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CURRENT HISTORY

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THE CRISIS OF LIBERALISM

Anchor Away

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"[T]he United States is voluntarily abdicating much of its global leadership role. And it is doing so in what appears to be a fit of petulance, as though it has been aggrieved and made into a victim by the very international order it helped to build."

The Liberal World Order Loses Its Leader

MLADA BUKOVANSKY

All political orders, domestic and international, mix elements of oppression and legitimacy, of violence and benevolence. Leaders also embody a mix of qualities, some admirable and some reprehensible; no leader is a pure paragon of virtue. Any logical inconsistency deriving from the fact that the United States has been seen simultaneously as an imperial oppressor and subjugator of nonwhite races, and as a virtuous human rights and democracy-promoting liberal leader of the "free world," need not disconcert us. The United States historically has not always been a unitary actor in world affairs, and its leaders have many disparate traditions and narratives of national identity on which to draw when articulating its ideals, interests, and role in the world.

That the liberal international order led by the United States has provided disproportionate advantages to some while relegating others to the margins of survivability is hardly news. But insofar as this order has promised to progressively extend the benefits of economic openness and human rights to those on the margins, its virtues and its legitimacy have counterbalanced its vices and its oppressiveness. The ambitious scope of its broadly progressive aims renders the order something of an historical anomaly, and this makes the US abdication of leadership especially sad.

It takes work to sustain the legitimacy of any political order, and to prevent its corrosion into a tool of a privileged few. Institutions purporting to serve a higher good are vulnerable to co-optation by self-serving interests; when such interests appear to have the upper hand, an institution risks losing broader legitimacy. The US executive branch

has been responsible for presenting a coherent vision and setting priorities for America's role in the world, and mustering resources to support that vision and those priorities. It presents to the world a set of values and virtues capable of attracting cooperation, drawing others to causes worthy of respect and collaboration: causes such as promoting economic growth and development, financial stability, and ecological sustainability; advancing human rights; defending allies against aggression; and curbing the proliferation of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. If these goals appear to be mere cover for naked self-interest, if the vices and the corruption are more easily discernible than the virtues evoked by its avowed public purposes, America's "soft power" is undermined. Without the legitimacy that comes with soft power—the power of attraction—the other options open to a leader are to threaten reluctant followers with force or buy them off; in other words, coercion or bribery.

The cacophony of disturbing news since the election of Donald Trump as US president suggests that coercion and bribery, rather than soft power, will be the modus operandi of his administration. We have seen populist authoritarian tendencies, increased visibility of pseudo-nativist racism, snubbing of allies, threats of nuclear war, aggressive reversal of both domestic and international efforts to address climate change, a revival of protectionism, fawning over Vladimir Putin and friendliness toward other authoritarian leaders (at least the ones who might support a Trump-franchised construction project), understaffing of the State Department, demonization of the free press, steamrolling of ethics rules, and general disrespect for the rule of law. None of this is likely to burnish the image of the United States.

MLADA BUKOVANSKY is a professor of government at Smith College.

“What was remarkable about the era of liberal consensus was not just its relative economic equality, but also the widespread, bipartisan, cross-class agreement about the nature of politics and government.”

Why the American Center Held— and Then Fell Apart

JENNIFER DELTON

The pollsters were wrong in 1948, too. A beaming Harry Truman holding up a newspaper with a headline announcing his presumed defeat is the main image remembered from that election. Democrats were divided that year—literally split into three different parties. The left, represented by ex-Vice President Henry Wallace, formed the Progressive Party, which stood against Cold War militarism and for black civil rights. Democrats responded by endorsing a civil rights platform—the first in the party’s history. This led the white Southern Dixiecrats to bolt and form the States’ Rights Party. Truman wasn’t even on the ballot in some states. And yet the center held.

Truman wasn’t a charismatic candidate, but he didn’t have to be. What won that election was something called liberalism, which positioned itself as the “vital center” between an ascendant international socialism on the left and a fading small-government, small-minded parochialism on the right. Liberals in the post-World War II era were New Dealers who believed that the national government had a responsibility not just to protect borders and property, but also to ensure the basic welfare of its people. They weren’t socialists—they believed in free enterprise, but they sought to channel it in ways that strengthened both capitalism and democracy. Firm anticommunists, they nonetheless rejected the “liberal tradition” of limited government, localism, and “rugged individualism.” They captured the Democratic Party with nonideological policies designed to meet the demands of labor, farmers, and trade expansionists.

So powerful was their progressive, problem-solving pragmatism that Republicans and corporate leaders were forced to embrace it. Mid-twentieth-century liberals made a highly progressive tax system, public spending, infrastructure investment, social security, government-backed mortgages, civil rights, internationalism, and collective bargaining normal features of modern industrial democracy. The result was the most equitable distribution of wealth in US history.

And then it all fell apart. Vietnam, racial conflict, recession, deindustrialization, and the rise of the right all chipped away at liberalism’s empire. Liberalism survives today mainly as a political punching bag for the right, whose disparate principles were never able to unify Republican voters. The left, meanwhile, has reappeared in the form of the Bernie Sanders movement, attacking Democratic centrists as “neoliberal,” a term that connotes a coziness with and submission to corporate globalism. Once a bulwark against political extremes, liberalism is now at their mercy, no longer able to define itself, no longer able to slap down its nemeses. In the resulting polarized environment, elites have lost control and standards of decency and truth are up for grabs. The election of a man like Donald Trump as president was almost an inevitability.

