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**When the Trump Administration Ends; The Painful Task of Rebuilding Trust in American Leadership Can Begin**

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By Christopher R. Hill, June 19, 2020

The 2020 U.S. presidential election is still five months away, an eternity in American politics. Anything can happen, but polling trends increasingly suggest that the presidency of Donald Trump, which has itself seemed like an eternity to many, may be heading to its ignoble end.

Should the Trump administration lose its purchase on Washington, the presidency to follow will face a daunting task. The country needs to be brought back into compliance with its values, the rule of law, and the vital role it once played in the world as a beacon of hope, security, and leadership.

That road will be long and tough. When he departs the White House, Trump will have left the United States bereft of friends and admirers beyond its borders, save for a menagerie of unsavory characters who share the U.S. president’s dystopic vision. Damage scars every front, domestic and foreign. The institutions of governance inside the United States have been ripped apart, and many competent employees with great expertise in their fields driven away, unlikely ever to want to return to the federal government. If he wins the presidency, former Vice President Joe Biden will need to inspire a new generation of Americans to take up the call of duty: to restore the rule of law to the United States and defend the concept of government of, by, and for the people.

Beyond such clarion calls, however, the next administration will face the arduous task of regenerating trust in public service, not least by strengthening the institutions that protect those who perform it from political pressure, starting with the inspectors general and extending to those whose accountability is to the Constitution and to their oaths rather than to the person of the president. And it will have to restore the trust of other nations in a United States still fundamentally divided at home over what its role should be abroad.

**Stop the Slide**

The Trump presidency has been particularly destructive to standards of excellence and expertise in government service, where appointing loyalists has become more the norm. In recent years, the number of political appointees to governmental positions has increased to record highs, a byproduct of the failure to enact any workable campaign finance laws. Such an outcome is hardly surprising from an administration whose president refers pejoratively to the career services as the “deep state.” But it contributes to both the appearance and the reality of a government vulnerable to political pressure and executive interference.

Ambassadorships are particularly at issue. Passing the Foreign Service exam should not be the be all and end all qualification for becoming an ambassador: the interests of the country are often well served by emissaries with experience from other walks of life. But the increasing tendency to tie ambassadorial appointments to campaign contributions or political influence erodes the value of the positions and the regard in which U.S. overseas emissaries are held. No other major country doles out ambassadorships on the basis of campaign contributions in the manner that has become so acceptable in U.S. foreign policy. One can almost imagine a day when ambassadorships will be advertised with a price tag attached, along with perhaps a description of the official residence. The next administration needs to look hard at candidates who would serve as the United States’ eyes and ears abroad, with a view to ensuring that qualifications are paramount.

The Trump administration has damaged U.S. foreign policy not only in the manner of its appointments but by acting on views of the United States’ role in the world that were long thought to be extreme. To correct course, the next administration will need to return to fundamental questions of American grand strategy before it can even address such matters of nuance as its priorities for specific regions or issues abroad. Under Trump, the United States navigates the world alone, with neither a moral compass nor allies to escort it, toward an undetermined destination. The next administration should seek instead to enhance U.S. prosperity and security by working with like-minded friends, partners, and even competitors who respect the global system that the United States has helped build.

The problem of American unilateralism predates the Trump administration. The downfall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the world’s only remaining superpower led to triumphalism and a resultant tendency to reach too far in trying to remake the world in the U.S. image. The United States quickly squandered its reservoir of goodwill around the world by finger wagging and grandstanding on matters of democratic governance, with little regard to local histories. It even issued report cards on other countries, complete with a grade structure as if from an elementary school. By pressing such priorities, the United States no doubt helped strengthen international respect for the Human Rights Charter and other aspects of humanitarian law. But it did so at a cost to relationships with countries that perceive the U.S. approach as bullying.

Now, there are countries, in increasing numbers, whose support for international rules and norms is deteriorating. Under new leadership, the United States should address their backsliding, but by working with others when possible and alone only when absolutely necessary. Such work will be complicated by the widespread impression that the United States is itself one of the main backsliders. Washington will need to strengthen its domestic institutions if it is to supply a positive example for other countries straining to hang on to democratic norms. Moreover, a new administration will have to redress the damage the Trump administration has done by seemingly cultivating better relationships with dictatorships than with democracies: for example, Washington now appears to be on better terms with North Korea than with South Korea. The United States cannot avoid engaging with countries that do not share its values—but there should be no doubt about whom it considers its friends and allies.

**Restore Trust**

The Trump administration came in with the understanding that it inherited a war-weary public, tired of a militarized foreign policy that seemed to land the United States in open-ended commitments with dubious explanations. Trump has stayed away from major military deployments for this reason—but he has shown a persistent inability to choose wisely between military and diplomatic levers, often threatening the former while reducing the latter to theatrical reality television (in the case of North Korea) or essentially doing nothing (in the case of diplomacy with Iran). Both military action and diplomacy are serious means to serious ends. They need to be carefully explained to the American people, and not by a tweet.

Most concerning, the president, aided by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has made the United States largely irrelevant and incapable of shaping the international climate to support its interests. He has done this by withdrawing the United States from international agreements and multilateral endeavors without any explanation as to how this retreat might keep the country safer. Increasingly drastic reductions to foreign assistance have in some cases pushed the United States out of the picture entirely. During the Libyan crisis in 2013, an Obama administration spokesperson infamously coined the phrase “leading from behind.” Republicans at the time bridled at any suggestion of the United States being positioned “behind.” Now, Trump and Pompeo seem to object more to the first word of the phrase.

U.S. public opinion has long been suspicious of global governance and of the multilateral agencies and institutions the United States helped create. Yet to restore American leverage and global influence will surely require a new president to embrace these institutions and clearly explain to the public how they serve U.S. interests. The Trump administration’s contempt for the World Health Organization, for example, reduced not only the United States’ role in fighting the global coronavirus pandemic but also its domestic capacity to prepare for the virus’s spread. A new president will have to convince the American people of the value of playing an active role in international structures. Similarly, a new president will need to persuade the public that the United States will command far more influence if it is faithful to its fundamental principles and values than if it acts simply as another denizen of the international jungle.

Once the new president has laid out a comprehensive vision of the United States’ role in the world, skilled and well-prepared diplomats (remember them?) will need to be dispatched to amplify the president’s message and explain to friend and foe alike what they can now expect from the United States. The United States will have to demonstrate its regained reliability by acceding to global agreements, such as the Paris climate accord, from which the Trump administration withdrew, and by working patiently and at its own expense to restore global trust.

As Joe Biden has said many times, the United States is a resilient country. Certainly not in recent history will that description be put more to the test. But as Winston Churchill supposedly once said of his mother’s native country, the United States always does the right thing, after it has exhausted all the other possibilities.