Islam’s links to violence and terrorism is sensitive and controversial. There are nuances to be sure. However, most scholars know

fully well that Islam has a just war theory. It rests on the assumption that justice would not be served unless the will of Allah is established all over the world. As per this theory, non-believers in Islam have three choices.

First, they can convert to Islam and become part of the umma, the global community of Muslims who recognize there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his final messenger. Second, they can refuse to submit to Allah, but they must then flee their homes or face the sword. Third, they can surrender to Muslims and pay jizya, a poll tax for non-Muslims in a state run according to Islamic principles.

Both Sunnis and Shias prize jihad, which denotes both personal struggle and just war. Both Sunnis and Shias believe that jihad is the duty of an Islamic state, should certain conditions arise. There is little daylight between Sunnis and Shias on their ideas of jihad against non-believers. Many Muslim jurists considered the non-acceptance of Islam by non-Muslims an act of aggression that had to be countered through jihad. Like Christianity, Islam lays claim to universality and jihad is its version of a crusade.

Arguably, the most interesting reform of Islamic law occurred when Arabs conquered Sindh in the eighth century. For the first time, Islam encountered Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. A puritanical Abrahamic faith encountered much older spiritual traditions of the Indus and Gangetic river basins. These pagan polytheists were not covered by the Quran. Its verses recognized Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and the imprecisely defined Sabians. These religions are based on divine revelations and came to be known as Ahl al-Kitab, the People of the Book.

The Indo-Gangetic spiritual traditions were clearly not the People of the Book. When Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sindh, he approached the then-caliph in Damascus for how to deal with Indian polytheists. The fuqaha (Islamic jurists) and the ulema (clergy) in Damascus ruled that these new religions ultimately believed in the very same god as Muslims and the People of the Book. Therefore,

through the exercise of qiyas — analogical reasoning as applied to the deduction of Islamic juridical principles — these non-Muslim Sindhis were to be treated as protected minorities if they paid the jizya.

As waves of Muslim invaders came to the Indian subcontinent, conversion took place both through peaceful and violent means. Lower-caste Hindus turned to Islam because it offered a greater sense of community, charity for the poor and egalitarianism. Yet violence was par for the course too. Idols were smashed, temples desecrated and local communities slaughtered.

Muslims who claim that theirs is a religion of peace could do well to remember that even the golden age of Islam is full of blood. The first three caliphs were assassinated. Ali ibn Abi Talib and Khalid ibn al-Walid were brave generals who led aggressive armies and did not hesitate to spill blood.

The Battle of Karbala exemplifies the violence that has accompanied Islam from its early days. In 680, Umayyad Caliph Yazid I's troops massacred the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph. For Shias, it remains an annual holy day of public mourning. This was a bloodthirsty struggle for succession and has led to a Shia-Sunni divide that runs deep to this day.

The Umayyad Empire's extravagance and decadence led to a successful Abbasid rebellion in 750. The victors invited over 80 Umayyad family members to a grand feast on the pretext of reconciliation. In reality, this feat was the infamous Banquet of Blood in which the Umayyads were killed in cold blood. Abd al-Rahman I was the only Umayyad who escaped, and he fled all the way to Spain to set up the kingdom of al-Andalus.

Violence in Modern Times

Over time, Arab rule became benign. There is a strong argument to be made that Muslim rule was more tolerant than Christian rule in many matters. Minorities who paid jizya carried on with their business and way of life. The Ottomans, the

Safavids and the Mughals governed multi-ethnic empires even as Europe imploded into religious wars.

Once Europe took to technological, industrial and military innovation, the rest of the world fell under its sway. Tottering Muslim empires were no exception. This defeat still rankles among many Muslims. Many have turned inward and hark back to a glory period of Islamic dominance. They dream of the days when Muslim armies swept all before them, including Jerusalem in 1187 or Constantinople in 1453.

