

The American Conservative

The U.S. Should Not Lead the World

Doug Bandow

July 23rd, 2020

The international complaint about the Trump administration is thunderous: America doesn't lead. U.S. leadership has disappeared. The president has squandered the country's tradition of leadership. The administration is driving away Washington's closest allies.

This is a particularly sharp criticism to make of a Republican president. Perhaps the one consistent claim made by Republican presidential candidates over the years is the importance of American leadership. Leadership to do *what* is far less clear. But the GOP treats most any foreign problem, at least those evident under a Democratic administration, as a failure to "lead." According to the candidates, if only the president would promote American leadership, the lion would lie down with the lamb, crowds would gather globally to sing Kumbaya, and we would witness the Second Coming.

There is much substance to the sharp criticism of the current administration's approach. When someone spends more than three years insulting the officials, sanctioning the firms, and trashing the policies of supposedly friendly countries, the response isn't likely to be positive. Consider how the Europeans repeatedly chose Iran over the U.S. after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo demanded that they follow America's new policy toward Tehran. Given the opportunity most European leaders probably would vote for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei over President Donald Trump.

Nevertheless, many of the complaints about inadequate U.S. leadership really are about something else. They reflect frustration that the U.S. will no longer automatically take care of other nations' problems. Indeed, complaints about inadequate American leadership reflect a pervasive problem predating Trump's election. Even the most prosperous and populous nations prefer to send crises to Washington for solution by the global hegemon.

And American policymakers, overflowing with hubris and sanctimony, are only too happy to oblige. Although U.S. officials regularly whine about stingy, wimpy, myopic, and ungrateful allies, the former still try to do it all, believing that they have been anointed by providence to run the world. Everyone else has been designated to follow. So it is only appropriate, from this perspective, that minions from allied states make a pilgrimage to Washington, aka the Imperial City, seeking guidance.

The list of supposed recent lost opportunities offered by critics is long. The COVID-19 crisis. World Health Organization reform. South Korea-Japan relations. NATO burden-sharing. Turkey and Syria's Kurds. India and Kashmir. China and Hong Kong. Israel and Palestinians. Obviously, in this view, if only the administration had done its job nirvana would have arrived by now.

Yet how many of these issues could Washington solve? The Trump administration bungled the coronavirus at home, leaving little leadership to exercise overseas. It was impolitic for the U.S.

to walk out of the WHO amid a pandemic. However, while the political stunt is likely to undermine long-term reform, it probably won't hamper the short-term response to the outbreak.

Seoul and Tokyo get away with irresponsible behavior because they can rely on America's defense commitments. If they were responsible for their own futures, they could not afford such foolishness. Asking nicely has never gotten European governments to spend much more on their militaries since they believe Washington will defend them irrespective of how little they do. Ankara views Kurdish groups and territories as existential threats, not something to be talked through. India isn't interested in negotiation or mediation over Kashmir.

The more America gets involved in Hong Kong, the tougher China's stance will be. A succession of presidents have sought to bring peace to Palestinians and Israelis. A succession of the presidents will do the same in the future, with the same likelihood of success.

In all these cases utopia remains far away.

There are many forms of "leadership," such as using moral suasion, applying diplomatic pressure, giving money, and fighting wars. The U.S. employs all of them. However, too many Washington policymakers today emphasize the latter, since it is seen as America's greatest comparative advantage. As the saying goes, if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Only the U.S. is capable of simultaneously fighting multiple wars for years—and, more important, is foolish enough to do so.

It is this form of alleged leadership that Trump has most often challenged. He is right to do so: this policy has not turned out well for Americans, or anyone else.

After two decades of U.S. "leadership" in the Middle East, what is the result? A series of nations wrecked. New terrorist organizations created. Even more new enemies made. Thousands of Americans killed. Tens of thousands of U.S. personnel wounded. Hundreds of thousands of foreign civilians killed. Even more wounded. Millions of people displaced. Trillions of dollars squandered.

