

3-28-2017

# Trump's Ascendancy as History

Ryan Irwin

*University at Albany, State University of New York*, [rirwin@albany.edu](mailto:rirwin@albany.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history\\_fac\\_scholar](http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Irwin, Ryan, "Trump's Ascendancy as History" (2017). *History Faculty Scholarship*. 15.  
[http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history\\_fac\\_scholar/15](http://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/history_fac_scholar/15)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@albany.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@albany.edu).

## POLICY Series

### America and the World—2017 and Beyond

#### “Trump’s Ascendancy as History”

Essay by **Ryan Irwin**, University at Albany, SUNY

Published on **28 March 2017** | [issforum.org](http://issforum.org)

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

---

Shortlink: [tiny.cc/PR-1-5X](http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5X)

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5X-ascendancy>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5X.pdf>

*“The way to love anything is to realize that it may be lost.”*  
—G.K. Chesterton

How did this happen? Donald Trump—a real estate mogul with a television show and no political experience—is America’s forty-fifth president. “Those that did not foresee” his ascendancy “are going to find it hard to discipline themselves to a balanced projection of his forthcoming first term,” Jonathan Haslam declared in a recent ISSF/H-Diplo essay.<sup>1</sup> I’m in that group; maybe you are too. Polls aside, no major newspaper or magazine endorsed Trump’s candidacy, and a big chunk of the Republican Party establishment actively resisted his nomination. The GOP’s previous standard-bearer, Mitt Romney, said Trump was a charlatan, and Speaker Paul Ryan kept the candidate at arm’s length throughout 2016. Neither George W. Bush nor George H.W. Bush supported Trump, and President Barack Obama campaigned against the GOP nominee while enjoying an approval rate that hovered near 60%. Trump’s victory was unexpected because it was improbable.<sup>2</sup>

This particular forum, focused on the significance of Trump’s rise, has proffered an array of insights. Participants have already covered everything from the President’s rhetorical habits to his human rights record. Many have analyzed what Trump means to IR Theory. I’d like to contribute to the conversation by historicizing Trump’s ascendance, lingering on the riddle of how the 2016 election happened. I am not interested in revisiting the tit-for-tat of the presidential campaign; that seems sadomasochistic. This essay

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Haslam, “The Significance of the Trump Presidency,” *ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-5H*, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5h-trump-significance>.

<sup>2</sup> For some reflections, Matt Taibbi, “Extracts from Insane Clown President,” available: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/find-your-next-read/extracts/2017/jan/insane-clown-president-intro-by-matt-taibbi>.

takes up a different challenge by considering the conditions that facilitated Trump's election, and it explores how our methodological choices as scholars inform the stories we tell about the present.

Three metaphors frame the essay: a chessboard, a looking glass, and a wave. The first section explores the politics that preceded the 2016 election, and considers Trump's victory as the unintended consequence of an earlier Republican strategy to subvert Obama's presidency. By resisting Obama so comprehensively, GOP leaders cultivated the backlash that facilitated Trump's emergence. The second section considers ideology, and contextualizes the president's worldview as an outgrowth of the so-called culture wars. His attacks on multiculturalism, liberalism, and internationalism draw on a distinct, coherent narrative of U.S. history, which has arguably incubated within the conservative movement for decades. Finally, the essay's third section considers the forty-fifth president in the context of American grand strategy. Some analysts have suggested that the 2016 election repudiated the logic of American world power, and Trump's animosity toward the U.S. foreign policy establishment begs a reassessment of American power—and its future. Viewed together, these three metaphors provide complementary insights into Trump victory, but they gesture toward very different conclusions and lessons.

I should admit at the outset that I did not vote for Trump. Moreover, I am critical of the administration's political style and policy goals. But this essay is not intended to be polemic against the President; it is an attempt to historicize the present.

### **Breaking the fever**

The chessboard is a popular metaphor. Politicians invoke it because it suggests that everything happens for a reason. Powerbrokers play different roles and events reflect coherent plans that can be neatly reconstructed after the game ends. Historians use the chessboard metaphor because it makes the past seem rational, hierarchical, and orderly. Even better, while chess requires forethought, it can be very unpredictable. Under the right circumstances, a pawn can slip through a player's defenses and become a queen.