After World War II, European colonial rule has been replaced by American economic domination. Oil was discovered in key parts of the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, it was Western companies that took much of the profits. Till today, the price of oil is denominated in dollars. The formation and domination of Israel in the Middle East added to this Muslim angst. In 1979, a millenarian revolution succeeded in Iran. In the same year, militants seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca, and it took two weeks of pitched battles for Saudi forces to regain control. The militants might have lost, but Saudi Arabia emulated Iran in hardening sharia and giving more power to the ulema.

In Iran, the new regime killed thousands who did not agree with it. They included liberals and leftists. Led by hardline clerics, the Iranian regime liquidated the minority Bahai sect in Iran. It set out to export its Islamic revolution. In response, the Saudis began to export their own puritanical Wahhabi Islam. Saudi money poured all the way from Indonesia and India to Bosnia and Chechnya.

This took place at the height of the Cold War. This was a time when the West in general and Washington in particular were terrified of the Soviet Union. The fear of communism led Americans to intervene in Iran, Vietnam and elsewhere. They made a Faustian pact with militant Islam. The CIA worked with god-fearing Islamists to fight godless communists. These Islamists went on to become a trusty sword arm for the US against the communist menace of the

Soviet Union. Nowhere was this best exemplified than the jihad Americans funded in Afghanistan against the Soviets. As is hilariously captured in Charlie Wilson's War, the Saudis matched the Americans dollar for dollar.

Eventually, the Soviet Union fell and the West won. As nationalism, socialism and pan-Arabism stood discredited, the battle-hardened jihadis stood ready to take their place. Conservative, fundamentalist, extreme and radical Islamists soon found their spot in the sun. The Molotov cocktail of violence and terrorism spread throughout Muslim societies. Disgruntled young Muslim men in the West found this cocktail particularly irresistible. In the post-9/11 world, there is a mountain of literature that chronicles all this and more.

American action after the attacks on September 11, 2001, have strengthened rather than weakened this culture of violence and terrorism. George W. Bush's war on terror has proved an unmitigated disaster. In 2003, the Americans unleashed chaos in Iraq by dismantling the Baathist regime and leaving nothing in its place. A Shia-Sunni civil war followed. Iran became a touch too powerful in Iraq. Sunnis who had been dominant during the Baathist era under Saddam Hussein were left leaderless and felt marginalized. In the aftermath, the Islamic State emerged in the vacuum. Syria imploded as well and the Sykes-Picot construct collapsed. The Islamic State's messianic message of violence and terrorism not only garnered local support, but it also drew in recruits from Europe, South Asia and elsewhere.

Eventually, Syria, Iran and Russia allied together even as the UK and the US collaborated quietly to crush the Islamic State. They were able to destroy it militarily, but radical Islamist ideology lives on. It is the same ideology that powered the Iranian Revolution, the Afghan jihad and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Now, it is inspiring Anzorovs to behead Patys.

A Clash of Cultures

In the aftermath of Paty's beheading, France and Turkey have fallen out. Macron has championed freedom of expression, which includes the liberty of publishing cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. Like many of his countrymen, Macron sees freedom of expression as an essential part of France's secular values. Laïcité, the French version of secularism, is enshrined in the very first article of the constitution. It declares, "France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic." Macron has pledged to "to defend secular values and fight radical Islam."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan takes objection to Macron's position. He believes that there must be limits to freedom of expression. With millions of Muslims in France and over a billion around the world, the French should desist from insulting Prophet Muhammad. Erdogan sees Macron as having a problem with Islam and Muslims. In a speech, the Turkish leader declared, "Macron needs treatment on a mental level." In response, France has said Erdogan's comments are unacceptable and recalled its ambassador to Turkey.

A new kind of Islamism has now entered the scene. Unlike clerics in Iran or royals in Saudi Arabia, Erdogan is a democratically elected leader. Ironically, he rose to power in Turkey thanks to the country's growing democratization, which in turn was fueled by its quest to join the European Union. In Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's secular Turkey, the Islamist Erdogan seized power and brought in a very different vision for the future.

