

Naive or Cynical (or Both)? U. S. Alliance Strategies and Authoritarian Counterparts

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Abstract

Existing models of “authoritarian cooperation and diffusion” rely on an implicit comparison between these and the alliance strategies of the leading Western democracies, in particular, the United States. But post-Cold War U. S. alliance strategies call into question the starkness of that binary contrast. The United States has constructed multiple forms of alliance with diverse and contrasting regime types. It has tended either to exercise global hegemonic authority through “liberal internationalism”; to build “alliances of the willing”; or to assert national primacy. Historically, there have been sharp shifts in emphasis over time, partly driven by international developments, but also often by domestic factors. This essay uses a comparative American Political Development (APD) approach to highlight how, in a context of a high degree of discretion, an unstable mix of national beliefs and values entangled with rival domestic interests and political ambitions compete to set external alliance strategies. It also distinguishes between some recent and contingent impediments to effective U. S. international leadership and other more durable setbacks to Washington’s capacity for alliance-maintenance and rebuilding.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, discretion, exceptionalism, hegemony, idealism, realism.

I’d rather be naïve than cynical.
—Condoleezza Rice¹

Since at least 1945, the United States has exercised global leadership, crafting alliances and shaping international institutions to produce a world

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¹ In Berlin, shortly after the invasion of Iraq, European policy makers told Condoleezza Rice (then U. S. National Security adviser) she was too wide-eyed about the prospects for democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her response: “*I’d rather be naïve than cynical*. I had thought to

order congruent with its interests and reflective of its declared values. This overarching generalization is too simple. Different subperiods need to be distinguished, national priorities have varied as both external and domestic pressures have shifted, genuine alternative possibilities have been discarded, and the commitment to U. S. ascendancy has wavered over time. Indeed, after seven decades, such orthodox assumptions underlying this hegemonic project are now being brought into question. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, an “America First” challenger disrupted many features of this longstanding discursive consensus. This analysis is prompted by the challenges and discontinuities arising from Donald Trump’s insurgent takeover of the leadership of the Republican Party, and his subsequent elevation to the presidency, buttressed by clear or slight partisan majorities in his favor in both of the houses of Congress.

It is early days for assessing how this new disposition will unfold, or whether actual policies will bear any relationship to the disruptive rhetoric of that election campaign,² but it is not too soon to look into the precursor conditions and subterranean tendencies that foreshadow Trump’s electoral breakthrough. His first fifteen months in office have proved sufficiently remarkable to provide a benchmark for reassessing orthodox assumptions about the domestic underpinnings of U. S. global leadership, and the stability of the interests/values matrix determining its alliance strategies. Of particular interest in the context of this journal issue is what these developments indicate about the supposed binary divide separating authoritarian from democratic regime types in regard to the support and promotion of liberal democracy as a global norm.

myself...returning to my hotel I felt *so* American—with a kind of optimism about the rightness of democracy for everyone, everywhere, at all times.” Condoleezza Rice, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom* (New York: Twelve, 2017), 26. Although the Founders (naively) took it as “self-evident” that “all men are created equal,” they went on to unanimously (and cynically) adopt the Three-Fifths Clause of the U. S. Constitution, providing that, for the purpose of allocating representation in the House, three-fifths of the slave population would be added to the free population (“Indians” were rated zero). Likewise, even after the abolition of slavery, the democratic idealism of the 1879 state constitution of California proclaimed that “all men by nature [are] free and independent and have certain inalienable rights,” but Article II, section I, which granted universal adult male suffrage, also (cynically) “*provided*, no native of China, no idiot (etc.)...shall ever exercise the privilege of an elector in this State.”

² Even at this early stage, a remarkable number of U. S. political scientists have come forward with strong interpretations of what the 2016 election reveals about the hitherto unconsidered weaknesses of U. S. democracy. Consider Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017); and Cass R. Sunstein, ed., *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018). Note the assumed collective “we” in these titles, which are not written for the American *demos* in its entirety.

We draw on the American Political Development (APD) research tradition and compare official U. S. rhetoric and practices with their equivalents in other leading nations—both other leading democracies and some important nondemocracies. A comparative and historical standpoint necessarily casts doubt on some assertions about “American exceptionalism” that have tended to cloud discussion in this area.

The APD approach to explanation is worth developing, given the reduced leverage of other standard approaches. U. S. strategies are not determined by concerns with regime survival. Although geopolitical necessity plays some part, U. S. security suffices to leave unusual scope for alternative choices. This relative “exceptionalism” leaves Washington comparatively free to opt for a suit of self-directed alliance strategies. Among other possibilities, it can project itself as “leader of the Free World,” while at the same time promote strong alliances with select authoritarian regimes. Despite this large discretion over alliance choices, Washington’s external commitments are still subject to major constraints that require systematic explanation: internationally by inertia and the “sunk costs” of past commitments, and domestically by the need to manage both elite and mass opinion in an open democracy. Under current conditions, both kinds of constraint have been much in evidence, with gridlock and polarization producing tensions and loss of direction. This has weakened Washington’s capacity to exercise international leadership and undermined its long-proclaimed intention to orchestrate democratization processes worldwide.

A historical reappraisal of the orthodox assumptions prevailing before 2016, and the jolt they received at that point, require a long-run perspective. Thus, we begin with a condensed historical overview of the evolution of U. S. “hegemonic” leadership in world affairs since 1945. There follows a section addressing claims about “American exceptionalism” in comparative terms. Our third framing approach concerns the decline of the domestic political dynamics that long supported an internationalist U. S. foreign policy.

These perspectives ground our core arguments concerning U. S. alliance strategies in the post-Cold War period, especially as they relate to the conventional “democracy/authoritarian regime” dichotomy. In the final sections of the essay, we draw some tentative conclusions about likely developments in the projection of U. S. leadership and highlight the implications of our analysis for international engagement with the advances (or retreats) of democratic development around the globe.