How did Trump happen? For one answer we might study a single chess move from January 2009. According to Obama, he entered the White House believing that the United States' economic crisis—prompted by the collapse of the subprime mortgage industry—had created the conditions for bipartisan cooperation. And cooperation had been the central premise of his 2008 campaign; “Yes We Can” was not a progressive call to arms but a promise to change America's political culture. In interviews, Obama's inner circle has been fairly explicit about what this meant. The president hoped that Republicans would design a stimulus bill *with* Democrats, which, in theory, would fulfill the promise of his famous 2004 address at the Democratic National Convention and reaffirm the premise that Democrats governed better than Republicans. “Probably the moment in which I realized that the Republican leadership intended to take a different tack was actually as we were shaping the stimulus bill,” Obama recalled in 2016.

I vividly remember having prepared a basic proposal that had a variety of components. We had tax cuts; we had funding for the states so that teachers wouldn't be laid off and firefighters and so forth; we had an infrastructure component. We felt . . . we would begin negotiations with the Republicans and they would show us things that they thought also needed to happen. On the drive up to Capitol Hill to meet with the

House Republican Caucus, John Boehner released a press statement saying that they were opposed to the stimulus. At that point we didn't even actually have a stimulus bill drawn up.<sup>3</sup>

Boehner's rebuff hinted at a deeper divide. Obama's strategic objective in 2009 was to establish common ground within Washington, and, from his perspective, the stimulus bill was a means toward that end. Republican leaders, who were in the minority in the House and Senate in 2009, understood that bipartisan cooperation would undercut their chances of retaking Congress in the 2010 midterm election. By opposing the stimulus, the GOP assured that Washington would remain gridlocked—despite the president's rhetoric—and their discipline gave them the high ground because the administration's strategy *required* some semblance of Republican support. "There were times that I would meet with [Senate Minority Leader] Mitch McConnell," Obama remembered, "and he would say to me very bluntly, 'Look, I'm doing you a favor if I do any deal with you, so it should be entirely on my terms because it hurts me just being seen photographed with you.'"<sup>4</sup> In retrospect, Obama's inability to see the relationship between his own political strategy and the GOP response was as remarkable as McConnell's intransigence.

This moment illuminates Obama's motives in 2010. Undeterred by Boehner's slight, Obama, in his own words, tried to "break the fever" that afflicted his Republican counterparts.<sup>5</sup> As the midterm election approached, he put Boehner and McConnell in check by advancing a framework for healthcare reform that drew on the plan that Romney had implemented a few years earlier in Massachusetts. As commentators observed at the time, the program had originated from the conservative Heritage Foundation—it was the sort of proposal that John McCain might have advanced if he had won the 2008 election.<sup>6</sup> But Boehner and McConnell cried 'socialism,' and the new President relented on the eve of the midterm election. "During the health-care debate," Obama recalled, "there was a point in time where, after having had multiple negotiations with [Iowa senator Chuck] Grassley, who was the ranking [Republican] . . . I finally just said, 'Is there any form of healthcare reform that you can support?' and he shrugged and looked a little sheepish and said, 'Probably not.'"<sup>7</sup> By the following year, blanket opposition had broken any hope for a grand bargain between Democrats and Republicans. Obama's offensive was over.

Trump emerged from the milieu that Boehner and McConnell created. As a political figure, he was an avatar of total resistance, shifting attention away from public policy with racist dog-whistles about Obama's citizenship. At the 2011 Correspondent's Dinner, the establishment mocked Trump, and some GOP

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Chait, "Five Days That Shaped a Presidency," *New York*, 2 October 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/10/barack-obama-on-5-days-that-shaped-his-presidency.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> For analysis, Brendan Nyhan, "Will Obama really 'break the fever'?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, 24 September 2012, [http://archives.cjr.org/united\\_states\\_project/will\\_obama\\_really\\_break\\_the\\_fever.php](http://archives.cjr.org/united_states_project/will_obama_really_break_the_fever.php).

<sup>6</sup> Norm Orstein, "The Real Story of Obamacare's Birth," *The Atlantic*, 6 July 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/the-real-story-of-obamacares-birth/397742>; "History of the Individual Health Insurance Mandate, 1989-2010," *ProCon.org*, 9 February 2012, <http://healthcarereform.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=004182>.