Erdogan jettisoned Ataturk's Europeanization of Turkey. Instead, he decided to become the popular, democratic voice for Islam. He has championed causes like Palestine, Kashmir and Xinjiang that resonate with Muslims worldwide. Even as the Turkish economy stumbles, Erdogan is taking on Macron as a defender of Islam. Erdogan gains inspiration from the Ottoman Empire. Until a century ago, the Ottoman sultan was also the caliph, the spiritual leader of the Sunni world. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi's first

mass movement in 1919 demanded the restoration of the Ottoman caliphate.

President Erdogan wants to bring back Ottoman cultural glory to Turkey. One by one, he is smashing up the symbols of secular Turkey. A few years ago, Erdogan built a 1,000-room white palace on 50 acres of Ataturk Forest Farm, breaking environmental codes and contravening court orders. On July 10, 2020, he reversed the 1934 decision to convert Hagia Sophia into a museum. Now, this architectural marvel is a mosque again.

France is a land of *joie de vivre*, which favors bikinis over burkinis. *Laïcité* emerged after a bitter struggle with the Catholic Church, is central to the republic and is an article of faith. In contrast, Turkey is rolling back Ataturk's version of *laïcité*. Erdogan is striving to emerge as the popular Islamic leader who takes on the West, India and even China. He has thus thrown the gauntlet to Macron.

Erdogan has geopolitical reasons to rile Macron. Turkey and France are on opposing sides in Libya's civil war as well as the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. France has deployed jets and frigates to counter Turkish oil and gas exploration in disputed waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Now, the two countries are squaring off on religion.

The Turkish president is not alone in criticizing Macron. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has also accused Macron of "attacking Islam." Erdogan is urging a boycott of French goods. Many others in the Muslim world are also calling for such a boycott. Some shops in Kuwait, Jordan and Qatar have already removed French products. Protests have broken out in Libya, Syria and Gaza.

Secularism vs. Faith

Erdogan's actions and the support they have garnered raise uncomfortable questions. In the Westphalian system of nation-states, what right does he have to tell Macron how to run his country? More importantly, his rhetoric raises a key question about the world. Who decides what

is offensive? Can a popularly elected leader of a former imperial power speak up for co-religionists to another former imperial power or anyone else? If so, are we seeing a drift toward Samuel Huntington's famous proposition about a clash of civilizations?

This question assumes importance in the light of the past. When Spanish conquistadores took over Latin America, they did not just rape, torture and kill. They killed the local gods and ensured the triumph of the Christian one. In "Things Fall Apart," the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe chronicles how Christianity went hand in hand with colonization in Africa. In India, Muslim invaders sacked temples. In Iran, Safavids destroyed Sunni mosques and converted them into Shia ones. In recent years, many have seen secularism as a way out of this maze of centuries-old religious conflict.

Intellectually, secularism is the legacy of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It involves the shrinking of religion from the public to the private sphere. After all, religious wars tore apart Europe for more than a century and a half. Today, France is thankfully not ruled according to l'ancien regime's dictum of "un roi, une foi, une loi" (one king, one faith, one law). Unlike Huguenots, Muslims have not been subjected to St. Bartholomew's Day massacre. *Laïcité* may not be perfect, but it is much better than the alternative.

Unfortunately, Muslim societies have failed to embrace secularism. From Indonesia and Pakistan to Iran and Turkey, there is a disturbing intolerance afoot. Of course, the West fanned the flames, but now this conflagration inspired by religion is singeing societies, states and even the international order. Earlier this year, the Islamic State group massacred Sikhs in Kabul. By September, most of the Hindus and Sikhs had left Afghanistan. It is important to note that these communities had lived in Afghanistan for centuries and even stayed on during the heydays of the Taliban.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the failure of American-style capitalism to provide

prosperity or opportunity, people are turning again to religion. On October 22, a Polish court banned almost all abortions. In Eastern Europe and Russia, the influence of the church has been increasing. Even benign Buddhists have turned malign and are targeting minorities in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Yet the scale of what is going on in the Muslim world is different. There are tectonic shifts underway from Islamabad to Istanbul that are disturbing. Minorities are fleeing Muslim countries and radical Islamists like Anzorov are taking to the sword.