The Long-Run Evolution of U. S. “Hegemony”

The United States was already in the ascendant in its own continent well before it attained global preeminence, acquiring experience and developing a self-understanding of its international entitlements through its internal and regional expansionism. Although it adhered to an antiimperialist outlook laced with isolationism on extra-continental issues, the nineteenth century doctrine of

“Manifest Destiny” deployed exceptionalist arguments to justify the aggressive acquisition of land and eventually naval bases.³ This ended in 1898 and was followed by a tussle between the temptations of global power projection and the alternative attractions of world leadership through moral internationalism. Woodrow Wilson championed the second alternative from 1902 onward.⁴

In Walter Lippmann’s formulation, the “American Century”⁵ in world affairs began when Wilson led the United States into the First World War. However, a coherent approach to global governance emerged only with the Second conflagration, and a U. S.-led international system began to take shape only with the total defeat of the Axis powers. The key ingredients of a Washington-based “hegemonic” order were put in place during the first two decades of the postwar era. These innovations notably included the occupation and democratic reconstruction of Germany, Italy, and Japan; the decolonization of the British and French empires, in some cases giving rise to new democratic regimes; the development of a network of security arrangements and military alliances designed to “contain” the Soviet bloc, in the name of an ostensibly “free” world (although this included the Iberian dictatorships, and other military and monarchical systems with few or no liberal credentials); and the establishment of an array of international treaty-based organizations intended to prevent a return to the destructive nationalisms of the interwar period.

There followed a second phase lasting over a decade, in which this emerging system was subjected to some severe stresses, especially in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and U. S. leadership seemed to falter (as exemplified domestically by Watergate, and externally with the humiliating evacuation from South Vietnam). The third phase of the Cold War took a different direction as the Sino-Soviet split provided an opportunity for Washington to win ascendancy over Moscow, and the dynamism of an increasingly globalized market system outstripped the rigidities of the ossified command economy alternative. The Sino-Soviet divide is particularly noteworthy in this context, since it was made possible only by the Nixon-Kissinger decision to promote reconciliation with a “Red” enemy state, governed by Mao Zedong’s radicalized communist regime.

³ Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the U. S. Military Overseas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

⁴ Tony Smith, *Why Woodrow Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). But compare Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers* (London: Verso, 2014). See also, Patricia O’Toole, *The Moralists: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2018), which topically highlights the perils of moral vanity and American overreach in foreign affairs.

⁵ Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1999).

A century has elapsed since the United States moved from regional to global primacy, but the first quarter of that period was characterized by hesitancy and missed opportunities, and then half a century of evolving Cold War bipolarity supervened. It was only during the last quarter century that resolute U. S. primacy coexisted with unipolar ascendancy, and even that brief period has witnessed two sharp discontinuities: 9/11 and the financial crisis of 2008.

This essay focuses primarily on the three decades following the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. The fall of the Berlin Wall brought to an end the Cold War explanation for U. S. entanglements with repressive authoritarian regimes. A new era was proclaimed. A world community of democracies orchestrated from Washington would exert increased leverage over the world's retrograde predemocratic residue to ensure the spread of "best practice" Western liberal democratic standards. A quarter of a century later, how accurate was that forecast, and how sound the underlying premise that geopolitical victory would systematically align U. S. foreign policies to promote democracy and democratization? In stark contrast to much official rhetoric about democracy promotion, outside the EU, the efforts have been meagre, the results patchy, and the backlash strong. This contrast between earnest hopes and intractable realities helps to explain the change in outlook crystallized by the 2016 election outcome. The academy may be the only world in which the 1990s framework of assumptions about the democracy/authoritarianism binary remains ascendant.

A brief overview of the post-Cold War record suffices to back up the above assessment. Democracy did advance substantially in the first decade, although it stalled thereafter, and seems on the retreat most recently. But did Washington's international policies contribute to that initial advance, or help resist the subsequent retreat?

The Gulf War—the first "big initiative"—forced Saddam Hussein to disgorge Kuwait and restored the Emir's probusiness family autocracy. The most energetic U. S. democracy-promoting policies—vis-à-vis post-Tiananmen China, Russia (an intense embrace of the Yeltsin administration), and Cuba (stepped-up sanctions against the Castro regime)—did not produce the expected results. NATO bombing forced Milosevic out in Belgrade and detached Kosovo from Serbia, but the Balkans hardly can be portrayed as a clear-cut success for democratization, and it is the EU rather than Washington that has led such successes as have been achieved there. Plan Colombia, the last big initiative launched at the end of Clinton's second term (bolstering the Colombian armed forces and subsequently the Uribe administration), was concerned mostly with counter-insurgency and only tangentially with democracy. Thereafter, Washington turned its supposedly prodemocracy efforts to the Greater Middle East. The Taliban was ousted from Kabul and Saddam Hussein from Baghdad. The consequences in terms of democracy and

human rights require little comment here.⁶ The second Bush administration also encouraged elections in Palestine, but voters there chose the “wrong” alternative and the results were promptly delegitimized.⁷ Clumsy initiatives in Georgia and the Ukraine provoked military backlash from Moscow.⁸ President Obama spoke up for Arab democracy in Cairo in 2009, but the “Arab Spring” unfolded soon after without effective U. S. support (except in Libya, where previous “regime change” blunders recurred) and with contrary results, notably in Bahrain and in Egypt where U. S. influence was strongest.⁹ To reiterate then, recent U. S. democracy promotion efforts have been “meagre,” the results have been “patchy,” and the backlash has been “strong.”

To complete the historical record, we should note the main examples of democratic advance over this period. South Africa made its transition, and the U. S. made a positive contribution (mainly in Namibia), but Washington was a latecomer and a relatively secondary player in that process. The same can be said about Chile. Post-communist Eastern Europe democratized, but overall this was guided as much, if not more so, by the incentives of European enlargement as by Washington’s activities. In Mexico, the relationship between the creation of NAFTA (1994) and the phased establishment of democracy (full alternation only was achieved six years later) remains a topic of debate—did Mexico’s strong integration into North America shelter its fragile new democracy from disruptive populism, or did it thwart hopes for a more inclusive and responsive political system? In Indonesia, the downfall of the Suharto regime and the installation of a democratic system was a major advance, but it was not led by the United States. Where Washington had the most leverage (as in Egypt, Georgia, Honduras, and Thailand) the evidence of principled support for these incipient democracies is mostly thin.