<sup>7</sup> Chait, "Five Days."

strategists begged the party to change course after Obama's 2012 reelection, fearful that Republicans were becoming the "stupid party."<sup>8</sup> But it was too late. The problem, *Breitbart's* Steve Bannon claimed, was that Romney was a card-carrying member of the "party of Davos," who had more in common with the Clintons than "real" America.<sup>9</sup> In short order, Boehner was cast aside by the Congress he had helped elect in 2010, and Trump was blustering through the Republican primaries, suggesting that the GOP would play total opposition to the end. One could almost hear McConnell's laconic drawl on November 9: 'Checkmate, Mr. President.'

Why did this particular strategy resonate among so many Republicans? Although Obama ran against the Clinton machine in 2008, veterans from Bill Clinton's administration populated the White House in 2009, and Obama's words—his eagerness to trade tax cuts for infrastructure investments—recalled Clinton's so-called 'Third Way' strategy. After 1994, Clinton had rolled back regulations and balanced budgets. This strategy had arguably blunted President Ronald Reagan's revolution (and inarguably eviscerated the Left), and Obama's overtures in 2009 were instantly recognizable among Democrats and widely reviled by Republicans.<sup>10</sup> Bill Clinton had turned every "hard choice" into a "false choice," conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg quipped in 2007. "When asked how he'd have voted in 1990 on the Persian Gulf War, [Clinton] said he agreed with the minority but would have voted with the majority. He smoked pot but didn't inhale. Monica Lewinsky had sex with him, but he could swear under oath he didn't have sex with her."<sup>11</sup> Goldberg's acidity elides the deeper truth that total resistance resonated because Clinton had demonstrated triangulation's potential. McConnell and Boehner cut their teeth in the 1990s; Obama's approach had bested them once already.

This insight gestures toward a pair of preliminary conclusions. First, when we use the chessboard metaphor, Trump emerges from an older story about the rise of New Democrats. The game began in the early 1990s, when Clinton bumbled toward the political center, and it has probably ended with the anti-establishmentarianism of 2016. During that quarter century, Republicans won the popular vote once. It remains to be seen if Trump is a Faustian bargain, but his victory—when considered alongside Senator Bernie Sanders' rise—suggests the arrival of a new set of assumptions. Indeed, second, we are witnessing the start of a different sort of chess match. "It's important for us to understand," Obama commented in 2016, "that whether or not we are able to achieve certain policy objectives is going to be primarily dependent on how many votes we've got in each chamber." The premise of bipartisanship is dead. In Obama's opinion, governance in the United States no longer involves "classic deal-making between Democrats and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ta-Neishi Coates, "On Being the 'Stupid Party,'" *The Atlantic*, 20 November 2012, available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/11/on-being-the-stupid-party/265461>.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Gwynn Guilford and Nikhail Sonnad, "What Steve Bannon Really Wants," *Quartz*, 3 February 2017, available: <https://qz.com/898134/what-steve-bannon-really-wants>.

<sup>10</sup> For insight, Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Winning the Presidency in the Nineties* (New York: Random House, 1997); James Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapters 8-12.

<sup>11</sup> Jonah Goldberg, "Clintonian Triangulation Comes Full Circle," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December 2007, available: <http://www.latimes.com/news/la-oe-goldberg18dec18-column.html>.

Republicans,” and politicians cannot “move to the center on fiscal policy” or any other issue of public importance. His words are a postscript to the 2004 speech that launched his career:

I have very cordial relations with a lot of the Republican members. We can have really great conversations and arrive at a meeting of the minds on a range of policy issues, but if they think they’re going to lose seats or that they’re going to lose their own seat because the social media has declared that they sold out the Republican Party, then they won’t do it. That dynamic . . . is going to be harder and harder to change because of the balkanization of the media, because of political gerrymandering.<sup>12</sup>

### **We’re at War**

Obama’s analysis hints at the problem with chessboards. As metaphor, they imply that everyone knows the rules—and that someone is in control. It is plausible that Boehner cultivated a backlash against Obama to enhance the Republican Party’s leverage within Congress, and that the Speaker planned to use this leverage to resolve America’s debt issues on his terms, which backfired when his caucus—juiced on social media and gerrymandered to the hilt—tossed him into History’s waste bin. But the interpretation is a little narcissistic, and the looking glass metaphor starts from the premise that people simply see things differently. This approach pushes strategy to the side, since no one is omniscient, to focus on the relationship between perspective and creed. Like any belief system, a looking glass adds clarity by removing context, and looking glasses are manmade, which means they can be taken apart and analyzed critically.