Does Macron have a point? Is Islam truly in crisis?

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Anti-Semitism Is Resurfacing Again in Germany

Kiran Bowry
October 28, 2020

Life for Jewish people in Germany has become increasingly angst-ridden because of rising public displays of anti-Semitism.

In October 2019, a right-wing terrorist attack on a synagogue in Halle an der Saale led to two fatalities and reminded the German public of rising anti-Jewish violence and right-wing extremism. In the aftermath of the attack, Chancellor Angela Merkel called for more protection for Jewish people. Sadly, statements like these expose the fact that the political sphere in Germany has been underestimating the growing threat against Jewish life.

Roman Yossel Remis was leading the prayers at the synagogue on the day of the attack and

stated, “Today I experienced what it means to be Jewish, to be a Jew in 2019.” According to the journalist and author Richard Chaim Schneider, the attack in Halle showed that “Anti-Semitism has long since returned to the center of society. No, not arrived, because it never left: it simply crawled out of its holes again.”

Jewish Voters Want to Know

The Halle terrorist attack was the point of culmination and a gruesome expression of overriding societal developments concerning anti-Semitism in Germany. According to the latest report on anti-Semitism from Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, “Anti-Jewish sentiment can be found in all extremist areas of Germany but is particularly prevalent in the right-wing spectrum.” Corresponding anti-Semitic attitudes also circulate among conspiracy theorists, in Islamism and, to a lesser extent, in left-wing extremism. Recent statistics undermine these worrying developments: Anti-Semitic violence doubled between 2017 and 2019, and 85% of the 73 anti-Semitic acts of violence in 2019 were motivated by right-wing extremism.

The return of anti-Semitism into the mainstream of German society highlights the question of where political parties stand in respect to its manifestations. The question also weighs heavily on those affected, namely Jewish people living in Germany. Linda Rachel Sabiers, a German author and columnist of Jewish descent, tried to describe the psychology of Jewish voters. According to Sabiers, many hinge their voting decisions on two key questions. Which party does the most against anti-Semitism and how to “vote Jewish.”

These were the questions she had to face up to herself: “If one wants to vote Jewish ... one can perhaps weigh up which party actively opposes anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. The search for a political home that offers both has made many Jews unhappy. ... For years, I asked myself similar questions when voting, and at times — because of the anti-Semitism that flared ... — I

felt so cornered that between the ages of 18 and 34, I had no normal relationship to voting.” Following Sabiers’ opinion that this pattern of thought seems to be widespread among Jewish voters, a closer look at Germany’s political parties is of interest. Where do the main German parties stand in regard to anti-Semitism?

Alternative for Germany (AfD)

Despite leading representatives of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) stressing the party’s pro-Israel and pro-Jewish stance, statements by members repeatedly trigger allegations of anti-Semitism. Even the existing faction, Jews in the AfD, which the AfD often refers to as evidence for the party’s pro-Jewish viewpoints, cannot gloss over anti-Semitic tendencies in the party ranks. The Central Council of Jews in Germany criticized the AfD’s pro-Jewish image by stating that the “AfD is a danger for Jewish life in Germany [and] a racist and anti-Semitic party.”

This warning comes against the backdrop of numerous problematic incidents of anti-Semitism within the AfD. One accusation was brought against Wolfgang Gedeon, an MP for the AfD in the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, according to whom the view that the blame for the Second World War lies with the Nazis is “a version dictated by Zionism.”

Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU)

Learning the lessons from the Nazi past and in correspondence with the pro-Jewish fundamental consensus in postwar politics in Germany, anti-Semitic references ceased to play a part in the programmatic alignment of the center-right CDU/CSU. Nevertheless, the reproaches of anti-Semitism occurred regularly. Most prominently, Martin Hohmann, a former CDU MP, stated in 2003 that the claim of collective guilt against Germans during the Nazi period should also apply to Jewish people. The CDU/CSU subsequently excluded Hohmann from the fraction and party. Hohmann joined the AfD.

