

FOUR YEARS OF TRUMP

THE US AND THE WORLD

edited by **Mario Del Pero** and **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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Introduction

Mario del Pero, Paolo Magri

As November 3rd, the date for the 2020 US presidential election, fast approaches, supporters of President Trump at rallies around the country repeatedly chant: “Four more years”. Just a few months ago, many would have branded those voters as fanatics, with Trump sinking in national polls and trailing Joe Biden, the then-Democratic hopeful, by 10 percentage points. By early September, however, the gap between the two contenders had narrowed to 6 points and while still solid, Biden’s lead in key battleground states is also challenged.

Whether Trump manages to seal another four years in office, or Biden wins a rare victory against an incumbent President (in the US this has happened only three times in the last century), it is high time to take stock of what has been a highly unpredictable and unconventional four years. Unpredictability has been the trademark of Trump’s presidency even before inauguration day, as the President managed to beat Hillary Clinton against the bets of most observers, who in October 2016 gave Clinton an almost unassailable lead. Unpredictability has also been an involuntary distinguishing mark of the latter part of Trump’s four years in office, with the worst global pandemic in over a century striking the US as well as the world, and forcing the American government to respond to one of the most dramatic health and economic crises in history.

It would be tempting, but futile, to look at Trump’s presidency mainly through the lens of the novel coronavirus, and its global reverberations. Yet, it is indisputable that the

Covid-19 pandemic and its impact have the potential to affect the results of the November elections, and to go far beyond that at the international level, maybe even reshaping the regional and global balance of power. Within the United States, a domestic economy that was recording the best labour market conditions since 1969 has seen unemployment levels skyrocket from 3.5% in February to almost 15% in April, only to recover somewhat to around 9% by August. On the healthcare side of the equation, as of mid-September the official number of deaths from Sars-CoV-2 infections in the US hovered at around 200,000, almost double the number of casualties that the American public experienced during World War I (117,000), and nearly four times those related to the Vietnam war (58,000).

Nonetheless, it is important to look beyond the coronavirus, and beyond the President's unconventional style. Doing so reveals that on many levels Trump's policy choices have been marked by both continuity and change from previous American administrations. Indeed, in many policy fields even under Trump continuity reigned supreme. That is to say that even a most unconventional President who promised to "drain the swamp" has found itself embroiled in the tangled realities of government – and that while his tweets might suggest otherwise, many policy choices had to be toned down, or were axed altogether by Congress. In economic terms, while the lowest unemployment levels in decades have been reached during Trump's mandate, the country's performance under the President has in many respects been a linear continuation of the Obama recovery, with lax monetary policies supporting an unabated (if dangerous, given current public debt levels) fiscal expansion. In the foreign policy field, Trump's strategic disengagement from conflict theatres in the Middle East, and distrust of NATO, were reminiscent of Obama's "leading from behind" strategy and of many other US presidents' complaints of European allies who allegedly were not doing enough to support the Transatlantic Alliance and share the burden of a common security policy.

As for change, Trump has undoubtedly had more latitude to break with tradition in the foreign policy realm. He tried to negotiate a deal directly with the North Korean leadership, launched an all-out trade war with China, alternatively warmed up and cooled down relationships with Russia, and withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, bolstering the US alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel instead. As of late, the Trump administration broke with tradition even in its traditional balancing act between Israel and Arab countries, managing to convince the United Arab Emirates to fully normalise its relations with Israel – with Bahrain soon following suit. Even so, Trump has never been alone in taking these decisions, which can of course be criticized but need to be understood and placed into context. And, as a chapter in this Report reveals (see below), even some policy choices that might be labelled as “change” at first sight, such as restrictions on regular immigration and a staunch fight against irregular migratory flows, may be traced back to decades-old trends.

This Report aims to analyse continuity and change during Trump’s four years, both at the domestic and international level. What are the longer-term trends that this unconventional president has had to ride through? What was his trademark, and what could be his lasting legacy?

In the first chapter, Gary Jacobson describes how the United States became more and more polarized during the Trump era. As a matter of fact, the growing divergence between the preferred policies of Republicans and Democrats was an already visible trend for the past three decades. But the pugnacious, unscripted style that had enabled Trump’s hostile takeover of the Republican Party further polarized the country, as the President doubled down on his strategy of mobilizing extreme sentiments. As Jacobson argues, Trump’s actions aggravated partisan, racial, and regional conflicts: rather than a unifying presidency, Trump’s has been, so far, a dividing one and divisive one. As a result, even the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the country in such a devastating form did little to soothe

divisions, leaving existing political fault lines almost untouched as the election date draws nearer.

Turning to the economic performance of the country under Trump, Michele Alacevich considers the Covid-19 pandemic as a massive stress test, which shone a spotlight on several deeply problematic characteristics of the American economy and society. Alacevich points at several instances of continuity in economic policy and performance between Trump and Obama. For one, Trump's economic results followed in the footsteps of the previous administration – at least until the novel coronavirus hit the country. However, continuity is visible also in a second, troubling trend: that of rising inequality, made even worse by Trump through the 2017 tax reform, which had highly regressive effects, and his attempts to undermine “Obamacare” (i.e., the Affordable Care Act).

A third, crucial point to evaluate Trump's presidency is immigration reform. In her chapter, Gabriella Sanchez elaborates on the many policies and practices implemented over the past four years by the US administration, showing that immigration law and its enforcement have become increasingly restrictive. The separation of thousands of families that attempted to cross the southern border irregularly, and the expansion of child detention, are two of the main examples of such practices. Sanchez also explains that Trump has used the current global pandemic to further crack down on migration flows and on immigrants already residing on US territory. However, as problematic as the White House's migration-related policies and practices can be, Sanchez shows that Trump's policies did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they are a continuation of decades old choices aimed at curbing, or strongly regulating, migration flows, especially from those regions of the world that were perceived as threats to US national security.

Finally, on the domestic side, Scott Greer analyses the Covid-19 pandemic and the healthcare response that followed. The United States has been one of the countries most affected by the crisis, not only in absolute terms but also relative to its

population. Greer asks what made the country so vulnerable to the virus, focusing on fragmentation, inequality, and Trump's role as a disruptive president. He shows how fragmented US communicable disease control structures are. Paired with a constant underfunding and the temptation to direct those small financial amounts elsewhere, this made the system too dependent on federal government agencies, and especially the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Greer argues that this overreliance on central action, combined with policies adopted by the President prior to the pandemic, led the country into a perfect storm: indeed, Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton abolished the pandemic preparedness function of the NSC that Obama had created and, as a result, by 2020 there was little central capacity to effectively address health emergencies.

Turning to how Trump's United States approached the outside world, the first issue that deserves attention is the relationship between the two great contenders for global leadership: the US and China. As Mario Del Pero explains, US-China relations have shaped the international context for decades, making it increasingly integrated and globalized. Whether we observe the relationship as of interdependencies (the "Chimerica" model) or one of inevitable conflict between the established hegemon and a rising power, there is no doubt that the sheer volume of trade, investment, offshoring of production, and cultural exchanges generated by the US-China relationship helped support the perception of an increasingly integrated world. As cooperation between the two big powers appears to give way to competition, Del Pero argues that, for Trump, the relationship with China was naturally adversarial, with some easily measurable indicators (the trade deficit, or the loss of US manufacturing jobs) showing that Beijing was "winning", and Washington was "losing". This, in turn, has driven the whole approach of the US towards China during the past four years, both on security and economic grounds.

Trump's approach to the Middle East has been less confrontational and much more transactional in nature. In this vein, William Wechsler shows that the US foreign policy appears to be undergoing an ideological shift, moving from being seen as the primary defender of the status quo to a key driver of regional realignment. Trump's preferences have focused on reversing many of former President Obama's decisions, in particular by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal. But the Trump administration's policies have also been much more erratic and unconventional than expected, as Trump allowed other foreign powers (such as Turkey and Russia) to take the lead in Syria, losing influence in the region, but then helping normalize relations between Israel and two Arab countries (the UAE and Bahrain). Moreover, Wechsler also explains that the situation is not necessarily likely to change even if Trump loses the November vote, as foreign observers tend to overestimate the likelihood of fundamental changes in US foreign policy after the inauguration of a new president.

In the last chapter, Erik Jones turns to the relationship between the US and the European Union during Trump's first term. Trump created any number of moments that could pass for a low point in the history of US-EU relationships, especially with regards to NATO. He also shelved the already comatose transatlantic trade and investment partnership, referred to Europe as an adversary of the United States, and went as far as threatening to start a trade war with the EU. However, Jones explains that other presidents have acted along those same lines, if less violently than Trump, and asks whether a different US administration with another, perhaps more conventional, president could have a restorative effect. Unfortunately for anyone who feels a deep sense of nostalgia, Jones argues that that is unlikely to happen. The world has changed, the balance of power is shifting along with the global economic centre of gravity, Europe is less pivotal for Washington, and the US-EU relationship is adapting to the reality of a world in which no president could erase the strategic transformations underway.

In conclusion, Trump's first four years have been memorable and momentous. Whether the current President manages to clinch a second term, or is defeated by Biden, Trump's presidency has elicited high emotions and much soul-searching within the American public and the political and economic elites. Whereas many questions that still remain open on the conduct of this American presidency, there is one that we can answer straight away: with or after Trump, the US will be called to repair its image and recover, rebuild, and reassess its place in the world.

PART I

**THE US IN THE MIRROR.
HOW THE US HAS CHANGED**

1. *Divide et Impera*: Polarization in Trump's America

Gary C. Jacobson

The devastating social and economic dislocations spawned by the coronavirus pandemic that struck the United States (and the world) in early 2020 gave Donald Trump the defining challenge of his presidency. Uniting the country against a common threat is basic to the president's job description, and the moment clearly cried out for unifying national leadership. Trump claimed the mantle of wartime President but could summon neither the will nor capacity to craft and stick to a unifying message. Having built his entire political career on mobilizing grievances, sowing discord, spinning lies, and savaging critics, Trump stayed true to form as the crisis unfolded, using his press briefings and tweets to praise himself and rewrite history while issuing crude attacks on anyone in politics or the media who dared to question his administration's decidedly questionable performance. In a crisis demanding coordinated, coherent, and informed national action, Trump continued to preside as always: impulsively, erratically, and ignorantly, with contradictory messages that extended to floating quack remedies and cheering on populist protests against his own administration's policies.¹ In other words, he remained the same Donald Trump on display

¹ M. Shear and S. Mervosh, "Trump Encourages Protest Against Governors Who Have Imposed Virus Restrictions", *New York Times*, 17 April 2020; W. Broad and D. Levin, "Trump Muses About Light as Remedy, but Also Disinfectant, Which is Dangerous", *New York Times*, 24 April 2020.

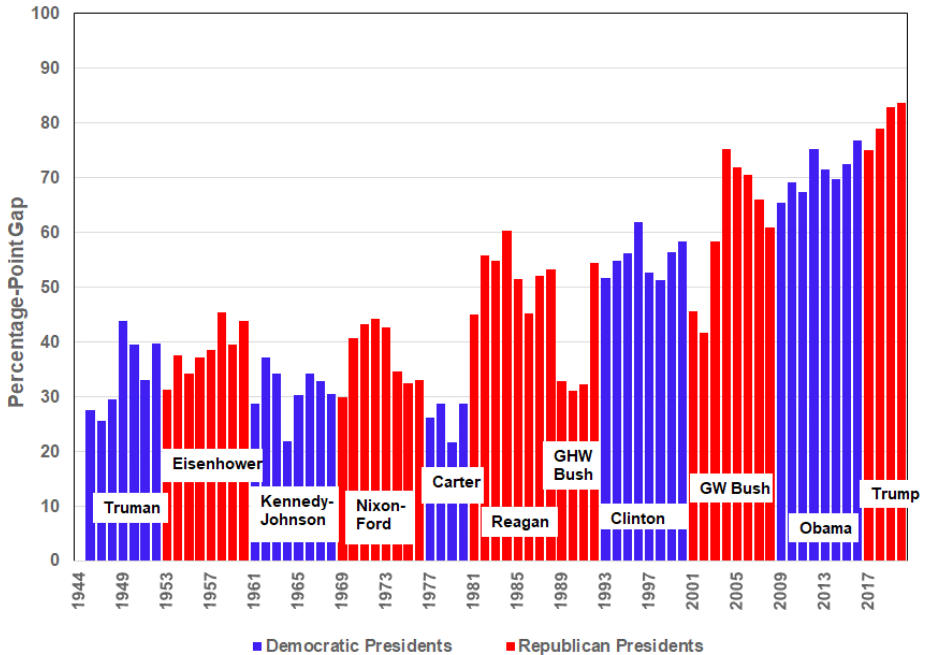
from the beginning of his campaign for the presidency in 2015 through his first three years in office.

The pugnacious, unscripted style that had enabled his hostile takeover of the Republican Party, got him elected in 2016, and seen him through various sex scandals, the Mueller investigation, and impeachment no longer fit the moment, but Trump would or could not adapt to the radically altered context of his presidency. To the contrary; he doubled down on his stock strategy of mobilizing the illiberal sentiments of his white populist base at the cost of aggravating partisan, racial, and regional conflicts. Rather than unite the country, Trump left it nearly as polarized over his response to the communal disaster as it had been over his earlier impeachment and acquittal. As a result, the gravest and most disruptive crisis to hit the United States since the Second World War did almost nothing to alter existing political battle lines – at least in the short run.

Prior to the pandemic, Trump's genius for exciting and exploiting discord had given him the most polarized presidential job approval ratings in modern American history. His new record was, however, only the latest extension of a long-term trend. The partisan divide in opinions of presidents had been growing wider for several decades and had reached new highs during the presidencies of his immediate predecessors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The trend is summarized in Figure 1.1, which displays the annual averages in the partisan gap in presidential approval ratings in Gallup Polls taken since the Truman administration.² The gap expanded in stages, initially with Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, then further with G.W. Bush and Obama, and finally to new extremes during Trump's presidency. Since the beginning of 2019, partisan differences in opinions of Trump's performance has averaged a remarkable 83 points, with an average 90% of Republicans but only 7% of Democrats approving of his job performance.

² The gap is calculated as difference in the percentage approving the president's job performance between respondents identifying with the president's party and those identifying with the rival party.

FIG. 1.1 – PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN PRESIDENTIAL JOB APPROVAL, 1945-2020 (ANNUAL AVERAGES FROM GALLUP POLLS)



The growing party gap in presidential approval is but one symptom of widening divisions in the electorate that have both echoed and reinforced party polarization in Washington. Trump's victory in 2016, and the remarkably divisive presidency it launched, are the end products of decades of deepening elite and mass partisan division fused with his singular character, a fateful meeting of opportunity and opportunist. Trump's presidency is also scarcely conceivable without Obama's. This chapter begins summarizing the developments in the party system that set the stage for the intense partisan conflicts of the Obama years, and then it considers how the lines of cleavage amplified by the Obama presidency, and the social and economic dislocations

they reflected, made Trump's election possible. The course of the Trump presidency, and the starkly divergent reactions it has provoked, are the subjects of the third section. The final section reviews Trump's response to the coronavirus pandemic and to a second test of his leadership, the protests sparked by a video of the brutal killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis policeman, consider how far Trump's go-to strategy of deception and division remains viable, and speculate briefly about his legacy, win or lose in 2020.

Polarization Before Trump

Trump's disruptive presidency was made possible by a long-term reordering of elite and mass party politics in the United States. In the decades leading up to the 2016 election, the nation had by almost every measure grown increasingly polarized along party lines. Deepening conflict was most obvious at the elite level in the frequent public clashes between partisan warriors in Washington, but it emerged in the broader public as well. From the 1970s onward, largely in response to the more sharply differentiated alternatives offered by the national parties and their candidates, Americans gradually sorted themselves into increasingly distinct and discordant Republican and Democratic camps. Their partisan identities, ideological leanings, and policy opinions became more consistent internally and more divergent from those of rival partisans. Political cleavages that once divided up the public in diverse ways grew more coincident, leaving partisans on opposite sides on a growing range of issues. Traditional disagreements over the role and size of government (with a focus on taxes, regulation, and the social safety net) widened, as did disagreements about social issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration, race and gun control. Partisans moved apart on beliefs about reality as well as in values and opinions; most Democrats, for example, came to believe that humans are heating up the planet, with potentially dire consequences; most Republicans did not. Polarization also

had an affective component, with expressed feelings about the rival party and its leaders growing increasingly negative.

Attitudinal and affective polarization coincided with changing party demographics. The emerging Democratic coalition included a growing proportion of young, single, female, secular, urban, ethnic minority, LGBTQ, and highly educated voters. The Republican coalition remained overwhelmingly white and was increasingly composed of older, married, religiously observant, male, and less educated people living in smaller cities or rural communities. As people sorted themselves into more dissimilar party coalitions, they also, by their choices about where to live and work, sorted themselves geographically, producing more politically homogeneous and lopsidedly partisan states, counties, and cities.³

The information environment also evolved in ways that furthered polarization. The sources Americans rely on for political news became more fragmented, ideologically diverse, and openly biased. Mainstream news sources – the network news programs and the prestige press – lost audiences to tendentious radio talk shows, internet websites and bloggers, and Fox News. Fox News was the first national television news outlet to adopt a transparent ideological and partisan identity, staffing its shows with conservative pundits and Republican politicians; its audience of older, less educated whites proved highly receptive to its right-wing populist messages. Media fragmentation, partiality, and competition for niche audiences both coarsened public discourse and enabled people to find information outlets that could be counted on to reinforce rather than challenge their political beliefs and opinions.⁴

³ For more details on these developments and full citations from the rich literature on polarization, see G. Jacobson, “Polarization, Gridlock, and Presidential Campaign Politics in 2016”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 667, Spring 2016, pp. 227-228.

⁴ G. Jacobson, “Partisan Media and Electoral Polarization in 2012: Evidence from the American National Election Study”, in J.A. Thurber and A. Yoshinaka (eds.), *American Gridlock*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 259-286.

The Obama Factor

These trends converged during Barack Obama's presidency. Obama, accurately regarded by most Democrats as a pragmatist at about the median of their center-left coalition, came to be reviled by large portion of Republican voters (following their leaders and conservative media) as a radical socialist posing a fundamental threat to American institutions and values. Obama's background and traits were guaranteed to arouse antipathy among the populist, nationalist, and conservative whites that had come to form a substantial part of the Republican Party's base. An African American bearing a foreign-sounding name with "Hussein" in its middle, Obama also had an Ivy League education, a detached manner, an air of cosmopolitan sophistication, and a cerebral approach to politics. Obama thus vibrated the racist, xenophobic, anti-intellectual, and anti-elitist as well as anti-liberal strands lurking within right-wing populism. To many ordinary Republicans, Obama was not merely a routinely objectionable mainstream Democrat but a person whose name, race, upbringing, alleged objectives, and presumed values put him outside the boundaries of what is acceptable in an American President. The persistent and widespread belief among Republicans in bogus claims about his birthplace and religion reflects this mindset. Even at the end of his presidency, a poll found that 28% of Republicans still said Obama was foreign born and thus never eligible to be President (only 45% said he was born in the US; the remaining 27% were, after all this time, "not sure"), and 45% said he was a Muslim.⁵ Some of this was simply opportunistic Obama bashing invited by the survey questions,⁶ but even as such it underlined their enmity toward Obama and eagerness to deny

⁵ 2016 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) survey, Week 6 (29 September-3 October 2016) .

⁶ J.G. Bullock, A.S. Gerber, S.J. Hill, and G.A. Huber, "[Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs About Politics](#)", *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2015, pp. 519-578.

his legitimacy. This enmity had a racial component; extensive research confirms that racial animus shaped reactions to Obama from his emergence as a presidential contender and throughout his presidency.⁷ It was no accident that Donald Trump touted the racist “birther” lie while pursuing the presidency and did not concede that Obama was born in the United States until after he had won the nomination.

A second important reason that Obama became such a powerful polarizer was his adversaries’ tactics. Republican congressional leaders made the strategic decision very early in his presidency to oppose his agenda root and branch, capitalizing on the anger and energy emanating from the right (manifest in the Tea Party movement) in what turned out to be a highly successful effort to revive their party’s electoral fortunes. It was a deliberately polarizing strategy that rejected cooperation or compromise in favor of drawing sharp distinctions that would mobilize conservative Republican voters.

Reactions to the Obama presidency reinforced the trends in party demographics noted earlier. Obama made his party more attractive to people who were younger, better educated, minority, socially liberal, and cosmopolitan in tastes and outlook, while making it less attractive to people who were none of those things: older, white, less educated, and socially conservative, and insular. In particular, the Democrats lost ground among white working-class voters, who collectively continued to suffer from a long-term decline in manufacturing jobs, stagnant wages, and diminished prospects for their families and communities. The consequences are displayed in Table 1.1, which summarizes partisan distribution of white respondents in the American National Election Studies taken since 1952 as well as subsets of whites with no more than a high school education.

⁷ M. Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most Racial? Race and Politics in the Obama Era*, Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 2016. Racial resentment was, unsurprisingly, a strong predictor of false beliefs about Obama’s birthplace and religion in the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Study surveys.

TABLE 1.1- PARTY IDENTIFICATION OF WHITES, 1952-2016
(PERCENTAGES)

	1952-1982	1984-2000	2002-2008	2012	2016
All Whites					
Republicans	36.2	44.0	48.0	51.9	52.4
Democrats	52.2	43.8	42.6	38.8	38.8
Difference	-16.0	0.2	5.4	13.1	13.6
High School Only					
Republicans	30.9	36.9	42.5	48.3	52.7
Democrats	56.0	47.8	45.0	36.2	32.4
Difference	-25.1	-10.9	-3.5	12.1	20.3

Between 1952 and 1982, Democrats held a steady lead in party identification of about 16 point among all whites and 25 points among less-educated whites. From Reagan's reelection in 1984 to the end of the Clinton administration, the parties were evenly balanced among all whites, while Democrats retained an advantage among the high school-only subgroup. Republicans gained further support among whites during the G.W. Bush administration but reaped their greatest gains during Obama's presidency. Notice that this shift had occurred by 2012, well before Donald Trump emerged as a candidate; while the Obama era was attracting ethnically diverse younger citizens to the Democratic Party, it was alienating older and less educated whites. A Trump effect is, however, clearly visible in the data for lower-educated whites, who in 2016 were for the first time more Republican than better-educated whites.

The Election of Obama's Antithesis

Obama cast a long shadow over the Republican primary season in 2016. Nearly every candidate, mindful of Republican primary voters' disdain for Obama, vowed to undo virtually everything that he had accomplished. Donald Trump's unique advantage was that, beyond repeating the standard Republican promise to click the "undo" button on the Obama era, he came across as the complete antithesis of the prudent, articulate, cerebral, restrained, cosmopolitan, African-American President: crude, impulsive, aggressive, unreflective, uninformed, xenophobic, jingoistic, racist, uncivil, and of course white.⁸ None of these manifest traits turned off Trump's growing band of Republican supporters, who either saw them as signs of strength, authenticity, and blunt honesty; discounted their relevance; or shared his perspectives and attitudes.⁹

Trump won the nomination over the protests of nearly the entire Republican establishment – elected leaders, elder statesmen, most major campaign contributors, and a large and prominent segment of the conservative commentariat. He rose to dominate the large primary field by inciting and exploiting the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-globalization as well as anti-Obama sentiments common to a large faction ordinary Republicans. His vulgar attacks on detractors in both parties and the media tapped into a rich vein of right-wing populist resentment toward cultural, corporate and political elites. That Trump's statements were often self-contradictory, wildly misinformed or flatly untrue did not faze his supporters in the least. They were deaf to fact-checking by mainstream news sources they do not trust – and have remained so throughout his presidency.¹⁰

⁸ D. Axelrod, "The Obama Theory of Trump", *New York Times*, 25 January 2016.

⁹ M.J. Lee et al., "Why I am Voting for Trump", *CNNpolitics*, 28 January 2016.

¹⁰ G. Jacobson, "The Triumph of Polarized Partisanship in 2016: Donald Trump's Improbable Victory", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 132, no. 1, 2017, pp. 20-23.

Trump's approach to campaigning and the responses it drew from both supporters and detractors established patterns that persisted throughout his presidency. Trump connected with the substantial minority of Americans who felt besieged economically and culturally by globalism, the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the country, and changing social norms. His supporters shared a deep cultural pessimism, believing that life in America for people like them was worse than it had been 50 years ago and would be even worse for the next generation. They distrusted the government and believed that its social programs serve mostly undeserving racial minorities and immigrants rather than people like them. They felt abandoned and marginalized, not without justification, by national politicians in both parties, the corporate world, and the urban sophisticates in the media and entertainment industries.¹¹ Trump's message of xenophobia and flirtation with white identity politics (a portion of both his fans and critics heard "Make American Great Again" as "Make American White Again"¹²) resonated most strongly among whites without a college education, especially men, among whom he eventually defeated Hillary Clinton by an estimated margin of 49 percentage points.

Clinton had inherited the Republican antipathy toward Obama and then some, and her unpopularity among Republicans was crucial to Trump's victory. Although a substantial minority of Republican voters had reservations about Trump, very few defected to Clinton because nearly all of them liked her even less. Trump effectively mobilized an enthusiastic base of white populist conservatives, but he won only because he was also able to hold onto a large majority of the more conventional Republicans who were not admirers but could not abide the idea of voting for Hillary Clinton; polarized partisanship made Trump President.¹³

¹¹ Ibid., p. 22.

¹² K.J. Baker, "Make America White Again?", *The Atlantic*, 12 March 2016; C.M. Blow, "Trump: Make American White Again", *New York Times*, 21 November 2016.

¹³ G. Jacobson (2017), pp. 16-18.

The combination of Obama's shadow and Trump's embrace of white identity politics strengthened the relationship between racial attitudes, party identification, and opinions of the parties and presidential candidates, all of which set new records in 2016. Partisan splits along the dimensions of race and ethnicity, age, education, gender, region, religiosity, and social values continued to widen in 2016; urban-rural differences also increased noticeably.¹⁴ Racial and ethnic differences are now arguably more potent drivers of political division than any other demographic characteristics, a development that predated Trump but has been extended by his candidacy and presidency.¹⁵

Trump in Office: A Polarizer from Day One

Winner of a bitter fight between two unusually unpopular candidates, Donald Trump entered the White House as the least popular and most polarizing newly elected President since onset of national polling. Republicans rated him very highly, a record 90% approving, but his approval rating among Democrats of 14% was by far the lowest received from rival partisans at the beginning of a presidency (the previous low was 32% for G.W. Bush after his disputed election in 2000). Trump's rating among independents and all respondents combined were also record lows for a newcomer.

These initial numbers set a pattern that has prevailed ever since. Despite the constant turmoil and periodic shocks that have characterized his presidency, opinions of Trump and his performance has varied surprisingly little over his term in office,

¹⁴ “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart”, Pew Research Center, 13 September 2016; L. Gamio, “Urban and Rural Americans are Becoming Increasingly Polarized”, *Washington Post*, 17 November 2016.

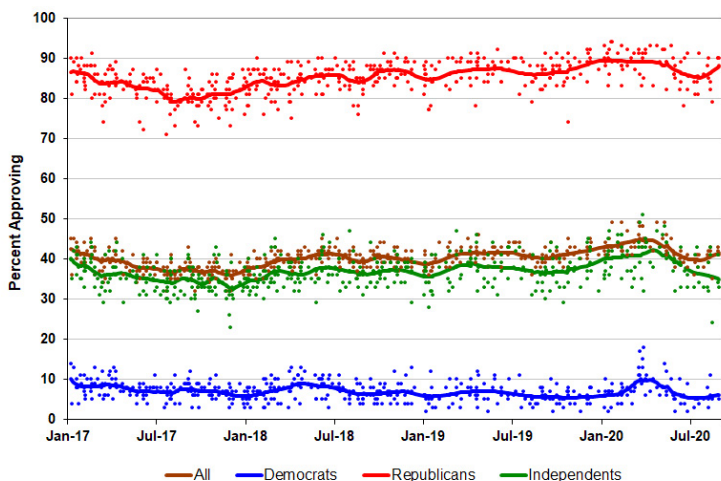
¹⁵ M. Abrajano and Z.L. Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015.

and partisan differences on both have remained unusually wide. No previous President had provoked such stable and intensely partisan reactions during any comparable period of his presidency.¹⁶ As Figure 1.2 shows, Trump's overall standing with the public has varied in a narrow range around the 40% mark.¹⁷ His approval ratings dipped during his first year in office amid the failed attempt to repeal Obama's Affordable Care Act but recovered after that issue was off the table, replaced by the successful effort to enact tax cuts in December 2017. They increased a couple of points around the time of his impeachment, as Republicans and some Republican-leaning independents rallied to his side. Trump's ratings rose a couple of more points in March 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, but the small surge, fueled mainly by a subset of Democrats willing to rally around the President in a time of national crisis, quickly faded, depressed by the continuing rise in Covid-19 deaths and by unfavorable reviews of his response to the protests spawned by Floyd's murder in late May (a later section shall have more to say about the public's reaction to these events). Partisans have expressed very divergent views of the Trump from day one, but differences have widened over time, reaching an all-time high of 87 points (approval by 94% of Republicans, 7% of Democrats) in the January 2020 Gallup Poll taken while impeachment proceedings were underway. Remarkably, that record was eclipsed in Gallup's June 2020 survey, with 91% of Republicans but only 2% of Democrats approving, leaving an 89 point gap.

¹⁶ J.M. Jones, "Trump Third Year Sets New Standard for Party Polarization", Gallup Report, 27 January 2020.

¹⁷ The mean for all respondents in Figure 2 is 39.9, with a standard deviation of 3.0.

FIG. 1.2 – APPROVAL OF TRUMP'S JOB PERFORMANCE, 2017-2020



Source: 452 ABC News/Washington Post, CBS News/New York Times, CNN, Gallup, IBD-TIPP, Marist, Monmouth, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, Pew, Grinnell/Seltzer, Kaiser, AP/NORC, and Quinnipiac polls

The extreme divergence in partisan opinions of Trump's performance raises two obvious questions: Why did ordinary Democrats become so uniformly critical of the President? And why did ordinary Republicans become so uniformly supportive?

The Democrats' consensus is easily explained. In response to Trump's character and policy objectives as revealed during his 2016 campaign, the proportion of Democrats viewing him unfavorably grew steadily. During the final month of the campaign, an average of 7% expressed a favorable opinion of Trump, 91%, an unfavorable opinion,¹⁸ anticipating his future approval-disapproval ratios very accurately, because nothing in his conduct as President has given ordinary Democrats

¹⁸ Averaged from 14 polls conducted by CNN, Fox News, Gallup, Morning Consult, *Economist/YouGov*, Suffolk University, Marist University, and Monmouth University.

reason to revise what they thought of him as a candidate. The trafficking in white identity politics, xenophobia, racism, and misogyny that characterized his campaign has continued unabated. His agenda has consisted largely of assaults on Obama's legacy on health care, the environment, financial regulation, taxes, fiscal policy, foreign policy, immigration, and trade. He routinely accuses Democratic leaders of treason, corruption, and hatred of America while peppering them with puerile schoolyard taunts. He tweets out crude rants against anyone in politics or the media who deigns to criticize him and vilifies any institution – the judiciary, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the intelligence services, at times the congressional Republican Party, and always the news media (even, on occasion, Fox News) – that declines to do his personal bidding. He disparages traditional allies and fawns over authoritarian rulers. His management of the executive branch has been a chaotic combination of incompetence and indifference, with slipshod vetting of dubious appointees, record turnover at all levels, and the hollowing out of crucial departments such as State and Homeland Security.¹⁹ And all of this accompanied by rising torrent of transparent, self-serving lies.²⁰ That Trump's approval ratings among Democrats have been as low as 2% in some major polls is stunning but not surprising.

To the enduring bafflement of his critics, none of the particulars that have made Trump so repugnant to ordinary Democrats has weakened his support among ordinary Republicans. Indeed, most evidently share his opinions, grievances, and resentments, admiring what Democrats despise

¹⁹ At the end of Trump's third year in office, 250 of the top 742 most important appointments requiring Senate approval remained unfilled; based on data reported in "[Tracking how many key positions Trump has filled so far](#)", *The Washington Post*, accessed 2 December 2019.

²⁰ By April 2020, Trump's count of false and misleading statements exceeded 18,000 and was up to an average of 23 per day; see G. Kessler, S. Rizzo, and M. Kelly, "[President Trump made 18,000 false or misleading claims in 1,170 days](#)", *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2020 .

about him: his America-first nationalism, disdain for non-white immigrants and assertive minorities, attacks on mainstream news media as “enemies of the people”, defiance of elite and expert opinion, mistrust of government institutions, contempt for Democratic leaders and their party, and the impulse to erase Obama’s legacy. With Trump’s encouragement, many of his supporters see his enemies as their enemies and view any attack on him as an attack on them, not least those conservative Christians who regard him as their divinely appointed defender.²¹ Even Republicans who find Trump’s manner and character off-putting have continued to support him for his policies on taxes, deregulation, trade, and immigration, as well as his stacking the judiciary with conservative judges. Letting “Trump be Trump” is a price they have been willing to pay for these results. And before the coronavirus pandemic crashed the economy, they could point to steady economic growth, very low unemployment, and a booming stock market as additional reasons to praise his performance.