Heckuva job, Washington! Let's have some more American leadership.

Yet even the slightest suggestion that the U.S. step back anywhere generates horrified, frenetic opposition. The president's proposals to withdraw troops from countries as disparate as Afghanistan, Germany, Iraq, South Korea, and Syria triggered sustained bouts of wailing and gnashing of teeth in Washington and overseas. Not only must America lead, it must always lead, and once having led anywhere, it must forever lead everywhere. No retreats, substitutions, or transformations are allowed.

This fixation on U.S. leadership amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy. If nothing can be accomplished without America, then other nations will act as if nothing can be accomplished without America. Which means they will not act. And nothing will be accomplished without Washington.

However, the claim that American leadership is necessary does not reflect the long arc of human history. Even before the U.S. existed, "stuff" happened in the world. Even before Washington was able to take a leading role in international affairs, decisions were made. Even before America chose to exercise its power, events occurred and problems were solved around the

world. So there is good reason to be skeptical of the apocalyptic prophesies of doom from the supposed lack of U.S. leadership.

However, the world does suffer from a serious leadership problem—the failure of those with the most at stake in international problems and those most able to come up with solutions to such challenges to act. When they instead stand around demanding “American leadership,” they are demonstrating the lack of real leadership.

What would genuine leadership look like?

Governments of impoverished nations should reconsider their own policies before looking to foreigners—governments, aid institutions, NGOs—for answers. Dirigiste economics result in mass poverty and hardship and cannot be cured by foreign aid, from the U.S. or anyone else. For decades government-to-government “aid” programs typically took money from poor people in rich countries to give to rich people in poor countries. Too often the economic results were negative.

Populous, prosperous states should take over responsibility for their own defense when able. They should not expect foreign nations, even wealthy ones like America, to handle what should be the core responsibility of any serious government of a serious nation. It is particularly poor form for such a state to criticize a country that finally decides to focus on domestic needs after offering decades of protection.

Governments which seek global respect should be prepared to pay the price of acting in the world. For instance, if they want to contest ownership of nearby islands claimed by other nations, they should build a serious navy. If they want to criticize a rising power, they should be prepared for retaliation. If they want to play international leader they should be prepared to pay up, without expecting to be reimbursed by the U.S. or anyone else.

Countries facing serious common threats should put aside their differences, rather than wait, hoping their mutual protector, almost always Washington, will take their side and pressure the other government. Such public officials should put national necessity before political advantage when facing an international moment of truth. America has no obligation to play nursemaid and beg them to make the right decision.

Governments and peoples at war have good reason to make peace without relying on other nations, especially the U.S., to pressure and/or bribe one or both sides. The overwhelming beneficiaries of peace are the parties themselves. Demanding payment to end combat suggests an attempt to profit from tragedy. Good societies should aid the recovery of those in need, not pay others to do what is right and in their interest.

Those closest to problems should address them first. Cooperation and institution-building should be integral to addressing international challenges. Of course, it can be difficult even for the best-intentioned parties to reach agreement or coordinate action. Sometimes mediation by an outside power, including a global superpower, can midwife a solution which originally seemed impossible. Sometimes outside assistance is necessary to address particularly serious problems. In which cases America should “lead.”

However, as much as Washington might like to see peace, good governance, and prosperity everywhere, Americans are not capable of pacifying the globe. Indeed, no one with a realistic

understanding of how the world operates should expect a self-interested, heavily burdened, overconfident global superpower to solve other nations' problems.

Despite the tsunami of criticism, Donald Trump and his administration have good reason to be skeptical of the ubiquitous call for American leadership. Indeed, the extraordinary and ostentatious failures of the Trump administration when it has attempted to "lead" demonstrates why there should be much greater skepticism of global demands for greater U.S. leadership.

The world needs better leadership. From all countries and peoples. It is not Washington's duty to run the world. Other nations must pick up after themselves, pay their bills, fulfill their responsibilities, and shape their futures. American leadership is no substitute for better leadership by all.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.