Trump's Rise, Elites' Fall, Rot at the Top in Higher Ed

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President Donald Trump's controversial executive order prohibiting nationals from seven countries roiled by jihadism from entering the United States for three months—and the administration's bungled roll-out of the order—reminded foreign policy elites in both parties why they feared and loathed Trump. As if they needed a reminder.

From the beginning, the Democratic foreign policy elite contemplated the possibility of a Trump presidency with horror. More striking were the many establishment Republicans who substantially agreed. In an open letter in March, before Trump secured the GOP nomination, and in one in August after the Republican National Convention launched his general election campaign, scores of prominent Republican national security figures declared Trump unfit to serve as commander in chief.

There was always a self-serving component to this criticism. Foreign policy elites have conveniently overlooked their role in propelling Trump to the White House. The Bush administration sought to take the fight to the terrorists and promote democracy abroad with, in the words of President Bush's second inaugural address, "the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." But the Bush administration left a legacy of mismanaged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which squandered U.S. credibility.

The Obama administration touted its "smart power" as opening a new era in American foreign policy. Unfortunately, President Obama displayed a reckless reluctance to back diplomacy—or even his own public declarations—with the credible threat of force. Irresoluteness and a wild overestimation of his gifts for persuasion contributed to the emergence on Obama's watch of heightened danger from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea; humanitarian catastrophe in Syria producing a massive flow of refugees destabilizing neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as Western Europe; and the resurgence of Islamic extremism throughout the Middle East.

With a dismal record of miscalculation and floundering stretching across two two-term administrations, small wonder that many voters rallied to Trump, who promised to smash the establishment and restore America's standing. But is President Trump the answer to America's foreign policy woes?

Two of the nation's outstanding students of American foreign policy have recently turned their attention to Trump's evident ambition to overturn the post-World War II liberal international order that the United States took the lead in establishing and which it has

anchored for 70 years. In "Twilight of the Liberal World Order," Robert Kagan sketches a grim picture of international chaos that he believes is likely to result from a foreign policy based on Trump's promises. In "The Jacksonian Revolt," Walter Russell Mead focuses on the appeal Trump's promises held for a substantial portion of the electorate. Both touch on but neither gets to the roots of the key domestic failure—the miseducation of our elites—that drives American foreign policy debacles.

A Brookings Institution senior fellow, Kagan contends that the liberal world order Trump inherits is severely threatened by a combination of external and internal causes. From without, great powers China and Russia are bent on "establishing hegemony in their desired spheres of influence." The Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to dominate the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East. Totalitarian North Korea aspires to control the Korean Peninsula, which would have ripple effects on northeast Asia. A lesser threat, in Kagan's judgment, but still worrisome, "is the effort by ISIS and other radical Islamist groups to establish a new Islamic caliphate in the Middle East."

Military power, principally American, has provided the major check on the enemies of liberal international order. But that check has been weakening from within.

The "liberal enlightenment project," Kagan argues, has suffered "a crisis of confidence." In its foreign policy manifestation, that project embraces a commitment to human rights, economic interdependence, and cooperation among nations through international institutions. Economic distress, unresponsive and ineffective political parties, and the return of nationalism and tribalism facilitated by social media have eroded those commitments.

While Kagan acknowledges that inherent weaknesses in democracy and capitalism may have contributed to the crisis, the crucial variable determining the fate of liberal international order, he maintains, is "the United States' own willingness to continue upholding" it. In the Obama administration's curtailment of America's role abroad, Kagan sees a decline in that willingness. He fears that Trump will intensify the trend.

Trump's slogan, "America First," captures a "fairly coherent philosophy," argues Kagan. "It calls for viewing American interests through a narrow lens," he writes. "It suggests no longer supporting an international alliance structure, no longer seeking to deny great powers their spheres of influence and regional hegemony, no longer attempting to uphold liberal norms in the international system, and no longer sacrificing short-term interests—in trade for instance—in the longer-term interest of preserving an open economic order."

If Trump acts on this philosophy, concludes Kagan, "then the collapse of the world order, with all that entails, may not be far off."

Rightly noting that no one can say with confidence how the onrush of events will affect Trump's foreign policy thinking, Walter Russell Mead, a Hudson Institute senior fellow, asserts that Trump's professed approach departs from the two major schools of thought that

have dominated post-World War II America. Hamiltonians aim to construct a world order devoted to finance, trade, and security, while Wilsonians promote human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law. In contrast, Trump's thinking, according to Mead, is rooted in the cultural appeal of the country's first populist president, Andrew Jackson.

Jacksonians believe that government's "chief business" consists in protecting the nation's individual liberty and promoting economic prosperity. They prefer to avoid international involvement except when American national interests are directly threatened; then they favor responding swiftly and decisively.

Jacksonianism, in the person of Donald Trump, has returned in large measure, Mead suggests, because many working-class men and women lost faith in the Democratic and Republican establishments. Significant numbers of middle-class voters believe that elite Washington policymakers disregard the consequences of open borders and free trade for the non-elite. And they think that elites of both parties view them as "bitter" people who "cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations"—as, Mead notes, "Barack Obama famously put it in 2008."

To restore a U.S. foreign policy that advances America's interest in maintaining a liberal international order, we must correct two weighty and closely connected errors that have produced the policies that have estranged in particular the lower-middle class: first, overlooking the beliefs, practices and associations that sustain liberal democracy; second, neglecting the basic cultural and religious convictions that determine how different peoples understand their interests, set their priorities, and fashion their policies.

This, however, is not the prism through which foreign policy elites view the moment. The "resistance" that has greeted the Trump presidency from the Democratic Party establishment and influential establishment conservatives only convinces Trump supporters that they were right—that the elites routinely ignore their voices, perspectives, and aspirations.

Meanwhile, elites persist in expecting grassroots populists to listen to the experts even though the makers of American foreign policy have made a succession of major mistakes in the course of the last 16 years and fellow members of America's governing class have presided over the transformation of the bastions of their own authority—the nation's colleges and universities—into purveyors of intolerance masquerading as champions of inclusiveness.

The corrective is straightforward, though daunting obstacles stand in the way. We must replace the desultory and often-illiberal education provided by our colleges and universities with a truly liberal education rooted in the study of constitutional, diplomatic, military, and religious history; political and economic principles; literature; and foreign languages and civilizations. This will prepare those who conduct American foreign policy to understand the world as it is and not as they posit or wish it to be.

The foreign policy elites who fear and loathe Trump are asking the perennial question: who will guard the guardians? That's important. They should consider also a still more fundamental question: who will educate the educators?

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