Still, Republicans have been somewhat less united than Democrats in their opinions of Trump. The Quinnipiac Poll has regularly asked a large battery of questions regarding Trump’s character and behavior, with illuminating results.²² Figures 1.3 and 1.4 display the average distribution of responses by Democrats and Republicans to a selection of these questions. Partisan differences are huge on every question, but Democrats are more nearly unanimous in their negative opinions than are Republicans in their positive opinions. The only question that elicit pro-Trump responses from more than 11% of Democrats concerns his intelligence (28% consider him intelligent); on the rest, 85 to 97% give negative evaluations, with especially high negatives on character traits such as honesty, respect for minorities and women, level-headedness, moral leadership, and shared values.

²¹ A. Restuccia, “[The sanctification of Donald Trump](#)”, *Politico*, 30 April 2019.

²² Results for the Quinnipiac Polls are posted at <https://poll.qu.edu/>

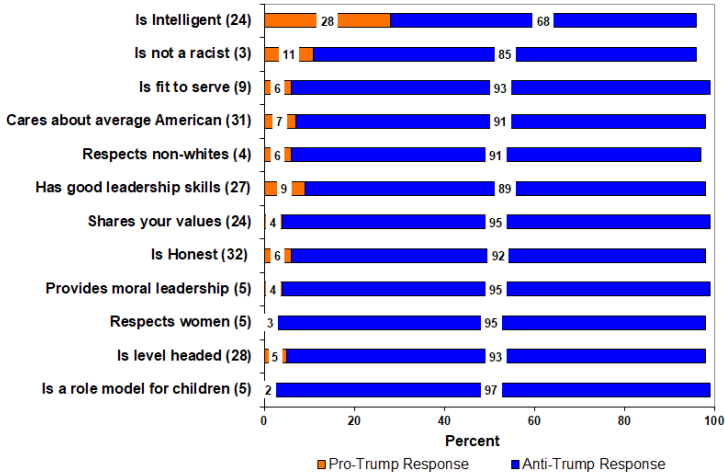
The pro-Trump consensus among Republicans is not so broadly consistent, but on every question a large majority sides with Trump. Majorities are somewhat smaller on questions of character, but it remains remarkable that, for example, 78% regard an inveterate liar and hater as an honest provider of moral leadership; 71% think that a man who brags about grabbing women's privates respects them; two-thirds think someone given to chaotic decision making and impulsive tweet storms is level-headed; and 60% deem the whole package a role model for children.²³ Some of this may be a matter of perspective; for example, Trump could be considered honest for openly expressing the respondent's own grievances and illiberal sentiments. But these responses are on the whole incongruous enough to suggest widespread partisan cheerleading.²⁴ For some Republicans, whatever their true beliefs, commitment to their side evidently precludes saying anything negative about Trump to a stranger asking questions over the phone (or the internet), which in itself is testimony to the depth of that commitment. Loathing for the other side – negative partisanship – is also at work. Regardless of Trump's flaws, his Democratic critics are viewed as worse; why give them comfort by conceding his faults?²⁵

²³ The distributions on these items among independents fall in between the partisans but majorities express anti-Trump opinions on all but "intelligent". Their average across items is 37% pro, 48% anti.

²⁴ J.G. Bullock and G. Lenz, "[Partisan Bias in Surveys](#)", *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 22, 2019, pp. 325-342; B. Schaffner and S. Luks, "Misinformation or Expressive Responding?", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 82, no.1 2018, pp. 135-147.

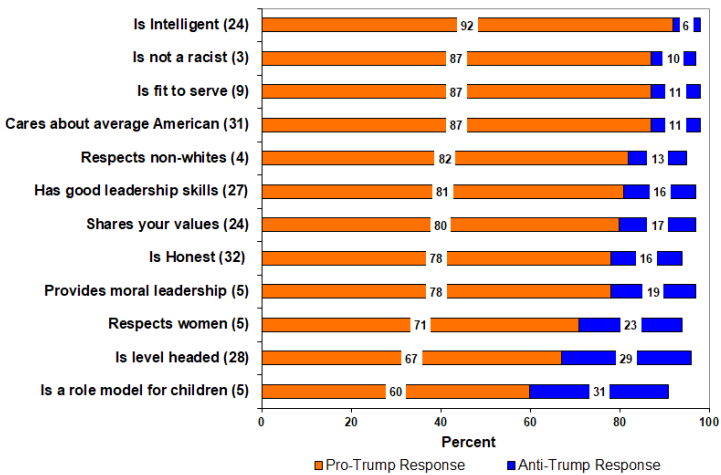
²⁵ Republicans' hesitation to say anything critical of the President is also suggested by the relatively larger proportion of Republicans who are uncertain or decline to answer the Quinnipiac questions.

FIG. 1.3 – ASSESSMENTS OF DONALD TRUMP'S CHARACTER (DEMOCRATS)



Note: Number of Quinnipiac Polls is in parentheses

FIG. 1.4 – ASSESSMENTS OF DONALD TRUMP'S CHARACTER (REPUBLICANS)

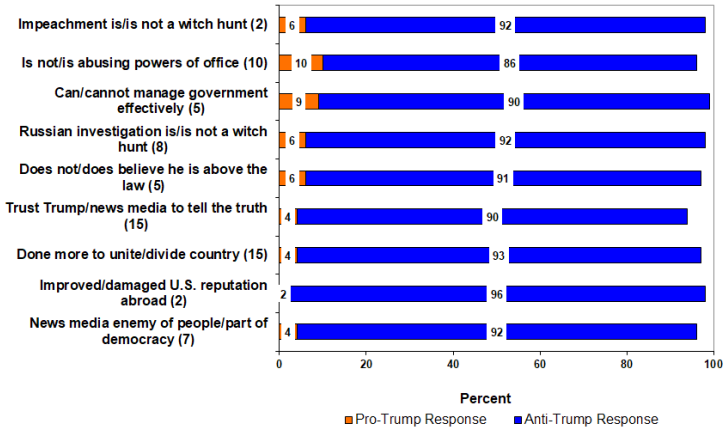


Note: Number of Quinnipiac Polls averaged is in parentheses

Partisans are almost as divided on Trump's conduct as they are on his character (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). By huge majorities, Democrats reject his claims that the investigation of Russia's intervention on his behalf in 2016 and the impeachment inquiries were "witch hunts", believe he abuses his power, manages the government ineffectively, and has damaged the country's reputation abroad. They are nearly unanimous in rejecting Trump's charge that the news media are "the enemy of the people", in trusting them rather than him to tell the truth, and in believing that he has divided rather than united the country.

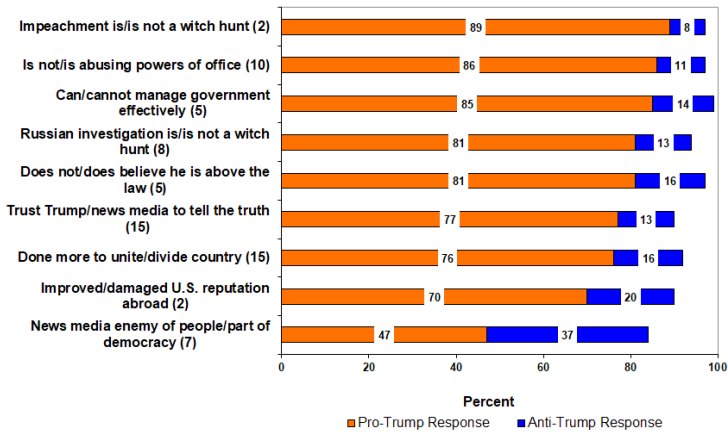
Again, most Republicans side with Trump on all these questions, albeit with less uniformity than anti-Trump Democrats. A plurality, although not a majority, even agree with Trump's sinister characterization of the news media as the enemy of the people rather than an important part of democracy. More than three-quarters of Republicans say he has done more to unite than divide the country, a risible conclusion given the partisan differences on this very question, the others in these surveys, and his job approval numbers – and a very impressive display of partisan cheerleading.

FIG. 1.5 – OPINIONS OF DONALD TRUMP'S PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIOR (DEMOCRATS)



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses

FIG. 1.6 – OPINIONS OF DONALD TRUMP'S PERFORMANCE AND BEHAVIOR (REPUBLICANS)



Note: The number of surveys averaged is in parentheses

Impeachment

The public's intensely partisan reactions to Trump have strongly influenced the way political elites have dealt with him. Criticism from congressional Republicans, common while Trump was pursuing the nomination and still heard early in his presidency, had by the time of his impeachment virtually disappeared, as critics departed, fell silent, or morphed into ardent defenders. Congressional Democrats, emboldened by their takeover of the House of Representatives in 2018 and their coalition's overwhelming animus toward Trump, moved to impeach him despite initial reluctance among some of their leaders, notably House speaker Nancy Pelosi, and the virtual certainty that the Republican-controlled Senate would never convict him.

Partisan predispositions totally dominated the public's response to the charge that Trump illegally withheld military aid to the Ukraine to coerce its government into opening investigations targeting Joe Biden, a potential opponent in 2020, and pursuing the spurious claim that it was Ukrainian hackers who intervened in 2016 to help Hillary Clinton rather than Russian hackers intervening to help him. Trump, characteristically, refused to admit that his dealings with Ukraine were other than "perfect" and mounted a defense replete with lies, misdirection, silenced witnesses, dubious readings of the Constitution, and boorish attacks on Democratic leaders. His behavior reinforced the case for impeachment in the eyes of Democrats, but ordinary Republicans accepted his claim that he was the victim of a partisan witch hunt and rallied to his side, giving him their highest approval ratings of his presidency (Figure 1.2).

From the beginning, partisans were very far apart on virtually everything related to the impeachment case, and opinions remained largely unchanged between announcement of a formal House impeachment inquiry in September 2019 and the end of the process in February 2020. Large majorities of Democrats believed that Trump tried to get the Ukrainian government

to investigate Biden and his son by withholding military aid and that doing so was an impeachable offense. At the time of the Senate trial in January, they were nearly unanimous in believing the charges in the two articles of impeachment, that Trump had abused his power and obstructed Congress, were true, and afterward 90% said they disapproved his acquittal by the Senate. Equally large Republican majorities took the positions that Trump didn't do what he was accused of and even if he did, it was either justified or not an impeachable offense. They overwhelmingly rejected the premises of both articles of impeachment, and 95% approved of his acquittal.²⁶

It is obvious from partisan opinions why Trump's impeachment took the course it did in Congress. No House Republican voted for either of the two articles of impeachment; only two Democrats voted against both articles, one of whom switched to the Republican Party the next day. After the trial in the Republican-majority Senate, every Republican but one, Mitt Romney of Utah (on the first count, abuse of power) voted for Trump's acquittal, while every Democrat voted to convict on both counts. The nearly perfect party line votes in Congress faithfully represented the sentiments of partisans in the electorate. With Trump as the focal object and both sides responsive to their voters, partisan rancor in Washington reached new extremes by the beginning of Trump's fourth year in office.

The Coronavirus Crisis

While the impeachment spectacle was absorbing the nation's attention, the coronavirus was spreading quietly from China to the rest of the world, not least the United States, which eventually led the world in confirmed Covid-19 cases and

²⁶ For a detailed examination polling on impeachment, see G. Jacobson, "Donald Trump and the Future of American Politics", prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 16-19 April 2020, pp. 30-34.

deaths. The resulting medical and economic crises forced a host of urgent demands on government at all levels. A nation that had just experienced new extremes of partisan division suddenly faced a crisis that called for a coherent, focused, and collaborative response from both elected leaders and the public. At the state and local levels, that call was for the most part met. Governors in several large states – notably California, Ohio, and New York – took the lead in closing schools and inessential businesses, banning gatherings, setting social distancing rules and imposing other measures to protect public health, and most other states followed. These steps won broad, bipartisan support from state residents, as did the governors; 74% of respondents to an early April Quinnipiac Poll, approved of their governor’s performance, including 78% of Democrats, 74% of independents, and 70% of Republicans.²⁷ At the national level, the Federal Reserve acted swiftly and decisively to shore up the financial system, and Congress passed several bipartisan bills providing a total of US\$3 trillion to combat the virus and help businesses and people hammered by the sudden shutdown of a large part of the economy. These actions also won broad bipartisan support in the public.

The impulse toward unity in the face of a common enemy did not extend to the White House, where Trump’s standard operating procedures proved a poor match to the occasion. Beginning in early January 2020, the administration received a series of warnings from intelligence agencies, biodefense experts, and epidemiologists in and out of the government that the coronavirus had the potential to kill tens of thousands of Americans if steps were not taken to halt its spread and care for its victims.²⁸ Trump’s reflexive response was to discount the threat, essentially wishing it away: “It’s one person coming in from China, and we have it under control. It’s going to be just fine” (22 January); “Looks like by April ... when it gets a little

²⁷ Quinnipiac National Poll, 2-6 April 2020.

²⁸ E. Lipton et al., “He Could Have Seen What Was Coming: Behind Trump’s Failure on the Virus”, *The New York Times*, 4 May 2020.

warmer, it miraculously goes away” (12 February); “One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear” (27 February); “We’re prepared, and we’re doing a great job with it. And it will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away” (10 March).²⁹ Trump downplayed the threat because taking it seriously would require closing down large parts of the economy (as it eventually did), wrecking the foundation of his case for reelection: record high stock prices, record low unemployment, and solid economic growth (as it eventually did).

Trump’s wishful thinking, distrust of experts and career civil servants, chaotic administrative style, and unquenchable thirst for flattery, along with internal disputes among his administration’s officials, led to tardy, disorganized, and often mismanaged efforts to address the crisis. His bans on travel from China and, weeks later, from some European countries were too little and too late. He resisted calling for social distancing, with school and business closures, until 16 March, weeks after his scientific advisors had concluded these steps were essential, a delay that research suggests meant more cases and more deaths.³⁰ The administration’s initial recommendation was for a two-week shut-down, but the growing number of cases forced an extension; Trump floated the idea of opening by Easter (12 April) but it, too, was sunk by rising cases and deaths.

Trump was eager for states to reopen as soon as possible so the economy could recover before the November election but did not want the blame if they opened too soon and infections spiked again. This was behind his head-snapping reversal on who could decide when states could relax restrictions, claiming “total authority” over the decision one day, taking the opposite position the very next day, saying “the governors are responsible”

²⁹ H. Stevens and S. Tan, “From ‘It’s going to disappear’ to WE WILL WIN THIS WAR”, *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2020.

³⁰ J. Fowler, et al., “The Effect of Stay-at-Home Orders on COVID Cases and Fatalities in the United States”, 7 May 2020, *MedRxiv*, 12 May 2020; S. Pei, S. Kandula, and J. Sharman, “Differential Effects of Intervention Timing on COVID-19 Spread in the United States”, *MedRxiv*, 15 May 2020.

and “have to take charge”.³¹ It apparently dawned on him that exercising this (imaginary) total authority would make him responsible for the consequences. Leaving it up to the governors would put them at fault if things went bad; if things went well, he could claim credit for “authorizing” them to act.

Trump’s U-turn revealed his overriding goal: to avoid responsibility at all costs for any defects in his administration’s response to the crisis while taking credit for any successes in mitigating it. The defects were indeed glaring, with shortages of protective masks, ventilators, and testing kits, along with badly disorganized procurement and distribution operations that left state and local governments competing with each other and the federal government for crucial supplies.³² These and other obvious shortcomings in the federal government’s handling of the crisis were an international embarrassment and put Trump on the defensive. Rather than concede any of them, he insisted his administration’s responses had all been “perfect”, blaming variously China, the World Health Organization, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and Democratic governors for whatever was amiss. And, characteristically, Trump raged at anyone in politics or the media who suggested he might be accountable for any of it.

In the weeks following his 13 March declaration of a national emergency, Trump presided over a series of daily prime-time press briefings that became his substitute for the “Keep American Great” campaign rallies he could no longer hold. His performance, detailed in a study reported in the *Washington Post*, was vintage Trump. The study calculated that over a three-week period in April, Trump held forth for a total of 13 hours, “including two hours spent on attacks and 45 minutes praising himself and his administration, but just 4½ minutes expressing condolences for coronavirus victims”. He “attacked someone in 113 of the 346 questions he answered” and “87

³¹ B. Gittleson and J. Phelps, “Trump’s stunning reversal on ‘total’ authority claim over governors: ANALYSIS”, *ABC News*, 15 April 2020.

³² Y. Abutaleb et al., “The US was Beset by Denial and Dysfunction as the Coronavirus Raged”, *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2020.

of his comments or answers – a full 47 minutes – included factually inaccurate comments”.³³

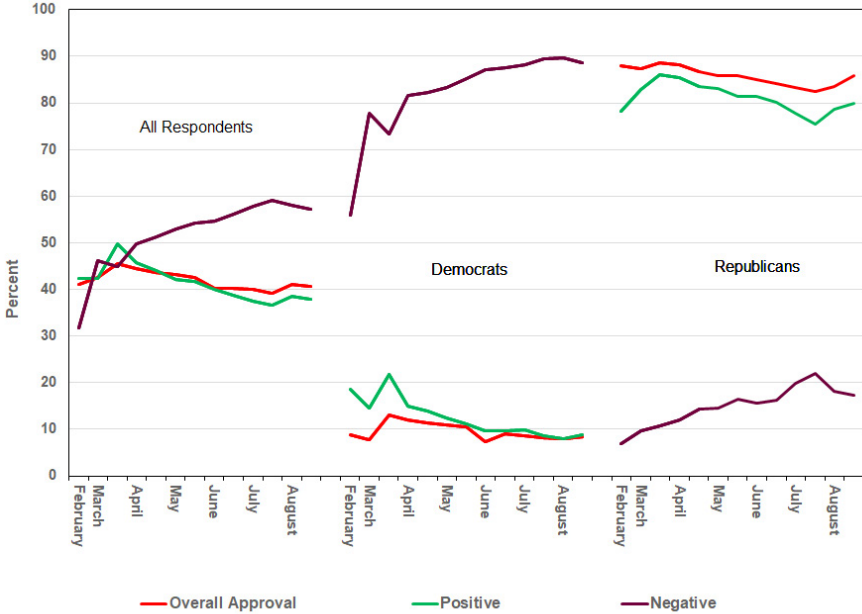
Vintage Trump provoked a vintage response, killing any prospect for a broader rally of the kind presidents normally enjoy when taking the lead in national emergencies. Trump enjoyed a small bump up in public approval (Figure 1.2) but it was short lived. His approval among Democrats rose above single digits briefly but then fell back to where they had been before he declared the national emergency. Meanwhile, among Republicans, his ratings stayed close to 90%. Evaluations of his handling of coronavirus pandemic itself were also highly polarized, although initially less so than his overall approval ratings. By May, however, the two ratings had converged, as is evident from the data in Figure 1.7, which show the averages of positive or negative views of Trump's dealings with the pandemic and his overall approval ratings in the same polls over two-week intervals from February through August 2020.³⁴ In February Trump enjoyed net positive ratings on the pandemic but a substantial share of respondents did not yet have an opinion. As the threat grew during early March, disapproval rose, but after Trump's mid-March declaration of a state of emergency and his new status as a wartime President, his numbers improved, with approval on the pandemic exceeding disapproval (and his overall approval ratings) by about 6 points. By April, however, Trump was underwater again as news stories about the administration's belated and

³³ All quotes are from P. Bump and A. Parker, “13 hours of Trump: The president fills briefings with attacks and boasts, but little empathy”, *The Washington Post*, 26 April 2020.

³⁴ Positive views include approval of Trump's actions or rating them as excellent or good; negative views include disapproval the Trump's actions or rating them as only fair or poor. The number of polls averaged is 7 for February, 35 for March, 54 for April, 40 for May, 53 for June, 35 for July, and 43 for August through September 1. Responses of independents track those of the full population but are about 5 points more negative about Trump's performance. Data are from *FiveThirtyEight* at https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/coronavirus-polls/?ex_cid=rrpromo.

chaotic responses to the crisis circulated and the number of cases and deaths kept rising.

FIG. 1.7 – POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE OPINIONS OF TRUMP'S HANDLING OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS



The pattern for Democrats suggests a modest rally to a national leader in a time of crisis, with positive opinions of Trump's handling of the pandemic exceeding 20% during the last half of March. Republicans gave Trump high positive ratings all along but were a bit less united in praising his handling of the crisis than they were in approving of his overall job performance, and negative views also rose between February and June. Assessments of Trump's handling of the crisis were thus initially considerably less polarized than opinions of his general job performance, but polarization increased over time. It did not help that his administration took advantage of the situation

to further its deeply divisive agenda, including blocking almost all immigration, slashing environmental regulations, and disengaging from international institutions. The total abdication of American leadership amid a global crisis was unprecedented in post-war history but a predictable expression of Trump's strident – and thoroughly polarizing – America-first nationalism.

As in every previous occasion when Trump's actions had raised questions about his fitness to serve as President – the video tape of him bragging of assaulting women, the Mueller investigation, the payment to cover up his dalliance with a porn star, the attempt to extort Ukraine to go after Biden – people who were not already supporters condemned his behavior, while those who were remained unshaken. By any objective measure, Trump's handling of the pandemic was deficient on multiple fronts. To his detractors, Trump's performance simply reconfirmed in the starkest way his utter unfitness for the office, and in circumstances where thousands of American lives were on the line. That it did not erode his support among ordinary Republicans revealed once again their readiness to ignore, disbelieve, discount, or reject as irrelevant any information suggesting that he might not deserve their backing; such sustained exercises in motivated reasoning signal strong motivation, firmly rooted in identity politics.³⁵ And as always, Trump supporters could turn to *Fox News* and other right-wing media for validation; a survey taken in late April found that among the 25% of respondents for whom *Fox* was the most trusted news source, 92% approved of Trump's handling of the pandemic; among the other 75%, approval was at 30%.³⁶ Trump's effort to fabricate an alternative reality in which his handling of the crisis deserved nothing but praise largely succeeded with his core supporters.

³⁵ A. Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019; D.J. Ahler, "The Group Theory of Politics: Identity Politics, Party Stereotypes, and Polarization in the 21st Century", *The Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, June 2018.

³⁶ Suffolk University Poll, 21-25 April 2020.

Partisanship colored not only opinions of Trump's performance but also how people viewed the pandemic and policies addressing it. Party differences on the order of 20 to 40 percentage points appear in survey questions asking about the severity of the crisis, whether the American death toll is under- or overstated, how soon and how fast to open up for business, and whether the priority should be protecting public health or getting the economy back on track. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to say the crisis is overblown, favor an early relaxation of restrictions, and put the economy ahead of public health.³⁷ In this they echoed Trump, impatient to turn the economy around before November regardless of the risk. In the Tea Party mode, some right-wing groups mounted protests against state restrictions, and Trump, ever attuned to his base, cheered them on. When in late April armed protesters, some carrying confederate flags and nooses, stormed the Michigan Capitol demanding the state lift coronavirus restrictions, Trump tweeted that "these are very good people, but they are angry. They want their lives back again, safely!".³⁸ The "safely" is a telling hedge; Trump wanted to side with anti-government insurgents who were part of his following but avoid responsibility if they prevailed and the death toll took off.

The 2020 Election

As of this writing, the presidential election is still almost two away and the pandemic's impact on the American social and economic life is still unfolding, so its ultimate effect on the electorate's assessment of Trump's performance, and thus on his

³⁷ Ibid.; A. Daniller, "[Americans remain concerned that states will lift restrictions too quickly, but partisan differences widen](#)", Pew Research Center report, 7 May 2020.

³⁸ A. Gearan and J. Wagner, "[Trump expresses support for angry anti-shutdown protesters as more states lift coronavirus lockdowns](#)", *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2020.

reelection prospects, remains uncertain. Neither the crisis nor Trump's handling of it shifted prospective voters' choices for the 2020 election between January and May; Biden's advantage in the horserace polls remained steady at an average of about 5.5 percentage points, with 94.5% of Democrats and 93.4% of Republicans planning to vote for their own party's nominee.³⁹ On 25 May, however, another national crisis arrived that, combined with a second national surge in Covid-19 cases, did move the needle at least temporarily in Biden's favor. The shocking video of George Floyd's murder by a white policeman while his colleagues stood by watching provoked a series of public demonstrations in all 50 states against racially biased policing and systemic racism more broadly. Although a small portion of the protests turned violent, strong majorities, including majorities of whites, supported the protesters and the idea that bias against blacks and other minorities was indeed systemic and demanded remedial action. News stories documenting persistent racial inequalities across multiple dimensions proliferated, and favorable opinions of the "Black Lives Matter" movement rose sharply, reaching a net 25-30 points positive in June.⁴⁰

Trump's response to these events again proved ill-suited to the moment. His past advocacy of aggressive policing, scorn for assertive Blacks, and sympathy for white supremacists, aimed at pleasing his conservative white base, now put him firmly on the wrong side of majority opinion, but he made no effort to adapt. He sought to frame the protests as a "law and order" issue, focusing on the violence he blamed on radical leftists and threatening to use the military to impose order, but most Americans found these responses deficient. On average through August, 57% disapproved while only 34% approved of

³⁹ Data are from *FiveThirtyEight* at https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/?ex_cid=irpromo.

⁴⁰ N. Cohn and K. Quealy, "How Public Opinion Has Moved on Black Lives Matter", *New York Times*, 10 June 2020.

his handling of the protests.⁴¹ Democrats were predictably and overwhelmingly critical (8% approving, 87% disapproving), but independents' opinions were also decisively negative (28% approving, 59% disapproving), and even Republicans were more critical than they had been of his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, let alone of his overall performance (71% approving, 21% disapproving).

Trump's reaction, on full display 20 June in Tulsa, Oklahoma, during his first mass rally in three months, was to double down on racist rhetoric, portraying the protestors as "thugs" and attacking Democrats as radical anarchists who would allow criminals to run wild. He also celebrated his administration's coronavirus policies, claiming they had saved millions of lives. The event was widely panned as a failure, not only because the 19,000 seat arena was only a third full after a promise of overflow crowds, but also because Trump's rhetoric seemed so out of touch with what most Americans felt about the racial injustices inspiring the protests and the coronavirus' continuing threat.⁴² The presidential horserace polls taken in June reflected the poor reviews of Trump's handling of the two crises, with Joe Biden's lead rising to an average of 9.4 percentage points nationally in July and early August and remaining at 8.2 points after the Republican convention at the end of the month.⁴³

The swing toward Biden is evidence that attitudes toward Trump had not become so completely entrenched that nothing could move them, but the movement reflected increasing support for Biden among Democrats (up an average of 5.0 points in net preferences between pre-June and August polls) and independents (up 2.6 points) rather than among

⁴¹ There was very little variance across the 25 surveys, which were published by ABC News, Ipsos, Sienna College/*New York Times*, Emerson College, Fox News, *Washington Post*, Global Strategies, CNN, IBD/Tipp, and *Economist/YouGov*.

⁴² D. Montanaro, "Trump Returns To Campaign Trail With A Familiar Message In A Changing World", NPR, 20 June 2020.

⁴³ Data from *FiveThirtyEight* at https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/?ex_cid=ipromo.

Republicans (unchanged). These swings echo the Trump approval data in Figure 1.2, which show ratings dipping among Democrats and independents during this period, with only a temporary dip among Republicans in early summer that was reversed by late August. The vast majority of partisans who expressed a preference in August and early September polls – 95.3% of Democrats and 93.2% of Republicans – still favored their party's nominee, but Democrats were more inclined to loyalty than they had been earlier in the year.

Although Biden's average advantage in the polls was quite stable between June and late August and dropped only a little more than a point after the Republican convention, most observers still expected the race to tighten as the election drew closer. If they are right, and with so few voters either undecided about Trump or willing to cross party lines, the outcome is will hinge on turnout, with victory going to the party that does the better job of mobilizing its supporters, particularly in swing states. Inciting fear and loathing of the other side, a Trump specialty, will doubtless be a favorite motivating tactic. By March, Democratic campaign ads were already using Trump's own words to slam his response to the crisis.⁴⁴ Desperate to change the subject, Trump renewed his attack on Obama, this time with the completely baseless accusation that he was guilty of criminal conspiracy in initiating the Russia investigation back in 2016. He also ramped up his race-baiting rhetoric, posing as defender of the confederate flag and the statues of rebel generals erected as markers of white dominance in the post-reconstruction South, and retweeting a video of a supporter shouting "white power" at demonstrators in Florida.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, one son, Donald Jr., circulated a meme from the

⁴⁴ G. Sergent, "A Brutal New Ad Uses Trump's Own Words Against Him", *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2020.

⁴⁵ R. Best, "Confederate Statues Were Never Really About Preserving History", *FiveThirtyEight*, 8 July 2020, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/confederate-statues/>; M.Haberman, "Trump Adds to Playbook of Stoking White Fear and Resentment", *New York Times*, 6 July 2020.

dregs of the internet implying Joe Biden was a pedophile, while the other, Eric, claimed the coronavirus shut-downs were a Democratic plot to keep Trump from holding his signature mass rallies and that the virus would “magically” disappear after 3 November.⁴⁶ The Trump family’s misdirection, blatant lies, and revival of white identity politics foreshadowed a campaign of unbounded deception and ugliness, one certain to sustain if not amplify the extreme partisan divisions already occasioned by Trump’s presidency.

As of this writing (early September 2020), Trump remains behind in the polls nationally and in key states, but his reelection certainly remains possible. *Divide et impera* was clearly not working during the summer, but with nearly two months of campaigning left, it may yet prove effective again. If not, it won’t be for lack of trying on Trump’s part. Whatever the electorate’s ultimate verdict, it will be profoundly consequential for the future of the United States and the world. But win or lose, the political divisions Trump has exploited and deepened are likely to endure for a long time to come. The cultural and economic trends threatening the status and identities of the older, non-college whites who make up the core of Trump’s support show no signs of reversing. Demographics are not on their side; the Census Bureau projects the United States to become majority non-white in about 25 years.⁴⁷ With or without Trump, the Republican Party faces an severe demographic challenge; among voters under 50, Democrats now enjoy about a 20 point advantage in party identifiers.⁴⁸ Republican efforts to rig the electoral system in their favor through gerrymandering⁴⁹

⁴⁶ G. Bruney, “Donald Trump and His Sons Spent the Weekend Sharing Dangerous Conspiracy Theories”, *Esquire*, 17 May 2020.

⁴⁷ W. Frey, *The US will become ‘minority white’ in 2045*, *Census projects*, Brookings Report, 10 September 2018.

⁴⁸ In the 187 weekly *Economist*/YouGov surveys taken so far during the Trump presidency, 53% of the registered voters under 50 identify as Democrats, 33% as Republicans (N=101,887); in the 2019 ANES pilot study, the comparable figures were 49% Democrats, 29% Republicans.

⁴⁹ D. Daley, “The Secret Files of the Masters of Modern Republican

and voter suppression⁵⁰ cannot hold back the demographic tide indefinitely. But attempts to stem that tide or to “make America great again” by turning back the political and cultural clock, even as the coronavirus pandemic’s uneven impact and rising demands for social justice highlight the nation’s deep economic and racial inequities, promise to generate fierce partisan conflicts far beyond the 2020 election.

Gerrymandering”, *The New Yorker*, 6 September 2019

⁵⁰ C. Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying our Democracy*, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

2. Trickle-up Economics. Trump, Growth, and Inequality*

Michele Alacevich

*I was out at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach[and] the president was there...
He said, "Hey, Stephen, isn't this tax cut the most unbelievable thing?"
He's a very cheerful guy. I just said,
"Mr. President, this stuff is working even better we thought it would".
I just said to him, I knew it was going to help growth,
but I didn't think we'd get to 4% so quickly.
He just turned to me with a big smile, he said,
"Stephen, you ain't seen nothing yet".*

Stephen Moore, Economic Advisor to Donald Trump, 3 August 2018

Continuity and Rupture between Obama and Trump

On 4 February 2020, Donald Trump opened his State of the Union Address with a description of what he called “the great American comeback”. As he told the audience, “Jobs are booming, incomes are soaring, poverty is plummeting, crime is falling, confidence is surging, and our country is thriving and highly respected again. (Applause)”. Then Covid-19 hit America. In just one month, the unemployment rate more than tripled, from 4.4% in March to 14.7% in April, while the GDP fell by 5 percentage points.¹

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¹ Unemployment rate series, seasonally adjusted, Series Id: LNS14000000, U.S.