How did Trump happen? Trump inspired nearly 63 million people to vote for him—no small feat—and his supporters see the present through a particular lens. “It seems futile to try to generalize about a group as large and disparate as ‘Trump supporters,’” writer George Saunders acknowledged in 2016, but “these people have *something* in common.” In Saunders’s estimation, they emerged from the conservative tradition without being traditionally conservative. They are angry, and nostalgic. When studied up close,

[T]he Trump supporter might be best understood as a guy who wakes up one day in a lively, crowded house full of people, from a dream in which he was the only one living there, and then mistakes the dream for the past: a better time, manageable and orderly, during which privilege and respect came to him naturally, and he had the whole place to himself.<sup>13</sup>

The assessment would feel more condescending if it didn’t ring so true. “Once upon a time there were factories and mills in Oklahoma,” a Trump enthusiast reported to journalist Rick Perlstein in October 2016. People went to church and respected authority, and no one wanted handouts. Then Washington arrived (at some unspecified date), and began raising taxes and distributing welfare, which left Oklahomans “scraping the bottom of the barrel.” According to this particular voter, this new arrangement was fraudulent because it undercut Oklahoma’s ability to take care of itself. “In the name of ‘Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,’ the government taxes away your means of happiness, takes away your liberty to spend your own money as you please, and the benefits, that were supposed to help you, ruin your life.” Trump was no

---

<sup>12</sup> Chait, “Five Days.”

<sup>13</sup> George Saunders, “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?” *New Yorker*, 11 July 2016, available: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/11/george-saunders-goes-to-trump-rallies>.

messiah—he was a “wrecking ball” who promised to restore American greatness by destroying the federal government. For this voter, that was the appeal.<sup>14</sup>

Every ideological framework has blind spots. As Perlstein observed, the voter who articulated these sentiments grew up in a county where unemployment hovers at 4 percent and the real GDP is growing near 3 percent, which is a far cry from the “bottom of the barrel.” Moreover, Oklahoma’s tax burden is the forty-fifth lowest in the United States, which cuts against the premise that taxes and welfare ruined the state. Oklahoma spends less than ten percent of its welfare budget on cash assistance, and the “most a single-parent family of three can get is \$292 a month—that’s eighteen percent of the federal poverty line,” Perlstein discovered. “Only 2,469 of the more than 370,000 Oklahomans aged 18 to 64 who live in poverty get this aid,” and “the state’s Medicaid eligibility is one of the stingiest in the nation, covering only adults with dependent children and incomes below 42 percent of the poverty level.”<sup>15</sup> National studies have affirmed that most Trump supporters blame government for problems caused by corporations.<sup>16</sup> And sure enough, with no sense of irony, this same voter claimed that Walmart saved his town and then blamed the company’s low-paying, part-time jobs on government regulations and national unions.<sup>17</sup>

We are a storytelling species, and this particular narrative is popular because it has been around a while. President Andrew Jackson—whose portrait now hangs in the Oval Office—blamed America’s National Bank for dislocations caused by the market revolutions of the early nineteenth century. After the Civil War, anti-statism saturated politics in the American South, and during Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency it informed resistance to the New Deal. There has always been a tension between advocates of a managerial state and their opponents, and Americans have navigated this fight with a flare for contradiction. Jackson, for instance, lamented Washington’s unchecked power until the judiciary challenged his Indian Removal Acts—then he had no time for checks and balances—and southern politicians lambasted federal government when it targeted slavery and cheered when it electrified the Tennessee River Valley. Similarly, voters celebrated affirmative action when it was white—and called the G.I. Bill—and then fled the Democratic Party as soon as black Americans began receiving federal support. Reagan’s imaginary ‘welfare queen,’ living comfortably on food stamps and public housing, became synonymous with the phrase ‘big government’ after the 1980s, and the epithet successfully popularized the argument that federal support was destroying minority communities by cheating white Americans.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Rick Perlstein, “Peter’s Choice,” *Mother Jones*, January 2017, available: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/01/donald-trump-2016-election-oklahoma-working-class>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell, “Explaining nationalist political views: The case of Donald Trump,” *SSRN*, 2 November 2016, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2822059](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2822059).