The record of Washington’s response to democratic resistance and backsliding is similarly equivocal. The most important case is China. Following the Tiananmen Square upheaval, Washington initially brought pressure to bear on Beijing to ease repression and return to a path of political liberalization. But as it became clear that the Communist Party remained in full control and was implacably opposed to the agenda of the student protesters, the strategic and economic benefits of continued U. S. cooperation with the regime returned to the fore, and within a few years the attractions of stability, prosperity, and collaboration with Beijing swamped the urge to press for political opening.

⁶ For one forthright critique, see Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of American Promise* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007).

⁷ Jason Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US–Egyptian Alliance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chap. 4.

⁸ For a nuanced insider account, see Steven Pifer, *The Eagle and the Trident: US–Ukraine Relations in Turbulent Times* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2017).

⁹ Elliott Abrams, *Realism and Democracy: American Foreign Policy after the Arab Spring* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Washington had more than enough opportunities to support the democratization of other more pliable post-communist regimes.

In stark contrast to the Chinese case, U. S. policy makers enjoyed an unprecedented degree of access and influence over the Yeltsin administration in Moscow. During the 1990s, the Russian Federation seemed willing to go to extraordinary lengths to embrace Western alternatives to the discredited Soviet model, and to exemplify the transformative potential of U. S. support. But a decade later, both elite and popular perceptions of the attractions of this path were exhausted. Indeed, this turbulent period of U. S.-supported “liberalization and democratization” is now remembered mainly as a national humiliation. That perception partly reflects the propaganda successes of an increasingly authoritarian (albeit formally still “hybrid”) Putin regime. But, equally, Washington’s policy choices also helped to make such negative assessments believable. So, in the longer run, the result has been a reassertion of both centralized political control and national (even “great power”) Russian assertiveness, with a particular focus on resisting U. S. interference in internal affairs, and more recently on turning the tables against the democratic West.

The two dominant features of the negative reaction can be summed up as “backsliding”¹⁰ on liberal democracy at home, and “pushback” (as covered by the IDCAR project) against liberal internationalism abroad. Although the Russian and Chinese trajectories starkly contrast, both of these major states resolved to oppose Washington’s democracy agenda, at least in their areas of regional influence, and seem willing to work together to that effect.¹¹ Although China and Russia may be the strongest players, here, this response is not confined to former (and current) communist regimes. Iran and its 2009 “green revolution” movement provide another important example. And despite the House of Saud’s intense entanglements with Western military and commercial elites, so does Wahhabi-inflected Saudi Arabia, especially following the “Arab Spring.” Other significant “backsliders” with some leverage in Washington include Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, perhaps Poland, and Thailand.

In summary, therefore, the historical record since 1945, including the post-1989 period, and particularly the past decade or so, reveals a clear mismatch between the international alliance strategy pursued by Washington to underpin its “hegemonic” role in world affairs and the “global community of democracies” narrative deployed to legitimize U. S. ascendancy. This record undermines the centrality of the “authoritarian/democratic” binary divide so prominent in much academic work in current comparative politics.

A “realist” approach to international relations would counter that alliance strategies always are determined by the logic of interstate competition, leaving little scope for any power, no matter how dominant, to choose or forswear

¹⁰ Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5-19.

¹¹ Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018).

partners solely on any other grounds than real “interests.”¹² But this disregards the considerable discretion available to Washington policy makers, a margin of choice beyond strategic necessity that always was important, and that increased still further after 1989.

During the Cold War, it was easy to explain why Washington treated some “authoritarian” regimes as good allies and viewed some “democracies” as unreliable or even disloyal. But after 1989, the contrast between realists and democratic idealists became much sharper, with the former still insisting that the cloak of values was misleading, and the latter remaining committed to the authenticity of the “democracy promotion” agenda under unipolar conditions. After 9/11, the so-called “war on terror” temporarily shifted the terms of this debate, and after the 2008 financial crisis the focus shifted again, but until 2016 each camp could still claim that its respective views would be vindicated in the long run, once normalcy returned. However, a retrospective assessment in the light of the Trump election casts serious doubt on the adequacy of both competing explanations. So, what did they overlook?

“Constructivism” and U. S. Alliance Choices

The rhetorical shocks to the commonly accepted view of the world by the incoming Trump administration become less puzzling in the light of the mentioned antecedents. But U. S. public discourse is still wedded to a narrative about the special value of American democracy, and the beneficent role the U. S. is destined to play in world affairs.¹³ There long have been intense debates between global liberal evangelists and “America Firsters” (and a range of mixed or intermediate positions), but what mainly determines the outcome is not external realities but rather the balance of domestic beliefs and agendas, and the ways in which the conduct of allies and adversaries is selectively interpreted and processed by both elite and mass domestic opinion.¹⁴ For a long time, there has been a considerable divergence between international

¹² For the contextual factors behind the evolution of “realist” doctrines, see John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ The George W. Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy*, published just before the Iraq invasion, ended with a promise to “further freedom’s triumph,” “to lead in this great mission,” and to “work actively to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world.” Fifteen years later, Condoleezza Rice recorded her response to European doubts about her expectations of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan as follows: “*I’d rather be naïve than cynical. ...I felt so American—with a kind of optimism about the rightness of democracy for everyone, everywhere, at all times.*” See Rice, *Democracy*, 26.

¹⁴ There is a vast literature on the endless debates that have long informed U. S. foreign policy. Charles Laderman and Brendan Simms even have taken the trouble to reconstruct three decades of Trumpian “thinking” on such questions in *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017). But for our purposes, it is as useful to trace broader domestic traditions concerning America and its role in the world. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1962) provides an indispensable insight.

dynamics and how they are domestically assessed, with Washington often seeming capable of bending realities to make them more closely conform to domestic expectations. But even at the apex of its power, this kind of forced adjustment was limited and artificial, and in current conditions, the “Making America Great Again” agenda seems to many U. S. partners to require an excessive degree of plasticity.