Obviously, the pandemic affected international trade and national economies all over the world. But to consider it simply an act of God or an exogenous shock in the face of which governments of every stripe have struggled and capitulated in the same way would be grossly misleading. In fact, the massive public health and economic emergency that swept the United States after China and Europe shone a spotlight on several deeply problematic characteristics of American economy and society. In this sense, the pandemic functioned as a stress test not only for the country as an interconnected system – something that evolves alongside the successions of administrations, though obviously it is also influenced by them – but for specific policies that the Trump administration has enforced in the past three years. The results are at odds with the bombastic propaganda of Trump and his constituency.

During the first three years of the Trump administration, the US economy grew steadily, and the unemployment rate fell to levels unseen since 1969. In the fall of 2019 and the early winter of 2020, it remained between 3.5 and 3.6%, a level that most economists consider to be virtually full employment.² Donald Trump was swift in crediting the boon to his deregulatory policies, tax cuts, industrial protectionism and trade wars.³ It should be noted, however, that the complementary trends of rising production and decreasing unemployment had begun much earlier than 2017. The economic results of the Trump

Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet>; National Income and Product Accounts, Table 1.1.1. - Percent Change from Preceding Period in Real Gross Domestic Product, seasonally adjusted at annual rates, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, <https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?reqid=19&step=2#reqid=19&step=2&isuri=1&1921=survey>

² Unemployment rate series, seasonally adjusted, Series Id: LNS14000000, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics..., cit.

³ Likewise, Trump has heralded the positive performance of the US stock market as proof of his success, though the causal link remains obscure. A more convincing explanation can be found in the overrepresentation of tech-heavy firms (which have benefited from the Covid crisis) in the stock market, as well as in the concentrated nature of stock ownership in the US.

administration, in fact, continued in the footsteps of the Obama administration. Moreover, as we will show below, there are serious reasons to consider the new policies of the Trump administration to be harmful for the US economy and the wellbeing of American citizens.

What's more, the continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations is visible in another, deeply negative aspect of the current US economy – and more generally of the social landscape – that has been widely debated in recent years, namely increasing inequality. While it's true that inequality in the age of Trump is the last chapter, for now, of a story that began much earlier, it must be noted that the Trump administration took initiatives that have worsened an already dire situation. The introduction of the Tax Cuts and Job Act in November 2017 and the several attempts at repealing and hindering the functioning of the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare, contributed to increasingly skewed income, health, and racial disparities. Trump prided himself on these initiatives in the 2020 State of the Union, but two outcomes are crystal clear to all: fewer people will have access to health insurance than before, and the federal and state governments will have still fewer resources for basic welfare services. What's more, since the pandemic hit, lack of health insurance has arguably meant the difference between life and death for many.

It's well known that inequality is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Income and wealth inequality go hand in hand with inequalities in other dimensions such as health, as we have seen, but also education, gender rights, knowledge and information, access to services, participation in the public discourse, and race. These inequalities are growing and will continue to worsen because of the Trump policies. The Covid pandemic works as a magnifier of many of these inequalities, especially the racial divide that still haunts the United States.

Not Three but Ten Years of Economic Growth

The first three years of Donald Trump's presidency have witnessed constant economic growth and the fall of the unemployment rate, taking by surprise those observers who expected the unpredictable and wavering character of the decision-making process of the new administration to be a dubious basis for reassuring markets, investors and economic interests at large. The erratic character of the head of the administration, his constant Twitter outbursts, and his international trade war escalations made many projections decidedly bleak. And yet, in 2017, 2018, and 2019 real GDP grew by 2.4, 2.9, and 2.3% respectively. Particularly impressive, for many commentators, seemed to be the comparison between Trump's 2017 GDP growth of 2.4% and Obama's 1.6% the previous year.⁴ CNBC commentator Jeff Fox, for example, wrote that Trump set "economic growth on fire ... a tremendous achievement ... an economic boom uniquely his".⁵ A more balanced comparison, however, shows not a break between the two presidencies, but, with important qualifications that we will discuss below, the continuation of trends that began under Obama and were maintained under Trump.

First, it should be remembered that when Obama took office in January 2009, the US economy, according to his opponent, Republican Senator John McCain, was "about to crater".⁶ For

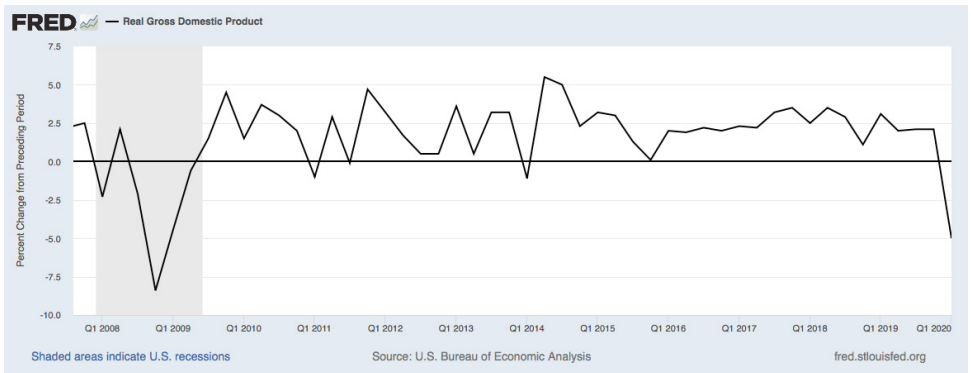
⁴ National Income and Product Accounts, Table 1.1.1 - Percent Change from Preceding Period in Real Gross Domestic Product, Annual data from 1930 to 2019, published 28 May 2020, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, <https://apps.bea.gov/histdata/fileStructDisplay.cfm?HMI=7&DY=2020&DQ=Q1&DV=SSecon&dNRD=May-29-2020>. See also <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gross-domestic-product>, Supplemental Information & Additional Data, Percent Change from Preceding Period, published 28 May 2020.

⁵ J. Cox, "Trump has set economic growth on fire. Here is how he did it", *CNBC.com*, 7 September 2018.

⁶ K. Phillips, "Last Words: Debating the Debate", *The Caucus. The Politics and Government Blog of the Times*, 24 September 2008.

the last quarter of 2008 the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported a fall of real GDP of 8.4 percentage points, which followed a fall of 2.1 points the previous quarter (Figure 2.1). The recovery in 2009 was spectacular, and by the fall of that year, real GDP was back to positive figures. Much more than McCain, Obama had a crucial role in moving the bailout package, unpopular with Republicans and Democrats of all stripes, through Congress, persuading colleagues from both sides of the aisle to vote for it after an initial rejection.

FIG. 2.1 - US REAL GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT, PERCENT CHANGE FROM PRECEDING PERIOD (QUARTERS, IN 2012 DOLLARS), DECEMBER 2008-MARCH 2020 (THE SHADED AREA INDICATES THE US 2007-2009 RECESSION)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, *Real Gross Domestic Product* [A191RL1Q225SBEA], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 12 June 2020. Original data are available here: <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gross-domestic-product>. Supplemental Information & Additional Data, Percent change from preceding period, published on 28 May 2020

Despite the US\$700 billion Emergency Economic Stabilization Act that was passed in the last few months of the Bush administration, the more faithful (if not necessarily enthusiastic) supporters of the Act were the Democrats. The GOP was *de facto* split, and the radical wing of the party (later the Tea Party), represented on the presidential ticket by Sarah

Palin, was adamantly opposed. As one historian has written, “With the GOP divided between establishmentarians willing to pay that check lest disaster ensue, and outsiders content to let the system collapse, ownership of the policy devolved on the Democratic Party, and specifically Barack Obama”.⁷

To this, one should add the additional difficulties of passing a subsequent stimulus package of almost US\$800 billion, strongly opposed by the entire Republican Party despite the fact that the figure was a far cry from the almost US\$2 trillion that the chair of Obama’s Council of Economic Advisers, Christina Romer, had calculated. And not only was the stimulus much smaller than needed, but in order to deflate political partisanship and opposition, Obama consistently tried to downplay it in the public perception. In this respect, Julian Zelizer commented, “Whereas most Americans could never miss a bridge or road built by FDR’s Public Works Administration, they traveled past projects from Obama’s stimulus program without noticing a thing”.⁸ Obama’s “pragmatic cautiousness”, as Mario Del Pero described it, did not pay, and all attempts at enhancing cooperation were frustrated, as shown by the federal government’s shutdowns of 2011 and 2013 and the personal attacks against Barack Obama – most notably, the conspiracy theory, fueled by Donald Trump, according to which Obama was not born in the US and was thus an illegitimate President.⁹

Yet, with all its limitations, due largely to an inability to cross political divides and build a more cohesive and larger package, Obama’s economic record was reasonably successful. At the end of 2009, GDP increased 4.5% over the previous quarter, and subsequent annual values ranged between highs of 2.6% growth in 2010 and 2.9 in 2016, and lows of 1.6 in 2011 and

⁷ E. Rauchway, “Neither a Depression nor a New Deal: Bailout, Stimulus, and the Economy”, in J.E. Zelizer (ed.), *The Presidency of Barack Obama. A First Historical Assessment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018.

⁸ J.E. Zelizer, “Policy Revolution without a Political Transformation”, in *Ibid.*

⁹ M. Del Pero, *Eru Obama*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2017, p. 13.

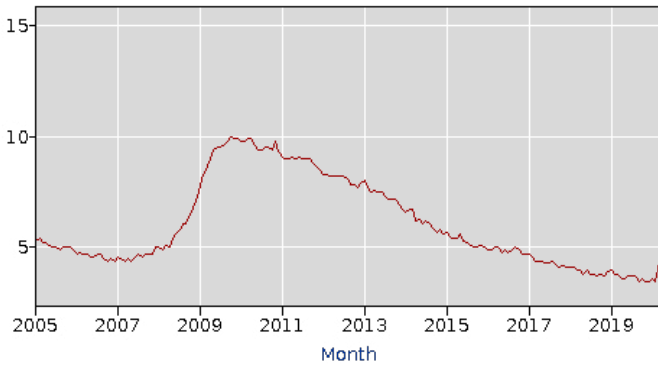
2016.¹⁰ Consequently, US real GDP growth under Trump, though undoubtedly positive, is not a new result.

As for unemployment, when Obama took office, the unemployment rate was at 7.8%, and grew in the following months to a plateau of 10.0% or slightly less between the fall 2009 and the spring 2010, after which the rate decreased almost constantly to 4.7% when Obama left office.¹¹ This trend continued under Trump, as mentioned, but it cannot be said that it was Trump who set it in motion. If one puts the values of the last three years in perspective, it becomes easily apparent that they are the final segment of a massive redirection from a negative to a positive trend in employment rates that took place in the years of the Obama administration (Figure 2.2). In fact, on a three-year basis, Trump's record on unemployment reduction has been worse than Obama's: a 1.2% unemployment decrement in 2017-19 (Trump) versus a 1.9% decrement in 2014-16 and a 2.4% decrement in 2011-13 (Obama). Reducing unemployment when the starting point is already low may be relatively more difficult, but claiming to have done better than the previous incumbent is undoubtedly an unfounded statement.

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Gross Domestic Product, <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gross-domestic-product...>, cit.

¹¹ Unemployment rate series, seasonally adjusted, Series Id: LNS14000000, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet...>, cit.

FIG. 2.2 - US: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, SEASONALLY ADJUSTED, 2005-2020



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, data extracted on 13 June 2020

Government Spending, Unemployment, and Wages

In short, Trump’s claim of the “great American comeback” from the Obama administration is demonstrably false. But how did Trump manage to keep the positive trend going?¹² More impressive than the growth of GDP is the continuing decrease in the unemployment rate from 4.7% in January 2017 to 3.5 in December 2019.¹³ If only for frictions and temporary misalignments in the job market, a situation of full employment in which all workers are actually employed is a possibility that exists only in theory. Economists have thus long debated what rate of unemployment is low enough to be

¹² For another testimony of Trump’s narrative, see the White House briefing of 20 January 2020, “[The Historic Results Of President Donald J. Trump’s Economic Agenda](#)”.

¹³ Unemployment rate series, seasonally adjusted, Series Id: LNS14000000, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <https://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet...>, cit.

considered “natural” or virtually inevitable. As one can imagine, the figures and explanations offered are many, but it is safe to say that economists of different schools would agree that an unemployment rate of less than 4.0% is definitely low. How did Trump reach it?

The eclectic policies of the Trump administration make it difficult to disentangle the real causes. “America First” industrial policies and trade protectionism do not seem to be relevant candidates. A very rough estimate of gross output by industry shows that, on average, production increased in the last three years, in particular in the mining and oil and gas extraction sector (an increase of approximately US\$27 billion per year under Trump and a decrease of approximately US\$17 billion per year under Obama), and in the manufacture of durable goods such as machinery, motor vehicles, and computers (an increase of approximately 66 billion per year under Trump and of 48 under Obama). But these are small figures if compared with annual increases of the gross domestic product that average about one trillion per year (i.e. 1,000 billion per year). In other typically domestic sectors like wholesale and retail trade, the record of the Obama administration is better than subsequent years, though again for relatively small amounts.

Remarkably, despite the rhetoric against big government, it is the Trump administration that has been spending an average of two and a half times more than the Obama administration (US\$112.7 billion per year *versus* 46.4). These figures include also state and local governments, but if we limit our analysis to the federal government, the picture is even more interesting given the discrepancy between political rhetoric and actual policy. Whereas Obama saved an average of US\$4.2 billion per year, Trump spent on average US\$40.8 billion for the federal machine.¹⁴ In general, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, economic growth was mainly due to growth in the

¹⁴ Gross Output by Industry, Release Date: 6 April 2020, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, <https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=51&step=1>

service-producing and government sectors which offset a steady decline in the goods-producing sector.¹⁵ The trade balance has remained in deficit overall, in particular for the deficit in goods trade with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and the European Union, among others.¹⁶

What is left to explain the continuing decline in unemployment are monetary and fiscal policies. While the Fed has returned to a very low interest rate of 0.25%, after increasing it slowly in 2015 and 2016 and more quickly in 2017 and 2018 (up to 2.25 in December 2018), disposable income has increased for at least two reasons which, in the medium run, are mutually incompatible.¹⁷ First, minimum wages have been rising at least since 2014. As Ernie Tedeschi wrote on *The New York Times* in January 2020, “wages in the United States are doing something extraordinary: they’re growing faster at the bottom than at the top”.¹⁸ As Tedeschi showed, this was due not to an increase of the federal minimum wage, stuck at US\$7.25 since 2009, but to increases of the minimum wage at the state and city level that increased it to approximately US\$12 per hour.¹⁹ The second reason must be found in the corporate and income tax cuts introduced by Trump in December 2017. As we will see, these tax cuts are highly regressive (hence they are at odds with increases in the minimum wage), and trade

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, News Release, 6 April 2020, <https://www.bea.gov/system/files/2020-04/gdpind419.pdf>

¹⁶ International Trade in Goods and Services, Current Release, Tables only, US Bureau of Economic Analysis, <https://www.bea.gov/data/intl-trade-investment/international-trade-goods-and-services>

¹⁷ J. Pisani-Ferry, “Explaining the Triumph of Trump’s Economic Recklessness”, *Project Syndicate*, 28 January 2020; for historical series of the Fed interest rate, see <https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/openmarket.htm>

¹⁸ E. Tedeschi, “Wages Rise at Low End”, *The New York Times*, 6 January 2020, Section B, p. 1.

¹⁹ E. Tedeschi, “Minimum Wage at Record High (Without Federal Help)”, *The New York Times*, 29 April 2019, Section A, p. 12; for historical series of the minimum wage, see *History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009*, US Department of Labor.

long-term prosperity for the population at large for a short-sighted fiscal stimulus and major fiscal advantages for the rich. The real novelty under Trump was not economic growth, but, as an observer wrote, “economic recklessness”.²⁰

The Undoing Project: Tax Cuts and the Trickle-up Effect

In 1992, Bill Clinton’s strategists built the presidential victory on the famous quip: “The economy, stupid”. That slogan summarized a basic tenet of political struggle: elections are lost or won depending on the state of the national economy (another crucial element are wars, or – lacking wars – enemies, true or imagined). But a robust literature, as well as common sense, tell us that GDP is not a sufficient ingredient for the wellbeing of individuals; access to healthcare is equally important, as well as living in a society that is not excessively unequal (another catch-phrase at the Clinton headquarters in 1992 was “don’t forget health care”).²¹

Trump’s first political battle as President was to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. Though the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, maintained the structure of US health insurance based on the

²⁰ J. Pisani-Ferry (2020).

²¹ M. Kelly, “THE 1992 CAMPAIGN: The Democrats - Clinton and Bush Compete to Be Champion of Change; Democrat Fights Perceptions of Bush Gain”, *The New York Times*, 31 October 1992, Section 1, p. 1. To name only a few analyses of the need to move beyond GDP to gauge the well-being of individuals, see R.G. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London, Allen Lane, 2009; R.G. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone’s Well-Being*, London, Allen Lane, 2019; A. Deaton, *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013; A. Case and A. Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020; and J.E. Stiglitz, J.-P. Fitoussi, and M. Durand, *Measuring What Counts. The Global Movement for Well-Being*, New York, The New Press, 2019.

three pillars of Medicare (covering those over 65), Medicaid (covering those earning low incomes), and the private sector, it introduced changes that de facto made it the most important health reform in the US since the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid under Lyndon Johnson in 1965. By limiting premiums and discriminatory practices in the individual insurance market, cutting providers' rates in the Medicare program, and increasing eligibility for Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) managed to reduce overall health costs for individuals and the government, as well as to increase coverage for an additional 20 to 24 million individuals.²²

Passed in 2010 and effective in 2014, Obamacare enacted a huge income redistribution from higher incomes, and especially the top 1%, to the lowest quintiles. In particular, data by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) show that of the US\$3 billion from the federal budget committed to lower individual insurance costs, 40% went to households in the lowest quintile, another 33% to households in the second quintile, and only 3% to households in the top quintile. Premium tax credits on federal taxes totaled almost US\$15 billion and went for almost 30% to households in the lowest quintile, 33% to households in the second quintile, 22% to households in the middle quintile, 10% to households in the fourth quintile, and 5% to the top quintile. On average, households in the lowest quintile received an additional income of US\$690, and families in the second quintile of US\$560, almost entirely covered by the average increase of US\$1,100 paid by households in the highest quintile.²³ Moreover, households in the highest quintile were mostly unaffected by this redistributive reform. As the CBO remarked “most of the burden of the ACA fell on households in the top 1% of the income distribution, and relatively little fell

²² Congressional Budget Office, “Federal Subsidies for Health Insurance Coverage for People Under Age 65: 2016 to 2026”, March 2016.

²³ Congressional Budget Office, “The Distribution of Household Income, 2014”, March 2018, p. 9, Table 1.

on the remainder of households in that quintile”.²⁴ The burden of Obamacare, in other words, fell not on the top quintile, but only on the 1%, who on average paid an additional US\$21,000 for the benefit of the remaining 80% of the US population, and especially the poorest households.

No wonder that Obama was accused of being a socialist. It is worth reiterating that the Affordable Care Act reduced the federal deficit and the costs of the least efficient and costliest health system of the Western world, at the same time increasing the number of people covered (in all other OECD countries the coverage is universal) and the resources devoted to care provision instead of overhead costs.

Despite the fact that the Joint Committee on Taxation and the CBO released a study claiming that the repeal of the Affordable Care Act would increase the federal budget deficits by US\$137 billion in ten years, it was on this hill that Trump decided to wage battle in the first months of his administration.²⁵ But he arrived too late. Public opinion had been initially cool towards the ACA – though not necessarily hostile – and the disastrous start of the HealthCare.gov website, which crashed on the first day of operations and had serious problems for several months, did not help. With time, however, the share of those in favor of repealing Obamacare decreased against those in favor of maintaining and possibly expanding it; in January 2017 even *Fox News* had to admit that “the number of voters who want Obamacare completely repealed is at a new low ... And for the first time, more favor expanding the law than killing it entirely”.²⁶ Only a mere 19% was in favor of going back to 2009. Despite many attempts at repealing the act, the Democrat majority in the Senate stopped Trump’s agenda.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ Congressional Budget Office, “[Budgetary and Economic Effects of Repealing the Affordable Care Act](#)”, June 2015.

²⁶ D. Blanton, “[Fox News Poll: Views on ObamaCare shift](#)”, *Fox News*, 19 January 2017.

Unable to repeal Obamacare and short of any major legislative achievement, Trump and the Republicans redirected their energies toward a tax bill that deeply changed the fiscal landscape of the United States. The bill that Trump signed on 22 December 2017 was the largest tax reform since 1986 – in the words of two commentators, “a catchall legislative creation that could reshape major areas of American life, from education to health care”.²⁷ The 1986 bill, too, was the product of a Republican administration, but it took years of discussion, hearings, and compromises across party lines to take shape. The 2017 bill, instead, was presented and voted in a mere four weeks, and no member of the opposition supported it – a first in tax reform history in the US, as many commentators noticed.

The bill reduced the corporate tax rate to 21%, produced a major revision of individual income taxes (reducing the upper limits of most brackets and their tax rates), limited itemized deductions (primarily at the state and local level), added a 20% deduction for pass-through businesses (businesses taxed under the individual tax rather than the corporate tax, e.g., partnerships), and, finally, introduced deductions for equipment investment and an increase in the exemption for estate taxes. Considering the increasingly plutocratic nature of Congress membership and the specific history of the President that signed the bill, this last element is not mere political gossip. After the bill was approved, the *New York Times* estimated that Trump himself would save approximately US\$11 million on his taxes, or 30% of his federal tax return.²⁸ One month earlier, he had claimed at a rally in Missouri that it would cost him “a fortune”.²⁹

²⁷ P.S. Goodman and P. Cohen, “G.O.P. Tax Plan Could Reshape Life in the US”, *The New York Times*, 30 November 2017, Section A, p. 1.

²⁸ J. Drucker and A. Carlsen, “[Trump Could Save More Than \\$11 Million Under the New Tax Plan](#)”, *The New York Times*, 22 December 2017. Based on information from Trump’s 2005 federal tax return (notoriously, Trump refused to disclose his tax returns).

²⁹ White House, “[Remarks by President Trump on Tax Reform](#)”, St. Charles

The Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT) estimated that by 2027 tax revenue would fall by US\$1.5 trillion, but the Trump administration retorted that the bill would pay for itself by an increase in output and investments (including increasing flows of investments from abroad), increasing wages and demand, the repatriation of US corporate income, and a reduction in production outsourcing.³⁰ The Congressional Research Service, however, indicated in 2019 that “not enough growth occurred in the first year to cause the tax cut to pay for itself”, and that in fact growth had been “even smaller than projected by most analysts”.³¹ The supply-side effects, moreover, appeared debatable, to say the least: since the tax cuts mostly benefited corporations and higher-income individuals, wages did not increase as expected; dividends previously held abroad were repatriated, but the reinvestment of additional earnings witnessed a sharp decline, and by the end of 2018 both repatriations and reinvested earnings had returned to pre-tax cuts levels.³²

More than two years after the bill was passed, four things are clear. First, the emphasis on corporate tax cuts and higher income cuts marks a full-fledged return to trickle-down economics – the idea that if one taxes the rich and corporate interests less, they will spend and reinvest more, and national income will grow like a rising tide that lifts all boats, rich and poor, together. The problem is that trickle-down economics is an act of faith (at best) or cynicism (at worst), as the additional income available to the rich and corporate interests does not increase consumption significantly (as economist Branko Milanovic quipped, “there is a limit to the number of Dom

Convention Center, St. Charles, Missouri, 29 November 2017.

³⁰ See for example Council of Economic Advisers, “[Corporate Tax Reform and Wages: Theory and Evidence](#)”, October 2017.

³¹ J.G. Gravelle and D.J. Marples, “[The Economic Effects of the 2017 Tax Revision: Preliminary Observations](#)”, Congressional Research Service, R45736, 7 June 2019, pp. 4, 3, and 6.

³² *Ibid.* See also M.F. Sherlock and D.J. Marples, “[The 2017 Tax Revision \(P.L. 115-97\): Comparison to 2017 Tax Law](#)”, Congressional Research Service, R45092, 6 February 2018.

Pérignons and Armani suits one can drink or wear”); is often distributed as dividends instead of reinvested; and contributes to financial speculations and instability. Former Chief Economist and Director of Research at the International Monetary Fund, Raghuram Rajan, demonstrated the direct relationship between increasing inequality and the speculative bubble that exploded in 2007-08.³³

Second, the bill is immensely regressive. According to the Tax Policy Center, while the poorest 60% of taxpayers will receive small percentage tax cuts in 2018 to 2025 and actual percentage tax *increases* starting in 2027 (the lowest quintile, for example, will receive a tax cut of 1% in 2018, 1.3 in 2025, and a tax increase of 4.6 in 2027), the top quintile of taxpayers would receive a more than 65% tax cut between 2018 and 2025 and a stellar 107.3% tax cut in 2027. The share of tax cuts that would benefit the 0.1% of taxpayers will increase from 8% in 2018 to 10% in 2025 and an outrageous 60% in 2027 (Table 2.1).

TAB. 2.1 - SHARE OF TOTAL FEDERAL TAX CHANGE (%),
2018, 2025, AND 2027

	2018	2025	2027
Lowest quintile	1.0	1.3	-4.6
Second quintile	5.2	5.6	-5.4
Middle quintile	11.2	11.4	-2.1
Fourth quintile	18.4	17.4	2.9
Top quintile	65.3	65.8	107.3
Top 0.1 percent	7.9	10.5	59.8

Source: Tax Policy Center, Urban Institute & Brookings Institute. Distributional Analysis of the Conference Agreement for the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, 18 December 2020

³³ Milanovic’s quote is from B. Milanovic, *The Haves and the Have-Nots. A Brief and Idiosyncratic History of Global Inequality*, New York, Basic Books, 2010, pp. 193-94. R.G. Rajan, *Fault Lines: How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010. For another important study on this by the IMF, see M. Kumhof and R. Rancière, “[Inequality, Leverage and Crises](#)”, IMF Working Paper WP/10/268, 2010.

Perhaps the most egregious proof of the regressive nature of the bill lies in the limited temporary horizon of some of its provisions. While corporate tax cuts are permanent, personal income cuts are only temporary and destined to expire in 2025. One might consider this end date a sign of lucidity about the dire conditions of the federal budget, were it not for the fact that it hides one of the most massive transfers of wealth from low-income workers to corporations and affluent individuals since the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of oligarchs' fortunes. According to the Joint Committee on Taxation and the Congressional Budget Office, by 2027 the distributional effect of the bill will mean an additional tax burden of 60 billion dollars for people making from less than US\$10,000 to US\$75,000 per year and a cut of US\$20 billion for individuals with an income higher than US\$75,000 per year. Particularly interesting is the almost direct transfer of approximately US\$5.5 billion from individuals whose income is between US\$40-50,000 to individuals whose income is more than US\$1 million.³⁴ By 2025, the personal income tax reform will be repealed, but at that point it will have completed its transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. This is indeed trickle-up economics on a bold scale, at the cost of a staggering debt for the next generations.

The third clear point, not unexpectedly, is that the bill is not going to pay for itself. The CBO has recently stated that it expects an increasing gap between spending and revenues. If between 1970 and 2019 the gap averaged 3%, the CBO expects the gap to increase at 5% in the next ten years: assuming, that is, that the temporary tax cuts will actually expire in 2025. As the director of CBO puts it, "much of the growth of revenues in our

³⁴ To be precise, the income category of US\$40,000-US\$50,000 will witness a tax increase of US\$5.27 billion, while the income category of US\$1,000,000 or more will see cuts for US\$5.78 billion, Congressional Budget Office, "[Reconciliation Recommendations of the Senate Committee on Finance](#)", 26 November 2017, p. 10.

projections stems from the expiration of the tax provisions”.³⁵ But by then it will be too late. In 2050, the US debt is projected to equal 180% of GDP, “far higher than it has ever been”.³⁶ As the *New York Times* summarized, “Republican leaders aren’t just trying to transfer money from current middle-class and poor Americans to corporations and the very wealthy. They are also trying to transfer money from *future* middle-class and poor Americans to corporations and the very wealthy”.³⁷

Fourth, the tax bill is much more than just a tax reform. Because of the constraints that it imposes on the ability of states and local governments to levy their own taxes, it limits health care, education, public transportation and social services, whose bills are largely paid at the sub-federal level. “In their longstanding battle to shrink government”, two commentators wrote, “Republicans have found in the tax bill a vehicle to broaden the fight beyond Washington ... especially in high-tax states like California and New York, which, not coincidentally, tend to vote Democratic”.³⁸

Moreover, the bill repealed the penalties for those who do not comply with the requirement to indicate on their tax return their health insurance coverage (also known as the individual mandate). These penalties were an important barrier against dropping out from health coverage, and commentators have argued that this small clause will have disruptive consequences, for as many as 13 million individuals would lose health insurance.³⁹ The combined effect of reduced resources for

³⁵ P.L. Swagel, “The 2020 Budget and Economic Outlook. A Presentation to the Forecasters Club of New York”, Congressional Budget Office, 20 February 2020.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “The Republican Tax on the Future”, *The New York Times*, 26 November 2017, Section SR, p. 8, emphasis added. See also W.G. Gale, *Did the 2017 tax cut – the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act – pay for itself?*, Brookings, 14 February 2020.

³⁸ P.S. Goodman and P. Cohen (2017).

³⁹ Congressional Budget Office, “Repealing the Individual Health Insurance Mandate: An Updated Estimate”, November 2017. See also A. Chandra, J. Gruber, and R.McKnight, “The Importance of the Individual Mandate

health care and the sabotage of individual mandate, in other words, turned the tax bill in a stealth health care bill. As several commentators noticed, across-the-board spending cuts also directly affected Medicare. “The last time Medicare was hit with cuts like this”, one noticed, “patients lost access to critical services like chemotherapy treatment”.⁴⁰

Income, Health, and Racial Inequality

The problem of inequality in the US, as in most of the world, is not new. More than ten years of debates have made the notion that inequality in advanced economies started to rise in the 1970s part of public discourse, and in 2011 Warren Buffett made a sensation with some back-of-the-envelope calculations about the distortions in the fiscal system. As he wrote, in 2010 his federal tax bill was US\$6,938,744. A notable sum, but only 17.4% of his taxable income. That was lower than the percentage paid by anyone else working in his office – a point abbreviated to the oft-repeated claim that Buffett pays fewer taxes than his secretary.⁴¹ As commentators have noticed, whereas that was not the norm in 2011, it *is* today.⁴²

If we look at data from the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2010 the Gini index was 0.4690; it had grown at 0.4824 in 2016 and was at 0.4845 in 2018. An increasing Gini index means worsening inequality, but the problem does not lie at the level of the third

– Evidence from Massachusetts”, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 27 January 2011, vol. 364, no. 4, p. 293.

⁴⁰ S. Kliff, “The Senate’s tax bill is a sweeping change to every part of federal health care”, *Vox.com*, 29 November 2017.

⁴¹ W.E. Buffett, “Stop Coddling the Super-Rich”, *The New York Times*, 15 August 2011, Section A, p. 21.

⁴² D. Leonhardt, “The Rich Really Do Pay Lower Taxes Than You”, *The New York Times*, 6 October 2019, online, last accessed on 21 June 2020. See in particular E. Saez and G. Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*, New York, Norton, 2019, and their very informative website, taxjusticenow.org.

decimal.⁴³ The actual problem is that inequality is consistently on the rise, and compared to other advanced economies, the United States shows very high levels of inequality. Among OECD countries, only Turkey, Mexico and Chile do worse.⁴⁴ These high levels of income inequality have direct repercussions on other dimensions of inequality, through what economist and international civil servant Gunnar Myrdal called “principle of cumulation”, or vicious circle.⁴⁵

The reference to Myrdal is not accidental, for he studied the dynamics of the principle of cumulation with specific reference to Black Americans between 1937 and 1944. Segregation and income inequality reinforced each other, and produced, and were in turn affected by, inequality in access to justice, political representation, housing, education, well remunerated jobs, and so on. Trump tax and health policies will not only increase income and health inequality, as discussed above, but will have – and in fact are already having – a disproportionate impact on Black Americans. The Covid pandemic is a sad demonstration of this. Chicago, for example, is 30% Black, but African Americans account for 70% of all coronavirus cases and more than half of the deaths in the state of Illinois. As the director of the Illinois department of public health summarized the point, “we know all too well that there are general disparities in health outcomes that play along racial lines and the same may be true for this virus”.⁴⁶ The African American population lives

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau, Table B19083, “[Gini Index of Income Inequality](#)”, Survey/Program: American Community Survey, Years: 2010-2018. But it should be noted that J. Semega, M. Kollar, J. Creamer, and A. Mohanty in “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2018”, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, 10 September 2019, p. 34, Table A-3 show a very small *decrease* in the money income Gini index between 2017 (0.489) and 2018 (0.486). The equivalence-adjusted income shows a stronger decrease from 0.471 in 2017 to 0.464 in 2018.

⁴⁴ OECD, [Income inequality \(indicator\)](#), 2020, doi: 10.1787/459aa7f1-en.

