



America Adrift and Aflame: Fix the US Before the World

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The Beer Belly Putsch, as the January 6 takeover of the Capitol has been called, created shock waves across the nation's capital and around the world. It was never as serious as some observers suggested: the president had no coup plan and most of the ragtag protesters appeared to be little more than accidental tourists, wandering aimlessly through the building snapping selfies.

Nevertheless, enough of the invaders had malice aforethought to cause serious harm: imagine the capture of the vice president and a score of leading legislators. Then who knows what? America would not have fallen, but the outcome could have been much uglier and deadlier. The impact on U.S. politics would have been far more profound.

For the following two weeks the nation's capital was an armed camp. Large sections of the city were cordoned off. There was extra scrutiny of passengers flying to Washington. National Guardsmen were checked for extreme political views. Inauguration day was a pale imitation of the usual ceremony. Much of the new president's address was about "unity." Foreign affairs was but a footnote, sufficient to alert allied leaders that they had not been forgotten.

Most Americans agreed with the president's emphasis, recognizing that something was seriously wrong with their country. Yet that turned out to be a secondary concern for many denizens of Washington, D.C. Their greatest fear appeared to be that the US had sacrificed its credibility and thus their opportunity to lead the rest of the world to democratic utopia. How could the international order survive without Americans – meaning them – selflessly wandering the globe, funding or bombing other nations as seemed appropriate?

Indeed, Uncle Sam's dramatic act of self-immolation came after four years of Donald Trump, who refused to conform to the established protocol of pretending to be concerned about every problem in every nation at every moment. Even worse, he failed to "reassure" other nations that Washington cared and would always handle their problems, irrespective of how little they did on their own behalf. After all, the mythical "international community" believes that it is America's sacred duty to pay for everything and defend everyone.

In fact, Trump gave voice to broad public dissatisfaction with the Blob, Washington's foreign policy establishment, which people blamed for the disasters in Iraq and Libya. Unsurprisingly, foreign policy practitioners thought it was terribly unfair that the unenlightened masses wanted

to hold the bipartisan War Party accountable for visiting so much death and destruction on others.

Joe Biden appeared to be the Blob's salvation. He surrounded himself with members of the Democratic government-in-exile who had supported or plotted most of America's recent foreign misadventures. Who better to restore US foreign policy to its former course?

Then came the Capitol Hill takeover. Blob members were horrified, but not so much for America. Rather, they worried about how events hurt Washington's and their reputations. Now who on earth would take US "leadership" seriously? Who would want to be led by people who couldn't govern themselves?

These are actually very good questions. But what the rest of the world thinks about January 6 really shouldn't matter much. Far more important is what that moment of mob rule said about our own system and situation. For our own good this would be a good time for the Biden administration to adopt the "humble foreign policy" which George W. Bush initially spoke of 20 years ago. Americans are very busy dealing with problems at home. Policymakers should focus on addressing America's ills, rather than pretending that they are ready to resume their international leadership position in humanity's utopian march.

Of course, Blob members are horrified when anyone opposes their grand plans for global social engineering. Surely the US is capable of responding to insurrection at home and starting a couple wars abroad, they contend. Moreover, the outcomes in Iraq and Yemen demonstrated that there is minimal accountability for American policymakers, even those responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. So what's the problem?

Washington's inveterate global social engineers apparently underestimate the domestic problems which must be addressed. Rather like 9/11, 1/6 changed the world, or at least America, dramatically.

The political system is broken and remains so despite Biden's victory. Even Donald Trump was surprised by his triumph in 2016. However, he benefited from deep dissatisfaction with the political duopoly which had run the US aground – wildly spendthrift, recklessly warlike, and resolutely unresponsive. Tens of millions of people felt consistently ignored and deplored. Trump, despite his manifold flaws, became their vehicle for political revolution.

Although grossly irresponsible and incompetent, he almost won reelection for the same reason. He received more than 74 million votes. Switching just 22,000 votes would have tied the Electoral College, sending the contest to the House, in which Republicans controlled a majority of state delegations, which would have given him victory. Switching another 11,000 votes would have given him an electoral majority. Had he observed the rules of the first debate or shown up to the second one he might have collected those votes. Had he taken COVID-19 precautions with his own staff rather than becoming a viral spreader he might have picked up the extra ballots needed. He tossed away his reelection by his repeatedly irresponsible behavior.

America's reputation for democratic stability has been damaged. As noted earlier, the Beer Belly Putsch, though a profound embarrassment, was not a serious attempt to overthrow the government. Nothing the protesters could have done would have prevented Trump's term from expiring on January 20. Even the worst case – kidnapping or murdering the vice president and leading congressmen – would not have overthrown the government.