<sup>17</sup> Perlstein, “Peter’s Choice.”

<sup>18</sup> For insights, Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction, 15 anniversary edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); David Zucchino, *Myth of the Welfare Queen: A Pulitzer Prize-Winning Journalist’s Portrait of Women on the Line* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Trump and his supporters swim in these rhetorical waters. When asked if government at least deserved credit for ending slavery, Perlstein's voter responded emphatically—no, slavery would have ended on its own—and dismissed race as “an attention-grabbing tool that politicians use to their advantage.” Until “urban liberals move to the rural South,” the young man continued, “there's no way to fully appreciate [my] view.”<sup>19</sup> On the campaign trail, Trump weaponized the notion that the problem was not racism; it was the government's apathy toward white people. Trump's daily tweets conjured images of a long-gone United States with firm borders and copious jobs, destroyed by the indifference of government bureaucrats. On inauguration day, he declared (to an overwhelmingly white crowd) that he was “transferring power from Washington” and “giving it back to you, the people.”<sup>20</sup> Since then his team has plowed ahead with symbolic executive orders and blasted the news media as an “embarrassed and humiliated” opposition party that should “keep its mouth shut and just listen.”<sup>21</sup> Supporters swoon. “It used to be that conservatives” would “get unfair coverage” and “go home and grumble,” Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach said on the *PBS Newshour* in February 2017. Trump “is confrontational, and I think that's refreshing.”<sup>22</sup>

The President obviously relishes these fights, and his surrogates have written extensively about the regenerative power of conflict. According to Bannon, who became Trump's chief strategist in 2016, the president is readying the United States for a once-in-a-generation fight. The baby boomers, Bannon writes, weakened America by embracing moral relativism—renouncing their Judeo-Christian heritage—and bankers eroded capitalism by detaching the profit motive from its moral foundations.<sup>23</sup> Unmoored and avaricious, the country elected Obama, who bailed out Wall Street and cheered on the Islamic State. Bannon's claims are insane and it barely matters. Many of Trump's supporters earnestly believe that Obama is a closeted Muslim.<sup>24</sup> “This is the fourth great crisis in American history,” Bannon boasts. “We had the revolution, we had the Civil War, we had the Great Depression and World War II.” Through violence, the United States would revive its fortunes again. “The biggest open question in this country,” he continues, “is [whether] our grit [is] still there, that tenacity that we've seen on the battlefields.”<sup>25</sup> The new administration's fury has been unfocused so far—directed at immigrants, Muslims, liberals, and reporters—but its message is unmistakable.

---

<sup>19</sup> Perlstein, “Peter's Choice.”

<sup>20</sup> Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” *The White House*, 20 January 2017, available: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Michael Grynbaum, “Trump Strategist Stephen Bannon Says Media Should ‘Keep Its Mouth Shut,’” *New York Times*, 26 January 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/business/media/stephen-bannon-trump-news-media.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/business/media/stephen-bannon-trump-news-media.html?_r=0).

<sup>22</sup> “Does Trump's confrontation style help him as president?” *PBS Newshour*, 16 February 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/trumps-confrontational-style-help-president>.

<sup>23</sup> Gilford and Sonnad, “What Steve Bannon Really Wants.”

<sup>24</sup> German Lopez, “Polls show many—even most—Trump supporters really are deeply hostile to Muslims and nonwhites,” *Vox*, 12 September 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/9/12/12882796/trump-supporters-racist-deplorable>.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Livingston, “The World According to Bannon,” *Jacobin*, 7 February 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/bannon-trump-muslim-travel-ban-breitbart-generation-zero>.



“America at war, America’s at war,” Bannon declared on his radio program in 2015. “We’re at war. Note to self, beloved commander in chief: we’re at war.”<sup>26</sup>

How was this sort of rhetoric mainstreamed? Two decades ago, Patrick Buchanan, a conservative populist who dubbed his followers the ‘pitchfork people,’ was a political curiosity. He lost the 1996 Republican primaries soundly, and won just .4% of the popular vote in 2000. The news industry has obviously splintered since then, creating a platform for Bannon’s ilk, and gerrymandering has become an art form, clustering like-minded Americans into culturally homogeneous congressional fiefdoms. However, the ‘big sort,’ as journalist Bill Bishop coined these processes, is only part of the story.<sup>27</sup> “The remarkable truth is this,” journalist Robert P. Jones noted in 2016, “America is no longer a white Christian nation.” In 2000, white Christians constituted 66% of the electorate; they are now 45% of the electorate. When Buchanan entered politics in the mid-1970s, 63% of Americans identified as Protestant and 25% belonged to the Catholic Church. The decline of American religiosity has overlapped the diversification of American society. As Jones explains,