⁴⁵ G. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma. The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, New York and London, Harper, 1944, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Ngozi Esike as quoted by K. Evelyn, “[‘It’s a racial justice issue’: Black Americans](#)

in more crowded areas, has a lower average income per capita, less access to health care, and in several cases is employed in jobs that do not allow social distancing, telecommuting, paid leave and health benefits. They are more likely to work essential jobs in the public and the private sectors alike, risking coronavirus exposure.

Trump could easily consider the effects of this cumulative discrimination and increasing inequality that he has been actively promoting, if he only observed what happens outside of his windows: African Americans are almost half of the population of the District of Columbia, but they count for almost two thirds of the deaths. Observers in the federal capital say as much. Three policy analysts at Brookings Institution recently wrote, “The coronavirus does not discriminate, but our housing, economic, and health care policies do”.⁴⁷ And *Washington Post* journalist Jennifer Rubin has summarized the situation as follows: “In short, if you are poor, a woman, nonwhite or live paycheck to paycheck in a blue-collar job, you have a greater chance of being unemployed or, if still employed, of getting sick and dying”.⁴⁸

are dying in greater numbers from Covid-19”, *The Guardian*, 8 April 2020.

⁴⁷ A.M. Perry, D. Harshbarger, and C. Romer, *Mapping racial inequity amid COVID-19 underscores policy discriminations against Black Americans*, Brookings, 16 April 2020.

⁴⁸ J. Rubin, “Inequality is now an issue of life and death”, *The Washington Post*, 15 May 2020.

3. Beyond the Wall: US Immigration Policy under Trump

Gabriella Sanchez

The policies and practices implemented over the last four years by the Trump administration and US agencies in charge of immigration enforcement have generated headlines around the world, not to mention constant waves of condemnation and anguish. For the entire duration of President Trump's term the public has witnessed a seemingly endless onslaught of cruel measures aimed to deter immigration into the United States. The world has watched as agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have been involved in the separation of thousands of families, in detention practices involving the placement of children in cells denounced by migrant advocates as nothing other than metal cages, and on the virtual suspension of the international asylum protection system through the implementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). We have listened to the racist claims mobilized by the US President himself in the context of his campaign but also throughout his mandate that portray "Mexicans" – a proxy for Latin American migrants – as rapists, drug dealers and murderers; watched the construction of the border wall and its lethal impact on the men, women and children desperate to crack it; and witnessed the precariousness and desperation emerging from the closing of border checkpoints allegedly to contain the spread of Covid-19. US citizens from predominantly Muslim countries or identified as supporting

pro-immigrant activities have been subjected to unexplained questioning at ports of entry, their admission into the country delayed without justification. As this article goes to press, US Citizenship and Immigration Services continues to ignore a US Supreme Court order to reinstate the programme providing temporary employment and residence protections to people brought into the United States as children (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme, or DACA) claiming it is inherently illegitimate, and international students throughout the US are still reeling in the aftermath of a reversed order from the White House which could have forced them to return to their countries of origin following the cancellation of in-person classes in most universities as a result of Covid-19.

The Trump administration has from the onset made clear its distaste for migrants – in particular those arriving to the US-Mexico border, historically ground zero of the US immigration debate. Fighting irregular migration and in doing so countering the presence of so-called “aliens”, drug traffickers, migrant smugglers and drug traffickers through the construction of a “big, beautiful wall” became one of the pivotal promises of the Trump campaign – a campaign that was easily embraced by the hundreds of thousands if not millions of struggling Americans who had long felt side-lined and disrespected by the triumphalist message of change coming from the Obama White House, which hardly spoke to their concerns in an increasingly unequal and polarized nation.

The problematic nature of virtually the entire body of migration-related policies and practices coming from or supported by the Trump White House cannot be denied (as evidenced by the multiple legal challenges they have faced in courts across the land). Yet it is also fundamental to remember that US immigration policy under Trump did not emerge in a vacuum. It constitutes the continuation of decades of US policy-making that has overwhelmingly focused on the Southwestern US border, and that while systematically aiming to control irregular migration across the US-Mexico border from Latin

America, has by extension impacted the lives of people from regions around the world selectively construed as threats to US national security. In other words, US migration policy and practice under Trump is far from new or unprecedented. It is part of a long continuum of decision-making that has impacted disproportionately those reaching the US-Mexico border, at a time when migration dynamics throughout the Americas and into the United States are increasingly diverse. If at all, US immigration policy under Trump is for millions of migrants – including many of those who grew up on the US-Mexico border or who call the region home – yet another if perhaps fiercer iteration of the historical efforts to criminalise our mobility and lives.

In what follows, I summarize some of the most salient points of migration policy and practice under Trump. I must emphasize this is not a comprehensive review of all the Trump administration's measures that have aimed from the onset to restrict US-bound immigration and punish migrants. It is instead an effort to look back at some of these measures in light of the 2020 US presidential election – one that could mark the end of the (current) Trump era, or presage another four years of migration policy rooted in escalating racism and right-wing nationalism. It is also an attempt to express concern over what the return of the Democratic party into office could bring about, given it also lacks a solid plan to safeguard the rights of those arriving to the US-Mexico border or seeking to enter the US in search of protection. I say this not only as a scholar who follows US migration and border policy for a living, but as a migrant who has witnessed how US migration policy's alleged efforts to protect a nation and its people have systematically and historically relied on the depiction of migrants and their communities as threats – a trend that is unlikely to disappear under a new administration, regardless of party.

Beyond “Children in Cages”: Child Immigration Detention

Between May and June of 2018, a series of pictures by the Associated Press generated a global outcry over the conditions faced by migrant children in US immigration custody on the US Mexico border. Taken inside an immigration detention facility in South Texas, the images depicted what were promptly characterized as “cages created by metal fencing”,¹ in which children – some of them apparently infants – were kept as they were classified for immigration-enforcement purposes following their arrival, entry and detention within US territory.

For a number of weeks, the Trump administration, congresspersons and migrant advocates became involved in a battle over the proper way to designate these detention areas.² The semantic debate however took significant time away from the much more urgent conversation on the systematic reliance of US immigration authorities on child detention as a form of immigration deterrence,³ which as President Trump denounced via Twitter,⁴ was not unique to his administration.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s migrant advocates documented extensive abuses committed against children in immigration detention. Litigation led to the signing of the 1997 Flores settlement, in which the US government agreed to limit the length of time migrant children could be detained to

¹ N. Merchant, “[Judge: US must free migrant children detained with parents](#)”, *Time Magazine*, 26 June 2020.

² S. Rizzo, “[Jeff Merkley’s claims about immigrant children in ‘cages’, access to a Texas shelter](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 6 June 2018; D. Graham, “[Are children being kept in cages at the border?](#)”, *The Atlantic*, 18 June 2018; A. Merelli, “[Those pictures of immigrant children ‘caged’ by the US? They are from 2014](#)”, *Quartz Magazine*, 29 May 2018.

³ C. Domonoske and R. Gonzales, “[What we know: family separation and ‘zero tolerance’ at the Border](#)”, National Public Radio, 19 June 2018.

⁴ D. Trump, “[Democrats had to quickly take down a tweet called ‘Kids in Cages’ because that horrible picture was from the Obama years. Very embarrassing!](#)”, on Twitter, 11 July 2019.

20 days, to comply with certain standards of care, and to place children in the “least restrictive” setting appropriate for their age and needs.⁵ However, the Flores settlement did not lead to the reduction in the number of children processed by immigration detention or to real improvements to the treatment of children in custody. In fact, the practice of child immigration became increasingly institutionalized. Numbers from the then-U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) demonstrate the growth in the number of unaccompanied children detained by immigration authorities in the United States after the Flores agreement, going from 2,375 in 1997 to 5,385 in 2001.⁶ In fiscal year 2014, in the midst of the Obama administration, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (U.S. CBP) reported encounters with 67,338 unaccompanied children.⁷ Statistics from CBP confirm that its agents had 76,020 contacts with unaccompanied migrant children for immigration enforcement purposes by the end of the year.⁸ It is estimated that during that same term 4,000 of these children were in custody.⁹

While media coverage focused on the images of infants and young children in detention, there were more pressing issues at hand. Numbers have been shown to be inexact, and not to reflect current deportation and removal practices. Contrary to widely circulated media images, most children in US immigration custody are teenage boys from Central America and Mexico.¹⁰ Often traveling with the hope of reaching the United States to

⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center, *Family separation under the Trump administration – a timeline*, 17 June 2020.

⁶ United States Department of Justice, *Immigration and Naturalization Service*, INS Office of Juvenile Affairs Fact Sheet, 1 August 2002.

⁷ American Immigration Council, *A guide to children arriving at the border. Laws, Policies and Responses*, Special Report, June 2015.

⁸ United States Customs and Border Protection, “Southwest Border Migration Fiscal year 2019”, 2019.

⁹ C. Sherman, M. Mendoza, and G. Burke, “US held record number of migrant children in custody in 2019”, Associated Press, 12 November 2019.

¹⁰ US Department of Health and Human Services (US HHS), “Latest UAC Data. Fiscal Year 2019”, 2019.

support their families back home, cover the expenses generated from their journeys and start new lives.¹¹ Children under the age of 12 are more likely to travel in the company of parents or extended family members who care for them, and they in fact constitute a significantly smaller proportion of children in US immigration custody (18.6% of all children in immigration detention by September of 2019).¹²

In the aftermath of the AP pictures much has continued to be written about the conditions children face in US immigration and/or detention facilities under Trump.¹³ Their deplorable and dangerous settings have been shown to inflict lasting physical and psychological damage on migrant children,¹⁴ and to have played a critical role in the deaths of at least seven of them in 2019 alone.¹⁵ It is important, however, not to forget that what are needed are not merely improved conditions in detention. Alternatives to a system that has institutionalized child detention in the first place must be proposed and implemented. Discursive debates of the kind mobilized over the course of the Trump administration have been effective at deflecting attention from the enduring reliance on detention as an ineffective and cruel way to deter child migration, and more specifically, to punish parents by separating them from their children. The

¹¹ L. Heidbrink and M. Statz, "Parents of global youth: contesting debt and belonging", *Children's Geographies*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2017, pp. 545-557.

¹² US Department of Health and Human Services (2019).

¹³ A. Cheatham, *US Detention of Child Migrants*, Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2020; Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Questions and Answers on the Trump Administration's Zero-Tolerance Immigration Policy", *Human Rights Watch*, 16 August 2018.

¹⁴ US Commission on Human Rights, *Trauma at the Border The Human Cost of Inhumane Immigration Policies*, Briefing report, Washington, DC, October 2019; R. Mishori, "US Policies and Their Effects on Immigrant Children's Health", *Am Fam Physician*, Georgetown University, School of Medicine, Washington, District of Columbia, 15 February 2020, vol. 101, no. 4, pp. 202-204.

¹⁵ J. Morales Rocketto, "Seven Children Have Died In Immigration Custody. Remember Their Names.", *Buzz Feed News*, 30 September 2019; R Moore, "Six children died in US Border Patrol Care and Democrats in congress want to know why", *ProPublica*, 13 January 2020.

initial outpouring of efforts to make child detention visible has distracted us collectively from the fact that to this day the whereabouts of hundreds, if not thousands of migrant children processed by US immigration authorities under the orders of the Trump administration remain unknown.¹⁶ In other words, the focus on detention conditions has served to take attention away from an even more pervasive immigration enforcement practice: the separation of families as they attempt to enter the United States.

From Family Detention to Family Separation

As stated in the previous section, the emphasis on semantics and conditions in detention obscured the much more troubling, long-standing practice of migrant child detention in the United States – one that reached unprecedented levels by fiscal year 2019. It is not surprising that the separation of children from their parents that led to such significant numbers was the subject of a similar narrative by the Trump administration. The administration systematically blamed not merely the detention, but also the deaths of children in US Immigration custody on the negligence of their parents. One by one, Trump officials labelled parents as irresponsible, careless and even potentially criminal¹⁷ for bringing their children on “the treacherous trek to the US-Mexico border”.¹⁸ On at least one occasion, then-US Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kirsten Nielsen, blamed the family of an indigenous migrant child for her death by saying the family “chose to cross illegally”.¹⁹

¹⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center (2020).

¹⁷ L. Dickinson, “Hundreds of immigrant children have been taken from parents at US Border”, *The New York Times*, 20 April 2018.

¹⁸ K. Nielsen, “Statement on the passing of eight year old Guatemalan child”, Press release, US Department of Homeland Security, 26 December 2018.

¹⁹ A. Russo, “DHS Secretary blames migrant family for child’s harrowing death”, *Huffington Post*, 14 December 2018.

Claims of this nature were alarmingly amplified by journalistic coverage suggesting parents were using their children to get admission into the US, allegedly taking advantage of a legal loophole to enter the country and remain together. Conservative think tanks and Trump officials further fuelled the narrative by arguing “some migrants were using children as “human shields” in order to get out of immigration custody faster”,²⁰ while conspiring with smuggling facilitators across Central America, who in response to an allegedly unprecedented demand for services were offering discounts to parents eager to bring their children to the United States.²¹

Taken as a whole, statements of this kind were often used by the Trump administration to justify two key decisions over the span of a few weeks. The first, in early May 2018, allowed US immigration authorities to separate children from their parents at the time they reached US territory. The second, following the uproar over family separation, was an executive order on 20 June 2018 that implemented family detention, in the process ignoring legal limits on the detention of minors.²² In other words, Trump’s executive order suspended the practice of family separation, yet effectively subjected families to indefinite detention terms. This policy marked a definite break with prior presidential administrations, which with the exception of Obama’s had not enforced family detention.²³

²⁰ L. Dickinson (2018).

²¹ J. Partlow and N. Miroff, “For Central Americans, Children open apath to the US and bring a discount”, *The Washington Post*, 23 November 2018; J. Root, “How one migrant family got caught between smugglers, the cartel and Trump’s zero-tolerance policy”, *Texas Tribune*, 7 March 2019.

²² C. Domonoske and R. Gonzales (2018).

²³ Here it is important to mention that the creation of family detention facilities for the purpose of processing admission and stay in the US, and the implementation of protocols aimed to monitor families, and in particular mothers – often ran by for-profit companies – were the target of heavy criticism during Obama’s term in office. *Ibid.*; and B. Chapel, “US To Open Immigrant Family Detention Centers In Response To Influx”, *NPR News*, 20 June 2014.

There have been significant responses to counter the devastating impact family separation has had on children and their families. The Trump administration has repeatedly had to admit in court its failure to keep track of children and reunite families;²⁴ immigration officials' reliance on abusive and misleading tactics to separate parents from their children;²⁵ the prevalence of physical and even sexual abuse (often at the hands of immigration officials and their private contractors) at detention and care facilities,²⁶ among others in a list long of practices.

However, and as discussed earlier, it is important to reflect on how the focus on the actions of immigration officials and on the experiences of children alone have often obscured the impact of family separation on parents themselves. Parents found to be traveling with their children were also subject of criminal prosecution under Trump's zero-tolerance policy. The April 2018 measure "directs US Attorney's offices along the Southwest border to accept for criminal prosecution all cases involving illegal entry referred to them by U.S. CBP" and has led to an exponential increase in "the numbers of parents traveling with children who are prosecuted".²⁷ This suggests that rather than taking advantage of an alleged loophole as the administration argued, many parents were in fact deliberately risking detention, conviction and family separation with the hope that their cases would eventually be heard in court and they would lawfully be allowed to stay in the country together as families. Furthermore, the claim that parents were conspiring with smuggling facilitators, benefitting from reduced prices or other forms of discounts, reflected the monolithic and

²⁴ A. Cheatham (2020).

²⁵ J. Barajas, "Separated parents unknowingly gave up reunification rights, lawyers say", *National Public Radio*, 26 July 2018.

²⁶ R. Gonzales, "Sexual Assault Of Detained Migrant Children Reported In The Thousands Since 2015", *National Public Radio*, 26 February 2019.

²⁷ "In the Freezer: Abusive Conditions for Women and Children in US Immigration Holding Cells", *Human Rights Watch*, 28 February 2018.

dominant perceptions concerning smuggling services and their availability.

While facilitators may certainly adapt their prices, the smuggling of children is generally catalogued as a high-risk activity, which rather than being subjected to price reductions often involves significantly higher costs given the physical vulnerabilities of children.²⁸ In other words, the costs of smuggling a child are often prohibitive for migrant families already living in highly precarious settings and/or fleeing from conflict or violence, as in the case of most of those arriving on the US-Mexico border. Families instead often decide to travel alongside others for protection, and to dedicate whichever financial resources they may have to cover other expenses like room, board or medication.²⁹ In other words, smuggling facilitation services, and in particular those for children are often unaffordable, and assuming all migrant families can simply cover costs at will as many journalistic and policy outlets suggest is amiss. The precariousness faced by families may in fact help explain why in the aftermath of the signing of the executive order and despite the existence of the zero-tolerance policy, groups of hundreds of families began to turn themselves to US immigration authorities near the US Mexico border, hoping to be eventually reunited,³⁰ rather than relying

²⁸ W.A. Vogt, *Lives in transit: Violence and intimacy on the migrant journey*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2018; G. Sanchez, “‘This Time I Am Going to Cross!': Fighting Entrapment Processes Through the Provision of Human Smuggling Services on the US-Mexico Border”, in F. Vecchio and A. Gerard (eds.), *Entrapping Asylum Seekers*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017, pp. 135-155; J.M. Hagan, *Migration miracle*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2008.

²⁹ W.A. Vogt (2018); Y. González-Guevara, “Navigating with coyotes: Pathways of Central American migrants in Mexico’s southern borders”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 676, no. 1, 2018, pp. 174-193.

³⁰ United States Customs and Border Protection, “[Large groups of migrants surrender near Sasabe](#)”, Press release, 30 August 2019; D. Silva, “[CBP says it has seen ‘dramatic increase’ of large groups of 100 or more migrants crossing border](#)”, *NBC News*, 24 January 2019; C. Hansen, “[Border Patrol: More Large](#)

on smuggling services to specific locations within the United States.

But the Trump administration's attempts to curtail migration did not stop here. In fact, Trump's officials had already started to craft other measures that would eventually allow the US to remove itself from its commitments to the international protection and asylum system. The Migrant Protection Protocols, known informally as the MPP programme, is perhaps the most recent and drastic assault of the Trump administration on US and international asylum law.

Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)

As described above, the Trump administration has imposed a series of policies to stop migration and to deter asylum seekers from reaching the United States and ask for protection. But perhaps the most drastic of them was the passage on 25 January 2019 of the Migrant Protection Protocols or MPP. Under MPP, people seeking to enter the US at official ports of entry, or who are apprehended in between them (that is, along any other section of the US-Mexico border), were to be immediately returned by immigration officials to Mexico to await a US-immigration court hearing. In other words, rather than following international law, MPP made it impossible for those reaching US ports of entry to apply for asylum, forcing them to wait at their own risk in a country known to be hostile to people in transit, in cities often ranked among the most dangerous in the world, until a US-immigration court was able to schedule them.

Trump administration officials immediately claimed MPP would “allow more resources to be dedicated to individuals who legitimately qualify for asylum”, and to help end “the exploitation of our generous immigration laws”³¹ by allegedly

Groups of Migrants Trying to Enter U.S.”, *US News*, 31 May 2019.

³¹ The United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “Migrant

decreasing the ability of smuggling facilitators to take advantage of people and ensuring that those who were really vulnerable received the protections they deserved. DHS (Department of Homeland Security) went as far as claiming MPP effectiveness would be such that all cases would be heard within a year.³² It was estimated that the numbers of people waiting on the Mexican side of the US border for a hearing peaked in November of 2019, when the total number of records contained in “waiting lists” – registries of every person who had officially presented him or herself to US immigration authorities for admission – reached 21,400.³³

Numbers had decreased not as a result of expedited processing by US immigration authorities – in fact, efforts to limit the number of people applying for asylum and those attending court hearings became quite clear since the onset of MPP.³⁴ It is not hard to imagine that news of the unlikelihood of being admitted into the United States served in part to deter some people seeking asylum. It is also believed that many decided to apply for asylum in Mexico instead. Data from Mexico’s agency in charge of asylum processing, COMAR, reports a total of 20,496 people applied for refugee status in the first six months of 2020.³⁵

However, it is also likely that the numbers are a reflection of changing and worrisome trends that show the desperation faced by many migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter the United States. The number of apprehensions at the US-Mexico

Protection Protocols”, Press release, 24 January 2019.

³² D. Lind, “The US is sending some legal asylum seekers back to Mexico”, *Vox*, 25 January 2019.

³³ S. Leutert, E. Ezzell, and S. Arvey, *Metering Update*, Strauss Center International Security and Law and Center for US-Mexican Studies, February 2020.

³⁴ S. Leutert, E. Ezzell, S. Arvey, G. Sanchez, C. Yates, and P. Kuhne, *Asylum Processing and Wait lists at the US-Mexico Border*, Strauss Center for International Security and Law, Center for US-Mexican Studies, Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, December 2018; American Immigration Council, “Policies affecting asylum seekers at the border”, *Fact Sheet*, 29 January 2020.

³⁵ COMAR, *Estadísticas de Enero a Junio de 2020*, Cierre de Junio 2020.

border, after having decreased significantly in April and May of 2020, are on the rise again.³⁶ This suggests that rather than waiting, or as indicated by migrant advocates, after having waited for months for a court hearing or on the outcome of an asylum claim under precarious conditions on the Mexican side of the border, people may be opting to enter the US without inspection by themselves or with the assistance of smuggling facilitators.³⁷

The physical and psychological risks involved in crossing the border irregularly have been well documented, as well as the acts of violence irregular migrants encounter on their journeys across the US-Mexico border. Yet for those who manage to cross successfully, the precariousness does not stop. Migrants opting for an irregular entry will be unlikely to qualify for relief under the current guidelines, and could even be placing themselves at risk of deportation or removal, not to mention facing criminal charges under the zero-tolerance policy, if they make their presence in the United States known to immigration authorities. What a successful irregular entry to the United States under the current administration also implies is the unlikelihood of obtaining regular immigration status, which in turn perpetuates the precariousness of migrants and their families, and condemns them to enduring low salaries, insecure and unstable labour, and limited mobility.

Another worrisome trend has been the large increase in the number of children traveling unaccompanied across the US Mexico border for the purpose of turning themselves to immigration authorities.³⁸ This also suggests that parents unable

³⁶ U.S. Border Patrol Southwest border encounters for April 2020 reached 16,045 people, compared with 21,498 in May, and 30,300 in June of the same year. See U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “[Southwest Border Migration Fiscal Year 2020](#)”, 2020.

³⁷ D. Silva, “[One year into ‘Remain in Mexico’ policy, migrants confront danger and instability](#)”, *NBC News*, 29 January 2020; M. Gupta and M. Fawcett, “[Refugees in the Time of Covid-19](#)”, *The Nation*, 21 April 2020.

³⁸ The number of unaccompanied children encountered by US Border Patrol more than doubled from April to June of 2020, going from 697 to 1,564. See U.S.

to reach US territory may be making the decision of allowing their children to cross on their own, or with the assistance of facilitators, so that they can be admitted by immigration authorities, even if this implies detention, or long-term or even permanent separations. This would also confirm reports by media and migrant advocates that fearing the conditions on irregular settlements or camps on the Mexican side of the border, many parents are opting to invest whichever resources they may have available in sending their children across, with the hopes they can safely reach relatives in the US.³⁹

The Weaponization of Covid and Its Impact on the Asylum System

As described above, the MPP altered admission dynamics along the entire border, while creating a backlog of asylum seekers who had to wait in cities on the Mexican side of the border for their claims to be heard.⁴⁰ The experience of managing large numbers of arrivals however was by no means new to civil society on either side of the US-Mexico border, which over the years has systematically responded to humanitarian crises derived from migration enforcement and controls. Neither the US nor the Mexican government put official provisions in place to ensure the well-being and safety of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees on the border, a region that is often characterized by its high levels of violence. The sheer numbers of people stranded along border cities, however, did indeed limit the initial capacity of both local governments and civil society to respond to MPP, especially given the lack of facilities that could accommodate hundreds of people in search of international protection for long periods of time.

Customs and Border Protection, 2020.

³⁹ J. Burnett, “I Want To Be Sure My Son Is Safe’: Asylum-Seekers Send Children Across Border Alone, *National Public Radio*, 27 November 2019; J. Root (2019).

⁴⁰ S. Leutert et al. (2018).

Despite some initial challenges, and having to adapt to the guidelines established by US immigration authorities, local officials, civil society and international organizations on both sides of the border were able to devise a system that provided arriving, waiting and stranded migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in key cities on the Mexican side of the border with a basic layer of services (shelter, access to emergency medical services, legal and consular assistance, and for many, a path to employment) while they waited in Mexico for their court dates in the United States.

This newfound stability, however, came to a halt with the advent of Covid-19 and the responses that were put in place on both sides of the US-Mexico border to contain the virus's spread. The United States Government closed international borders to non-essential transits on 20 March with the claim that the decision would prevent the spread of the virus.⁴¹ In the days that followed, cities hosting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers on the Mexican side of the border also proceeded to shut down all non-essential activities,⁴² bringing an end to many of the employment options and income sources available to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Mexico. The closure orders meant many emerging, small migrant-owned businesses like grocery stores, hair salons, restaurants and other shops had to shut down; construction (an important labour-generating industry for migrants) was also suspended in most border cities. The availability and frequency of local public transportation⁴³ also left many migrants, asylum seekers and refugees unable to reach their places of employment.

The lack of employment translated not only on the drying up of sources of income, but eventually in the loss of housing

⁴¹ J. Aguilar, "To slow COVID-19, Trump administration closes southern border to non-essential travel", *The Texas Tribune*, 20 March 2020.

⁴² J. Olmos, "Inicia Juárez su cuarentena: educación reanudará hasta el 22 de abril", *El Diario de Juárez*, 21 March 2020.

⁴³ S. Miranda, "Reducirán a la mitad el transporte público", *El Heraldo de Juárez*, 26 March 2020.

for the many who had managed to move out of the shelters. It is unknown how many migrants, asylum seekers and refugees found themselves without a place to stay, and shelters, out of public health concerns related to the pandemic and the potential for contagion, were unable to receive returning guests.

These challenges do not merely impact the lives of people under MPP waiting for a hearing in Mexico. Concerns over the spread of the virus have been used by the Trump administration to maintain border ports of entry closed to non-citizens. But most critically, the White House has used the pandemic to argue that as a result of migrants and asylum seekers coming from countries with high numbers of Covid-19 cases, MPP court dates must be rescheduled in order to contain the spread of the virus in the United States (this despite the record number of Covid-19 cases in the US).⁴⁴ While the need to reschedule hearings is understandable in light of the public health crisis, what the Trump government's measure has caused is the effective suspension of any possibilities for people to secure protection or relief in the immediate future.

Restrictions on Foreign and International Students

On 6 July 2020, the Trump administration announced that international students enrolled at US universities that had switched their classes to online mode would not be allowed to remain in the country unless they secured a way to attend in-person classes. The Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) indicated that

the US Department of State will not issue visas to students enrolled in schools and/or programs that are fully online for the fall semester nor will U.S. Customs and Border Protection permit these students to enter the United States. Active students

⁴⁴ The United States Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice, [Announce Plan to Restart MPP Hearings](#), Press release, 17 July 2020.

currently in the United States enrolled in such programs must depart the country or take other measures, such as transferring to a school with in-person instruction to remain in lawful status”, [or] “face immigration consequences including, but not limited to, the initiation of removal proceedings (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020).

The announcement was a devastating blow to universities across the United States that had been forced to shut down or to switch to online activities as a result of the pandemic. It also implied massive financial losses, since foreign students in the United States are by mandate required to pay significantly higher fees than those paid by US nationals. Foreign students were also seen as a potential way to maintain universities afloat post-Covid-19, as academic institutions saw their revenue decrease as a result of the pandemic and decreasing enrolment.

While the quick reaction of elite universities in the form of a lawsuit led the White House to drop its plans a few days after the initial announcement was made, the Trump administration policies have already sent a clear message to international students: their status as international, elite or paying students does not necessarily make them safe. While a significant portion of the international students who attend university in the United States have the ability to finance their education, it is also important to keep in mind that for many others studying abroad is the result of hard work and dedication at obtaining scholarships and participating in funding programmes aimed to reduce educational disparities. Thousands of Mexican students cross the border to attend university on the American side of the border, assisted by binationally-funded programmes focused precisely on addressing educational gaps. An attempt to dismantle international education is also an attack on them and their efforts to improve their quality of life and that of their families.

DACA

In June 2020, the US Supreme Court blocked an attempt by the Trump administration to end the DACA programme, which provides young people who were brought to the United States the opportunity to apply for employment authorization and protection from deportation. Approximately 700,000 people in the US have applied and hold DACA status.⁴⁵

The Court's decision was initially welcomed by migrant advocates, who encouraged those already under DACA to file for extensions of their permits. It was also assumed that the Court's decision implied that those who qualified under DACA but had not been able to apply for it for the duration of the legal process, could file new petitions. However, acting US Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf was prompt to state that DACA had been implemented illegally and had to be ended.⁴⁶ As this article goes into print, the Trump administration has yet to start issuing permits or extensions, claiming DACA policies are being subjected to "ongoing active [...] deliberation"⁴⁷ and that no decision to restart issuing them had been made.

Conclusions: Beyond the Wall

The world has watched as the Trump administration enacts laws and policies aimed to prevent virtually all forms of migration into the United States. And yet, as described here, this has depended on the circulation of a specific discourse, which by focusing on the most visible and appalling of practices, has distracted most people from the real issues at hand: the pervasiveness of child detention; family separation practices; the virtual destruction

⁴⁵ *The case for protecting dreamers. General Fact Sheet*, fwd.us, Washington DC, 2020.

⁴⁶ United States Department of Homeland Security, "[DHS Statement on Supreme Court Decision on DACA](#)", Press release, 18 June 2020.

⁴⁷ A. De Vogue, "[No answers yet on DACA revival, Justice Department Says](#)", CNN, 24 July 2020.

of the asylum system, and the implementation of practices aimed to disrupt the lives and the livelihoods of young people and migrants. Similar to the conversation on metal cages, the rhetoric of fear and intimidation that accompanied the threats over the construction of the wall erased the fact that for the people of the border barriers, checkpoints, fences, and walls of many kinds have been part of their landscape for generations.

And yet, as mentioned in the introduction, we must be careful when attributing these developments to Trump alone. Child detention has been a constant element of the US immigration enforcement system; separating families has also been used as a deterrent. And while the MPP has virtually stopped the possibility of people reaching the US for protection, the number of asylum seekers being admitted to the US has been in decline since the 1980s (Multidimensional Poverty Index 2020).

It is therefore important, in the run-up to the 2020 election, to think beyond the wall, beyond the cages, and the overall border spectacle – especially at a time when neither party has articulated a strong migration agenda for the next presidency. While the concern of what another 4 years of Trump could mean to migrants in the United States is legitimate, equally concerning should be the lack of a migration agenda within the Democratic party. To this date, there have been no pronouncements on the part of Joseph Biden concerning migration other than the oft-recycled narrative of the nation of immigrants, one that rather than fostering unity, has systematically been used to exclude.

4. Debacle: Trump's Response to the Covid-19 Emergency

Scott L. Greer

In January 2020, a consortium led by the respected Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security produced its Global Health Security Ranking.¹ It evaluated the pandemic preparedness of governments almost everywhere, from Nauru and North Korea to Canada and China. While critical of every country, it ranked the United States as the best prepared country to face a pandemic. President Donald Trump flourished the report's color-coded map at the 26 February press conference. At that same conference, he assured Americans that their risk “remains very low” and that he had taken “very good decisions”.²

By June 2020, the United States stood out for one of the worst, if not the worst, pandemic response of any country. Its cases were high and rising, its population confused and embroiled in partisan struggles about masks and physical distancing, and its president, desperately trying to change the topic to economics and xenophobia, was holding rallies in pandemic hotspots. Citizens of the world's richest country, with supposedly the best pandemic preparedness, were very reasonably banned from travel to Europe on the grounds that they would bring infection.

What happened?

¹ <https://www.ghsindex.org/>

² V. Romo, “Trump Appoints Pence To Lead Government's Coronavirus Response”, *npr*, 26 February 2020.

This chapter explains the structures which made the United States so vulnerable to the virus and to Donald Trump's leadership. It focuses on fragmentation, inequality, and the disruptive president.

American Public Health: Fragmentation and Federal Leadership

Like everything in the United States public sector, communicable disease control is extremely fragmented. The United States has approximately 90,000 governments, of which approximately 18,000 have public health responsibilities. These latter range from mosquito control districts with a handful of staff to the state of California, with about 40 million inhabitants, to the federal government itself, with its approximately 4.5 million civilian and 1.3 million military employees. As the English constitutional theorist Walter Bagehot wrote in 1867:

The English constitution, in a word, is framed on the principle of choosing a single sovereign authority, and making it good: the American, upon the principle of having many sovereign authorities, and hoping that their multitude may atone for their inferiority.³

Local governments in the United States are even more multitudinous and inferior today than they were in 1867. American local and state government is optimized to minimize its costs, even while enabling a wide variety of rent-seeking, such as licensing and professional monopolies far more restrictive than the EU permits.⁴ They compete to offer services to voters and business at the lowest possible price. Many of them are frankly predatory, using police as revenue-generators through techniques such as large fines for minor infractions.⁵

³ W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1867.

