

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 14th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by **Sir David Manning**, UK Ambassador to the US (2003-2007), a Director of Gatehouse Advisory Partners and GSF Advisory Board member; and **Sir Jeremy Greenstock**, UK Permanent Representative to the UN (1998-2003) and the current Chair of Gatehouse Advisory Partners. As always, the views expressed are those of the authors and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

## The United States At The Crossroads: Deepening Division Or Renewed Global Leadership?

The last time that the United States was wracked by such domestic turmoil, and was the focus of such critical international scrutiny, was during the Nixon years. A turbulent period of mass, sometimes violent, demonstrations and social dislocation ended in a hurried military withdrawal from South Vietnam and the resignation in 1974 of a President who had acquiesced in the Watergate break-in and was caught lying in the ensuing cover-up.

Yet, shocking and chastening as those events were, their outcome provided striking proof of the strength of the American constitution and the international role of the United States. Vice-President Ford moved seamlessly into the White House with the endorsement of both Republicans and Democrats and held the country together until the presidential election of 1976. American global leadership barely broke step as Ford, Carter, Reagan and finally Bush Senior successively held the Western Alliance together until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Mark Twain allegedly said that ‘History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes.’ Despite widespread protests and a President reviled by many, what is happening in America today is profoundly different from the Nixon years. The United States is now led by a President whose guiding political principle both domestically and internationally is to divide and rule. Trump was elected in 2016 with a minority of the popular vote after a campaign that was notable for his personalised attacks on his opponents. Denigration of those whom he challenges, or who challenge him, is a trade mark. His targets have frequently been members of his own Administration who have offered advice that has been objective but unwelcome. Their reward has invariably been some form of character assassination by tweet, followed by summary dismissal.

The political climate in the United States was already disturbingly polarised and confrontational when Trump took office. It has become steadily more rancid and abusive as his term has progressed. Many Americans, and many of America’s friends and admirers, despair that civilised debate and cross-party deliberation in pursuit of the national good



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is any longer possible. Such concepts appear to be anathema to a President who seeks to profit from differences not conciliate them. At no time since his inaugural Presidential address set the tone, has Trump shown any interest in speaking to the whole nation as the advocate for all its different constituent elements.

Until January, this approach continued to pay political dividends. Trump's chances of re-election looked good. A soaring stock market and an apparently fragmented Democratic Party made a second Trump victory look not only plausible but likely, particularly given the American electorate's reluctance to evict a President after one term.

Now the calculation looks altogether different. The Democrats have rallied behind Biden as their presidential candidate and the US economy is on the skids as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic which Trump initially underestimated and then mishandled. He is accused of being more interested in the economic numbers, which may be crucial to his re-election chances, than in the numbers of COVID-19 victims. Some of those worst affected by the virus are African Americans, often among the poorest members of the community, often with minimal health insurance, often the victims not just of COVID-19 but of racial discrimination. George Floyd's death under the knee of a white policeman in Minneapolis lit a fuse among Americans of many different backgrounds suffering from economic hardship, poor health care and racial inequality.

So far the President has found no convincing words to address them. Instead, he has preferred to pose as a tough law-and-order President, warning that *'when the looting starts the shooting starts'*, lumping together those demonstrating peacefully over George Floyd's death with the small minority of violent anarchists seeking to exploit the current

wave of protest rolling across America and around the world.

Dr Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State in President George W. Bush's Administration, is someone who knows about racial discrimination at first hand from her childhood in, then, racially segregated Alabama. She has called upon Trump to stop tweeting and instead have a conversation with the American people. General Jim Mattis, one of several former Secretaries of State for Defense in Trump's revolving door Pentagon, has condemned the President for threatening to use US troops against demonstrators. He has described Trump as a threat to the US constitution and the first President in his lifetime who seeks to divide the nation rather than unite it.

Perhaps ominously for Trump, a growing number of senior Republican Party figures are speaking out against him for the first time. More may follow, putting nation above party, something that with the notable exception of Mitt Romney they have hitherto been conspicuously unwilling to do. A President who has scorned so many, including those on his own side, may find there are few that he can count on.

