

## The way forward for America

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The American foreign policy establishment is two years into a prolonged existential crisis. It is watching a president spurn its expertise, attack its institutions and ridicule its most cherished assumptions. It gets much of the blame for a quarter-century of flailing hegemony, one characterised by, depending on whom you ask, too much foreign intervention (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya) or too little (Rwanda, Syria, Iran). In introspective moments, it asks itself whether anything it says or does matters at all.

But for all the turmoil and torment, that establishment is in fact converging around a stronger consensus than any it has held since the Cold War. After an era of uncontested American dominance, the thinking goes, we have entered a new era of rivalry. Or as the Trump administration's National Security Strategy puts it, "After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned." Different camps and thinkers define the causes and contours of this rivalry in different ways: They may see the biggest challenge in Beijing or in Moscow or in Tehran or somewhere else. But the basic point has become uncontroversial.

What to do about it is a more contentious matter. Should the United States step up and fight for its interests and values, or hunker down and restrain its ambitions? Should it defend fellow democracies and reassure allies, or cede authority to other powers, even if that means some outcomes it might not like? Should it muster the resolve to do more or accept the necessity of doing less?

Two new books stake out positions at opposite poles of the debate. In *The Empire and the Five Kings*, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy — a "committed intellectual," in his own description — proclaims that the United States, now in a moment of doubt and retreat, must again take a stand for freedom. "Do not give in to discouragement," exhorts the man usually referred to as B.H.L. "Do not become resigned." In *Gullible Superpower*, Ted Galen Carpenter, a scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, counters that nearly every American attempt to take such a seemingly heroic stand founders on messy foreign realities. The better course is a "return to an earlier, more prudent, realistic and sensible policy tradition."

In the 1990s, at the apex of American dominance, one of Levy's compatriots dubbed the United States a "hyperpower." It was said sneeringly, but Levy embraces it: The United States "is an empire, if you will, but a recalcitrant one, whose nobility has always been to balk at imperialism." His celebration of this American empire is soaring and sincere — "the second home of every free person on the planet" — and often incomprehensible, laced with name-dropping digressions, circuitous analogies and mixed metaphors.

Underneath the breezy Gallic grandiosity, Levy delivers fairly ordinary analysis. The United States kept some semblance of decent order around the globe for decades but has given up this “noblest vocation” because of a combination of toxic politics and technology. “Trump and Zuckerberg, though they probably agree on nothing, are the two blades of a pair of scissors,” destroying democracy at home and leadership abroad. Into this “great vacuum left by the evaporation of the empire” have stepped Levy’s “five kings” — China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (together with its Sunni allies).

Levy makes an ardent and mostly persuasive case about what dominance by these resurgent powers would mean for the world. “A friend of freedom,” he decrees, “must pray for the empire.” And for all his doomsaying, he sees basic weaknesses in these challengers that, with enough American resolve, will stop them from “implementing their grandiose dreams.” But his call to action seems to demand that the United States confront all five with the same urgency at the same time. Most problematically, his five kings include every Middle Eastern power centre; taking on all of them simultaneously is unlikely to turn out well for anyone, except perhaps hardliners in Moscow and Beijing, who would look on the resulting American quagmire with baffled surprise at their own good fortune.

Levy begins and ends his book with the story of the Kurds, who joined with the United States and its allies to fight Daesh but then never got the backing they hoped for in support of their own independence. Despite his own efforts to rally American and European policymakers, the Kurds’ “sister democracies uttered not a word as Kurdish houses in Kirkuk were gassed and ransacked, women raped, people tortured.”

In recounting this tragedy, Levy reflects not at all on the last time he made himself a player in such a cause: his effort, in 2011, to persuade the United States and Europe to intervene in Libya. That action stopped a possible massacre in Benghazi and helped bring about Muammar Gaddafi’s downfall, but it also stoked a bloody civil war that continues today. Levy is less interested in weighing consequences than he is in celebrating the purity of intent, the nobility of the cause, the heroism of the stand.

That, to Carpenter, is exactly where American foreign policy has gone wrong. Since the 1980s, as he tells it, the United States has repeatedly fallen for the charm offensives of foreign actors — insurgent groups, protest movements, dissidents — who con Washington into reckless action. What Levy sees as a virtuous hegemon, Carpenter sees as a naive and hapless superpower playing the sucker to “foreign factions adept at exploiting Americans’ sincere desire for the spread of enlightened liberal capitalist ideals.”

Carpenter marshals example after cringe-inducing example of American politicians and commentators hailing unsavoury foreign movements as the “moral equal of our founding fathers” — as Ronald Reagan said of a Nicaraguan contra army led largely by officers loyal to a fallen dictator. In various Cold War proxy battles, in the Iraq war, in the debate over Syria, in the Libya intervention — again and again, predictions of a peaceful democratic future have yielded dismal results.

Yet by focusing on the gauzy myths that tend to dominate speeches and newspaper columns, Carpenter evades the harder questions and more cold-blooded calculations that lie behind them. (He also has the same fondness for overstatement and overreliance on sketchy evidence that he lambastes in others.)

As often as not, high-flown rhetoric is deployed in the service of some other foreign policy goal; an American leader may have led with talk of democracy or human rights even when they are secondary to, or mere covers for, other, less idealistic considerations. Indeed, Carpenter concedes of several of his cases that a “strategic rationale” for some action existed, even if the exalted language used to sell it could not withstand scrutiny.

For all their dissimilarity, Levy and Carpenter share an unstated conviction that runs through most American debates about foreign policy: that all good things should come together. Like Levy, we want every moral cause to also be strategically smart; like Carpenter, we want to believe that a choice made on prudential grounds won’t involve costs to ideals or values we hold dear. We want always to do well by doing good, and good by doing well. Unfortunately, in foreign policy, only in rare circumstances do all good things actually come together — and even less in a time of contested power than in a time of primacy. The trade-offs to come will be both wrenching and inescapable.

In the early days of the Cold War — the last time the American foreign policy establishment converged around a broad objective — one of the most influential “committed intellectuals,” to use Levy’s term, was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Niebuhr was famous for his Serenity Prayer: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.”

If we are in fact entering a new era of great power competition, determining what we can and cannot change will be the most important, and the most difficult, task ahead. Carpenter makes a pointed case for serenity. Levy issues a fervent call for courage. Neither offers much of the wisdom we’ll need to know the difference.