⁴ M. Matthijs, C. Parsons, and C. Toenshoff, "Ever tighter union? Brexit, Grexit, and frustrated differentiation in the single market and Eurozone", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2019, pp. 209-230.

⁵ B. Atuahene, "Predatory Cities", *California Law Review*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2020, p.

There are virtues to this competitive system if the goal is to prevent excessive provision of public services (whatever that means outside a tendentious and formal economic model), though the whole logic is somewhat invalidated if their approach to balancing tax revenue and services is to escape the tradeoff by depending on predatory policing for revenue. But one thing is clear: the system is not set up for optimal local production of public goods. It is set up to provide public goods such as public health at the lowest level that allows society to function without negative political feedback, and will often err on the side of providing too little. Public goods, in the United States even more than in other federal countries, are best and most sustainably produced by the federal government.⁶

This dynamic is more important because so few parts of the United States health care system are actually built to provide public goods. As has been endlessly rehearsed by comparative studies, the United States health care system costs an enormous amount of money to produce outcomes that are average by international standards while leaving a large number of Americans with inadequate or no health insurance (the annual *Health at a Glance* publications of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development are a damning portrayal of the US health care system compared to its peers, as are the Commonwealth Fund's annual surveys). Private and nonprofit health care providers in the US respond to regulatory mandates, lawsuits, and payment systems. These highly imperfect tools are only part of the toolkit for health policymakers in most systems, but in the United States they are most of the toolkit. The underlying problem for the United States health care system is simple enough to see in comparative perspective: there is no effective monopsony purchaser of health care and there is no price-setting mechanism. Every other OECD health system

107.

⁶ S.L. Greer, "Comparative Federalism as If Policy Mattered", in S.L. Greer and H. Elliott (eds.), *Federalism and Social Policy: Patterns of Redistribution in 11 Democracies*, Ann Arbor, Mi, University of Michigan Press, 2019, p. 289.

has these and the endlessly fascinating differences between system types such as Bismarckian and Beveridgean systems are secondary to that basic structural fact.⁷ Combined with the lack of commitment to universal health care access, the result is a health care system focused on economic efficiency and revenue. Predictably enough, that focus meant that it lacked resilience in the pandemic, and that the pandemic threatened to leave key areas such as primary care seriously damaged by the lack of customers. That the United States faced a health care recession which threatened to devastate its rural and primary health care in the middle of a pandemic is a testament to the underlying perversities of its health policies and health care sector.

In such a system, some governments, even vile ones, will provide public health, whether as a service to citizen in urban areas such as New York⁸ or as a service to businesses that require stable and cheap labor.⁹ But tax competition, balanced budget rules which make states viciously procyclical,¹⁰ weak and declining transparency and media, and anti-government politicians all ensure underinvestment in even the biggest, most capable, and most progressive states. Most state and local policymakers will understand their incentives correctly, roll the dice, underinvest, and assume that there will be no public health crisis for which they can be held accountable.

As a result, the dominant theme of the development of public health in the United States has always been the role of the federal government. The federal government has the expertise

⁷ S.L. Greer, H. Jarman, and P.D. Donnelly. 2019. "Lessons for the United States From Single-Payer Systems", *American journal of public health*, vol. 109, pp. 1493-6; J. White, "The 2010 Us Health Care Reform: Approaching and Avoiding How Other Countries Finance Health Care", *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, vo. 8, 2013, pp. 289-315.

⁸ D.M. Fox, "Social policy and city politics: tuberculosis reporting in New York, 1889-1900", *Bull Hist Med*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1975, pp. 169-175.

⁹ J.C. Giesen, *Boll Weevil Blues: Cotton, Myth, and Power in the American South*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012.

¹⁰ S.L. Greer and P.D. Jacobson, "Health Policy and Federalism", *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2010, pp. 203-226.

and powers of suasion and leadership that can mobilize the rest of the US's weak public health system, adding crucial expertise and making the whole more than the sum of its parts. And above all, it has money.¹¹

Federal leadership has compelling advantages in the abstract (as we see in debates about what the EU, while respecting subsidiarity, can do better in public health).¹² It enables specialism- CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) employs experts in almost any known disease, and can rapidly create expertise in new ones. Smaller countries, such as even big EU member states, have difficulty justifying such investment (the solution is to work with universities, but that creates other complexities). It is efficient – there is no reason for any other single US government to employ scientists interested in topics such as coronaviruses. CDC can maintain staff and research all over the world; the calculus for a polity of ten million people such as North Carolina, Michigan, or Sweden would be different, and we would absolutely not expect a small polity like Wyoming, Vermont, Rhode Island, Cyprus, Malta or Estonia to do things like run a large research station in Indonesia. Size enables specialization and division of labor, which can be very helpful.

In the particular context of US federalism, where other governments' tax competition and politics lead them to invest as little as possible in public health, federal leadership and resources are necessary to provide public health when there is a public health emergency¹³ American local governments are,

¹¹ S.L. Greer and P.M. Singer, "The United States confronts Ebola: Suasion, executive action, and fragmentation", *Health Economics, Policy and Law*, 27 June 2016; D. Sledge, *Health Divided: Public Health and Individual Medicine in the Making of the Modern American State*, Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 2017.

¹² S.L. Greer and M. Mätzke, "Bacteria without Borders: Communicable Disease Politics in Europe", *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2012, pp. 887-915; C. Adolph, S.L. Greer, and E. Massard da Fonseca, "Allocation of authority in European health policy", *Soc. Sci. Med.*, vol. 75, no. 9, 2012, pp. 1595-1603.

¹³ P. Rocco, D. Béland, and A. Waddan, "Stuck in neutral? Federalism, policy

structurally, like people who are forced to build closely-packed houses out of flammable wood but enjoy a very good fire department. As Margitta Mätzke pointed out, the problem for them is that while the fire department can put out individual fires alone, in a real crisis everybody has to join the bucket brigade.¹⁴ The CDC can manage individual outbreaks well, but organizing a bucket brigade requires that everybody have buckets, strength, and leadership. Austerity policies driven by the Republican Party since 2010 had been undermining the fire department as well as that bucket brigade. State and local government finances never left the austerity of the financial crisis, the result has been a decade of declining expenditure on public health and related services and a loss of around a fifth of public health jobs between 2010 and 2020.

In short: the system was too dependent on a CDC that was dependent on competent federal leadership. The federal role depends on the ability to marshal the federal government. The United States executive branch is notoriously complex, filled with fiefdoms and agencies with their own political and legal accountabilities, and lines of authority on paper that have no relation to reality. To summarize a huge volume of research, the result is a system in which coordinated action is only possible if the White House wants it, whether through the established interagency mechanism of the National Security Council or an ad hoc “czar”.¹⁵ Trump’s National Security Advisor John Bolton abolished the pandemic preparedness function of the NSC that Obama had created. As a result, there was little central capacity to respond to health emergencies by 2020. Powerful components of the US government, from CDC, to the military and emergency management, were never really coordinated.

[instruments, and counter-cyclical responses to COVID-19 in the United States](#)”, *Policy and Society*, 24 June 2020, pp. 1-20.

¹⁴ M. Mätzke, “Institutional resources for communicable disease control in Europe: Diversity across time and place”, *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, pp. 967-976.

¹⁵ S.L. Greer and P.M. Singer (2016).

Thus, for example, it was immediately obvious that the inability of the Food and Drug Administration and the CDC to agree on procedures for testing in the crucial months of March and April reflected a failure of the White House to demand coordination. Given the way the Trump administration operates, a failure of coordination was a reasonable expectation, but evidence immediately started to build up that Trump was actively hindering response. Early in the pandemic, he made it clear that he opposed testing because it increased the numbers of reported cases.¹⁶ In June, he told a rally that “I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down’”,¹⁷ and when his communications staff said he was joking, he reaffirmed it: “I don’t kid ... By having more tests we find more cases”.¹⁸ The US federal failure could well have been a sin of commission, impeding testing. It clearly was responsible for the blatantly obvious sin of omission, omission to coordinate the federal bureaucracy in the way only the White House can do.

American Public Health Politics: Partisanship and Inequalities

What politics produced this public health system, in which the federal government rose up like a giant before the world despite its feet of clay at the local and state levels? The politics of public health in the United States reflects its institutions, discussed above, as well as the broader trends in its political economy and society that shape interests and party strategies.

There are two key relevant issues in the American political arena. The first is the extent of partisan polarization among

¹⁶ A. Rupar, “Trump seems to think there’d be no coronavirus if there was no testing. It doesn’t work like that”, *Vox*, 15 May 2020.

¹⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/21/coronavirus-live-updates-us/>

¹⁸ Q. Forgey, “‘I don’t kid’: Trump says he wasn’t joking about slowing coronavirus testing”, *Politico*, 23 June 2020.

elites and in the electorate. By any indicator, federal and state elected representatives of the two big political parties no longer overlap on many issues; the most-right-wing federal Democrat is to the left of the most left-wing Republican. American political parties, long known for ideological incoherence and transactional behavior, have achieved levels of legislative bloc voting and ideological decision-making that rival parties in European systems long known for their well-coordinated parliamentary blocks. Voters have taken the cue: to the extent that an American voter knows about politics, that voter is likely to be partisan and ideological. Voters who followed politics at all were more and more likely to have adopted coherent partisan views that reflected party elite politics.¹⁹ This polarization extended to the level of increasing reluctance to accept a child's decision to marry a partisan of the other party.²⁰ It was also asymmetrical; Republicans are a much more socially coherent and self-consciously ideological party.²¹ One result has been that Americans disposed to magical thinking, conspiracy theory and superstition, who used to be evenly distributed across the parties, have sorted into the Republican Party.²² Donald Trump accelerated this polarizing trend with his skill at inserting himself into issues. Trump is exceptionally good at turning disparate news items, from weather to sports, into stories about him and his preferred issues.

It is a commonplace of electoral studies that partisanship rests on cleavages, and a commonplace of American electoral studies that the key American electoral cleavage is to do with race. White superiority, religious fundamentalism, and patriarchy

¹⁹ A.I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*, London, Yale University Press, 2018.

²⁰ S. Iyengar, G. Sood, and Y. Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 3, Fall 2012, pp. 405-431.

²¹ M. Grossmann and D.A. Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016.

²² J.E. Oliver and T.J. Wood, *Enchanted America: How Intuition and Reason Divide Our Politics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

form a “trptych” of conservative beliefs that dominate the south and structure the Republican Party as a whole.²³ The United States shares with other societies shaped by slavery a particular kind of politics in which racial divisions are the key tool that elites use to block cross-class racial coalitions.²⁴ Combined with a partisan political media, notably the powerful role of the Murdoch-owned Fox News channel,²⁵ the result is that partisanship predicts attention to and understanding of public health issues.²⁶ It should be no surprise that partisanship predicted compliance with social distancing, that refusal to take public health precautions correlated with refusal to accept science on other issues such as global heating,²⁷ and that viewers of Murdoch’s Fox News network, especially specific hosts, were less likely to take public health precautions.²⁸

²³ A. Maxwell and T. Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

²⁴ A.W. Marx, *Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

²⁵ Y. Benkler, R. Faris, and H. Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

²⁶ S.L. Greer and P.M. Singer (2016); Idem, “Addressing Zika in the United States: Polarization, Fragmentation, and Public Health”, *Am J Public Health*, vol. 107, no. 6, 2017, pp. 861-862.

²⁷ A. Brzezinski, V. Kecht, D. Van Dijcke, and A.L. Wright, *Belief in science influences physical distancing in response to covid-19 lockdown policies*, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper, University of Chicago, no. 56, April 2020.

²⁸ L. Burszty, A. Rao, C. Roth, and D. Yanagizawa-Drott, *Misinformation during a pandemic*, Becker Friedman Institute for Economics Working Paper, University of Chicago, no. 44, June 2020.

Donald Trump: Denial and Distraction

Donald Trump made extensive welfare chauvinist claims during his campaign,²⁹ seeming at time to claim the largely unoccupied American political space of an advocate for an ethnically exclusionary but generous welfare state. In practice, though, he had a strong preference for focusing his symbolic and programmatic politics on his core issues of xenophobia and racism, such as brutal border enforcement and massive restrictions on visas for legal immigrants.

In this he was not unlike other politicians of the populist radical right, whether entire parties or individual politicians who draw on that political repertoire such as Boris Johnson.³⁰ It was entirely in character with the man, his political strategy, and his ethnonationalist party to simply declare victory over the virus and push to re-open the country without even masking or the pretense of physical distancing (e.g. holding a packed rally on 23 June in Phoenix, just when it was clear that Arizona's outbreak was completely out of control and its health systems close to collapse). Changing the topic to "LAW AND ORDER" (which he tweeted on 31 May and 6 June), immigration policy, and a putatively reviving economy would at least allow him to excite his base voters and shape the agenda in a way beneficial to him.

Trump came into office at a time when the presidentialism of the US had created an extremely powerful and autonomous executive that legislators had, for a variety of reasons, little interest in checking.³¹ The whole federal public health system

²⁹ M. Falkenbach and S.L. Greer, "Political parties matter: the impact of the populist radical right on health", *European Journal of Public Health*, vol. 28, suppl_3, 2018, pp. 15-18.

³⁰ M. Falkenbach and S.L. Greer, "Denial and Distraction: How the Populist Radical Right Responds to Covid-19 Comment on 'a Scoping Review of Prr Parties' Influence on Welfare Policy and Its Implication for Population Health in Europe'", *International journal of health policy and management*, 2020.

³¹ S.L. Greer, E.J. King, E. Massard da Fonseca, and A. Peralta-Santos, "The Comparative Politics of Covid-19: The Need to Understand Government Responses", *Global Public Health*, 2020, pp. 1-4; J.J. Linz and A. Valenzuela, *The*

depended on the leadership of the federal government; the federal government depended on the leadership of the White House; and the White House, unfortunately, depended on Donald Trump.

Daniel Drezner summarized the story of US public administration that led to this situation:

For decades, political architects in both major parties had worked at building the presidency into the most powerful position in the world. As polarization gripped Congress, the president was viewed as the last adult in the room. And then someone with the emotional maturity of a small child was elected to that office. Each of the guardrails checking presidential power had eroded before Trump was elected president. Under the 45th President, they have almost completely disappeared. As president, Donald Trump has acted like many toddlers: he is bad at building structures, but fantastic at making a complete mess of existing ones.³²

There are, as noted above, deeper issues in American politics and more impressive evolution. Without the increasingly obvious shift from a white majority, undemocratic institutions such as the unrepresentative Senate and Electoral College, extraordinary economic inequality that means political scientists debate whether the US is an oligarchy,³³ Republican jurists' decisions that exacerbate political inequality, the partisanship of Republican Senators, or the increasing focus on white identity of the Republican Party, Donald Trump would not have been in office by March 2020. But there are accidents in history as well, and Trump's showmanship and strategy of ethnic outbidding might have been the necessary condition to take over a Republican party uncomfortably stretched between racist appeals and other electoral pitches.

Failure of Presidential Democracy, vol. 1, Baltimore, Ma, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

³² D.W. Drezner, "Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency", *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 2, 2020, pp. 383-400.

³³ J.A. Winters, *Oligarchy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Summary: Before the Storm

As of January 2020, then, before storm, we could characterize public health politics in the United States as follows.

A fiercely competitive and often inept set of state and local governments were structurally inclined to underinvest in public health. Rather than change their overall incentives, the federal government built an impressive apparatus, especially CDC, to make up for their deficiencies. This was efficient and enabled American communicable disease control to run smoothly despite the meager resources state and local governments gave it. Federal leadership, normally through CDC, was the center of the system. Federal leadership, however, is difficult given the difficulty of coordinating the federal government. Coordinating the federal government requires an effective White House or National Security Council.

If the White House is ineffective or uninterested in solving the problem, then the federal government will not lead. If the federal government will not lead, then the system overall does not function. In particular, no other actor, whether state or local, public or private, has the money and staff or scientific resources to replace an incompetent or malign federal government. In principle, the federal response would be capable enough to compensate for the inequalities and perversities in the American health care sector and among its employers and state and local governments.

Debacle

Unfortunately, the president of the United States when Covid-19 hit was Donald Trump. Covid-19 and Donald Trump were both almost perfectly adapted to exploit the problems of American inequalities, American politics, and American public policy.

Inequalities

As sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom succinctly put it in March, “wealth is the vector”.³⁴ By late April, though, it was clear that pre-existing social, economic, racial and health inequalities would shape its effects on people and society. Once endemic in an area, Covid-19 quickly became a disaster for, poorer people and in particular people of color.³⁵

Morbidity and mortality were grotesquely disproportionate: by late June, CDC was reporting that Native Americans, Alaskan natives, and Blacks were approximately five times more likely to be hospitalized for Covid-19 than non-hispanic whites, and hispanics were four times more likely. Put another way, Blacks are 13% of the US population but as of the end of June 23% of the people who died of Covid-19 whose race was recorded were Black. Wisconsin is 6% Black but 27% of recorded deaths due to Covid-19 were Black people. Michigan is 14% Black, but 21% of the cases and 42% people whose deaths were attributed to Covid-19 were Black as of the end of May. Many of the states known for the worst health and other inequalities were not publishing data on Covid-19 that allowed us to understand the demographics of people with the disease and people who died from it. It is clear that much of the South had particularly bad outbreaks and mortality in black communities, e.g. in Georgia and Louisiana, but the states make it impossible to quantify the disparities. Some states, such as Georgia and Florida, were openly manipulating their statistics and presentations to minimize the scale of the outbreak; obviously, they were not going to furnish data on racial inequity.

The reasons why the pandemic was so devastating to people of color were no surprise to inequalities researchers.³⁶

³⁴ T. McMillan Cottom, “Wealth is the vector”, on Twitter, 2020.

³⁵ G.A. Millett et al., “Assessing Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Black Communities”, *Annals of Epidemiology*, 2020.

³⁶ Ibid.; and J.C. Phelan and B.G. Link, “Is Racism a Fundamental Cause of Inequalities in Health”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015, pp. 311-330.

First, race predicted exposure via the job market and living conditions. People of color were more likely to work in low-wage service sector jobs that demanded contact with the public. Many of these were deemed “essential” and continued during lockdowns, such as supermarket clerks or bus drivers. Many of them worked in health care, where tasks such as cleaning rooms were obviously dangerous. The agricultural workforce, including people employed in the country’s poorly regulated abattoirs, is disproportionately Latino and highly exposed.

In terms of risk factors for becoming sicker (e.g. requiring hospitalization), the same inequalities were at work. Residential segregation meant that exposure to a variety of contaminants was higher, which meant that risk factors such as asthma, shared housing, or lack of clean water were much more prevalent among Blacks, native Americans, and Latinos. Thus, for example, the shocking outbreak among the Navajo Nation in spring 2020 was partly due to extended and mutually supportive intergenerational families- exacerbated by the widespread lack of clean water supplies that even a cursory reading of American history would lead an observer to expect. Residents of the poor and mostly Black town of Flint, Michigan, still did not all have safe drinking water, and many others had been cut off from water for unpaid bills, which made it hard to obey calls for constant handwashing. As the Black Lives Matter movement has communicated clearly, racism in American society simply puts more daily stress on people of color and that translates into greater susceptibility to a wide range of health problems.³⁷ An uneventful interaction with police, for example, is much more stressful for Blacks than for whites.

Access to health care, then, is problematic. The United States has a long history of discrimination in health care provision that is by no means over. Nonwhite Americans are more likely to lack health insurance or stable health care providers. In rural

³⁷ A.D. Thames, M.R. Irwin, E.C. Breen, and S.W. Cole, “Experienced discrimination and racial differences in leukocyte gene expression”, *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, vol. 106, 2019, pp. 277-283.

areas, where health care infrastructure is increasingly poor, health systems lack capacity and are easily overwhelmed (e.g. with the early outbreak in majority-Black poor counties in southwestern Georgia). States that did not expand Medicaid have the worst health care access problems; they are also among the poorest, most unequal, and have large Black populations and highly racialized politics. A legacy of discrimination in health research and lack of Black health care providers also means many Blacks and many other people of color have less trust in health care providers.³⁸

The result was predictable enough: by mid-June, 31% of Black Americans surveyed reported that they knew somebody who had died of the virus, as against only 9% of whites.³⁹ In the lived experience of many well-off American whites, Covid-19 was simply not their problem, but lockdown and the economic slowdown were. It is unsurprising that Republican leaders, including ones who had initially defied Trump and taken strong measures, sped to undo lockdown and “reopen” their states even when epidemiological, public health, and health care infrastructure data all suggested it was a bad idea.⁴⁰ Scholars of public opinion will have an urgent and difficult research task working out how the burden of Covid-19 was understood by different voters, and how that fed into their views about appropriate responses.

³⁸ See for example M. Alsan and M. Wanamaker, “[Tuskegee and the Health of Black Men](#)”, Working Paper 22323, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017; S.M. Reverby, “Examining Tuskegee: The Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy”, *The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture*, 2009; H.A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present*, New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008.

³⁹ A. Goldmist and E. Guskin, “[Almost one-third of black Americans know someone who died of covid-19, survey shows](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 26 June 2020.

⁴⁰ B.D. Trump et al., “An analytical perspective on pandemic recovery”, *Health Security*, vol. 18, no. 3, June 2020.

Fragmentation

The simple axiom of American public health emergency management is that the system, to work, requires federal leadership while federal leadership, to work, requires White House leadership. If the White House refuses to lead, or cannot lead, then the federal government will not play the leading role written for it and state or local governments will have to figure it out as they go along. That is exactly what happened. The result was a federal Covid-19 plan that was quickly abandoned, the sidelining of CDC, a corrupt free-for-all in personal protective and medical equipment markets, and failure to take advantage of the months that the March-April lockdowns bought. The federal government did not just fail to coordinate and show leadership; it actively interfered with the efforts of state and private actors to do basic tasks like buy equipment.

This left it up to states. States, in US public health law, have the crucial “police power” to regulate behavior. It is states that can order businesses to close or people to wear masks. But despite their often impressive professionalism, state governments are also structurally without relevant resources. Much of their public health is Mätzke’s underfunded bucket brigade rather than the well funded federal fire brigade work. Many have gerrymandered electoral systems that mean that they have Republican legislative majorities despite large Democratic majorities in the popular vote (Wisconsin, Michigan). All, effectively, have balanced budget rules that mean they cannot run deficits; the result is that they are procyclical, and can neither spend to compensate for downturns nor even maintain existing programs in a downturn. State budget planners, faced with unprecedented revenue declines, were hardly able to rapidly build public health capacity.

Almost mathematically, devolving a function to states creates more divergence.⁴¹ Letting different jurisdictions do different

⁴¹ H. Kleider, PhD, “[Decentralization and the Welfare State: Territorial Disparities, Regional Governments and Political Parties](#)”, Department of Political Science,

things produces different outcomes, and to the extent that they must raise the revenue to do it, they will be more different still. By late March, governors and health systems began to realize that they would not have federal help, and began to suspect that the federal government was being used by the Trump White House for corrupt purposes.⁴² They responded by coordinating with each other (and areas of the federal government less affected by Trump, such as the military)- developing what amounted to small spontaneous confederacies.

In other words, the executive-federal system failed because the federal executive failed. The result is a complete failure to contain the virus, coupled with constant attempts to distract from the problem and corruption and incompetence in the response. Federalism produced a partial solution as under-resourced governors realized that they were on their own and began to exercise leadership. Federalism has a bad reputation in public health circles because it incentivizes egotism and makes coordination difficult, but in federations with dysfunctional executives, such as Brazil and the United States, it has allowed some public health leadership.⁴³ Predictably enough, though, partisanship rather than epidemiology, population health, or other factors drove state political decisions.⁴⁴

On the brighter side, the United States quite unexpectedly got the right ideas in social policy. Social and economic policy such as unemployment insurance and payroll subsidies (*kurzarbeit*) to employers are crucial to keep both businesses and people afloat in crisis. A hastily passed series of economic and social

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2015; S.L. Greer, “The politics of divergent policy”, in Idem (ed.), *Territory, Democracy, and Justice: Regionalism and Federalism in Western Democracies*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 157-174.

⁴² A.W. Artenstein, “In Pursuit of PPE”, *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 382, no. 18, 2020, p. e46.

⁴³ S.L. Greer et al. (2020).

⁴⁴ C. Adolph, K. Amano, B. Bang-Jensen, N. Fullman, and J. Wilkerson, “Pandemic Politics: Timing State-Level Social Distancing Responses to COVID-19”, *medRxiv*, 31 March 2020.

measures did just that, with a mixture of subsidies to industries (e.g. airlines), enhanced unemployment insurance, and flat payments to Americans. There are significant data problems at the time of writing, but it appears that spring 2020 saw both the most dramatic job losses in the history of American economic statistics- and a double-digit drop in poverty. While many Americans understandably focused on the enormous sums of money handed out by the Trump administration with no oversight or criteria (in defiance of the text of the law), the policies worked as a broad stimulus. Reducing poverty by a large margin in the context of an economic collapse on a scale known to no adult was impressive.

Partisanship

As many commentators had remarked, Trump was lucky in that most of the crises he faced were of his own making, and he could end them if he stopped making them. Regardless of the increasing challenges the US faced, the agenda-dominating issues of Trump's first three years were largely problems he created and extinguished as he chose. Covid-19 and the global economic shutdown were different. They exposed his and his party's fundamental unseriousness about public health or disasters, an unseriousness that was easily predictable by looking at the priorities of its key donors and voters. In the biggest disasters of his term before Covid-19, the hurricanes of 2017, his administration mainly distinguished itself for effectively ignoring Puerto Rico, with thousands of deaths and a migratory outflow as a result.⁴⁵

When Covid-19 hit, Trump pursued a base-focused strategy that research on the polarization of American politics suggested might work. Trump said, and made it clear, that he had slowed down testing in order to reduce Covid-19 test numbers. This

⁴⁵ C.E. Willison, P.M. Singer, M.S. Creary, and S.L. Greer. 2019. "Quantifying inequities in US federal response to hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico", *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 4, no. 1, e001191.

strange nominalism affected Republican policymakers in multiple state governments as well. They appeared to believe that policies to reduce positive Covid-19 tests would somehow be equivalent to having fewer sick people, that changing statistics on hospital usage would somehow affect hospitalizations (as in Florida), or that “reopening” strategies which forced laid-off employees back to work and off of unemployment insurance would obscure a nearly unprecedented depression. American voters today are stably and highly polarized by party, prone to motivated reasoning, and tend to interpret events in a manner that is both partisan⁴⁶ and myopic.⁴⁷ It is nonetheless very hard to imagine that a pandemic which kills tens of thousands of people a month, and double-digit unemployment in a country with a limited safety net, can be hidden by a redefinition of intensive care or the creation of administrative burdens on those who want tests.

Possible Futures

As of late June 2020, the United States probably has the world’s worst outbreak of Covid-19 and certainly has the worst outbreak in a rich country. Cases are rising in many of the states, and many major states have quite clearly and predictably lost control of the situation.

There is no reason to put much stock in the prediction of any analyst at this point. If there is a guideline, it is probably that an analyst who makes big predictions should not be trusted. The scale of the disease has no precedent in the last century of American history. The scale of the economic collapse has no precedent in the last ninety years of American history. The scale of the federal response has no precedent in the last ninety years

⁴⁶ L. Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*, Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 2018.

⁴⁷ L.M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008.

of American history. The President arguably has no precedent in American history.

In terms of public health, the United States had by late June suffered as many casualties as its armed forces saw in World War I (116,500 casualties). It seems highly unlikely that the US will adopt any policy trajectory before 2021 that avoids massive casualties. In late June, it was seeing a bit less than 600 Covid-attributable deaths a day, but since deaths lag infection by about a month the rising number of cases and test positivity rates suggest mortality will rise. In most countries, it is wise to avoid data about Covid attribution since it is subject to problems from limited testing and data problems and will tend to be an undercount. It is better, for scientific purposes, to focus on “excess mortality” which is simply the difference between the number of deaths on a given day and the number of deaths on average on that day in years past. Excess mortality data is robust (it is hard to hide dead bodies) but tends to be slow. It shows that the United States had about 122,300 excess deaths by 23 June 23 and the epidemic was out of control in much of the country.

The United States is therefore very likely to experience at least one September 11th (2,977 deaths) per week, and a Vietnam war (c. 58,000 dead) every few months for the rest of 2020. We simply do not know how American voters, however polarized and partisan they may be, will respond to that, any more than we could have known the impact of the Vietnam war in 1959.

Nor do we know which voters will face the consequences of the federal failure or will be seen to face those consequences. While wealth is the vector and structural racism the predictor of suffering to date, if risky behavior continues to become a badge of identity among conservative white people, their behavior might change the profile of the epidemic considerably. A pandemic that looks like a problem for people of color in Detroit, New Orleans, and New York- the situation in late spring- will have very different valence in American politics to a pandemic that is striking conservative suburban or rural

white populations precisely because of behavior such as unsafe churchgoing.

This means that the *duration* of the test the country is undergoing matters greatly. Enormous exertions in March, April, and May appeared to damp down the epidemic, leading to hasty and ill-advised re-openings and a surge of infections in southern and southwestern states with particularly bad health inequalities, particularly bad population health, and Republican governors. What will several more such rolling waves of infection and crisis do? Will the federal government respond with anything like the level of support for individuals and businesses that it initially did (or with the same, impressively large, opportunities for executive branch corruption)? Will Republican politicians continue to take their lead from Donald Trump or will they begin to hedge their bets as they see him founder? For example, they could revert to their behavior of March and April. In those months they had no clear partisan message on public health measures and their federal representatives voted for stupefyingly large federal aid to sustain the economy. American state and local governments, many of them led by Republicans, are seeing enormous budget shortfalls now and might see federal assistance as good for their own re-election prospects.

Major new federal economic assistance seems likely, but its direction will matter. What will it do for state and local governments? What will it do for precarious workers? Will it continue its generosity to the unemployed? When will American elites understand that the failure to contain the pandemic at all means that most of the live entertainment, bar, restaurant, travel, sports, higher education and other sectors will lose their economic viability unless given a long-term bailout of at least a year? And what will they do when they realize that? Interest rates on federal debt remain so low that the federal government could just keep these sectors in a medically induced coma for years. It could, but will it?

The federal government under Trump had, as of mid-June, placed all its bets on the technological solution of a vaccine. Having bungled essentially every element of pandemic response, the White House, in true American fashion, hoped that technology would help. Operation Warp Speed is an effort to test and distribute a vaccine faster than has ever happened-by the end of 2020. There are a number of seriously alarming issues. The first is that it might not work and there might not be a valid Warp Speed vaccine by the end of the year, in which case the abandonment of other public health measures by the federal government will condemn Americans to endemic disease and prolonged international isolation. The second is that the vaccine might work in some sense but might be dangerous. Until now, the fastest vaccine development had been the mumps vaccine, which took about four years. Vaccines can have unpredictable effects over time and people; they can interact with other issues to produce health problems in healthy people, they can have negative effects over time that short trials do not identify, and they can even make the illness worse for those who catch the virus. The purpose of clinical trials is to identify these problems-and send designers back to their labs if the problems cannot be remedied. That takes time; a side effect that takes time, or even infection, to arise might not be identified for a few years. A hasty trial could create public health problems on its own, and a hastily trialled vaccine that turned out later to have side effects could create serious public health problems once it was being widely distributed. These two major questions, which arise because of the haste with which the vaccine is being developed, will play into a third major issue, which is vaccine hesitancy. The United States, like much of the west, has problems of both vaccine hesitancy and a strange social movement opposed entirely to vaccines. Vaccine hesitancy might be especially high, and the opportunity for anti-vaccination groups especially big, if a vaccine is trialled or brought to market so quickly – still more since likely vaccines are made with synthetic biology

techniques whose public acceptance is far from clear.⁴⁸ There might be tremendous reticence or backlash. Even well-informed and generally pro-vaccination people with understanding of the science and statistics might choose to avoid a vaccine that was being administered with far less trial data than usual. If the Trump administration politicizes vaccines, it could easily increase vaccine reticence. Fourth, if a questionable vaccine is being distributed (even in the context of an immense “trial”), there will be huge political and ethical questions about who is obliged to get the vaccine. If white-collar workers are allowed to continue working from home, isolated and unvaccinated, while service workers are obliged to get the vaccine and keep working, both fears and any real problems with the vaccine will produce a political brew of rare toxicity. Fifth and finally, a vaccine-focused strategy with no public health component – which is where much of the US is headed – depends on the United States being able to buy and distribute the vaccine. There is simply no guarantee that the US will be able to do that. If a Chinese or European or other company develops the vaccine, or even if it is manufactured outside the US, the United States might find it is not at the front of the queue to buy hundreds of millions of doses. The loud egotism of the Trump administration might have made such an outcome more likely, but the incentives to national selfishness and power politics in this case are so immense⁴⁹ as to actually make it less likely that Trumpian boorishness does extra damage. In short, it is hardly surprising that the Trump administration has found itself betting on an extraordinary and high-risk technological feat or even giving the project a gauche name from 1970s science fiction. It would also be surprising if it were to work perfectly.