Any parallel with the Nixon period and its aftermath also falls down when it comes to America's international standing and its relations with its allies. Trump has repeatedly trumpeted his 'America First' policy, determined to use US economic and military muscle to dominate friends as well as rivals. Unlike his predecessors he has deliberately undermined and spurned international institutions. He has pursued protectionist trade policies while compromising the smooth working of the World Trade Organisation. He has withdrawn the United States from the World Health Organisation (at the height of the worst health crisis the world has faced since the flu pandemic of 1918/19) and from the 2017 Paris Climate Change Accord. He has been



reluctant to renew or renegotiate nuclear arms control agreements that have provided a security framework since the end of the Cold War.

It is obvious that he declines and disdains the leadership role that the US has played for over three generations, one that has sought to promote a global order based on democracy, the rule of law and free trade. Whatever mistakes and misjudgements the United States and its allies made in pursuing this multilateral vision over the years, and some were egregious, their shared commitment to building and sustaining a co-operative, rules-based international system was never in doubt.

Now it is. Trump takes the view that alliances and international organisations are an obstacle to American interests rather than a facilitator of them. His main interlocutor is more likely to be Fox News than allied leaders, whom he frequently disparages.

As a result, transatlantic relations are now at their lowest ebb for fifty years, and at the very moment when the rise of an increasingly antagonistic and assertive Communist China, and the threat from a revanchist, opportunistic Russia, puts a premium on close coordination between North America and its European partners.

The risk is that this widening gulf will turn into permanent schism. It is not just that Trump has no interest in Europe and no wish to work with European leaders, he has no interest either in giving a strong US lead to resolve the major global challenges that we share. He has made no attempt during the COVID-19 crisis to mobilise the G7 (the US currently holds the rotating chair) and has also failed to encourage the G20 to try to fashion a global response. It is impossible to imagine such indifference on the part of any former post-war Republican or Democratic US President.

There is also a growing realisation that, with Trump in the White House, America and its traditional partners may no longer share the same values. It is all but impossible to associate Trump with cooperation, conciliation and compromise, the values at the heart of free, transparent, democratic polities and societies. He appears to regard such values as a sign of weakness, incompatible with America's fundamental interests. Indeed, he seems often to prefer the tough talk and arbitrary behaviour of authoritarian leaders, who seldom do more than pay lip service to accountability, and who have no time for democratic consensus building either at home or abroad.

In the presidential election in five months' time, the American electorate will have the chance to pass judgement. Trump may win again, particularly if he can portray himself as the champion of law and order amidst violence and disintegration. He still retains a strong core base of support; his track record is second to none when it comes to rhetoric designed to exploit divisions; and he comes to the campaign unencumbered by respect for his opponent or for any rules of engagement. He may yet be able to capitalise on a quicker post COVID-19 economic recovery than has so far been predicted. He may be able to whip up nationalist feeling against China as bilateral relations with Beijing continue to deteriorate with unpredictable consequences. He may beat Biden if the latter fails to offer a compelling vision for America's future. The electorate know that Biden is against Trump but they are, as yet, uncertain what he is for.

If there is a second Trump term, it will be a signal that half of America shares his outlook and condones his behaviour. It would almost certainly put further stress on the American constitution and on American institutions, not least the judiciary, which has played a key role in restraining the Administration in the past three years. It would, too, strain further the



fabric of a divided American society that will be wrestling with historically high levels of inequality and unemployment and with the racial conundrums that Trump has declined to address. It might also prove terminal for the multilateral institutions and alliances that have bound the West together since the Second World War and that have helped promote peace and prosperity around the globe.

A Biden presidency would not repair the damage quickly or easily. America's racial problems need deep, creative and sustained treatment before they can be overcome, as does the racial discrimination that scars many other countries including our own. And although the Western allies would be hugely relieved to have an internationalist President Biden, who would again seek to provide US leadership on the basis of co-operation and shared values, the global challenges will remain immense.

America's justified demands that the Europeans take more of the strain and pay more of the bills will not go away. Domestic pressures might make it difficult for Biden to conduct a firm but balanced relationship with China; and he has yet to set out a bold and imaginative approach to economic recovery. Nevertheless, despite the caveats, a Biden presidency would be transformative because he is not Trump. The dynamics of international relations

would change. We could hope to rebuild international co-operation rather than watch it disintegrate further in a world of dog-eat-dog nationalism.

Finding an antidote to COVID-19 will be crucial to global stability and well-being over the next five years. So will the outcome of the US Presidential election this November.

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