The same year that Americans reelected George W. Bush as president, the U.S. Census Bureau made waves by predicting that by 2050 the United States would no longer be a majority-white nation. Four years later, when Americans elected Barack Obama as their first African American head of state, the Census Bureau lowered that threshold year to 2042. When Obama was reelected in 2012, population experts forecasted that by 2060 whites will see their numbers decline for the first time in American history, while the number of people who identify as multiracial will nearly triple and the number of Hispanics and Asians will more than double.<sup>28</sup>

Looking glasses are man-made, but these changes are real and fairly new. “What’s happening now in terms of increasing diversity is unprecedented,” Campbell Gibson, a retired census demographer, said in 2008.<sup>29</sup> Gibson is wrong—migration remade the United States in the late nineteenth century and the Census Bureau’s racial categories change regularly—but few Americans ponder the finer points of immigration history and race formation. At least 63 million people *believe* these changes are unprecedented, and if Trump’s supporters are really prepared to go to war over them—to fight for their ideology—then this moment probably should be considered as part of a longer story about the United States and the world.

### City on a Hill . . . with Walls

Thinking about change over time is easier with a different metaphor. After all, while *Vox*’s Dara Lind is surely correct when she writes “there is more to racism than racists,” “thinking harder” about “the terms of the public debate”—the progressive rallying cry of 2017—feels awfully academic when the ‘pitchfork people’ have

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Robert Jones, “The Eclipse of White Christian America,” *The Atlantic*, 12 July 2016, available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/the-eclipse-of-white-christian-america/490724>.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Sam Roberts, “In a Generation, Minorities May Be the U.S. Majority,” *The New York Times*, 13 August 2008, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/14/washington/14census.html>.

a champion.<sup>30</sup> The image of a wave invites scholars to consider the grand sweep of things. History never repeats itself, just as no two waves are identical, but tides come and go, revealing questions that transcend our daily skirmishes over government policy and public discourse. As metaphor, waves can illuminate why the United States became more diverse and less Christian in recent decades, but they emphasize contextualization over mobilization. Waves are not to be outsmarted or deconstructed; you ride them or watch from a safe distance.

If we run with this image, Trump crested late and left a mess. (The existence of this forum testifies to the election's historical importance.) Historian Adam Tooze's initial assessment—the “American century is over”—may prove to be prescient.<sup>31</sup> If nothing else, his words eulogize a year when tsunami warnings felt omnipresent. After Great Britain voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, political scientist Stephen Walt speculated that the “liberal world order” was collapsing, and asked whether its foundations—integrated markets, shared security, and democratic elections—had passed their natural lifespan. “Unless you think the United States has infinite resources and a limitless willingness to subsidize other wealthy states' defenses,” it was hard to deny the simple appeal of Trump's ‘America First’ rhetoric. The real question posed by his candidacy, Walt wrote, was whether liberals would sacrifice other global priorities to preserve a political framework that had taken so long to build?<sup>32</sup>

The answer is revealing itself now, but the question invites a closer look at the waters that Trump displaced. Was Trump (or someone like him) inevitable? The foreign policy establishment in the United States has lambasted the question, proffering a Manichean choice between its record and the President's. “No country in history has ever played the role that the United States has played over the past 70 years,” the Brookings Institution argued in February 2017. And Washington's track record—the establishment's track record—has been quite exceptional:

There is no comparable analogy; even the British Empire, which is often mentioned as comparable, was an extractive and exploitative enterprise that sought to remain aloof from the balance of power in continental Europe, which is precisely the opposite of what the United States sought to accomplish after 1945. It is therefore impressive that there was overwhelming support for this most unusual of grand strategies for so long. It is perhaps best explained by the sense of ‘greatness’ this higher purpose bestowed on Americans, that we were pursuing something more than our narrow interests that benefited a significant proportion of humankind.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Dara Lind, “Racism is big, subtle, and messy,” *Vox*, 13 September 2016, available: <http://www.vox.com/2016/9/13/12889160/basket-deplorables-clinton-americans-racist>.