⁴⁸ S.L. Greer and B.D. Trump, “Regulation and regime: the comparative politics of adaptive regulation in synthetic biology”, *Policy Sciences*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2019, pp. 505-524; G.K. Gronvall, *Synthetic Biology: Safety, Security, and Promise*, UPMC Center for Health Security, 2016.

⁴⁹ M.M. Kavanagh et al., “Access to lifesaving medical resources for African countries: COVID-19 testing and response, ethics, and politics”, *The Lancet*, vol. 395, no. 10238, 2020, pp. 1735-1738.

Operation Warp Speed could change the development of the pandemic and its politics in many different ways, whether by saving us all or creating a new public health disaster, or it could simply fall by the wayside. There are too many imponderables to predict. It is not clear whether there will be anything like a free and fair nationwide election in November 2020. It is not clear what the reaction of the militant white nationalist right or Donald Trump to a Democratic victory would be. It is not clear what Donald Trump or his party would do were either voters or institutional dysfunction to grant him a second term (the Republican party considered re-using its 2016 platform for 2020 and then decided not to have a 2020 platform at all, instead asserting its loyalty to Trump). It is not clear what the responses of the many social movements aligned with the Democratic Party would be to a second Trump administration either. We just do not know enough about the disease, the economy, the voters, or the political actors to predict the overall outcome by the end of 2020, let alone 2021. What we can say is that the comprehensive failure of the federal government caused cascading failures in the first half of 2020 which have led to the United States' lethal and unpredictable situation.

Spare a thought for American citizens, finally. At each stage in this debacle, they have been let down. A system premised on federal leadership and good sense, which requires presidential leadership and good sense, was in the hands of Donald Trump. Trump's election reflected a series of failures by party elites and institutions that were supposed to block demagogues and ensure the will of the electorate and instead enabled a demagogue who had lost the popular vote by a large margin. The health care system was increasingly focused on profit and economic efficiency, which limited its resilience or the equity of its work. In a country that had increasingly focused power and autonomy in the federal executive, elite failures led to a situation in which a system that requires a grown-up in the White House confronted an enormous crisis with a toddler in charge.

PART II

THE US AND THE OTHERS

5. The Crisis of the US-Chinese Centered Globalization

Mario Del Pero

The relationship between the United States and China is the key interstate dynamic of the contemporary age. Both a product and, over time, a driver of the intense process of global integration, Sino-American multiple interdependencies have deepened over time, creating an unprecedented condition in modern international relations. Scholars have offered strikingly different, and sometimes antithetical, interpretations of this very exceptional relationship. This has in turn led to dissimilar predictions of what lies ahead. Forecasts have oscillated between two polarities that emphasize either the inescapable commonality of interests that Sino-American interdependencies have generated (the “Chimerica” model) or the inevitability of a conflict between the established hegemon (the United States) and a rising power (China) bound to challenge the US-centered world order (the “Thucydides Trap” sort of explanation).¹

The uniqueness of the relationship, and the lack of easily identifiable historical analogues, explain both the radicalism

¹ For some illustrative examples N. Ferguson and M. Schularick, “Chimerica and the Global Market Asset Boom”, *International Finance*, vol. 3, Winter 2007, pp. 215-239; A.L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, New York, Norton, 2011; G. Allison, *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape the Thucydides’s Trap?*, Boston & New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2017; D. Shambaugh (ed.), *China and the World*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 2020.

of these interpretations/predictions and the breadth of their range, which can oscillate from conflict and even war on the one extreme to collaboration and even convergence on the other. The key factors behind this uniqueness are of course the above-mentioned interdependencies. Outward and inward foreign direct investments, bilateral trade, the offshoring of key segments of US manufacturing to China, China's hoarding of US dollars and securities, cultural and academic exchanges: whichever historical parameter we adopt to measure and assess US-Chinese relations, it invariably reveals how deep, intense and inescapable their mutual dependence has become over the years. Such interdependence combines with the distribution of capabilities and resources in the international system. The United States and China are not just inextricably entangled one to the other, but also in a league of their own in terms of power and the ability to project it beyond their borders. Their combined GDP makes for more than 1/3 of the world total; their defense spending is, together, more than that of the rest of the world (38% in the case of the US; ca. 15% in the case of China); the two generate the highest quantity of CO₂ emissions, thus contributing more than any other country to polluting the environment and accelerating climate change.² Not unlike the early years of the Cold War, the current international system is somehow bipolar in the distribution of power and the privileges that ensue, although once again this bipolarism is very spurious and asymmetrical given the persistent, clear superiority of one pole (the United States) over the other (China). In the odd mix of collaboration and competition that characterizes the relationship between the US and China, the latter (and the lesser actor) is however capable of the contesting the leadership and the many quasi-imperial privileges of the former (the US), if not globally at least in the key strategic region of the

² The World Bank, *GDP (Current US\$) Data*, last accessed 15 July 2020; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Trends in World Military Expenditures 2019*, April 2020; The World Bank, *CO₂ Emissions (Metric Tons per Capita)*, last accessed 15 July 2020.

Asia-Pacific. Here, to add another element of peculiarity to this unique situation, we have witnessed the emergence of a dual hegemonic order, where the economic leadership of Beijing – epitomized by its investments in the area and the skyrocketing expansion of commercial exchanges with all the major countries of the region – has been matched by the reassertion of Washington’s security dominance, visible in the many bilateral and “minilateral” defense arrangements between the US and various Asia-Pacific states.³

In the competition vs. cooperation (or separation vs. convergence) interpretation and prediction, the pendulum appears in recent times to have clearly swung toward the former. Particularly in the United States, the thesis that the United States and China are naturally bound to collide has progressively gained ground and become the mantra of an array of different scholars, pundits and politicians. In 2016, Donald Trump ran on an explicit anti-China platform; in 2020 he has adopted the same playbook, trying to exploit the Covid-19 pandemic and the understandable irritation with Beijing for its mismanagement of the early phase of this global health crisis. Trump is both a product and a driver of this anti-Chinese pivot: he benefitted electorally from it and has been trying to ride and reinforce it, but its root causes long predates the unlikely political rise of the current President.

How do we explain the increasing popularity in the United States of this negative vision of China, which in some extreme manifestations can border on outright Sinophobia?

Four broad answers can be offered. The first is connected with the more general crisis of the US-China-centered globalized order of the last three decades. The financial crisis of 2007-08 and its reverberations were, in this regard, a key turning point.

³ G.J. Ikenberry, “Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China and the Middle States Strategies in East Asia”, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. XX, Spring 2016, pp. 9-43; H. Meijer, “Shaping China’s Rise: the Reordering of U.S. Alliances and Defense Partnerships in East Asia”, *International Politics*, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 166-184.

Until then, the common (albeit often contested) narrative was that the integration of China within the global liberal order was benefitting all the actors involved, beginning with the United States itself. This win-win situation was allegedly exemplified by the skyrocketing profits of US firms offshoring their production to China, the high returns of financial investments and – even more – the advantages for US consumers, who could absorb imported durable goods at diminishing prices (and therefore constant inflation) and continuously refinance their debts and mortgages thanks to this integrated global finance. Fueled by access to cheap and deregulated credit, the US “empire of consumption” – in the historian Charles Maier’s appropriate definition⁴ – drove global (and China’s) economic growth while offering to the US “citizens-consumers” a key social cushion in an age of increasing inequality, loss of decently paid industrial jobs and stagnant incomes, particularly for the middle class. Individual and household consumption, which peaked to unprecedented levels in the first years of the XXI century, could hide the heavy trade-offs that came with what many Americans would soon perceive as a sort of Faustian bargain: loss of manufacturing jobs (more than 5 million between 2001, when China joined the WTO-World Trade Organization, and 2009); increasing dependence on external lending (the foreign-held federal debt grew four times in the same period, with China leading the way and overcoming Japan as the main purchaser of US treasury securities); and a more general weakening of a middle class whose incomes were squeezed by trends that were rewarding the emerging middle classes of many developing countries while punishing those of the most advanced economies, the United States in particular.⁵

⁴ C.S. Maier, *Among Empires. American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2006.

⁵ Federal Reserve of ST. Louis – Economic Research (hereinafter FRED), *All Employees – Manufacturing*; Idem, *Federal Debt Held by Foreign and International Investors*; B. Milanovic, *Global Inequality. A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2016.

Those costs – second answer – were presented as even more intolerable given that globalization was not delivering what many liberals considered the inevitable by-product of the integration of China in the capitalist order: a progressive mellowing of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime and its ensuing transformation into a more open and democratic system. In this optimistic rendering, economic liberalization and opening would lead to political democratization and greater respect of civil and human rights. That was, for example, the argument used by many in the United States and elsewhere who supported China's admission to the WTO in spite of its abysmal human rights record. "Supporting China's entry into the WTO. ... is about more than our economic interests", – Bill Clinton famously argued in 2000 – "it is clearly in our larger national interest. It represents the most significant opportunity that we have had to create positive change in China since the 1970s".⁶ Positive change there certainly was, first and foremost in the rising living standards of millions of Chinese. But the democratic and liberal transition never took hold and under Xi Jinping a neo-authoritarian turn seems to have further strengthened the grip of the regime and its propensity to brutally repress any significant form of political or social dissent.

The third answer concerns the behavior of China in the international system. Beijing has often played by the rules, accepting US leadership (and Washington's ensuing entitlements) and playing a very responsible role, highlighted – for instance – by its contribution to the post-2008 economic recovery, the negotiations that led to the path-breaking accord on climate change signed in Paris in 2015 or the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program of the same year. But China has also unscrupulously exploited several features (and intrinsic loopholes) of the global order, with its flaunted disrespect for the respect of patents and intellectual rights, forced technology

⁶ B. Clinton, *Speech on China Trade Bill*, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, 8 March 2000.

transfers, domestic barriers and constrains to foreign investments, currency manipulation and unfair competition via state subsidies to its national economic “champions”. While occasionally contributing to the still partial and uneven structure of global governance, China has not invariably played the role of a “responsible stakeholder” of the international order, to use the controversial formula then-US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick first proposed in 2005.⁷ Donald Trump and many US conservatives have conveniently overlooked China’s contributions to global governance and stability (or frequent US unilateral actions and their effect on the legitimacy of the international order), while pointing the finger at its glaring violations of international norms and laws. In recent years, Europe has followed suit, adopting measures – such as a thorough vetting of Chinese foreign direct investments – aimed at limiting Beijing’s influence and punishing its behavior. The shift from a policy of engagement to one of partial containment has not been limited to the United States, in other words, although in the case of the EU it has been pursued with much less fanfare and without resorting to the rough anti-China rhetoric that has instead taken hold in the US.⁸

This leads us to the fourth and last point: the growing critical sentiment towards China in the United States. According to the most recent Gallup polls, 67% of Americans have now an unfavorable view of China, the highest percentage ever since this poll began, in the late 1970s, and 20 points above Trump’s inaugural day in January 2017.⁹ While Republicans are more negative, this unfavorable view of China is widespread among Democrats as well, and offers a rare display of bipartisanship, illustrative of how the opposition to China in today’s America appeals across the political board. The above-mentioned factors

⁷ R. Zoellick, *Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility*, National Committee on US-China Relations, New York, 21 September 2005.

⁸ T. Wright, *Europe Changes Its Mind on China*, The Brookings Institution, July 2020.

⁹ Gallup, *China*.

have certainly contributed to this shift in the attitude of the American public, and in the transformation of the view of China from a potential partner to an outright competitor. The negative view of China, however, is also indicative of the difficulty to accept a redefinition of the world power balance and the concomitant contestation of the many hegemonic privileges Washington has long enjoyed and exploited.

Trump's Moment

The Obama administration certainly acknowledged this new state of affairs. Its broadcasted desire to pivot its priorities to Asia was indicative of the redefinition of America's strategic priorities and geopolitical hierarchies. It also reflected a profound ambivalence, pivoting implying an activism that could verge towards either greater engagement or more intense competition. This ambivalence was visible in the mix of sticks and carrots the Obama administration displayed in its relations with China. On the one side, the effort to involve and integrate Beijing in the global liberal order proceeded unabated and even accelerated after 2009. The two giants attempted to coordinate their response to the economic crash of 2008. They negotiated a reform of the voting quotas at the IMF (International Monetary Fund) that recognized China's greater role and influence (agreed in 2010, it long stalled in the US Senate before being finally ratified in 2015). They signed a bilateral accord on CO2 emissions that ushered in the COP21 Paris Treaty. They found a *modus vivendi* on China's currency manipulation (with the renminbi further reevaluating *vis-à-vis* the dollar between 2009 and 2013). They collaborated on some important, and complicated, dossiers, beginning with Iran's nuclear program. Areas of confrontation, however, remained and the temptation for Washington to adopt a more belligerent posture and a rigid strategy of containment was always behind the corner. Obama continued the policy of George Bush Jr., bringing to the WTO courts various cases of China's egregious

violations of international norms while continuing to pursue those his predecessor had initiated. Traditional US security commitments in the Asia-Pacific were reasserted, and new ones were established including the decision – of high symbolic and political importance – to lift the ban on arms sales to Vietnam, inaugurating a military cooperation between the two former Cold War enemies that rapidly intensified in the following years. Finally, the Obama administration threw its full weight behind the adoption of a new trade agreement (Trans-Pacific Partnership, TPP), whose aim was also to reverse patterns that had increasingly positioned Beijing at the center of the regional trade routes.¹⁰

Meant to be the lynchpin of America's new Asia policy and the anchor of Obama's pivot to Asia, the TPP was finally aborted, a victim of the anti-free trade climate in the United States and of a widespread and politically heterogeneous opposition. Congress never ratified the agreement and one of Trump's first executive orders was to pull the US out of the treaty. The 45th President adopted a much more unambiguous anti-China (and China bashing) sort of approach. Both as a candidate and as a President, Trump has been unequivocal in his characterization of China as the main enemy of (and principal threat to) the United States. In this Trumpian (and conservative) narrative, China is: a) a strategic enemy that challenges America's allies and regional hegemony, thus menacing the security equilibria and broader stability in the Asia Pacific if not worldwide; b) a free-rider, and even a "robber-state", that steals technological secrets and violates intellectual and patent rights; c) a scavenger of the process of globalization, that exploits US naiveté and good faith, inundates the American market with low-quality goods, enjoys huge trade surpluses, and competes unfairly thanks to its artificially low currency, barriers to foreign investors, and State subsidies to its export oriented firms.

¹⁰ See the many essays in O. Turner and I. Parmar (eds.), *The United States in the Indo-Pacific. Obama's Legacy and the Trump Transition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020.

China “is killing us”, Trump claimed in June 2015 as he announced his decision to run for President.

They’re devaluing their currency to a level that you wouldn’t believe. It makes it impossible for our companies to compete ... we owe China \$1.3 trillion ... So they come in, they take our jobs, they take our money, and then they loan us back the money, and we pay them in interest, and then the dollar goes up so their deal’s even better.¹¹

This became one of the leitmotifs of his electoral campaign and, later, presidential rhetoric. For Trump, the relationship with China was, and had to be conceived, as naturally adversarial. In this Trumpian narrative, some easily measurable indicators – the trade deficit, the quantity of US treasury securities in Chinese hands, the loss of manufacturing jobs – were clearly showing who was winning (China) and who was losing (the United States) in this unfair competition. Five years after his 2015 announcement and approaching the end of his first term as President, Trump has yet to lower his ante and his anti-China rhetoric has possibly only intensified.

China’s pattern of misconduct is well known – he proclaimed in May 2020 –. For decades, they have ripped off the United States like no one has ever done before. Hundreds of billions of dollars a year were lost dealing with China, especially over the years during the prior administration. China raided our factories, offshored our jobs, gutted our industries, stole our intellectual property, and violated their commitments under the World Trade Organization.¹²

This representation of China and of the threat it poses to America’s security and well-being has somehow been embedded in the three key ideological features shaping Trump’s narrative

¹¹ “Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech”, *Time Magazine*, 16 June 2015.

¹² The White House, *Remarks by President Trump on Action Against China*, National Security and Defense, 30 May 2020.

and foreign-policy vision. For the sake of simplicity, we could define them as: 1) his hyper-nationalism, 2) his populism and 3) his ostentatious and crude realism. Nationalism often needs easily identifiable alien enemies, and Trump – both as a candidate and as a President – has provided plenty to the American public and to its electoral base, among them China, Mexico, Germany or even insufficiently patriotic domestic opponents with some foreign roots, real or imaginary. Trump’s populism thrives on the denunciation of the alleged decline of the United States – the “America carnage” to quote his inaugural speech¹³ – epitomized by the crime that, according to him, illegal immigrants have brought to the US or a de-industrialization fraudulently imposed through trade policies that have benefitted China and others to the detriment of the US citizens and the national interest. Here the populist element of this gloomy narrative is clearly visible in the link between the subordination of US interests to those of other countries and the alleged responsibilities of American liberal and cosmopolitan elites, both political and economic, acting out of unprincipled selfishness or patent naïveté.¹⁴ Finally, the crude and unprincipled realism is expressed in a very rough and zero-sum game understanding of world politics, where interstate relations are invariably contingent and transactional, one state can maximize its interests only to the detriment of another, and great power competition – in the specific case that between China and the United States – still rules the day and defines how foreign policy must be conducted.

While often expressed in a hyper-simplified (and simplistic) form, radical nationalist, populist and realist tropes have shaped and informed Trump’s presidential rhetoric. But in a more polished and articulated way, they have found their way also into some key strategic and foreign policy documents of the

¹³ The White House, *Inaugural Address*, 20 January 2017.

¹⁴ On the anti-elitism of Trump’s populism see for example P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Trump administration. In Trump's first (and for the moment only) National Security Strategy (NSS), issued in December 2017, China has constantly been presented (along with Russia and Iran) as an unequivocal competitor, intent on challenging "American power, influence and interests," and "attempting to erode American security and prosperity". In presenting China as an economic, political and military adversary, the document has denounced Beijing as a "revisionist" actor, whose basic aim is to expand its power and influence, inevitably reducing those of the United States. "A central continuity in history is the contest for power", the 2017 NSS proclaimed in the hyper-stylized realist opening of one of its sections. "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests", the document continued.

For decades, US policy was rooted in the belief that support for China's rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. China gathers and exploits data on an unrivaled scale and spreads features of its authoritarian system, including corruption and the use of surveillance. It is building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own. Its nuclear arsenal is growing and diversifying. Part of China's military modernization and economic expansion is due to its access to the U.S. innovation economy, including America's world-class universities.¹⁵

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) of the Pentagon has echoed many themes and rhetorical elements of the NSS. It presented China as "a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea". As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy", the documents maintained,

¹⁵ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (NSS), Washington D.C., 18 December 2017.

“it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future”. Along with Russia, the NDS concluded, China is “undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and ‘rules of the road’”.¹⁶

These various elements shaping a specific representation of China and the threat it poses to the United States have been summarized in the 16-page report – titled *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China* – the White House issued in May 2020. The report unequivocally describes China as an actor intent on exploiting the “the free and open rules-based” world order in the attempt to reshape the international system in its favor” and align it with the “interests and ideology” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). “The CCP’s expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world”, the document states. To address the challenge and respond to it, Washington is thus called to adopt “a competitive approach to the PRC, based on a clear-eyed assessment of the CCP’s intentions and actions, a reappraisal of the United States’ many strategic advantages and shortfalls, and a tolerance of greater bilateral friction”. “Guided by a return to principled realism”, the document concluded, “the United States is responding to the CCP’s direct challenge by acknowledging that we are in a strategic competition and protecting our interests appropriately”.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America. Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (NDS), 19 January 2018.

¹⁷ The White House, *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, Washington D.C., 26 May 2020.

Trump's Policies

How has this narrative and representation of China as an intrinsic competitor (if not the competitor) of the United States translated into policy? Concretely, what kind of actions has the Trump administration taken to wage this competition and regain the condition of superiority allegedly sacrificed by the prior administrations of Obama, Bush Jr. and Clinton?

For analytical convenience, we can break down Trump's China policy in three main realms: security, economics and politics.

In terms of security, the Trump administration has largely followed in the footsteps of its predecessor, strengthening and expanding the network of bilateral and “minilateral” alliances the US has in the region, and maintaining the commitments that ensue for Washington. Talks of disengagement or greater burden sharing (particularly with Japan and South Korea) notwithstanding, the United States has confirmed the five key bilateral partnerships of its traditional hub-and-spokes system with Australia, South Korea, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines, although the latter – under the mercurial leadership of Rodrigo Duterte – has taken preliminary actions to terminate the security tie to the United States. This reassertion of a traditional system of alliances has been complemented and integrated by the attempt to involve other actors and to expand the collaboration and links between the different partners of the United States. The objective, IR scholar Hugo Meijer has convincingly argued, has been to create a more permanent and steady “networked security architecture”,¹⁸ capable of containing the rise of China while at the same time cajoling Beijing to abandon its revisionist ambitions, and contribute to the preservation of stability and peace in the region. The case of Vietnam is highly illustrative of the first element of this strategy. The Trump administration has built on what Obama

¹⁸ H. Meijer (2020).

had already initiated, creating what in all regards is becoming a robust strategic partnership cemented by US expanding security assistance and joint training and exercises, which were all part of a three-year plan of action for defense coordination started in 2018. As for the second element – regional security integration and greater cooperation and capacity building efforts among the various regional allies of the US – the Trump administration has simply continued many of the programs activated under Obama: the ties between Japan and Vietnam, for example, have intensified and so have the attempts at greater security cooperation involving the different allies of the United States. India has also been involved in an approach, and a strategy, whose geopolitical framework has been changed and partially refocused toward the West. The Department of Defense 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, for example, while stressing the “revisionist” ambitions of Beijing and offering an anti-Chinese rhetoric not dissimilar from the previously mentioned strategic documents, has also affirmed the necessity of “promoting an increasingly networked region”, that also includes India.¹⁹

In the security realm, expanding bilateral partnerships in Asia and trying to link them together in a more organic and coherent network has been one element of Trump’s response to the Chinese challenge. The other was the attempt to pressure, with a mix of sticks and carrots, US allies in Europe and Latin America to steer away from constraining economic entanglements with Beijing. The Trump administration has promoted an intense public campaign against China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), the ambitious infrastructural plan aimed at deepening the connections and interdependencies between China, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The President and his second Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, have frequently characterized the BRI as an initiative aimed at strengthening China’s global clout and eroding the sovereignty and freedom

¹⁹ The Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Preparedness, Strategy, and Promoting a Networked Region*, 1 June 2019.

of action of the countries involved. Several allies of the US have fallen under the arrows of this critique, including Italy, whose decision to join the BRI was criticized by Pompeo. During a meeting with the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio, the Secretary of State urged for example the Italian ally “to see how China uses its economic power to cultivate political influence and erode sovereignty” relying on a “zero sum predatory approach to trade and investment”.²⁰

When it comes to economics, Trump’s policies with regard to China have been – at least on paper – relatively straightforward. If the problem, and the key indicator of America’s loser status, was the trade deficit, then measures had to be adopted to restore some sort of equilibrium primarily by reducing US imports. Trump acted quite erratically during his first year, alternating threats to China, praises of Xi Jinping and optimistic assessments of a possible deal between the two countries. In early 2018, however, he adopted a series of measures that unleashed a trade war between the two countries. A first series of tariffs were imposed on a variety of items – particularly steel and aluminum – hitting some key sectors of the bilateral trade between China and the US. It was the beginning of a tit-for-tat escalation of tariffs and counter-tariffs that lasted almost two years. China retaliated imposing a 25% tariff on a variety of American products, including some key agricultural exports and filing a first WTO complaint against US actions. Washington retorted and during the summer of 2018 tariffs were extended to a larger pool of Chinese goods, leading to another retaliation from Beijing. A partial truce was agreed at the end of 2018, temporarily freezing Trump’s decision to further raise tariffs (from 10 to 25%) on ca. 200 billion of Chinese imports. 2019 was marked by incessant negotiations, temporary (and soon aborted) agreements and an obvious toll on global trade as well as world’s supply chains. A new, partial

²⁰ “U.S.’s Pompeo Asks Italy to Be Wary of China’s ‘Predatory’ Moves”, *Reuters*, 2 October 2019.

armistice was finally reached at the beginning of 2020: a “phase-one deal”, as it was called, according to which the United States accepted to scrap tariffs due to take effect at the end of 2019, to cut by half (from 15 to 7.5%) previously adopted tariffs and to drop its designation of China as a currency manipulator. In exchange Beijing accepted to step up to 200 billion dollars its imports of US goods – manufactured, agricultural, energy and services (excluding services, Chinese imports from the United States had declined from ca. 130 billion dollars in 2017 to 106 billion in 2019).²¹

It’s difficult, and certainly premature, to assess the effect of this “phase one”, all the more so given the immense disruption on the global economy that the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked. But in the weeks and months following the accord, the two sides have taken steps to diffuse tensions and reign in the trade war, with China halving some of the tariffs it had imposed or granting various waivers and exemptions, and the United States reaffirming its commitment to meet its obligations.

The trade war has been tightly tied to the dispute over technology transfer and the Chinese violations of rights and patents. The most renown case was that of Huawei, the Chinese telecom giant that by going global has stoked fears it could act as a tool of Beijing’s foreign policy designs and threaten the security of the United States and its allies. Washington has imposed several restrictions to Huawei’s purchase of US products and, more generally, to its access to technologies first developed in the United States. But the case of Huawei has been just the tip of the iceberg: the most visible example of Trump’s desire to vet more thoroughly the access to (and acquisition of) US technology by Chinese firms and eventually block them.

Politics, finally. The Trump administration has ridden and exacerbated the fear of China and the hostility it drives in the United States. It has, for example, denounced Chinese

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Trade in Goods With China*. See the very useful dossier of the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), *US-China Trade War*, June-July 2020.

students as potential agents of the regime and thieves of US technological secrets and know-how. In early 2018, during a hearing of the Senate Foreign Intelligence Committee, the FBI director Christopher Wray criticized the “naïveté” of the academic world towards the threat posed by Chinese students and cultural investments. “One of the things we’re trying to do”, Wray explained “is view the China threat as not just a whole-of-government threat but a whole-of-society threat on their end, and I think it’s going to take a whole-of-society response by us”. During the same hearing, the Republican Senator, and former presidential candidate, Marco Rubio accused the Confucius Institutes – research centers funded by the Chinese government and located in various US academic institutions – as “complicit” in the “efforts to covertly influence public opinion and to teach half-truths designed to present Chinese history, government or official policy in the most favorable light”.²² Wray doubled down in the following months, frequently returning to the necessity of monitoring more thoroughly both Chinese students and the Confucius Institutes. In the Summer of 2018 Congress included in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act a provision that prohibited universities hosting in their campuses Confucius Institutes from receiving Pentagon funding for the teaching of Chinese. Of the one hundred Confucius Institutes in the US, almost thirty have decided to close including the oldest one, hosted at the University of Maryland, College Park.²³

²² Christopher Wray and Marco Rubio quoted in E. Redden, “[The Chinese Student Threat?](#)”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 February 2018.

²³ K. Fischer, “[Oldest Confucius Institute in the U.S. to Close](#)”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22 January 2020.

Conclusion

The case of the Chinese students and the Confucius Institutes is just one illustrative example among many of the widespread anti-China climate in the United States, and how the Trump administration has both exploited and contributed to intensify it. This climate has transformed the political conversation on China and led to a broad bipartisan support for a more confrontational stance *vis-à-vis* Beijing (a position that has only been reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic). “Strength is the only way to win with China”, argued Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader at the Senate, who in multiple occasions has praised Trump’s tariffs on China’s products.²⁴ This unlikely convergence between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, relies on the plurality of grievances the US has with China, which range from issues that are dear to the Right – security concerns, ideological enmity to the Communist regime in Beijing, denunciations of China’s unfair economic competition – to others, such as human rights violations, insufficient workers’ protection or hazardous environmental practices, to which the Left is more sensitive. Trump has been somehow successful in uniting and synthesizing these different elements, and has also relied on a distrust of China that has deep historical roots in the US and can sometimes degenerate into crude Sinophobia.²⁵

And this leads us back to the question we have posed at the beginning of this chapter: whether this confrontation is inevitable or the interdependencies tying the two sides still offer a powerful and indissoluble glue. Several data still point to the second interpretation. Despite all, Chinese students continue

²⁴ Chuck Schumer cited in J. Ganesh, “America’s Eerie Lack of Debate About China”, *The Financial Times*, 15 July 2020.

²⁵ P. Trubowitz and J. Seo, “The China Card: Playing Politics with Sino-American Relations”, *Political Sciences Quarterly*, vol. 2, Summer 2012, pp. 189-211; D. Wang, *The United States and China: a History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Lanham, Md., Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.

to flow to US universities, accounting for more than 1/3 of the total and actually seeing an increase in their total number from 2017-18 to 2018-19. Leaving aside 2020, for which the disruption caused by Covid-19 does not yet allow an assessment of the data, the impact of the trade wars between China and the United States has been undoubtedly significant, but less than could have been expected and feared. The US trade deficit with China broke new records in the first two years of the Trump presidency (375 and 418 billion dollars, respectively), before decreasing to US\$345 billion in 2019 – the year of the tariffs’ escalation – which is more or less the same deficit of Obama’s last year in power.²⁶

The US-centric “networked security architecture” in Asia (whether we want to call it Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific) is still in place. And the paradoxical interest of China in buttressing it, and somehow keeping the US involved, has not disappeared overnight. When we look at the economic and security drivers of the Sino-American relationship, we see that many interdependencies are still fully operational: that despite everything, some elements of “Chimerica” have not vanished.

And yet, we have surely entered a new phase. The long shadow of the 2008 crisis, and of what it has revealed of the US-China centered contemporary globalization, is still with us: its aftershocks continue to be felt and visible. When it comes to the United States, this is particularly true in the realm of politics. The benign view of a natural convergence of interests between the two XXI century giants – the win-win narrative of pre-2008 globalization – has been largely discredited. The intrinsic ambiguities and contradictions of this globalization have become more visible and felt. Along with them, it has finally been recognized that these processes of global integration have produced winners and losers within the United States itself, among the latter those sectors of the American middle class that in the last few decades have taken the brunt of the

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, *Trade With China...*, cit.

process of partial de-industrialization. In the current overheated and polarized political climate, it has become all too easy, and electorally rewarding, to shift from the old benign narrative to an equally simplistic and one-sided representation, which stresses the many negative outcomes of Sino-US relations for how they have evolved and developed in recent times. All the more so, given how politically expedient it can be to scapegoat an easy target – and a convenient enemy such as China – particularly in times of economic and social mayhem. A nuanced approach is obviously required to rethink an engagement on which rests any possibility to reform the fundamentals of world governance and global interdependence. The alternative, and the road many seem now to pursue beginning with Trump’s America, is the shift to a form of “tribal interdependence” unjust, precarious and – as many historical antecedents well indicate – immensely dangerous.²⁷

²⁷ J. Adelman, *The Globalization We Need*, Institute Montaigne, Paris, 26 May 2020.

6. The US and the Middle East in 2021: Disengagement or Re-engagement?

William F. Wechsler

Government leaders abroad are counting the days before the upcoming American election. Increasingly concerned by what they view as a dangerous president who has openly broken from traditional norms, they have begun to question the durability of the US-centric alliances on which they have come to depend.

US policy appears to be undergoing an ideological shift, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Middle East. Across this region the US has moved from being seen as the primary defender of the status quo to a key driver of regional volatility, and overall the situation appears significantly more dangerous than when the president first took office. The outcome of the elections could usher in a different president committed to reversing all of these trends. Expectations are extremely high that in short order US policy will be restored to one better aligned with the preferences of American allies.

But which election is being described? This is undoubtedly how many around the world today see the 2020 election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, confident in their predictions that President Trump's departure will quickly solve all problems. And yet, this is also how many saw the 2008 election between George W. Bush and Barack Obama. After the disastrous US invasion of Iraq, European excitement about President Bush's departure reached such peaks that President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize after doing little

more than take office. Furthermore, this is also how still others saw the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Concerned by a burgeoning rapprochement between the US and Iran, leaders in the Gulf and in Israel were so enthusiastic about President Obama's departure that they received Donald Trump like a conquering hero during his first trip abroad, even before he had made any real changes in policy.