However, Washington's foreign reputation always outstripped reality. In 2019 Hong Kong protesters waved American flags and looked to the US for succor as they opposed the impending Chinese crackdown, even though Trump had not the slightest interest in their plight and would do nothing meaningful to intervene. Venezuelans wanted to borrow the US military to oust the repressive Maduro government, sure that the result would be stable, democratic governance despite ample past examples to the contrary. Foreign groups in multiple countries eagerly sought US grants to battle often autocratic governments in hopes that democracy would emerge, yet such efforts routinely intensify regime hostility toward opposition activists.

Now America's reputation has tanked. The *Washington Post* ran an article on the nation's muted "voice for democracy" overseas, filled with quotations from shocked foreign activists who had imagined the US as a beau ideal of democracy. Governments which Washington had criticized, such as China and Iran, cackled with delight. America's hypocrisy long had been on ostentatious display – consider former secretary of state Mike Pompeo's touching concern for human rights abuses in Iran compared to his fulsome embrace of Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman after the latter committed the most grotesque crimes. Now the US system has been shown to be defective as well as hypocritical.

Moreover, some of the strongest proponents of democracy abroad have been exposed as ostentatious frauds. For instance, Sen. Josh Hawley, he of the raised fist to the Capitol protesters, and Sen. Ted Cruz, challenged the election on the basis of "fake news" claims of widespread electoral fraud even after the Senate had been driven from its chamber by the mob. Their claim to merely be voicing people's concerns was rightly derided with contempt. Historian Jeffrey Ngo admitted that for foreign democracy advocates, "aligning with some of these folks is going to be a lot more contentious moving forward."

By the end of Trump's term, even close US allies were not interested in dealing with Washington. Pompeo had planned a trip to Europe barely a week before the inauguration but Jean Asselborn, the foreign minister of Luxembourg – *Luxembourg!* – refused to meet with him. Asselborn called Trump a "political pyromaniac." European Union members, too, begged off. Pompeo had little option but to cancel, lest he end up playing tourist on the American taxpayer's dime.

America's supposed consensus on behalf of perpetual intervention overseas is anything but. The last two decades of bloody, disastrous, and endless war have destroyed the popular foundation of US foreign policy. Although foreign policy practitioners retain supreme confidence in themselves, that likely reflects their location, at home rather than stuck in the nations where they send other Americans to fight and die. And the architects of these wars have sprinted away from the wreckage of entire nations – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen most dramatically – with nary a professional scratch. Has anyone suffered the loss of position, influence, and income despite the massive harm inflicted upon others?

However, members of the bipartisan War Party have sacrificed the public's trust. They never take responsibility for their failures, witness Antony Blinken's attempt to blame ousted dictator Muammar Khadafy for the Obama administration's Libya misadventure, and the public has tired bearing the cost. So profound is popular dissatisfaction that even candidate Biden claimed to be against endless wars, despite surrounding himself with those responsible for America's biggest foreign policy blunders. Antagonism toward ivory tower warriors who used the military to engage in international social engineering helped fuel Donald Trump's campaigns.

America's budget is busted with no money available for foreign adventurism. Even before the pandemic Washington was effectively broke, facing a couple hundred trillion dollars in unfunded liabilities for benefits promised with no revenue sources identified. After COVID-19 hit last year's deficit went from \$1 trillion to \$3.3 trillion. This year the red ink could run even more, depending upon how much of Biden's expansive agenda ends up as law.

The publicly held national debt is more than 100 percent of GDP and will soon break the record set by World War II. The total coronavirus deficit, reflecting lower taxes collected and higher benefits provided, could hit \$16 trillion. Rising entitlement spending as the rest of the Baby Boomers retire could drive debt to as much as double GDP by mid-century.

At some point Uncle Sam's bills will come due. And aging Americans are not likely to choose de facto subsidies for European welfare states over salvaging Social Security and Medicare. Any spare change would be best left at home to meet seemingly endless domestic needs: economic, health care, education, job training, social services, and more.

Americans want diplomatic engagement rather than military intervention. The American people are not isolationists. Under Trump public support for immigration and trade increased. Regarding foreign policy, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported that "Americans want the United States to continue to lead abroad, but few want it to lead alone." That is, more than two-thirds believe in "shared leadership" rather than unitary domination. A plurality backs reducing US troop commitments overseas. Far more Americans want to cut military outlays than increase them. Explained the Eurasia Group Foundation, "Support for American military primacy is much weaker than support for global diplomatic engagement." Younger Americans especially want to "redirect resources domestically."

All told, the US desperately needs a change in direction. Washington need not abandon the world. But it should adopt a different attitude, one of restraint and humility that focuses on problems at home. As government dramatically swallows more public resources policymakers should emphasize addressing challenges in America. Washington's leaders need to bolster their credibility at home, reaching out especially to the disaffected, before they can claim the mandate to advance new nation-building and democracy-promoting schemes abroad.

Come home, America, urged Sen. George McGovern in his forlorn campaign against Richard Nixon in 1972 as the Vietnam War continued to rage. His call should be repeated by members of both parties with even greater urgency today. Come home, America and address the serious challenges that face your people.

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