What was remarkable about the era of liberal consensus was not just its relative economic equality, but also the widespread, bipartisan, cross-class agreement about the nature of politics and government. Historians have since thrown quotation marks around the term “liberal consensus,” arguing that it was neither liberal nor a consensus, especially in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Their arguments are persuasive, but in light of today’s polarization it is worth revisiting the areas

JENNIFER DELTON is a professor of history at Skidmore College. Her latest book is *Rethinking the 1950s: How Anti-Communism and the Cold War Made America Liberal* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

September 2017

INTERNATIONAL

Caribbean

Sept. 20—Puerto Rico takes a direct hit from Hurricane Maria, the 2nd Category 5 storm to strike the Caribbean in 2 weeks. Hurricane Irma devastated islands including Barbuda and St. Martin Sept. 5 and 6, then sideswiped Puerto Rico before causing extensive damage throughout Florida. Maria knocks out Puerto Rico's electrical grid for the entire island of 3.4 million people; authorities warn that power might not be restored in some areas for months. The humanitarian crisis comes amid a fiscal collapse: the US territory, which owes \$74 billion to lenders, was forced to declare bankruptcy in May and had neglected infrastructure maintenance for years. Maria caused some \$95 billion in damage, according to a preliminary estimate.

BRAZIL

Sept. 5—Chief prosecutor Rodrigo Janot files criminal charges against former Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff of the left-wing Workers' Party, accusing them of running a scheme to collect kickbacks from companies for government contracts. Rousseff was impeached and removed from office in 2016. Da Silva was convicted in a separate corruption case in July and sentenced to nearly 10 years in prison.

Sept. 14—Just before leaving office, Janot indicts incumbent President Michel Temer, accusing him of obstructing justice and racketeering in a corruption scheme that crossed party lines. Temer, who belongs to the centrist Brazilian Democratic Movement Party, cannot be brought to trial on those charges unless the Congress, where he is supported by a coalition of parties, agrees to forward the indictment to the Supreme Court. It declined to act on an indictment that Janot filed against Temer in June.

GERMANY

Sept. 24—Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) comes out on top in elections for the lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, positioning her for a 4th term as chancellor. The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, will remain the largest bloc in the legislature, but take just 32.9% of the vote, down from 41.5% in the 2013 elections and their worst result since 1949. The far-right, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) more than doubles its vote total to 13%, and becomes the 3rd-largest party. It is the first overtly nationalist party in the Bundestag in decades. Merkel is expected to try to form a coalition government with 2 smaller parties, the Greens and the Free Democrats; her current coalition partner, the center-left Social Democratic Party, says it will go into opposition after taking just 20.8% of the vote.

IRAQ

Sept. 25—Voters in the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq give overwhelming approval to a nonbinding referendum proposal for independence from Baghdad. Officials with the Kurdistan Regional Government, which sponsored the referendum, said they do not intend to act on it for now but will use it as the basis for a dialogue with Baghdad. But Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi rejects the call for talks, asserting that the referendum is illegal and reiterating Iraq's right to use force to keep the Kurdish region from seceding. The referendum is also widely condemned internationally; the US, a close ally of the Kurds, warned them not to hold the vote. Turkey threatens the Iraqi Kurds with the shutdown of a key oil pipeline and a possible military intervention.

ISRAEL

Sept. 3—Police arrest David Sharan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former chief of staff, along with the retired head of the navy and 4 other people in an ongoing investigation into alleged corruption surrounding a \$3 billion purchase of submarines from the German manufacturer ThyssenKrupp. Sharan is arrested on suspicion of accepting bribes, fraud, breach of trust, and conspiracy. Netanyahu is not a suspect in the case, but several people close to him have been caught up in it, including David Shimron, his cousin and personal lawyer.

KENYA

Sept. 1—By a 4-2 vote, Kenya's Supreme Court annuls the Aug. 8 presidential election due to irregularities in the transmission of results from polling places. The court orders authorities to hold a new election within 60 days. The ruling is in response to a petition filed by opposition candidate Raila Odinga, who alleged widespread fraud after he came in 2nd with 44% of the vote; President Uhuru Kenyatta won with 54%. Kenyatta says he will honor the court's ruling, but calls the judges "crooks" and demands reforms of the judiciary. Although several dozen people were killed in election-related violence, the August vote did not precipitate a recurrence of the mass violence that cost 1,300 lives after the 2007 election, and international observers generally praised the voting process.

MYANMAR

Sept. 11—Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, the UN high commissioner for human rights, denounces the ongoing forced exodus of the Rohingya minority from Myanmar as "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing" and a flagrant violation of international law. More than 300,000 members of the Muslim ethnic group have fled, mostly into neighboring Bangladesh, since Aug. 25, when a Rohingya militant group attacked police posts and an army base, prompting a retaliatory offensive by the military. The de facto leader of the elected civilian government, Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, has drawn international criticism for failing to intervene on behalf of the Rohingya.

NORTH KOREA

Sept. 3—Seismic instruments indicate that North Korea has conducted its 6th test of a nuclear weapon, the most powerful yet. State media claim it was a hydrogen bomb small enough to fit in a warhead on a ballistic missile.

Sept. 11—In response to the test, the UN Security Council approves increased sanctions on North Korea, including a limit on oil imports and bans on its textile exports and new visas for its overseas workers, both important revenue sources for the country. The US had called for harsher sanctions including a total ban on oil imports, but settled for less after China and Russia objected.

Sept. 19—In his 1st speech before the UN General Assembly, US President Donald Trump vows to "totally destroy North Korea" if it forces the US to defend itself.

SAUDI ARABIA

Sept. 26—In a royal decree read live on state television, the government announces that as of June 2018, women will no longer be barred from driving in the kingdom. The move is in line with social and economic reforms pushed by the recently anointed crown prince, 32-year-old Muhammad bin Salman. In 2015, women were allowed to vote and run for seats in local council elections.