Yet in both these previous cases, onlookers who focus on the Middle East found themselves eventually disappointed when reality did not conform to their desires. Contrary to the hopes of those who imagined a demilitarized US approach to the region, President Obama vastly expanded the use of drone strikes as a counterterrorism tool outside of areas of active hostilities.¹ And contrary to those who imagined that President Trump would offer a more predictable and traditionalist approach to American regional influence, he has proved to be highly unconventional and erratic. This record of overexcited expectations followed by growing disillusionment should be a lesson to those who are today making predictions about a potential Biden administration.

Indeed, the rest of the world generally tends to overestimate the likelihood of fundamental changes in US foreign policies after the inauguration of a new president, especially if the envisioned change is to their liking. Similarly, observers abroad tend to underestimate the underlying consistencies that drive US foreign policy, especially if those consistencies are painful to acknowledge.

In order to avoid repeating this mistake yet again, analysts of US policies toward the Middle East should begin by clearly identifying US national security interests in region, the core understandings that tend to drive the consistent elements of American policies across administrations. Then they should

¹ See Micah Zenko's summary of Obama-era drone strike data compiled by *New America*, the *Long War Journal* and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. M. Zenko, *Obama's Final Drone Strike Data*, Council on Foreign Relations, 20 January 2017.

attempt an honest assessment of the efforts made to protect those interests by the current administration and its immediate predecessors. And finally, they should understand the evolving local geopolitical realities that will constrain or facilitate US policy options. Only after reaching conclusions on these three subjects will observers be in a position to make better informed predictions and recommendations about future US foreign policies toward the region.

US National Security Interests in the Middle East

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no generally accepted framework within the US government for defining US national security interests, though academic studies have attempted to do so.² All US interests are not equal, of course, so it is useful to distinguish between them. *Existential* interests seek to establish and defend conditions that, if compromised, would likely imperil the existence of the United States government as we know it or the fundamental condition of the American people for generations to come, if not permanently. *Vital* interests are one step removed from existential interests. They involve conditions that, if compromised, would likely sharply diminish US security, Americans' well-being, or both, with enduring implications spanning a decade or more.

² The modern American discussion of this topic starts with Hans Morgenthau's 1948 book *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, A. Knopf. See also the 1996 and 2000 reports of the Commission on America's National Interests: G. Allison, D.K. Simes and J. Thomson, *America's National Interests: A Report From The Commission on America's National Interests, 1996*, Harvard Kennedy School. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 1996; Idem, *America's National Interests: A Report From The Commission on America's National Interests*, Harvard Kennedy School. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, July 2000. Also note A.G. Stolberg, "Crafting National Interests in the 21st Century" in J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr. (ed.), *Guide to National Security Issues, Volume II: National Security Policy and Strategy*, US Army War College, 2008.

Next are *important* interests which seek to prevent circumstances that would likely present material short- or intermediate-term negative consequences for US security, Americans' well-being, or both. The effect would be serious, but not as enduring as when vital interests are diminished. And finally, there are a wide range of *secondary* interests. These include clearly desirable international conditions that provide benefits to the US and its people but would not, if compromised, likely present material negative consequences for US security or Americans' well-being.

This framework can help further distinguish between the multiple US interests at stake in the wider Middle East. The most critical of these is the US interest in preventing the emergence of a foreign power in the region that has the capability and the will to threaten a catastrophic attack against the US homeland. Depending on the nature of that threat, this interest can be vital or even potentially existential to the US.

The most immediate such threats today are from Salafi jihadists terrorist organizations. History has shown that such organizations, unlike some other types of terrorist groups or more traditional state sponsors of terrorism, inevitably begin conducting external attacks once they have established a physical sanctuary from which they can operate with perceived impunity. US policy has thus been to deny these organizations that sanctuary by disrupting ongoing operations, rolling back the physical caliphate and other sanctuaries when established, and working to build the capacities of local partners to effectively combat such threats within their borders. Despite being inconsistently applied over the years, this policy has been generally successful and Salafi jihadists groups in the region today find sanctuaries difficult to establish and hold unmolested for lengthy periods. Given their weakened capacities at present, such groups do not now pose an existential threat to the US. But they do still pose a vital threat to the US given their sustained ideological appeal, continuing local operations, unrelenting global aspirations, and potential for rapid expansion of

capabilities – and the almost inevitable American overreaction that would follow another successful catastrophic domestic attack. That will remain the case as long as the underlying drivers of Sunni grievances endure, and the solutions offered by Salafi jihadists remain attractive to a substantial number of fighting-age men.

Terrorism is not the most serious long-term physical threat that could emerge from the region, however. American policymakers have long concluded that the US could be directly threatened if any of the inherently unstable states in this region came to possess nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems. More generally, US strategists have traditionally worked to ensure that no single entity could militarily dominate the wider Eurasian landmass, of which the Middle East is part, as such a continental power would intrinsically pose a direct military threat. The emergence of either of these scenarios would be considered an existential threat to the US.

Given the region's unique role as a global energy producer and the US military's dependence on oil in order to project power, American strategists have also long considered it essential – indeed, potentially existential – to maintain access to Gulf energy resources, especially when planning for various war scenarios. This dynamic is changing, however, due to important shifts in domestic energy production. From a defensive perspective, increasing North American oil and gas production and the growth of renewable energy have indeed gone a long way toward mitigating the strategic risk of a foreign adversary cutting off distant energy supply lines in wartime. Of course, being forced to shift rapidly to an economy based on energy autarky would be massively costly and inefficient, but that might be considered a price worth paying if the circumstances were dire enough.

During peacetime, however, the US economy still remains disproportionately affected by the global market price of energy, and that price is still overly driven by events in the Middle East. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

controls about four-fifths of the world's proven oil reserves, and about two-thirds of OPEC members are in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia remains the oil market's global swing producer, which allows it to either prevent unwelcome market volatility or force historic price shifts on the world, as it did earlier this year when Riyadh flexed its muscles in a dispute with Russia, which drove futures below zero.³ Moreover, although the effect is not nearly as deep and immediate as it was decades ago when the Arab oil embargo brought the US economy to its knees, a long-term increase in prices would still negatively affect growth and inflation, and a long-term decline in prices would still threaten the viability of domestic energy producers. These prices can also be affected by regional instability, as was demonstrated last year when Iran conducted a limited attack against Saudi energy infrastructure.⁴ In that case the attack was such that the damage could be repaired rapidly, but Tehran made its point clear. From an economic perspective, therefore, most observers believe that the US still has a vital national security interest in the free flow of regional energy resources.

Moreover, from an offensive military perspective, many American strategists still see a potentially existential national security interest in maintaining military control over the flow of energy through the two key geographic chokepoints in the region. As the US military dependency on regional energy is declining, the Chinese military dependency is growing as it has already built the largest navy in the world and plans to greatly expand its overall military capacities.⁵ And the Chinese economy is likewise dependent on global energy markets, as

³ M. DeCambre, "Oil plunges 25% and investors brace for a race to the bottom, as an all-out OPEC 'price war' erupts between Saudi Arabia and Russia", *MarketWatch*, 8 March 2020; N. Irwin, "What the Negative Price of Oil Is Telling Us", *The New York Times*, 21 April 2020.

⁴ "Oil prices soar after attack on Saudi facilities", BBC News, 17 September 2019.

⁵ P. Sonne, "China is ramping up nuclear and missile forces to rival U.S., Pentagon says", *The Washington Post*, 1 September 2020.

China is already the world's largest importer of oil.⁶ Just under one-tenth of total seaborne traded petroleum moves through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. About one-third of total global seaborne traded oil, one-quarter of global liquefied natural gas, and, in total, over a fifth of the entire world's global oil supply move through the narrow Strait of Hormuz. It is no accident that US military bases are positioned near these straits. And it will be no surprise when Chinese military planners conclude, contrary to the denials one hears today, that they will need to be able to project power into the Gulf to protect their own energy supplies.

American policymakers still remember the powerful impact of US restrictions on energy shipments to Japan in the early phases of the second World War. Given the policies adopted by Xi Jinping since he rose to power in Beijing, a growing consensus in Washington now holds that China presents a real threat to dominate the Eurasian landmass in the decades ahead and might thus directly pose an existential threat to US national security. Given this line of reasoning, the US would therefore want to maintain a regional military presence along these regional chokepoints. The dual objective would be to ensure that US forces could continue to safely transit from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Pacific unmolested in a time of war, and also to be able to threaten Chinese energy resources if the current dynamic of great power competition eventually shifts to one of great power confrontation.

Everyone hopes that this great power confrontation does not emerge, even as they are required to plan for it. Indeed, there are many reasons why it is reasonable to imagine that the US and China will successfully avoid this outcome. In the Middle East, for instance, both countries share the assessment that, given the region's underlying insecurity, important national security interests are served by promoting general stability and

⁶ US Energy Information Administration, *China*, International Energy data and Analysis, 14 May 2015.

growing economic prosperity. Both countries have developed extensive trade initiatives in the region, a dynamic that has the potential to offer as many opportunities for collaboration as it will raise points of contention. Nevertheless, a continued US military presence along the energy chokepoints is seen as a vital, and potentially existential, hedge against a future Chinese-dominated Eurasia.

More recently, however, the US has been reminded that significant threats to stability and security across the wider Middle East can have second-order effects that put other US national security interests at risk elsewhere in the world. For instance, large-scale Syrian and Libyan refugee movements negatively impacted European domestic politics, to the detriment of US interests on that continent.

Israel's continued wellbeing is also an important national security interest for the US, and given longstanding American promises and commitments, existential threats to Israel put vital US national security interests at risk and increase the likelihood that the US might become involved in a war not of its choosing. Given the regional resonance of the plight of the Palestinians, the US has also long believed that it has an important national security interest in pressing for a two-state solution. Because the continued existence of NATO serves to protect vital US national security interests in Europe, the US-Turkey relationship in the Middle East also needs to be managed effectively.

The US also maintains notable secondary national security interests in the region that are often exacerbated by the region's multiple interstate conflicts, sectarian and ethnic divisions, and authoritarian practices. These include US efforts to alleviate humanitarian crises, support social development, defend human rights, encourage religious tolerance, promote democratization and rule of law, and prosecute war crimes. These interests are "secondary" because they do not directly affect the US government or its people. But they are hardly unimportant. Indeed, the US has in the past gone to war because of such

“secondary” national security interests, including most recently in Libya.⁷

These fundamental US national security interests have not changed over the decades, though the context for their application in the Middle East changes with every generation. The effectiveness of US administrations in protecting those interests has also changed, especially recently.

Grading Trump and His Predecessors

Given the national security interests listed about, the US role in the region during the second half of the twentieth century was largely that of a classic status quo power. The United States has been repeatedly required to lead diplomatic efforts to resolve crises, deter local interstate aggression, and maintain the regional military balance of power. When successful, US diplomacy, backed by economic and military assistance, tended to result in agreements to withdraw forces, restore borders, and formally return to the status quo ante. Even when US military force was used it was generally limited to reinforcing the status quo, as when Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was reversed in 1991.

This bipartisan, relatively consistent approach toward the Middle East has changed under the last three American presidents. This departure began with President George W. Bush’s decision to launch an unnecessary war in Iraq. The stated goal was to overturn the regional status quo rather than reinforce it, the exact opposite of longstanding US policy. This fundamental policy error was compounded by the subsequent failures in execution. As a result, the Salafi jihadist threat in Iraq grew from a negligible presence to the central concern of US policymakers, and the initial American victory in Afghanistan was left unsecured. After the US eliminated Iranian adversaries to its east and west, the door was open for Tehran to expand its malign influence. Both the region and US interests were left less secure.

⁷ “Responsibility to protect: the lessons of Libya”, *The Economist*, 19 May 2011.

President Obama opposed the war in Iraq but ended up compounding his predecessor's failures rather than reversing them. US forces were withdrawn from Iraq without allowing for a continued counterterrorism presence. After calling for President Bashar al-Assad departure, the US refused to engage in Syria which allowed for the country to collapse into a civil war. The predictable result from both of these actions was the reemergence of the Salafi jihadist threat, this time in the form of a physical caliphate declared by the Islamic State. Into the power vacuum left in Syria stepped Iran, which was allowed to expand its influence yet further. Iran was joined by a Russian return to the region, an outcome that the US had previously worked for decades to prevent. Yemen was viewed entirely through a counterterrorism lens, and then fell to an insurgency, which received growing support from Iran. And a military action intended to prevent genocide in Libya ended in regime change, which in turn resulted in a failed state whose chaos was a destabilizing factor across much of North Africa and the Sahel. The refugee flows from both Syria and Libya into Europe contributed to a worrying rise in right-wing populism there. The nuclear agreement with Iran was certainly a laudable attempt to address one of the most pressing US national security interests. But was concluded at the cost of US relations with its Gulf partners and Israel, which did not share the US assessment of the agreement's efficacy.

With only half the tenure in office as his two immediate predecessors, President Trump has already outdone them both in the damage done to US regional interests. Many regional observers have catalogued his routine inconsistencies and inaccuracies, have seen that he has overseen a historically dysfunctional decision-making process, and have noted that he has cycled through an extraordinary number of advisors that have offered widely differing advice. From this they have concluded that he lacks any coherent regional strategy. And yet, despite this, four continuities have emerged regarding the Trump administration's approach toward the Middle East.

First, President Trump is almost entirely tactically focused rather than strategic, and those tactics tend to be driven by a transactional view of diplomacy focused on trade deals and arms sales. Bilateral relations take precedence over multilateral considerations, and concerns are routinely dismissed regarding established American principles, settled international law, or even domestic legal authorities. He is therefore naturally attracted to counterparts who share this outlook, especially those authoritarian leaders who have personal or positional access to extremely large amounts of money. To pick just one example of many, this approach was evident in the still remarkable official White House statement on the murder of US resident Jamal Khashoggi, sections of which could only have been personally dictated by the President. After highlighting the amounts of money Saudi Arabia had committed to spend in the US, President Trump's conclusion about the personal culpability of the crown prince was a dismissive, "maybe he did and maybe he didn't!"⁸

Second, far more so than his predecessors, President Trump sees his policies toward the region as a function of his personal political interests. He wants to project an image of masculine strength that aligns with what he understands to be bold military action, unconstrained by legal or ethical niceties. He has exhibited unusual contempt for his immediate predecessor and is readily inclined to adopt a policy if it can be presented as reversing an Obama initiative. Sometimes these two political factors align and are supported throughout his administration, as they were when President Trump removed Obama-era constraints on military operations against the Islamic State and when he decided to strike Syrian forces in retaliation for a use of chemical weapons, something Obama earlier refused to do. Sometimes his desire to oppose an Obama policy led him to overrule a consensus reached by his top advisors, as was the case

⁸ The White House, *Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia*, Washington D.C., 20 November 2018.

when he withdrew the US from the nuclear agreement with Iran. And sometimes his desire to look strong in the face of sustained domestic criticism led him to surprise his advisors altogether, as was the case when he chose to kill Iranian military leader Qasem Soleimani in the wake of a previously unanswered series of Iranian-directed violence in Iraq and the Gulf.

President Obama left office barely on speaking terms with the leaders of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. So it was unsurprising when President Trump broke with precedent and took his first trip abroad to visit these countries, and then quickly adopted their agendas as his own. He gave a green light to UAE and Saudi actions against Qatar, announced only two weeks after the summit in Riyadh, notwithstanding the existence of the largest US military base in the region outside of Doha. Following his meetings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, he adopted policies toward Israel designed to appeal to its right-wing governing coalition and to encourage an imagined “jexodus” of Jewish votes from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. This involved “changing the paradigm” of peacemaking by marginalizing the Palestinians, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and asserting that the “establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not per se inconsistent with international law”.⁹ The resulting American peace proposal was predictably a nonstarter, however. Equally predictably, such a one-sided approach encouraged the Israeli government to actively consider unilateral annexation, an action that would have ended any prospects for a two-state solution.

In the end unilateral annexation was too extreme a step for even the Trump administration to openly support, and previous promises of a “deal of the century” between Israel and the Palestinians ended in failure. However, the UAE correctly recognized that the continuing prospect of a unilateral Israeli

⁹ L. Jakes and D.M. Halbfinger, “In Shift, U.S. Says Israeli Settlements in West Bank Do Not Violate International Law”, *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2019.

annexation would undo the quiet diplomacy that had been underway for years between the two states, and instead offered a full normalization of relations in return for the shelving of such plans. Bahrain closely followed with its own offer of normalization. This development was not the original intent of the Trump administration's approach, but it did quickly grasp the opportunity and the resulting announcement of the "Abraham Accords" today stands as the only positive strategic accomplishment in the Middle East on Trump's watch.

The most important factor undergirding the normalization between the UAE and Israel is their common assessment of the threat from Iran. Both initially were strong supporters of President Trump's "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign, despite the lack of clarity as to its desired ends. Even with the Trump administration some officials sought a return to negotiations to strike a "better" nuclear deal, some set their aspirations lower at merely increasing the cost of Iranian malign behavior, and still others set their aspirations quite higher at regime change. To the degree that the sanctions were structured to achieve any specific strategic end – other than positioning the Trump administration politically as being tough on Iran rather than "weak like Obama" – their design encouraged observers in Iran and elsewhere to believe that the true objective was regime change. If the goal had ever been to renew negotiations – ironically the option that President Trump may have actually preferred – then the policy has indisputably been a failure to date.

Meanwhile, the Arab Gulf states eventually saw that the Trump administration had no military plans for dealing with anticipatable Iranian attempts to answer the US "maximum pressure" campaign with their own "maximum resistance" campaign. When Iran shot down an American aircraft and Trump called off a poorly designed retaliatory attack on Iranian territory, Gulf leaders were left to consider which was the worse outcome: an emboldened Iran that faced no consequences, or a war precipitously launched by the US with them left on the

front lines. These fears continued as Iran attacked shipping, armed the Houthis in Yemen to shoot rockets at Riyadh, and eventually attacked Saudi Arabia directly. The result was a quick pivot to call for de-escalation of the forces that the “maximum pressure” campaign had unleashed.¹⁰

Third, President Trump has consistently and publicly argued that his overall objective in the region is to “stop the endless wars”. To demonstrate this commitment, he has announced withdrawals of substantial numbers of US forces from Afghanistan and Iraq.¹¹ Of course, the timing of these actions has been unabashedly aligned to the US presidential election calendar rather than following the “conditions-based” approach that was previously promised. His decision to abandon our brothers-in-arms in Syria after a call with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has further strengthened our adversaries in Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus, has encouraged Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations, and risks allowing the Salafi Jihadists to rebound once again.

Perhaps even more worrisome over the long run, he has broken from the longstanding bedrock of American regional policy by publicly questioning whether the United States should continue its central role in protecting the freedom of navigation. His views on this question have been as consistent and open as they are unprecedented and troubling. Even when announcing the “Abraham Accords” from the Oval Office, President Trump again called for the effective withdrawal of that US commitment. “We don’t have to be there anymore. We don’t need oil”, Trump took the moment to explain. “It started off when we had to be there, but as of a few years ago, we don’t have to be there. We don’t have to be patrolling the

¹⁰ F. Fassihi and B. Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War”, *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019.

¹¹ T. Gibbons-Neff, “More US Troops Will Leave Afghanistan Before the Election, Trump Says”, *The New York Times*, 4 August 2020; D. Riechmann, “Trump reaffirms plan to withdraw all US troops from Iraq”, *Associated Press*, 20 August 2020.

straits. We're doing things that other countries wouldn't do. But we put ourselves, over the last few years, in a position where we no longer have to be in areas that, at one point, were vital. And that's a big statement".¹² Indeed, it is. And nothing is a greater threat to US interests or more welcome in Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow.

This leads us to the fourth and final continuity that has emerged in the Trump administration's approach toward the Middle East. Against the advice of virtually all of his advisors, and to a degree that remains fundamentally mysterious, President Trump is personally, inexplicably accepting of Russian behavior in the Middle East and elsewhere. One would imagine that President Trump might oppose the reintroduction of Russian power into the region if only because it was a consequence of President Obama's policy choices. But rather than oppose Russia he has actively abetted its presence in Syria. He has overruled his own administration's experts on Libya by encouraging the insurgent leader attacking the internationally recognized government with the support of Russian mercenaries.¹³ He has denied his own military and intelligence assessments that Russia offered bounties to Afghans who kill American troops.¹⁴ And he was silent most recently when Russian forces in Syria directly harassed American forces.¹⁵

If President Trump loses his reelection in November, he will have left behind a region in which many core US national security interests are at higher risk than when he first took office. The risk of an Iranian nuclear program is higher and Iranian malign activities have reached levels not seen in decades. Great

¹² The White House, *Remarks by President Trump Announcing the Normalization of Relations Between Israel and the United Arab Emirates*, Washington D.C., 13 August 2020.

¹³ S. Holland, "White House says Trump spoke to Libyan commander Haftar on Monday", *Reuters*, 19 April 2019.

¹⁴ C. Savage, M.I. Crowley, and E. Schmitt, "Trump Says He Did Not Ask Putin About Suspected Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops", *The New York Times*, 29 July 2020.

¹⁵ E. Schmitt, "US Troops Injured in Syria After Collision With Russian Vehicles", *The New York Times*, 1 September 2020.

powers with the potential to dominate the Eurasian landmass, both Russia and China, have seen their power and influence expand in comparison with the US. American withdrawal in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan risks allowing Salafi jihadists to regroup, once again. The region overall is less stable, and the production of energy and its free navigation through key straits are both less secure. If Trump is reelected, we can expect these trends to continue until the end of his second term.

Whether a different American president takes office in January 2021 or January 2025, it will take time and concerted effort to reverse these dynamics after Trump's departure. It is hard to imagine any future American president of either party sharing Trump's personal need to acquiesce to Russia, his transactional and commercial form of diplomacy, or his deeply politicized approach to US policies toward the Middle East. But Trump's call for withdrawing the US from the region is likely to resonate with the American public well beyond his tenure. As they seek to protect US interests, a post-Trump American president will likely have to manage through continuing pressures to withdraw. But the first step will be to understand the new geopolitical dynamics at play in today's Middle East.

Tomorrow's Middle East

As I've previously described at length for a joint ISPI-Atlantic Council volume, the single factor that explains the most about the emerging geopolitics of the Middle East is the widespread perception of coming American withdrawal.¹⁶ Despite the unequalled US presence and power projection in the region, foreign allied and adversaries alike can read American polls. They certainly listen to statements that are made on the campaign trail from both parties which have stressed, nearly universally

¹⁶ W.F. Wechsler, "US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality", in K. Mezran and A. Varvelli (eds.), *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, Milan, Ledizioni LediPublishing-ISPI, 2019.

over at least the last twenty years, that politicians want the US to do less in the Middle East, not more. More importantly, they are living through the third consecutive American President who has deviated from the traditional US role as a status quo power. As they see daily evidence of the deep dysfunction of US politics and the growing cleavages in American society, they can't help but wonder how much longer the US will be capable of international leadership. They are already preparing for this future.

As a result, we are witnessing the birth of a new geopolitical order in the Middle East. It is one far less stable than the one to which we have become accustomed, with a larger number of actors and a more uncertain future. But the contours of this order are now coming into focus.

China is an ever-present economic engine for all, a key trading partner for most, and an indispensable consumer of energy for some. But it is not yet a major player in the region's evolving geopolitics. As noted earlier, it will almost undoubtedly develop into such a player in the decades ahead as a growing Chinese navy seeks to protect its energy lifelines. A precipitous American withdrawal would accelerate this process. However, for now, at least, China comfortably remains removed from the region's internal politics and continues free riding off of the continuing US security guarantees.

In contrast, three other non-Arab powers – Iran, Turkey and Russia – are already positioning themselves to step into the vacuum that the US would leave behind if it withdraws. Of these, Iran is the furthest along at expanding its power in the region and presents the most immediate challenge to longstanding US interests. Iran conducts continuous undisguised operations alongside proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. It works diligently to prevent the emergence of the kind of stable and legitimate governments in those countries that might threaten Iranian influence. Uniquely among regional powers, Iran routinely provides its proxies with rockets, missiles, drones and other advanced precision weapons, and provides them with

operational training, advice and assistance so those proxies can target civilians, including across borders. Iran has successfully made such operations appear commonplace, despite their truly egregious nature, and thus has generally been able to avoid global condemnation.

Iran also is reported to conduct an extensive program of covert and clandestine operations, especially among Shiite populations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. Iran's proxy and threat networks, including their cyber and disinformation capabilities, extend far outside of the region as well, including into the United States.¹⁷ And as we have seen demonstrated over the last two years, Iran is also willing to take direct military action to target its regional allies and their interests, often sheathed in the flimsiest of deniability to help hedge against escalation. It is the most direct threat to the US interest of protecting freedom of navigation. The targeted killing of Soleimani has likely made Iran less willing to directly and openly threaten the lives of Americans, though it continues to work toward its overall goal of driving the US from the region.

Iran is the uneasy inheritor of the legacy of the Persian Empire, which was a regional hegemon for centuries. But despite its ambitions, today's Iran is inherently constrained by the sectarian nature of its revolutionary regime, which limits its appeal to the Sunnis that constitute a clear majority across the region. Nevertheless, Iran presents itself as the champion for all Muslims, and will certainly seek to continue expanding its power in the event of a US withdrawal.

Turkey is the other inheritor of a history of regional hegemony, in this case the Ottoman Empire, but is not at all uneasy about the legacy. President Erdogan came to office on an Islamist platform and is increasingly presenting Turkey, and consequently himself, as the natural leader of the region's Muslims, and in particular Sunnis. Shaking off its more recent

¹⁷ M. Levitt, "Hezbollah Isn't Just in Beirut. It's in New York, Too", *Foreign Policy*, 14 June 2019.

Kemalist secular traditions, Turkey under Erdogan has jettisoned its prior relationship with Israel and aligned itself instead with the Muslim Brotherhood. In a manner inconceivable not very long ago, Turkey has become an active and mainly unhelpful regional power from the perspective of US interests. To be clear, Turkey is not a US adversary and indeed is a formal ally of the US through NATO and a valued host of a key regional US air base. But Turkish actions as of late have repeatedly strained bilateral relations, which might have hit their nadir when Ankara decided to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system.

Turkey has undertaken generally effective, and at times decisive, military operations in Syria against the axis of Assad, Russia and Iran, and also Kurdish forces it deems terrorists; in Iraq against the Kurds as well; and in Libya in defense of the government and against an insurgency backed by Russia, Egypt and the UAE. It has positioned military forces in Qatar, which shares Turkey's view of the Muslim Brotherhood, and is diplomatically and economically engaged in Yemen, Somalia and Sudan.¹⁸ Turkey has arranged to be paid billions in order to prevent additional Syrian refugees from traveling to European Union nations, a dynamic that also encouraged EU members to moderate their criticism of Turkish misbehavior.¹⁹ And it aims to become a major player in the competition for Eastern Mediterranean energy resources, even if that requires increasing military tensions with Greece and challenging established legal conclusions.²⁰

Russia's interests in the Middle East do not align with US interests. It wants to maximize its own energy revenues rather than work to keep production and prices stable, to sell its

¹⁸ "Turkey is wielding influence all over the Arab world", *The Economist*, 1 August 2020.

¹⁹ L. Pitel and M. Peel, "Turkey eyes more EU aid as funding pays off for Syrian refugees", *Financial Times*, 21 January 2020.

²⁰ M. Tanchum, "How Did the Eastern Mediterranean Become the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm?", *Foreign Policy*, 18 August 2020.

advanced weapons and air defense systems which pose an immediate threat to US military in the area, to establish a greater military presence in the Mediterranean which would threaten NATO, and has benefited immensely from the chaos in Syria and Libya. The Carter Doctrine that still underpins US policy was designed to prevent Soviet encroachment on the Gulf after its invasion of Afghanistan as much as it was a reaction to the Iranian revolution. One of the great accomplishments of US foreign policy in the last quarter of the twentieth century was expelling Russia from playing a meaningful role in the Middle East. And yet Russia is now back.

Russia has played a generally weak hand especially well over the last five years, since its intervention in the Syrian civil war. Despite US predictions that Russia would find itself suck in a “quagmire”, Russian involvement remained focused on air operations in support of Syrian and Iranian militaries and their proxies. Those operations were generally successful at achieving their military objectives, including expanding Russian basing on the Mediterranean.²¹ Russian diplomats have also leveraged this military success to position themselves as indispensable to any eventual diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war. Moreover, through this process Russia has greatly improved its relations with Israel and Turkey, both longstanding US allies. From a Russian cost-benefit perspective, this was as successful a foreign policy as could have been imagined at the outset. And more recently Russia has attempted a similarly low-risk, high-reward intervention by sending its ostensibly commercial mercenary forces to fight on the same side of the Libyan civil war as the UAE and Egypt, also countries with deep ties to the US.

Just a few decades ago, any non-Arab powers who sought to gain influence in the region would have to contend with the traditional Arab leaders in Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. These leaders jockeyed for power among themselves, directed

²¹ L. Sly, “No sign of Obama’s predicted ‘quagmire’ as Russia’s engagement in Syria escalates”, *The Washington Post*, 30 September 2016.

significant military forces, regularly received foreign dignitaries, were sought out by global media, held the attention of the proverbial Arab Street, and threatened their weaker Arab neighbors. Today these traditional Arab powers are a shadow of their former selves. Egypt, with a population that hit 100 million this year, was confronting a structurally unsound economy and dire economic projections even before the pandemic.²² While the civil war is not done in Syria, it's clear that the Assad regime has won. But Assad is a war criminal and pariah, dependent on Iran and with no plausible chance to secure the US\$400 billion needed for reconstruction. Meanwhile, seventeen years after the US toppled Saddam Hussein, Iraq is still deeply unstable and at risk of an Iranian-backed "Lebanonization" of its politics. Given the current state of Lebanon and its deeply dysfunctional political class, this is not a positive trend. Today these three traditional Arab powers are closer to becoming failed states than they are to being in a position to offer regional leadership.

What remains left in the region to counter the non-Arab powers is an emerging new coalition of Gulf states and Israel. These countries feel directly threatened by Iran and indirectly threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood movement and its Turkish supporters. They would prefer to rely on their traditional bilateral relationships with the US for their security requirements but are hedging for an uncertain future by developing new relationships with China, which they don't know, and Russia, which they don't trust. This Israel-Gulf relationship is straightforward from a security and economic perspective but complicated from a cultural perspective. Given the continuing resonance of the Palestinian cause among most Arabs, Gulf leaders have been forced to develop their relationships with Israel in secrecy. The new "Abraham Accords" between the UAE, Bahrain and Israel are a giant step forward in bringing these relationships out in the open where they might

²² D. Walsh, "[As Egypt's Population Hits 100 Million, Celebration Is Muted](#)", *The New York Times*, 11 February 2020.

further flourish, but it remains to be seen how and when other Gulf countries might follow, Saudi Arabia most importantly. And the coalition needs to grow further if it is to be in a position to counter the expanding influence of non-Arab powers in the region – especially if the US decides to withdraw.

Today's Choice: Disengagement or Re-engagement?

Should he be reelected, President Trump would be increasingly unconstrained by his advisors to adopt his preferred policies toward the Middle East. And he has been very clear that he personally desires a complete withdrawal – from Iraq, from Syria, from Afghanistan and from securing navigation through Hormuz and the Bab. Last year I concluded that the only certainty about the prospect of US withdrawal was that President Trump has proven to be both incapable of and unwilling to prevent it.²³ Everything that has happened since only reaffirms this conclusion.

During the primary season no major Democratic candidate had especially good things to say about the Middle East and all were critical of Saudi Arabia. Few went as far as one candidate who declared that “I think that we ought to get out of the Middle East. I don’t think we should have troops in the Middle East”. While that statement was later walked back, it was undoubtedly reflective of a significant proportion of the Democratic electorate.²⁴

Should he be elected, Joe Biden will have a choice to make. His natural inclination, demonstrated by his decades of work on the Middle East, is clearly to promote US leadership to protect US interests. At the same time, he has also promised

²³ W.F. Wechsler, “The US Has One Last Chance to Halt Its Withdrawal from the Middle East”, *Defense One*, 30 October 2019.

²⁴ J. Rogin, “Elizabeth Warren is failing the commander in chief test”, *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2019.

to “end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East” and has singled out Saudi Arabia as a “pariah” that needs to be confronted.²⁵

Daniel Benaim, a Middle East expert and fellow with the Century Foundation in New York, recently described the debate among the Democratic Party’s foreign policy thinkers as one pitting “resetters” against “rethinkers”.²⁶ Benaim looks at the regional question through the lens of US relations with Saudi Arabia, the most politically sensitive element given the Khashoggi murder, the Yemeni war, and the widespread perception that Saudi Arabia’s leadership has chosen sides in US domestic politics. He describes how:

Some, whom this report terms “resetters”, quietly argue for the enduring value of US-Saudi relations and warn of the downsides of US abandonment and Saudi hedging. While critical of Riyadh and Trump, they propose resetting the terms of cooperation, and engaging in “tough love” to influence Saudi actions. Others, referred to in this report as “rethinkers”, draw on a more fundamental critique of Saudi Arabia and US foreign policy priorities. They advocate for a departure from past US commitments to what they consider an unreliable, unpalatable, outdated, and overrated partnership.