Consequently, we now focus on broadly “constructivist” explanations of the domestic beliefs and expectations that shape Washington’s alliance choices, using the tools provided by the APD perspective. These are not the only factors worth considering, but we argue that they provide a crucial missing explanation beyond national interest and international necessity, and that explanations of current foreign policy turbulence, in particular, can benefit from constructivist/APD input. Overreliance on rationalist explanations fails to consider the high levels of discretion, inertia, and subjectivity on display, and risks opening the door to purely arbitrary, contingent, and even personalist approaches. Beyond these, there is considerable scope for historically and comparatively informed accounts that take the terms of domestic political debate seriously, but situate these clashing ideas in an appropriate socio-cultural context.¹⁵ In what follows, we briefly review the discretion issue, immigration, energy, and military security debates to illustrate the domestic filters constraining alliance choices, which color the “exceptionalist” discourse concerning the primacy of democratic “values.”

Washington’s early foreign policy outlook was shaped by the wish for nonentanglement in Old World power struggles. The Monroe Doctrine provided an early response to the discretion provided by the physical barriers of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. So, for much of its formative period, Washington’s foreign policy (outside the North American and Caribbean area) was more of an optional extra than an existential necessity. Shortly after the Mexican War, the U. S. chose to promote an “open door” policy toward Japan (thereby triggering a “regime change” soon after), and the ensuing projection of naval power across the Pacific extended to the occupation of Hawaii and the conquest of the Philippines. Our key point here is that, after the nineteenth century, America no longer turned inward; it was by choice (reflecting battles over internal beliefs, interests, and ambitions) rather than from necessity that it expanded overseas.

The twentieth century soon witnessed a huge—and probably inescapable—entanglement in the conflicts of the Old World, but even then, geography conferred a margin of strategic choice and discretion, and thus facilitated a direct and prompt transition from regional to global ascendancy without the risks and constraints typical of more gradually rising powers. One illustration

¹⁵ We set out the merits of this approach to U. S. politics more generally in Desmond King, Robert C. Lieberman, Gretchen Ritter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Democratization in America: A Comparative–Historical Analysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

is that the land, sea, and air integrity of the homeland was never seriously infringed, and all great battles took place in other hemispheres. Although Washington may have had no real choice other than to engage in the great power struggles of the last century, its control over the timing and location of its interventions was exceptionally strong. Likewise, domestic considerations shaped the timing of its shifts in alignments (as when, finally, Nixon chose to lever the PRC away from the USSR).

Reviewing this long record from a comparative-historical perspective, it is impossible to miss the remarkable degree to which Washington's alliance strategies remained optional. Beyond this high level of discretion at the global level, in bilateral relations the choice between individual allies and antagonists became still more unfettered (e.g., the switch from Pakistan to India, or from destabilizing Mossadegh to embracing the Shah). There was always some international rationale for the choices made, but such shifts were heavily influenced by the interplay of domestic lobbies and "inside the beltway" debates and conflicts. Long experience of this style of foreign policy making has left a lasting legacy of ideas and assumptions about U. S. foreign entitlements, and how to construct domestic legitimacy for its leadership choices.

The unusually high margin of policy discretion calls for constructivist explanations of the resulting alliance strategies. Of course, there are always external constraints on the range and structure of available alliance outcomes. While recognizing that reality, a constructivist perspective aims to shift the locus and nature of the constraints involved toward domestically constructed discourses and choice sets. The "realist" perspective on international leadership pays considerable attention to external factors that can explain the inertia of alliance commitments once they have been made. "Sunk costs," credibility, and reputation are among the key factors invoked. For example, there is no question, once a major military base has been opened in an allied territory, that move creates a strong material incentive to preserve the alliance. But the interests created domestically are at least as crucial as the commitments acquired abroad. Likewise, beyond the direct costs of dismantling a base, there is also a loss of credibility—other allies with bases may wonder if their facilities will be next, and whether U. S. guarantees of continuity may be at risk. Such realist accounts of alliance inertia point to the larger lesson that hegemonic power rests in large part on the leading player's reputation for reliability and consistency.¹⁶

But such inertia also can be explained from a constructivist viewpoint, which parallels the realist account. In a situation where the decision makers have high policy discretion, they can in any case become "locked in" to their international commitments by domestic expectations and pressures. In the U. S., the "sunk costs" of a commitment must be processed through internal

¹⁶ Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

bureaucratic politics and justified to a Congress answerable to taxpayers, even when much of the burden is borne by foreign allies whose priorities can be overridden. Even if allies remain in doubt about the “credibility” of some hegemonic pledge, domestic support coalitions have the power to make or break the deal. Below we shall review various bilateral relations that are underpinned by strong U. S. domestic lobbies that possess the media, financial, and electoral clout to penalize backsliding.

At the broader level of overall “reputational” consistency, as the Trump administration is confirming, Washington can withdraw from its climate change commitments, or ignore near unanimous UN resolutions on the status of Jerusalem or the use of unilateral and extraterritorial sanctions against Cuba, all in disregard of predominant external opinion. The really binding constraints on such issues arise only if domestic opinion is sufficiently activated. So, the interplay of domestic lobbies, interests, and expectations can operate as major “constructivist” factors bearing on Washington’s alliance choices. And although the “U. S. exceptionalist” school has a point when it stresses the distinctiveness of America’s place in the world, it is naively self-congratulatory about how that discretion plays out. If at times the internal dynamics of U. S. foreign policy making may gesture in the idealistic direction of worldwide democracy promotion, this should not obscure the more cynical accompanying presence of narrower and less noble policy entrepreneurs and lobbyists.

Here, we are specifically concerned with twenty-first century alliance choices and priorities that ostensibly are linked to the “regime type” of Washington’s preferred (or dispreferred) partners. For illustrative purposes, we have selected a small number of geographically dispersed cases—Israel, Cuba, Tunisia, and Taiwan—where the overwhelming power advantage rests with the United States, thus leaving Washington maximum discretion¹⁷ to engage with democratic regimes, and to shun undemocratic ones, if indeed that is what determines the relevant choice set. These are all cases where one would expect, *prima facie*, that the nature of the prevailing political regime would be a prime determinant of U. S. policy, and where “realist” considerations would not generate overriding alternative motivations.