<sup>31</sup> Adam Tooze, “Goodbye to the American Century,” *Zeit Online*, 13 January 2017, available: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-01/usa-hegemony-donald-trump-rise-leadership-europe>.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Walt, “The Collapse of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2016, available: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/26/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-world-order-european-union-brexite-donald-trump>.

<sup>33</sup> Derek Chollet, Eric Edelman, Michèle Flournoy, Stephen Hadley, Martin Indyk, Bruce Jones, Robert Kagan, Kristen Silverberg, Jake Sullivan, and Thomas Wright, “Building situations of strength: A national security

The Brookings' defensiveness is easier to defend than its hubris. However, if we dump phrases like "higher purpose," few scholars would disagree with the report's periodization—that the United States *embraced* its hegemony after World War II—and many historians would appreciate the subtler tensions on display here.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Brookings sidesteps how the experience of power affected powerbrokers, suggesting that American internationalism has been monolithic, uncontested, and unresponsive to external stimuli since 1945, which is not true. The United States' global footprint has evolved in the past seventy years. Washington has habitually used a sense of threat to justify its ambitions—so there is a tangential connection between the Marshall Plan in Germany and Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq—but the assumptions that oriented these two projects were different.<sup>35</sup> Americans built up the West German government's capacity and promoted interstate interdependence after World War II; they promoted economic privatization and individual entrepreneurship in Iraq after the 2003 invasion.

Indeed, if we put fear to the side, we might argue that American world power came in two waves after 1945. Until the 1970s, the United States projected its influence by making united states. The historical literature on development and governance speaks for itself.<sup>36</sup> After World War II, Washington invested enormous sums not only in Germany and Japan, but also in South Korea, Taiwan, and states in the Middle East, Latin America, and Southern Africa. Even countries like India and Indonesia, which refused to ally with Washington in the Cold War, used American aid to build infrastructure and bureaucracy. These were sovereign countries—they had constitutions and elections, their leaders talked about national identity and participated at the United Nations—but their freedom was circumscribed by conditional loans, trade deals, security pacts, and the conventions of modern diplomacy. By the late 1950s, American state-makers were so confident that they rebranded themselves as scientists, promising things like economic liftoff, and U.S. strategists were clamoring to prop up dominoes in places that many Americans could not find on a map. From the rubble of European imperialism, the United States would create an interdependent community of peaceful, prosperous national states—all in the name of national security.

Vietnam humbled this mindset. But state-makers took the fall of Saigon harder than their strategy-minded counterparts, and Richard Nixon triangulated his way through the early 1970s, ditching the monetary management system that Washington had created after World War II while repudiating the presupposition that the United States had any business building up foreign governments. It cost too much and did not work,

---

strategy for the United States," *Brookings*, February 2017, available: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/fp\\_201702\\_ofc\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/fp_201702_ofc_report_web.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> For recent elaborations, Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (New York: Penguin, 2015); John Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's World Role* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> For relevant thoughts, John Thompson, "The Appeal of 'America First,'" *ISSF Policy Roundtable 1-5Q* (February 2017), <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5Q-America-First>.

<sup>36</sup> For introduction, Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

which was not entirely untrue. As West Europe and Japan eroded America's relative economic weight, state-making receded as the organizing principle of U.S. power. Nixon essentially shook the United States from the interstate community it had cultivated after World War II. Watergate reflected the President's mantra that only bold strategy would preserve American influence while exposing his tendency to equate himself with the national interest.<sup>37</sup>

When Nixon's successors reclaimed the mantle of American exceptionalism, and inaugurated a second wave of U.S. global power, they did so with a different set of assumptions. This has been one of the revelations of the historical literature on rights—they are very political.<sup>38</sup> With Reagan's election, Washington went to war with walls, championing individual freedom and unregulated markets while importing capital to maintain domestic consumption and keep the U.S. government solvent. This project was bolstered by trade pacts, such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Association, and it was rooted in Reagan's high-minded belief that immigration affirmed American exceptionalism. If the United States was a city on a hill—as Puritan settler John Winthrop proclaimed in 1630—the President had no intention of building a community of predictable, like-minded neighbors. Instead, he evoked a “city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.”<sup>39</sup> This vision organized American power after the Cold War, and offered a framework for China's ascendance and Europe's integration, and it is one of the reasons why the United States became more diverse after the 1980s. Washington no longer makes united states—that mission buckled in Vietnam—but America is “still a beacon,” Reagan declared in 1989. “Still a magnet for all . . . the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”<sup>40</sup>