Some “rethinkers” question the nature of US national security interests in the region, inherently disagreeing with the assessments made earlier in this essay. In doing so, they may share President Trump’s view that the US no longer has a vital national security interest in the free flow of energy from the region. Holding such views certainly makes it easier to conclude that withdrawal is a viable option.

In the end, however, most observers doubt that a President Biden would conclude that the traditional bipartisan consensus

²⁵ G. Carey, “Biden’s Scorn of Saudis Is a Warning Shot After Trump’s Embrace”, *Bloomberg*, 6 August 2020.

²⁶ D. Benaim, *A Progressive Course Correction for U.S.–Saudi Relations*, The Century Foundation, 25 June 2020.

on US interests in the Middle East is suddenly obsolete. If US national security interests are still seen to be constant, the question then becomes how to best protect them given the newly emerging geopolitics of the region and lessons learned from the experiences of the last three American Presidents. Over the long term, one part of the solution is certainly to redouble our efforts to develop alternative energy sources that will eliminate the need for petroleum products. Unfortunately, that time is still likely to be very far away. In the meantime, the goal must be to work to end the perception of US withdrawal from the Middle East.

The most important step will be declaratory. Questions about US longevity will always persist; but they will be minimized if the next US President clearly declares his rejection of withdrawal and his commitment to regional security. Of course, such statements will be necessary but not sufficient to reverse the trends of the last twenty years. Five additional key policy changes will be further required.

First, threats to the homeland must be managed effectively. Salafi jihadist terrorists still threaten vital national security interests. In the current context, managing that threat means accelerating the shift already underway in counterterrorism policy from a reliance on direct action (drone strikes and unilateral raids) to a reliance on indirect action (often called working “by, with and through” local partners). Done correctly, this requires accepting the risks inherent to maintaining relatively modest military, intelligence and law enforcement presence on the ground in key countries, while expanding the aperture for their “advise, assist and accompany” work in support of local partners.²⁷ Just as we should not again choose to occupy a country in the region, we should also not again choose to abandon our local counterterrorism partners. A country that develops a reputation for abandoning its counterterrorism

²⁷ W.F. Wechsler, “Delegating the Dirty Work to U.S. Allies Is Smart Counterterrorism”, *The National Interest*, 13 February 2017.

partners is not a country that can be depended on to stay in the region in the face of domestic calls to withdraw more generally.

The potential threat to the homeland from the Iranian nuclear program must also be addressed by the next administration. The Iranian nuclear program remains a potentially existential threat to US national security. Those who cavalierly argue that deterrence can easily manage an Iran that has become a nuclear power have a Panglossian perception of how deterrence works. Covert operations to delay the Iranian nuclear program should be fully employed, but diplomacy should also be fully explored to test Iranian willingness to negotiate. It is relatively easy to imagine how a new administration might quickly send a signal that it would be willing to restart negotiations and begin doing so in the context of a series of mutual confidence-building measures to bring both sides closer into compliance with the previous accord. But Iran's views have hardened, and it is more difficult to conceive, given the current context, how a new administration could simply return to the previous agreement, as many in Europe would prefer, or successfully negotiate an entirely new agreement, as many in the US would prefer. In any case, the US should not repeat the mistake of negotiating without engaging adequately with its partners in the Gulf and Israel. The more these partners understand the US position – and ideally have bought into it – the more they will avoid perceiving US negotiations as a pretext for withdrawal.

Second, the US should maintain its military bases in the region, especially those along the critical waterways. For the reasons described earlier, these bases are key to protecting American vital national security interests in the free flow of energy resources, and may later be key to protecting an existential national security interest of being able to defend the homeland from a future China that seeks to dominate the Eurasian landmass.

That does not mean, however, that the future US military role should remain unchanged. On the contrary, given the changes underway in the region it is time for a fundamental

reassessment of the division of responsibilities. What has long been an almost entirely unilateral US mission to provide Gulf security must evolve into a joint mission with our Gulf partners. That will require Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait to invest significantly in select naval, air and air defense assets, along with the necessary training and maintenance, that would allow them each to contribute meaningfully to the mission of the US Fifth Fleet. This would likely require a multi-generational commitment, as building capable and interoperable militaries that can conduct these missions is no small task. But the UAE has demonstrated that with such a commitment of time and resources Gulf countries can indeed build select military capabilities. This will only work if everyone understands that the ultimate goal is not to allow the US to withdraw, but to build a sustainable framework that would require the US to stay.

Third, recognizing the evolving geopolitics of the region, the US should actively support the emerging coalition between Israel and the Gulf. A region dominated by either Iran, Turkey or Russia is not a region that protects US interests. This means encouraging, with both appropriate pressure and inducements, additional countries to normalize relations with Israel. It is not implausible to imagine that Oman, Sudan, Morocco and even Saudi Arabia might be able to normalize relations with Israel during the tenure of the next US administration. This will also require the US to encourage Israel to take the necessary steps with the Palestinians to allow this to happen. This also means working openly to maximize the perceived positive impact of these new relationships and working behind the scenes to expand cooperation on security matters.

Fourth, the next US President will need to recognize that US-Saudi relations are likely to be strained, particularly at the level of principals and especially if the transition to the next King is unusually quick and exceptionally messy – which is always a possibility. Nevertheless, care must be taken to prevent these strains from fatally undermining longstanding US

interests. Many Americans may not like it, but Saudi Arabia plays an important role in protecting US interests given its unique leverage on global energy prices. As difficult as relations are today, they could easily become much worse. Just as US diplomacy is able to protect US interests with Turkey despite the actions of President Erdogan, US interests with Saudi Arabia will need to be protected notwithstanding today's challenges. One way to facilitate this is through an early announcement of a formal six-month review of the bilateral relationship, which would provide both time and a formal structure to raise key issues and to test the Saudi leadership's commitment to their relationship with the US.

And fifth, a new security architecture for the region should be established. This should begin with a new multilateral military organization narrowly dedicated to air and maritime defenses in the Gulf and initially consisting only of countries that would agree to build real interoperable forces – likely only the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain at the start. The US would be an associated member and the headquarters could be collocated with the Fifth Fleet. In many ways this is the opposite of the Trump administration's stillborn MESA initiative (the Middle East Strategic Alliance, often referred to as the "Arab NATO") which was much more grandiose in scope and ambition. It would serve a similar purpose, but with a more practical focus. And it would help further address a central US national security interest, protecting the freedom of navigation.

In principle, a universal regional structure modeled on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has some merit. However, those who advocate for such an organization in the region tend to vastly overstate the importance of the OSCE in European security during the Cold War (NATO was infinitely more relevant) and tend to understate the difficulty of establishing such a framework in the Middle East. Nevertheless, there may be utility in having the emerging Israel-Gulf coalition propose such an entity, as it would both signal that they seek to deescalate tensions with Iran and also

position them positively when Iran inevitably declines the offer. Among the other commonly proposed ideas for deescalating tensions with Iran is establishing a “red phone” hotline to defuse tensions in a maritime environment. Such systems have been proposed before and been regularly rejected by Iran, but there is no reason why they should not be proposed again. Perhaps this time the focus might first be on communication through operations centers, as the US and Russia did effectively in Syria.

With these five policy changes, the US will be in a position to avoid withdrawal from the region. And equally as important, the regional leaders, both friends and foes alike, will slowly come to believe that the US intends to stay. That alone would have the greatest positive impact in helping to protect US interests in the years to follow.

7. The US and the EU: Game Over?

Erik Jones

Donald J. Trump created any number of moments that could pass for a low point in the history of the transatlantic relationship. As candidate for president, Trump mused about taking the United States out of NATO. During his first NATO summit, he complained about the cost of the new facilities and the burdens they posed for American taxpayers. He shelved the transatlantic trade and investment partnership. He referred to Europe as an adversary of the United States. He pulled out of an historic arms control agreement. He threatened European allies with sanctions over a natural gas pipeline with Russia. And, he talked off and on about starting a trade war over European automotive exports.

Of course, other US Presidents have played hardball with Europe and some could be accused of deploying similar tactics. The first administration of George W. Bush was also deeply problematic for the transatlantic partnership. Donald Rumsfeld's allusion to "old Europe and new Europe" still rangles. However, no US President has ever been so openly anti-European as Trump has. That may not be Trump's policy. He may not even have a recognizable policy toward Europe. The appearance of anti-European and anti-transatlantic sentiments may simply be the impression created by an administration that is relentlessly transactional in its approach to international relations. The point is simply that Europe has never been so divorced from the United States since the end of the Second World War as it has during the past four years.

Another four years with Trump as US President would most likely bring more of the same. It does not take a soothsayer to imagine that a second Trump administration will be at least as transactional as the first. If anything, a second Trump administration will be more confident about its license to challenge norms, to break with convention, and to escape from institutional constraint. The United States and Europe will continue to interact, but that interaction will look less like a “partnership” and more like barter.

The interesting question is whether a different US administration with a different President could have a restorative effect. The transatlantic relationship would not spring back to what it was before Trump rose to high office any more than the election of Barack Obama could remove all of the tensions that emerged during the first George W. Bush administration (or before).¹ But the transatlantic relationship could at least return to something that looks more like a fulsome partnership than what can be seen at the present.

Unfortunately for anyone who feels a deep sense of nostalgia, that is unlikely to happen. Whatever the exceptional nature of the Trump presidency, there are significant structural changes that have taken place within “The Atlantic Community”. These changes can be seen in the way successive US administrations have used their country’s privileged position in the world economy to exert leverage over their European allies. They show up in the new forms of power that can be used in a more disorderly political context. They find expression in American assertions of national interest and European aspirations to strategic autonomy and European sovereignty. They play out in the deepening realization that whatever values may be shared across the Atlantic are not altogether positive, and in the widening suspicion that transatlantic “leadership” is at best a morally ambiguous proposition. Most important, those changes

¹ See E. Jones, “Le nuove relazioni transatlantiche”, in P. Magri, (ed.), *Il Mondo di Obama: 2008-2016, L’America nello scenario globale*, Milan, Mondadori, 2016, pp. 21-45.

have been and are being coded into the institutions that shape global governance and the complex patterns of trade, investment, and manufacturing that constitute global economics.

No US President can erase the transformations underway in the transatlantic relationship. That process has roots that extend well before Trump and implications that will extend well beyond. Indeed, it will take inspired leadership on both sides of the ocean to use what remains of their Atlantic community as the foundation for a new relationship. If they are truly inspirational, the new partnership they foster will be powerful enough to help assert some measure of control over the many pressing challenges that need to be faced at the global level in relation to inequality, development, climate, energy, migration, conflict, pandemic, employment, and finance. Transatlantic partnership is not sufficient to tackle such challenges, but it is necessary – and that is why the transatlantic relationship remains important no matter what its current state or who occupies the White House.

From Exorbitant Privilege to Weaponized Interdependence

The first big change lies in the way the United States government takes advantage of its global role. This used to be a very subtle process that operated through the strength of the dollar, the resources available to US-based multinational corporations, or the attractiveness of American financial markets. Now that influence is more overt. The US government openly monitors communication flows that pass through the internet, it restricts access to the US financial system, it scrutinizes financial transactions between banks, and it forces European companies to change the way they do business with third countries (and fines them heavily when they do not comply). This exercise of power – called “weaponized interdependence” in the academic literature – is not entirely new, but it is qualitatively different from the way US administrations exercised influence in the past.²

² Much of the rest of this section draws heavily on H. Farrell and A.L. Newman,

The US President plays an outsized role in the transatlantic relationship because the United States plays a disproportionate role in the world economy. That has always been the case. If anything, the imbalance was greater in the early post-Second World War decades than it is today. Moreover, the United States has always taken advantage of its disproportionate influence to further American interests.³ That is unsurprising. The idea of a purely altruistic United States would be harder to accept. Moreover, Europe's political leaders have always been sensitive to America's "exorbitant privilege". As a result, each decade had a scandal about American overstretch and a "crisis" in the transatlantic relationship. More experienced analysis joked that any talk of crisis was more likely than not to be rhetoric.⁴ Indeed, if there is a long-term trend it points to a relative decline in the central role of the United States and a relative increase in the power and influence of Europe.⁵ The presumption was that US presidents would have to learn to embrace a more plural world order, and European politicians would have to assume the responsibility that comes with playing a more central role, as a consequence.

That presumption turns out to have relied on a mistaken understanding of how the world economy works. The United States did decline in relative terms related to output, trade, and even financial transactions. At the same time the European Union became both more integrated and more important. China also emerged as a global economic actor. The important point, however, was not the stock of wealth located in different countries or even the output and growth rates that different

"Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", *International Security*, vol. 44, no. 1, Summer 2019, pp. 42-79.

³ See, for example, D.P. Calleo, *The Imperious Economy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.

⁴ E. Jones, "Debating the Transatlantic Relationship: Rhetoric and Reality", *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2004, pp. 595-612.

⁵ This presumption sparked an important debate about the decline of American power. See P. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York, Random House, 1987.

economies could sustain. Instead, what mattered were the technical arrangements that tied those economies together – the financial clearing houses, the telecommunications protocols, the satellites, the fibre optic cables, and the internet. As the rest of the world economy expanded relative to the United States, this global infrastructure became increasingly important to holding that world economy together. And yet, because the United States was the world's leading economy for so many decades, its influence over these technical arrangements remained disproportionate.

Most global trade is denominated in dollars and eventually all dollar transactions have to be cleared through banks that are regulated in the United States or through banks that have close relations with banks that are regulated in the United States. In turn, those banks communicate with one another using protocols designed and maintained by the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT), which is itself owned by banks – many of which are regulated in the United States. That financial telecommunication takes place across satellite networks and through fibre optic cables, many of which are operated by the United States or run through the United States. And, increasingly, those satellites and cables are used to connect the servers that make up the internet, which in turn provides the backbone for databases, search engines, social networks and marketing platforms that bring buyers and sellers together in the global marketplace.

It did not take long for the US government to realize that it could use its disproportionate influence over these arrangements as a source of leverage. It could restrict individuals, firms, governments, or whole national economies from having access to clearing for dollar denominated transactions. It could monitor interbank communications to make sure those restrictions are not circumvented. It could prevent banks from communicating efficiently with one-another. It could filter choke points in the internet for illicit interaction. And it could use its influence over the large American technology companies to gain access

to information. The first George W. Bush administration used this leverage after 9/11 to prosecute what it called the “global war on terror” and to put pressure on rogue states like Iran. Successive Obama administrations increased the pressure on Iran and then began applying using it against Russia after the annexation of the Crimea.⁶

Governments in other countries quickly recognized their vulnerability. For America’s competitors and adversaries, the threat was obvious. This threat explains in large measure why China’s financial economy remains disconnected from the rest of the globe and why the Chinese government has been so eager to internationalize the use of the renminbi for trade finance. America’s allies in Europe also sensed the threat. European banks paid huge fines for providing dollar clearing for countries or firms under US sanctions. Because SWIFT is a European company headquartered in Belgium, the European Parliament had to provide legislative cover when the Obama administration decided to cut access to interbank telecommunications for the whole of the Iranian economy. Meanwhile governments across Europe faced popular pressure over the prospect that the American intelligence establishment might be violating personal privacy.

This new exercise of American power went beyond the more subtle, macroeconomic forms of “exorbitant privilege” that the United States enjoyed in the early post-Second World War period. It became more obvious, more intrusive, and more personal. It also seemed somehow harder to escape insofar as the growth of the rest of the world did not diminish US power but rather seemed to strengthen it. The big four American technology companies – Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple – not only provided a ubiquitous reminder of the central role of the United States in the world economy, but they also revealed the extent to which the laws of other countries could

⁶ See E. Jones and A. Whitworth, “The Unintended Consequences of European Sanctions on Russia”, *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 5, October-November 2014, pp. 21-30.

be ignored or manipulated, particularly in matters related to taxation. The challenge for Europeans was to bring a greater sense of balance into their relationship with the United States.

From Hegemonic Leadership to Control over Uncertainty

The Europeans were (and are) far from powerless. The United States may have disproportionate influence over global market infrastructure, but the European Union controls access to the world's largest market. European competition authorities used that control to push back against US-based technology giants, starting with Microsoft but quickly encompassing each of the big four as well. Along the way, the European Union created global standards for data protection and significant new momentum for multinational corporate tax reform – particularly in the area of digital commerce. Such actions inevitably created tensions with successive US administrations, but the European Union did not back down.⁷

The Europeans are also far from innocent or naïve. If the United States exercised “exorbitant privilege” within the transatlantic relationship, European governments accepted that (more or less willingly) as a fair exchange for world order. One of the most important lessons to emerge from the period between the world wars was that a world without leadership is unstable. Hence many European governments viewed American leadership after the Second World War as necessary for European stability. American leadership also offered other advantages. The more the United States invested in European security, for example, the more European governments could afford to develop their manufacturing economies and address important social needs. Europeans could also invest in the reconciliation of long-held national grievances. In that respect,

⁷ See A. Luzzato Gardner, *Stars with Stripes: The Essential Partnership between the European Union and the United States*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, chs. 5-6.

the European Union is their greatest achievement.

That story about American hegemony in Europe has changed a lot over the decades but it nevertheless continues to resonate. Europeans grumbled about the decision to cut Iran off from SWIFT and they complained even more loudly about the fines imposed on European banks for helping the Iranian government evade US sanctions, but they did not deny that the pressure worked. On the contrary, European negotiators agreed to work alongside their US counterparts to build on the leverage those sanctions created in order to negotiate a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to prevent Iran from completing its nuclear program while at the same time opening up the Iranian economy to trade and investment from the rest of the world.⁸ Moreover, European governments quickly agreed to apply similar pressure on Russia after Malaysia Airlines flight 17 was shot down over Ukraine in July 2014. If anything, European voices were more eager than those in the Obama administration to cut Russian banks out of SWIFT.⁹

The story about American hegemony resonates in the pattern of European security integration as well. Despite efforts to build a more comprehensive common security and defence policy within the European Union, Europe remains primarily dependent upon NATO for military infrastructure and large-scale military operations. Moreover, within NATO, many European governments spend less on security than they promised. This does not mean Europeans spend little on their security. Combined European spending is probably greater than military outlays in any other part of the world with a single exception, the US. What this means is that Europeans spend less on security than the United States spends, either in absolute terms or in terms of national income.¹⁰ More important,

⁸ M. Fitzpatrick, "Iran: A Good Deal", *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 5, October-November 2015, pp. 47-52.

⁹ E. Jones and A. Whitworth (2014).

¹⁰ See D.H. Allin and E. Jones, *Weary Policeman: American Power in an Age of Austerity*, London, Routledge, 2012.

much European spending on security is uncoordinated and ineffective, with the result that European security capabilities are uneven across countries and also hard to aggregate without US involvement to fill in the gaps.¹¹

The concern among Europeans was not that American hegemony would wither away; it was that the US government would use its power to create disorder rather than order. This concern arose off and on during the Cold War, particularly around the conflict in Vietnam and later during Ronald Reagan's presidency. The concern came back during the first George W. Bush administration, first with his administration's decision to dismantle key arms control and climate agreements, and then with the US prosecution of regime change in Iraq. It would be wrong in that sense to believe Europeans were ever complacent about their security. On the contrary, they worked hard to find ways to cooperate with every US administration in order to demonstrate the importance of reinforcing and renewing transatlantic relations. The second George W. Bush administration embraced this vision of transatlantic community. So did successive Obama administrations, much more than most commentators were willing to admit. Those administrations may not have agreed on every issue with their European allies, but they recognized the central role of the transatlantic relationship in promoting a more orderly global environment.¹²

The Trump administration marked a break. From the outset, his administration showed little appreciation for the transatlantic relationship. It also revealed an intense dislike for the institutional constraints implied by world order. For his part, Trump revelled in disruptive politics. He had an intuitive understanding that maintaining order consumes American energy and resources while disruption creates new

¹¹ For a contrasting view, see M. Ekengren and S. Hollis, "Explaining the European Union's Security Role in Practice", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2019, pp. 616-635.

¹² Again, see E. Jones (2016). See also A. Luzzato Gardner (2020).

opportunities to assert American power. Trump's insight was not new. Sociologists have long understood the impact of rule breaking on patterns of collective action and the possibilities for those who break the rules to exercise leverage by controlling uncertainty.¹³ Trump's application of this insight within the transatlantic context was nevertheless unprecedented. Threatening to withdraw from NATO, encouraging the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, seeking to negotiate bilateral trade deals with EU Member States, renouncing the JCPOA with Iran, forcing the Europeans to reapply sanctions on Iran including another round of SWIFT exclusion, and playing one European government against another to secure American troop deployments, run fundamentally against the grain of hegemonic leadership. This is not exercising privilege in exchange for the promise of order; it is creating disorder as an act of self-interest.

From National Interest to Strategic Autonomy

The Trump administration made no secret of its intention to focus narrowly on the national interest. Trump's inaugural address made the point explicitly: "We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world – but we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first".¹⁴ He placed similar statements at the beginning and the end of the short preface to his 2017 National Security Strategy. And he reiterated that position each time he addressed the general assembly of the United Nations. At a speech to the German Marshall Fund (GMF) in December 2018, Trump's Secretary of State took the argument one step further: "Every nation – every nation – must honestly acknowledge its responsibilities to its citizens and ask if the current international

¹³ M. Crozier, *The Stalled Society*, New York, Penguin, 1974, chs. 1-2.

¹⁴ The inaugural address is available on the Whitehouse website: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

order serves the good of its people as well as it could. And if not, we must ask how we can right it”.¹⁵ Mike Pompeo then went on to explain how “righting” the international order would involve the US government getting rid of any treaties or other institutions that it believed no longer functioned or had outlived their purpose.

The European Union was not wholly unprepared for this posture. The EU Global Strategy announced “the ambition of strategic autonomy” already in June 2016.¹⁶ Nevertheless, European leaders were surprised by the transactional nature of the Trump administration and by the willingness of Donald Trump as President to challenge even the most basic conventions of the alliance. Trump’s hesitation to pledge American commitment to collective defence as set out in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty came as a shock. Soon after Trump’s first NATO summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel told an audience in Bavaria that Europeans can no longer rely on the United States for their security and so, as she put it: “We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands”.¹⁷

Throughout 2017, European leaders tried and failed to build strong personal relationships with Trump. They also worked through their foreign and security bureaucracies to maintain the close ties and operational relationships that make the transatlantic community exist in practice rather than just in rhetoric. In turn, at least initially, these efforts to reach out were supported by foreign policy professionals working inside the Trump administration both as part of the career foreign and civil services and through the administration’s initial waves of

¹⁵ The text of that speech can be found on the State Department website here: <https://www.state.gov/restoring-the-role-of-the-nation-state-in-the-liberal-international-order-2/>.

¹⁶ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels, European External Action Service, June 2016, p. 4.

¹⁷ J. Henley, “Angela Merkel: EU Cannot Completely Rely on US and Britain Any More”, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2017.

political appointments. This activity was consistent with the patterns established in previous moments of tension across the Atlantic and the expectation in Europe was that the Trump administration would eventually come around to recognize the need for deeper transatlantic cooperation.

At the same time, however, European leaders began to place greater emphasis on their ambition for “strategic autonomy”. In September 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a long speech establishing the need for enhanced ‘European sovereignty’ and listing defence and security as the first key in the achievement of that objective. The following June, Macron joined with Merkel in making a declaration at Meseberg, Germany, about the need to create “a democratic, sovereign, and united Europe ... that is ready to assert its international role”.¹⁸ Both initiatives focused more broadly on the European Union than narrowly on the transatlantic relationship; they also included a range of proposals that had little if anything to do with the Trump administration. Both initiatives became entangled in complicated arguments about the nature of European solidarity, the potential for greater European fiscal cooperation, and the final objective that motivates the European project. These are big conversations that most Europeans find more important than anything to do with the United States, because they touch deeply on questions of national identity and political sovereignty. As a result, these initiatives failed to gain traction for reasons that had more to do with domestic European politics than anything connected to the United States or the wider global environment. Various elements from Macron’s speech and from the Meseberg declaration found their way into the policy making processes of the European Union, but the overarching ambition did not seem to take root.

The appointment of a new European Commission changed that dynamic. The European Commission President, Ursula

¹⁸ A copy of the Meseberg Declaration can be found on the French Foreign Ministry’s website here: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/events/article/europe-franco-german-declaration-19-06-18>.

von der Leyen, came to office with close ties to Merkel and Macron. She made it clear that her new team of commissioners would play an explicitly geopolitical role. She gave broad powers to her competition commissioner, Margrethe Vestager, and made her responsible for extending strategic autonomy into the digital realm – including with respect to taxation. The fact that Vestager had played that role in the previous Commission, and that she was the commissioner responsible for fining Apple over tax evasion, underscored the seriousness of von der Leyen’s commitment. Finally, von der Leyen promised to work with the Member States to modernize the European Union’s multiannual financial framework (or seven-year budget) to make sure she had sufficient resources to put her priorities into action.

European Commission presidents have made similar commitments in the past. The Member States control the purse strings, not the European Commission. It is important, therefore, that Macron gave a long interview to *The Economist* newspaper shortly after von der Leyen’s Commission came into office. In that interview he stressed the need for Europeans to create a “strategic Europe” that is capable of communicating in the “grammar of sovereignty and power”. He also made it clear that he did not believe American support for NATO could be taken for granted; indeed he went further to suggest the need “to reassess the reality of what NATO is in terms of the engagement of the United States”.¹⁹ Macron’s efforts did not change the dynamics of the budget negotiations, but they did lay down a clear marker about the need for Europeans to prepare for a more autonomous approach to global affairs.

This marker came due quickly. The onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic underscored the importance of European solidarity and autonomy. This was true partly because the Trump administration acted with a very narrow understanding of the national interest and with little regard to

¹⁹ “Transcript – Emmanuel Macron in His Own Words (French)”, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

the conventions of alliance politics. The Trump administration closed US borders to European travellers without consultation, competed with European governments for the procurement of personal protective equipment, and exerted leverage over pharmaceutical companies to give the United States preferential access to any treatment or vaccine. To an even greater extent, however, the crisis underscored the importance of coordination within Europe – to procure and distribute medical resources, to bolster national welfare state institutions, and to foster a European economic recovery. Von der Leyen saw the European Commission's role as spearheading that recovery effort. She drew up a proposal that not only sought to marshal fresh resources to support Member State governments, but also channel funds into her Commission's geopolitical priorities as part of the new European Union budget.

The fate of von der Leyen's proposal remains unclear. Her intent to foster greater European strategic autonomy is without question. References to it are scattered throughout the document. The support she has received from Macron and Merkel is strong as well. The question marks come from the implications of the proposal for the financial structure of the European Union. The problems there are much the same as they were in the context of the Meseberg Declaration. Europeans learned the need for solidarity and coordination in response to the pandemic; they also learned the limits of what domestic electorates are willing to share across national boundaries.²⁰

In a vague and yet still meaningful way, the politics within European countries showed many of the same characteristics or tendencies that brought the Trump administration into being. National politicians did not have to spearhead their own nativist populist movement to recognize that making concessions in the interests of the European Union as a collective might come at the cost of their own country's democratic stability. In that sense, the

²⁰ E. Jones, "European Union: Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better", *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 4, forthcoming.

Dutch government did not want to give money to Italy for the same reason that the Italian government did not want to borrow money from the European Stability Mechanism.

From Western Values to Moral Ambiguity

This comparison between the politics behind the Trump administration and the politics at work in countries across Europe is awkward. Nevertheless, it is an important part in any analysis of the transatlantic relationship. The simple fact is Europeans and Americans share many values. They believe in the importance of democracy and the rule of law. They believe in human rights, individual liberty, and the dignity of work. They also believe in the central role of private property to the functioning of the market economy. Europeans and Americans tend to differ on the role of the state or on the balance between states and markets, but that variation also exists on both sides of the Atlantic among American states and across European countries. In other words, Europeans and Americans agree and disagree on many of the same things.

Recognition of these shared values is important because it explains why Americans and Europeans have similar reactions to common experiences; it also explains why Americans and Europeans struggle in similar ways to reconcile the values they hold in the present with their conduct as peoples and nations in the past. Finally, it explains how Europeans once might have looked up to the United States in an almost idealistic way only now to look again with a greater sense of ambivalence or ambiguity. What most Europeans may not realize is that sense of idealism turned to a realism bordering on disappointment is also felt by many Americans looking at Europe. There is no disillusionment that matches the knowledge your idol shares your own failings.

The common experience on both sides of the Atlantic is found in the influence of technological innovation, industrial change, the widening of global trade, and the increasing role

of finance. It is also found in the mix of urbanization, immigration, evolving social norms, and changing patterns of communication. These influences are hard to disentangle and they tend to interact in complicated ways. Nevertheless, we can see the same broad patterns that emerge as a consequence. Those patterns reflect a rising perception of inequality, a heightened sense of uncertainty about the future, and a deepening frustration with the democratic process. Such patterns offend perceptions of fairness and justice on both sides of the Atlantic. They suggest that something in the organization of politics and economics is broken. And they raise questions about who is to blame for bringing about conditions that so obviously fail to conform to the social contract.²¹

The emphasis here is subjective rather than absolute. The point is not to compare the two sides of the Atlantic to determine which does worse by any given measure. Rather it is to suggest why Europe and the United States show increasing electoral volatility from one election to the next, declining support for traditional political parties over time, and the rise of new political challengers on both the right and the left. The phenomenon commentators call “populism” is not alien to the values shared by Americans and Europeans, it is a common reaction to the belief that those values are under threat in a way that challenges fundamentally the American or European way of life. Within that pattern, each country’s experience is unique and yet every other country seems to be going through something vaguely familiar. When Europeans look at the Trump administration, they cannot help but draw parallels to their own experience. When they push back against the Trump administration, they do so at least in part out of concern that a similar political movement could rise to power somewhere in Europe. Indeed, it may already have.

²¹ See P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019; B. Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

The ambivalence toward America extends almost instinctively to include the problem of racial injustice. Europeans who look at white nationalism in American society cannot help but draw parallels with their own homegrown anti-immigrant sentiments. The problems are historically different, but tension between race-based discrimination and commitment to individual liberty is similar.²² And that similarity is even greater for immigrants who come from former European colonies. If slavery is the original sin for the United States, imperialism plays that role for many European countries. When “Black Lives Matter” spread from the United States to Europe in 2020, the force of the indictment was the same even if what it means to be black differed from one country to the next.

Of course, this is not the first time that either side of the Atlantic has had to wrestle with populist political challengers, grass roots protests, or civil rights movements. The late 1960s and 1970s experienced similar unrest. The difficulty this time is that neither Europeans nor Americans can look to the other for inspiration. The best either side of the Atlantic seems to offer is an effort to hold back the most troubling sources of change while trying to respond to the others. It is at best a delicate balancing act. At its worst, politics devolves into an aggressive outpouring of anger – which for many Europeans is what the Trump Administration represents. The question they have is whether Trump leaving office will somehow make the anger and frustration go away. When they ask that question, the answer they want is for their own country as much as for the United States.

²² See S. Churchwell, “[American Fascism: It Has Happened Here](#)”, *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 2020.

Implications and Inspiration

The Trump administration is more a symptom than a cause of the changes taking place in domestic politics on both sides of the Atlantic and in the relationship between Europe and the United States. The impact of these changes is being carved into the very fibre of that relationship in the form of supply chains, troop dispositions, tariff structures, and tax arrangements. It is also emerging in the form of overlapping and competing arrangements for currency transactions, trade finance, and interbank communication, that put Europe (or other parts of the world) increasingly at the centre.

The transatlantic relationship will continue to evolve no matter who wins the upcoming US residential elections. The question is not whether the old relationship can be restored but whether the political will exists on both sides of the Atlantic to build a new relationship on the foundations that remain. The choice in November is between a candidate who seeks to profit from a bad situation and a candidate who seeks to make it better. The election of a US President with a more progressive (and less transactional) agenda is necessary but insufficient. Only inspired leadership on both sides of the Atlantic can make a decisive difference.

What is hard to imagine looking ahead to the elections is where politicians on either side of the Atlantic will find their inspiration. Perhaps by looking at each other, though, they are looking in the wrong place. Another point the two sides of the Atlantic have in common is an increasingly activist younger generation. This younger generation is accustomed to looking across the Atlantic, but it has a much wider perspective than the generations that preceded it because it has no illusions that the West is somehow bound to lead. The younger generation is also acutely aware of the challenges it must face. The best we can hope from the US elections is that they will buy time for this younger generation to assert itself more effectively into the conversation. When they do, it is unlikely that the transatlantic

relationship will be a strong focal point in their considerations. More likely they will take it for granted that Americans and Europeans can work together as necessary – and it will be necessary both within Europe and across the Atlantic if the goal is to marshal enough energy to make the world a better place.

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