Israel

Washington’s intensely supportive posture has persisted through successive administrations for over half a century and is conventionally justified by the assertion that this is the only solid democracy in the Middle East. But two other considerations have been invoked as alternative explanations that would reflect a “constructivist” approach. If domestic lobbying and perceptions (relatively unmoored from external realities) are the key to the solidity of this

¹⁷ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U S Foreign Policy* (New York: Penguin, 2008). Compare Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of U S Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

alliance, then the explanation should be sought in the influence of the AIPAC or the evangelicals (the electoral clout of pro-Israel lobbies), and in the filters that cause U. S. opinion to view Israel as such a positive democratic model, screening out counter-arguments that carry more weight elsewhere (especially in the occupied territories, but also within core Israel itself).

Cuba

The political regime in Cuba unquestionably repudiates core features of liberal democracy. For over half a century, it has been viewed as an affront to U. S. values, and worthy of unremitting hostility until it “democratizes” on precise terms specified in law by the U. S. Congress. The Obama administration began a cautious “normalization” of relations, bringing U. S. policy a little closer to the position adopted by almost all its democratic allies (notably Canada and the European Union). But Washington never has accepted the legitimacy of the Cuban regime, and disagreements between Obama and Trump on Cuba policy are questions of tactics and degree, not ultimate intent.

It is hard to explain the intensity and inflexibility of the unilateral and extraterritorial sanctions of the United States from a realist perspective. A “constructivist” approach would evaluate the financial and electoral power of the relevant domestic lobbies (it was only after Obama had carried the state of Florida in 2012 that he felt free to attempt some degree of normalization, despite congressional reluctance), and more broadly the patriotic and ideological filters that have long conditioned U. S. public opinion on Cuba, which differentiate America’s perceptions from those of its democratic partners.

Tunisia

In 1801, President Jefferson dispatched two thirds of the then incipient U. S. Navy to blockade the port of Tunis as part of the “First Barbary War,” America’s first foreign adventure (also directed against Tripoli in today’s Libya). One and a half centuries later, a very different type of regime emerged with Tunisian independence, but until the “Arab Spring” of 2011, democratic forms were used to decorate a highly authoritarian system of rule.¹⁸ Since 2011, Tunisia has emerged as the only reasonably promising example of democratic regime change in the Arab world, but it is not a focus of U. S. interest or support. The contrast with Israel, with a considerably smaller population and a less central strategic location, is notable. From a “constructivist” standpoint, the explanation would concern the different role of domestic lobbies and public opinion formation. Washington has no significant voices actively campaigning for the cause of democracy in Tunisia—if anything, the best organized U. S.

¹⁸ Brownlee writes of Obama’s reaction to the regime change in Tunisia that, “Amid the crisis the administration would urge calm—and by implication a return to the undemocratic status quo—but if opposition forces forced the ruler out, U. S. officials would extol the victory as if they had been seeking democratic change all along.” See Brownlee, *Democracy Prevention*, 170.

interests would be those that had benefited from the previous autocracy. More generally, the country hardly exists as a separate reality in American popular consciousness, other than as “one more place” infested by Islamists parading as democrats. Such negatives are almost as distortional as the Israeli positives.

Taiwan

While Chiang Kai-shek remained the anticommunist and pro-Western alternative to Mao’s regime in Beijing, there was a strong pro-Kuomintang lobby in the United States. The repressive and antidemocratic features of his regime were airbrushed as long as the Cold War continued. But Taiwan, no longer pretending to be “one China,” has undergone a profound regime transition since the late 1980s and is currently the most fully democratized polity in East Asia. Despite its strong economy and its internal cohesion, however, it is not internationally recognized by most countries as a sovereign state. Mainland China is in a position to sanction supporters of the island’s independence, whether internal or foreign. On the face of it, then, this would seem a good test case of the U. S. mission to champion democracy around the world. But, as the democratic regime has strengthened, its distinctively insular identity has become increasingly embarrassing to its erstwhile great power protector. From a “constructivist” perspective, while there are influential lobbies in Washington with an active interest in the island’s security and business affairs, they are rarely promoters of popular democracy, and pro-Beijing counter-lobbies increasingly stand in their way. As for American public opinion, the strong commitments elicited by the old Generalissimo (and his wife) have long since faded and understanding of the current issues is very thin.

These four brief examples all illustrate the high level of discretion applied to many current U. S. alliance choices, and the value of contextual and “constructivist” perspectives in explaining their distribution. At least in these highly asymmetric bilateral relationships, the full “democratic” status of the secondary regime does not seem to tell anything like the whole story.

On a larger canvas, of course, it could be argued that the most important dimensions of U. S. foreign policy concern much more powerful states, where realist and even existential constraints can be expected to prevail over “inside the beltway” lobbying and media hype. Certainly, current relations with China, Russia, the EU and others are more complex than the thumbnail sketches presented above. But there is a case for investigating the weight of domestic factors in reshaping these larger relationships as well. The post-2016 disruptions to Washington policy making highlight the need for new thinking about the underpinnings of America’s place in the world system more generally. For that purpose, native U. S. “exceptionalist” assumptions require reexamination in the light of the more grounded (and more disenchanting) insights that can be derived from comparative-historical and APD investigations. Both perspectives can contain elements of the truth—for, in practice, naiveté and cynicism can exist together in an unstable cocktail.

The Tenacity of “U. S. Exceptionalism” as a National Creed

What explains the patterns recounted above? How has this mismatch between highfaluting rhetoric and lowball business as usual remained so flagrant both in official U. S. policy and in the wider political culture? Washington debates on such matters are typically well-insulated from external reproach, and more concerned with domestic positioning vis-à-vis a mostly inattentive home electorate. So, comparative-historical analysis directs us toward domestic political culture and interests. The following is taken from the American Political Development perspective.