Or it was until recently. Reagan's ‘freedom men’ stumbled with the War on Terror, just as Lyndon Johnson's ‘mandarins of the future’ faltered after decolonization. The Iraq invasion proved incoherent—George W. Bush wanted to build a state by privatizing its economy, using the tools of the second wave of U.S. power to recreate an outcome from the first. The effort made sense to Brookings, and left most Americans confused and angry. Obama arguably invigorated Reagan's America—his story embodied the tensions and possibilities of Reagan's shining city—and deployed U.S. influence in a way that Reagan would have comprehended. But Obama was black, and while Reagan talked about diversity, Obama presided over the aforementioned

---

<sup>37</sup> For introduction, Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> For introduction, Barbara Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Steven Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights: The 1960s, Decolonization, and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> “Transcript of Reagan's Farewell Address to the Nation,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/12/news/transcript-of-reagan-s-farewell-address-to-american-people.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>40</sup> “Transcript of Reagan's Farewell Address.”

demographic shift. Regardless of whether Trump successfully weds new assumptions to American power, Republicans have unquestionably repudiated their forbearers' worldview. "Even a shining city on a hill needs walls," Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton explained in January 2017. "Times and circumstances change, and policies change along with them."<sup>41</sup> It is as inevitable as a wave that hits the seashore and recedes back into the ocean.

### Trump as History

Was Trump (or someone like him) inevitable? The answer depends on whether this second wave is truly over. Reagan's distinct combination of claims—about deregulation, immigration, and individual freedom—has enjoyed bipartisan support within the American establishment, arguably since Bill Clinton found his third way through the 1990s. And as Brookings' report suggests, the space between Robert Kagan and Michèle Flournoy—policymakers who co-wrote that paper and advised rival presidents—is surprisingly narrow. Few Trump supporters have the intellectual dexterity to blame Reagan for the fact that America is more diverse and less religious, but there is an undeniable tension between proselytizing a borderless world and expecting that world to exist on your terms. (It is a bit like building an interstate community and assuming everyone will follow your lead.) The irony is rich. The United States is not just vibrant and crowded, as Saunders suggested after his adventures in Trump land. Viewed with the proper perspective, Reagan organized the party that Trump wants to break up.

How did this happen? Although history's authority gestates with time, historical thinking can take many forms, and these three metaphors—chessboard, looking glass, and wave—hint at distinct yet complementary interpretations. It is tempting to indulge in counterfactuals. If Boehner and McConnell had taken a different approach toward Obama in 2009—or if McCain had won the 2008 election—perhaps Trump would be hosting the *Apprentice* right now. But the truth is that Trump popularized sentiments with deep roots in American political life at a moment of significant change. Lambasting his words while ignoring this context is a fool's errand. And it should not distract from the fact that the president's boosters believe they are riding a new wave in America's long story—rebuilding the country's military might in the name of religious patriotism—readying the rest of us for an epic conflict that will renew our national pride. Mocking their hyperbole is probably unwise.

Acquiescence is undoubtedly worse. History cannot stop Trump, of course, but it might contextualize the present for those who oppose his future. If turnout will determine American politics going forward, as Obama suggests, Trump's opponents face a particular challenge. They have to offer their supporters something to vote for—a looking glass that does not sidestep the challenges and anxieties of the present. Time will tell if Trump is a Nixon redux—using bluster, rather than strategy, to shore up America's influence—or a harbinger of the next chapter in U.S. and the world history.

**Ryan Irwin** is an associate professor at the University at Albany, SUNY. His first book, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford University Press, 2012), explored how

---

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, "Even a Shining City on a Hill Needs Walls," *The Atlantic*, 26 January 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/tom-cotton-donald-trump-one-china/514226>.

African independence altered the international system at the height of the Cold War. His current book examines what the Free World meant to its architects during the mid-twentieth century. He's also researching a book on Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

© **Copyright 2017 The Authors** | 