Liberal Democrats (FDP)

After the foundation of the FDP in the 1950s, national liberal tendencies were dominant. The party included people who had held high positions in the Nazi regime. From the late 1960s onward, the FDP departed from its national liberal imprint toward a center to center-right party.

But in 2002, the infamous Möllemann scandal awoke ghosts of the past. Jürgen Möllemann, a former MP in the national parliament, the Bundestag, was accused of stirring up anti-Semitic attitudes in society by claiming that the Israeli prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, had to bear the blame for the escalation of the Middle East conflict. He also branded German-Jewish television journalist, Michel Friedman, to be his political propagandist. The FDP refrained from taking decisive action against Möllemann. Since then, no incidents of equal gravity occurred.

The Greens

The center-left Green Party, which defines itself as a political force oriented toward human rights and the environment, publicly condemns anti-Semitism. Correspondingly, issues with anti-Semitism remained the exception. Still, debates about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resulted in internal party disputes about potential anti-Semitic remarks and connotations. One major incident took place in 2002, when Jamal Karsli, an MP in the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament, criticized the Israeli armed forces for applying Nazi methods in the conflict. In reaction to accusations of using anti-Semitic rhetoric, Karsli left the party and joined the FDP.

Die Linke (The Left)

A minority of The Left party harbors a pronounced hostility toward Israel that bubbles up regularly. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether anti-imperialism, anti-Semitism or a mixture of both lies at the forefront of this hostility. Anti-Israel positions in the left-wing of the party usually aim at Israeli state policies toward

Palestine. By often alluding to a “David versus Goliath” narrative, Israel supposedly acts as an imperial, ruthless power.

Among several problematic intraparty incidents was the invitation of two controversial publicists and Israel critics, Max Blumenthal and David Sheen, to a discussion on the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by two MPs from The Left. Gregor Gysi, former party whip in the Bundestag, disapproved of the invitation and decided to call off the meeting.

Social Democratic Party (SPD)

The center-left SPD has been steadfast in its committed stand against anti-Semitism. André Levi Israel Ufferfilge, a researcher in Jewish Studies at Münster University, wrote in 2009: “In my opinion, the SPD seems to have a good standing with many Jews. ... It is very welcome that the SPD has a working group for Jewish Social Democrats and that Judaism is considered part of the roots of social democracy in the SPD’s latest party manifesto.”

Although anti-Semitic incidents are just as rare as with the Greens, the party has not been untouched by accusations. In 2018, Ulrich Mäurer, an SPD senator from Bremen, falsely claimed that the Israeli army is “executing dozens of Palestinians at the border fence.” In response to fierce criticism from outside and within the party, Mäurer apologized for his “unfortunate choice of words.”

Acting on Anti-Semitism

All parties in the German Bundestag show sensitivity toward the issue of anti-Semitism and are quick in denouncing it. Still, some, particularly the AfD, either display more frequent or singular prominent allegations of anti-Semitism, like the Möllemann scandal in the FDP, that persist in the public memory. Thanks to fewer major allegations, Jewish voters lean toward parties closer to the center, like the SPD and the Greens.

Nevertheless, none of the parties have been unblemished by accusations of anti-Israel or anti-

Semitic rhetoric. These controversial incidents often give rise to exhaustive debates among the German public about the thin line between justifiable criticism of Israeli politics and anti-Semitism. Due to the public attention and the recent increase in anti-Semitic violence, these intra-party incidents weigh heavily on the minds of Jewish people and voters, and hence deserve scrutiny.

Jewish voters in Germany seem to make their voting decision dependent on the parties’ attitudes toward anti-Semitism. That highlights their vulnerability in society, which originates in Germany’s history and the persecution of Jews during the Nazi period. This vulnerability has reemerged due to soaring anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany. The growing concerns of Jewish people is a call to action for Germany’s political parties. Evaluating their own and other parties’ activities against anti-Semitism more thoroughly should be a small building block of a bigger picture, namely protecting Jewish life in Germany.

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