Origins and ideas about origins are crucial. On the idealistic side, the recently highlighted emphasis on securing religious freedom—a Thomas Paine imperative—as a core rationale for the break with Britain of the thirteen American colonies is not without validity. Allowing free religious practice and putting some limits on an established church was a motive for many colonial leaders. But it is impossible for us to separate this noble aspiration from some of the most devastating practices of the new state: the deepening of slavery and the accelerated displacement and extermination of American Indians.¹⁹ The attack on Native Americans cast a long shadow on white Americans’ self-understanding of their nation and its “destiny.” Already expressed in a domestic regime of slavery, superseded by racial segregation after the Civil War, a dominant motif in nineteenth-century American ideology was exceptionalism—albeit not always formulated explicitly but allowed to scent the air of national politics.

Persisting into the twentieth century, Manifest Destiny continued to provide a rationale to underpin the territorial expansionism of a nation-building process rooted in the interests of white Americans.²⁰ In the early twentieth century, public ethnological and eugenic values and beliefs about hierarchical differences among peoples classified by race, ethnicity, and national origins shaped public opinion and government policy.²¹ These ideas were articulated through elementary and high school curricula, citizenship and patriotic ceremonies, newspapers and journals, photography, and mass entertainment and presented publicly in such events as world’s fairs. These values and measures are inevitably dynamic and in constant revision; nonetheless, their content at particular points in time influences prevailing public opinion, and even such contemporary events as the race riot in Charlottesville in August

¹⁹ Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Samuel Huntington underscores the “wasp” features of what he celebrates as the “American creed,” in *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). Compare Weinberg and Stephanson on Manifest Destiny discourse.

²¹ Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of Diverse Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

2017 (in which one person died and the Virginia governor was prompted to declare an emergency in the city) conveys the durability of many nineteenth-century ideological tropes in American nationhood.

Political Inclusions and Exclusions

African Americans were kidnapped and removed to the U. S. involuntarily until the early nineteenth century, and indentured servants made the long haul from Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth. These immigrants fueled domestic ideologies of racial hierarchy and inequality, which echo in American politics today. Remarkably, white European immigrants succeeded in both dominating the migration flows until the 1960s, created and sustained an ideology of America as a “nation of immigrants” (neglecting involuntary arrivals) and an ideology about exceptionalism in the nation’s core beliefs. All this was racially and ethnically distorted until late in the twentieth century.²²

Myths and invented histories are notoriously powerful. The myths and values building up around cultural notions of the “founding” of the United States in 1776 is an obvious example. Despite the “one people” rhetoric of American nationalism asserted by conservatives in the United States, group divisions remain an integral factor in the evolution of American national identity. Where advocates of “assimilationist democracy” claim that group consciousness militates against patriotic feelings, the proponents of an “inclusive nationalism” maintain that diversity of groups strengthens the idea of a post-ethnic America. They conclude that the idea of a homogenizing melting pot myth was just that—a myth; in contrast, the salad bowl has more accuracy.

It was also a melting pot that was assumed to be white, with no equal place for African Americans or Latinos until the late twentieth century. Puerto Ricans were granted citizenship in 1917, but to this day those still residing on the island have only a “second-class” legal status.²³ The transformation from World War I anxieties about America’s multiple groups and “hyphenated” citizens—who needed to be exposed to rigorous regimes of Americanization instruction—became by World War II a basis for celebrating America’s pluralism as it faced fascist and authoritarian adversaries. Again, this pluralism was racist—not only excluding African Americans (who got a foothold in domestic defense industries during the war years but no advances in citizenship rights), but also exploiting the long badly treated American Indians, and interning over 100,000 Japanese Americans on spurious grounds. The pot was exposed as hollow from the 1960s, as civil rights reformers made inroads into the segregationist Congress, and the racial disparities in conscription, ranks,

²² Desmond King, *The Liberty of Strangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²³ See Laurence Whitehead, “Two-Tier Citizenship: The Unresolved Challenge of Puerto Rico’s Electoral Exclusion,” in *Democratization in America: A Comparative–Historical Analysis*, ed. Desmond King et al. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), chap. 3.

and deaths in the demanding and ultimately lost Vietnam War permitted no return to the “idyll” of Eisenhower-era suburban white Americanism.

Taking the sweep of the twentieth century, group loyalties and divisions were imposed on or adapted by successive generations of voluntary or involuntary immigrants. Government policy often countervailed these identities: by promoting the acculturation of individuals into American society, official policy had unintended consequences. This was especially the case with Americanization imposed on American Indians and new European immigrants, which frequently intensified their group consciousness, instead of erasing it, especially in future generations. These hierarchies were most pronounced for African Americans, and their struggle to achieve rights of citizenship haunted World War II, soon dominating the postwar decades as signaled by Emmett Till’s murder and the Rosa Parks-led bus boycott—and, indeed, the salience of racial inequality has been laid bare during the Trump presidency, dramatically displacing the historical significance of Barack Obama’s election to the White House in 2008.²⁴

A deep ambivalence persists in Americans’ self-conception of nationhood. No doubt, the Twin Towers atrocity of September 11, 2001, reactivated and refocused patriotic sentiments, but they were already potent, and easily manipulable. For example, an excitable mantra to celebrate the U. S. as a nation of immigrants often gets overshadowed by a harsh antiimmigrant or antiforeigner sentiment. In 2008, Barack Obama ran with a narrative about his rich and diverse family background, including his Kenyan connections. But this also gave rise to a counter-narrative according to which he (and the diversity and black pride that he represented) was “not American.” In 2016, candidate Donald Trump singled out some Mexican and other immigrants as criminals harming the United States and proposed building a wall to exclude them. In 2018, the U. S. Department of Homeland Security switched its logo from “a nation of immigrants” to “defending the homeland.” Anticipating these recurrent and contradictory references to American nationhood, shortly before his death, the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington published a searing attack on the spread of Catholic and non-English-speaking immigrants into the U. S., recycling alarmist and historically familiar objections about receiving new immigrants and their (in)compatibility with American values. Between the 1920s and 1970s, immigrant numbers were severely curtailed (and structured overwhelmingly to favor white migrants against African, Asian, or Latin American hopefuls), but in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the percentage of foreign born in the U. S. returned to its circa 1900 levels of 12 to 14 percent of the population, creating a ripe setting for the Trump campaign, which by extension also repudiated the idea of “democracy promotion” in racially undesirable countries of origin.

²⁴ Douglas Massey and Jacob Rugh, “Segregation in Post-Civil Rights America: Stalled Integration or End of the Segregated Century?” *Du Bois Review* 11, no. 2 (2014): 205-232, and Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Economic Hegemony and the Exceptionalist Imperative

There is much debate about whose interests were served in the post-1945 economic order hammered out at the eponymous hotel in Bretton Woods. New global institutions—the IMF and the World Bank—not only were supposed to avoid the economic disruptions of the 1930s, but also acquired a further significance as the Cold War produced two competing economic systems internationally. Consolidating U. S. influence through the widely admired and efficacious Marshall Plan gave the U. S. a hegemonic role in a bipolar world that endured until 1989. This economic order unquestionably benefited the United States hugely and ensured that the dollar remained the world’s reserve currency and central to international finance. Although focused on domestic monetary and employment policy, the Federal Reserve regularly presented itself as a central bank for the global capitalist economy—not just for the United States. Without Washington’s political and economic dominance through direct garrison presence, support of unsavory autocracies, and benign promotion of democratic values, this postwar world order would have looked very different. The contradictions were of course enormous—for example, between the poor domestic record of the United States on civil rights and its espousal of these abroad,²⁵ or between advocating free-market principles and cooperating with authoritarian regimes. The war against communism was invoked to justify much of this. But the economic gains to the United States in the decades between 1945 and 1975, an era with restricted immigration and a racialized labor market, were spectacular.²⁶

Two points bear underlining from this brief account of domestic values and U. S. foreign stances. First, like many democratic states, there is a persistent tension—on occasions becoming unmanageable as during the Vietnam War—between domestic aspirations and practices and the international stance of the United States. Adversaries are able to exploit these tensions to undermine America’s “soft” power credentials. Washington policy makers try to counter this by ratcheting up their liberal internationalist rhetoric, but this risks straining their credibility abroad while (more importantly) also stirring up resistance at home. Second, the clash between noble rhetoric and sordid conduct is not just a discursive contradiction. The two are both anchored in a powerful U. S. sense of economic self-interest. The intertwining of self-interest and benign orchestration stretches from the Marshall Plan, to NAFTA, to the aborted Trans Pacific Partnership. But (at least until very recently) U. S. dependence on Arab oil, or the profits generated by the sale of weaponry to authoritarian regimes, has carried equal economic weight, and led in the opposite normative direction. These longstanding tensions and contradictions have been masked

²⁵ A reality brilliantly documented by Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Demonstrated by Robert Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U. S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

by a subtle intertwinement that may have become rather less subtle since January 2017 as a new era of U. S. foreign policy unfolds.

Where Next? Temporary Issues, versus Long-Run Challenges

Much of the post-2016 literature on the Trump administration is likely to prove extremely ephemeral, both because there are still so many acute uncertainties, and in a polarized and unstable context so much commentary appears too partisan. APD and comparative-historical work have the potential, if well executed, to provide more lasting guidance about the underlying dynamics.

Thus far, we have argued that, in contrast to other great powers, U. S. alliance choices have been less constrained by the threat from potentially hostile immediate neighbors, or by the risk of outright defeat/invasion by rival powers; by the threat of economic blockade, lack of essential economic inputs, or the burden of external sanctions; or by trade, investment, and technological vulnerabilities. These geopolitical advantages remain intact, so for the foreseeable future, Washington foreign policy making is likely to continue to reflect a distinctively high level of discretion. However, a century-long history of global supremacy also has generated a powerful and diverse set of international commitments which represents “sunk costs” and entrenched relationships that also will tend to persist. This can be observed across a variety of policy areas (e.g., overseas bases, the recruitment and training of U. S.-friendly international elites, trade and investment ties, and so on).

Intensified domestic social and political conflicts recently have disturbed this previously rather settled balance between long-run foreign policy commitments and the intrusion of fragmentary and episodic domestic political demands. Both the high level of discretion and the limited public attention span shaping Washington’s foreign policy making are certain to persist, but divisions over alliance commitments will intensify and become more destabilizing, however the Trump experiment turns out. So, the subterranean identity clashes and “America First” reflexes that have now surfaced can be expected to affect Washington’s international posture for the indefinite future. Seesawing between cynical transactionalism and the reaffirmation of liberal international values may become more pronounced.

What does an APD perspective indicate about the determinants of such policy swings? External threat perception (as distinct from any actual threats registered by the security establishment) is a crucial variable, here.²⁷ Whenever such a collective perception takes hold, the subtleties of normal foreign policy are liable to be swept aside by a unifying popular demand for activism. Such episodes are intermittent though popular fears easy to manipulate. So, over time, the irresistible demand for security dissolves again into partisan

²⁷ Electoral cycles, and socio-economic integration or polarization within the United States, also may prove equally strong determinants of this ebb and flow, particularly after 2016.

recriminations and renewed focus on domestic issues. Lobbyists and foreign policy specialists then regain their normal freedom of action. Such cycles are repetitive, since in practice external security scares never have proved that durable or overwhelming (in contrast to other more vulnerable democracies and most other great powers). After 2016, it is possible, but not probable, that genuine external threats to the United States will intensify and become more durable. But even without this, the cycles of alarm and reaction are likely to intensify, as domestic partisanship deepens and because the gap between objective risk and subjective scare-mongering is deliberately widened. When general conditions have been benign, there has been scope for greater idealism in the selection of U. S. allies, but even under the most favorable of conditions (e.g., the first Clinton administration), this was always partial and erratic. Even then, it turned out that some unsavory entanglements were more “sticky” than others,²⁸ and that vested interests could learn to take advantage of naive liberalism to the same extent as previously they had played up to tough-minded realism. In harder times, the reverse logic applies—but, again, only in limited geographical arenas, where “coalitions of the willing” (including some very unsavory, but highly willing allies)²⁹ tend to take priority over alliances founded on strong principles and convergent values. Following 2016, neither “values-based” nor “security-minded” alliances are likely to be as robust as before, and domestic partisanship is more likely to destabilize both.

A U. S. Leadership Shorn of Illusions?

On most dimensions, the United States will remain the dominant hegemon in world affairs for some time to come, even though the neat bipolarism of the Cold War era is gone, and global powers such as China and more regional powers such as India, Russia, and Turkey have expansive ambitions in their respective local spheres. In terms of “hard” power, financial strength, and technological dynamism, the U. S. seems sure to continue leading for at least another decade, and probably more. Its “soft” power advantages may be dented as rival educational and cultural establishments gain greater traction, and the negative consequences of current “nativism” kick in. But it may take some time for such setbacks to fully materialize. It is in the area of “smart” power where a sharp loss of capacity is already most apparent. Denying the reality of climate

²⁸ The “stickiness” of U. S. alliance commitments varies in part with regional conditions. For example, U. S. dominance in the Caribbean and Central America is such that local forces have limited capacity to screen themselves from the ebb and flow of Washington’s preferences, whereas U. S. alignments in the Middle East seem more inflexible, perhaps because of oil, or Israel, or for military reasons.

²⁹ Some external linkages are highly visible and heavily politicized, whereas others remain largely hidden from domestic scrutiny. When particular alliance commitments prove unusually “sticky,” this is often because highly organized special interests are working intensively, on a narrow front, to protect specific partners from the vagaries of collective feeling.

change, displaying childish ignorance and prejudice about other countries, and substituting erratic tweets for stable diplomacy can quickly produce a downward spiral in national influence and external credibility. It is too early to tell how durable such behavior will prove, or how serious the consequences may be. But taken together, these setbacks already are sufficiently disruptive to invite reflection on their potential impact on Washington's alliance strategies, and on the status of the United States as the "leader of the Free World."

One longstanding pillar of America's self-understanding has been the idea of "U. S. exceptionalism" and the country's status as the "last best hope" for world democracy. We have doubted the objectivity of that assessment, both in the light of long-run historical enquiry, and as it applies after 2016. There is a connection between the (mostly tacit) assumption of U. S. exceptionalism in mainstream political science circles, and that academic community's embrace of the democracy/authoritarianism binary approach to regime classification. All other political regimes can be ranked, graded, rewarded, and punished according to their ratings on these scales, provided the democratic standing of the dominant hegemon is not an item on the agenda. (Is there a parallel, here, with the unquestioned role of the host in the *Apprentice* television show?)

But in the aftermath of the 2016 election, quite a few American democratization scholars have lurched abruptly from excluding the U. S. from comparative consideration to recentering the discussion around current risks to U. S. democracy. This is in some respects a necessary, and indeed salutary, shift of perspective. Once the integrity of electoral processes; the safeguards against democratic "backsliding"; or the nondemocratic factors shaping alliance choice are examined in all countries without exclusion, the practice of comparative politics becomes less abstract or distorted—and more challenging. Both the explanatory and the prescriptive implications of binary regime classifications look somewhat different when applied in the same way to one's own regime as to that of other nations. For example, it is a particular merit of the work of Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt³⁰ that they assemble a list of criteria for "democratic backsliding" among contemporary electoral authoritarians (according to their definition of the concept) and then run through their checklist as it relates to Trump's first year in office. This adds perspective and a certain degree of rigor to what would seem like a purely partisan debate if conducted solely within the United States. It also relativizes some of the conduct that might be too easily dismissed as aberrant if it occurred only outside the boundaries of the U. S. polity.³¹ Such sober comparative analysis avoids determinism, but generates alternative scenarios that demand careful appraisal, and that highlight both critical indicators of deterioration and key

³⁰ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*.

³¹ The authors conclude, debatably but quite judiciously, that in the first year the U. S. was not yet a backslider, but that the "guardrails" against later slippage had come under troubling pressure and might not hold in later years.

areas for possible remedial action. Still, the general shift from omitting the U. S. case to placing current American events center stage in a comparative analysis is too abrupt (and apparently arbitrary) for comfort, especially when accompanied by what many U. S. citizens will view as a partisan take on what may prove a short-term situation. Serious comparative scholarship involves the consistent application of analytical concepts, equal treatment of relevant cases, and a historical perspective.

We argue here the APD approach provides a much needed perspective. Thus, by dropping the “exceptionalist” taboo, and evaluating the United States as just one more (albeit exemplary) reporting unit, it becomes possible to monitor and investigate unforeseen developments wherever they occur, and to establish a richer and more balanced understanding of the dynamics of backsliding in both sympathetic and unsympathetic settings. Much further work is needed to develop this approach with consistency. For example, consider how it relates to the Levitsky and Ziblatt schema as applied to the United States. If their judgments are considered too harsh when applied to their own country, then softer standards also would be justified elsewhere. Equally, if their lenient assessment of the current situation is fair to the United States, then by the same token similar care is needed when referring to other democratic regimes as “backsliders.” Without rejecting the basic intuition that pure democracies function differently from pure authoritarian regimes, in current conditions and in practical terms, pinpointing the precise drivers, contours, and implications of these differences becomes a more subtle and demanding exercise. The righteous “them/us” rationale for alliance choices weakens once it is conceded that “we” are not in all respects that different after all. The challenge is to curb the righteousness without slipping into the opposite transactional error of concluding that all types of regime are equally desirable as allies. Instead, a more careful (one might even say “empathetic”) understanding of the strains other democracies are experiencing can serve to support better choices of partners and more discriminating responses to antagonists.

There is also another probably more fundamental way in which dropping the “exceptionalist” taboo can improve U. S. alliance strategies. Since the end of the Cold War, a prime justification for U. S. intervention in the internal affairs of other countries has been the desire and intention to bring the benefits of U. S.-based freedoms to the benighted lands of the unfree. Condoleezza Rice expresses this idea very bluntly in the passage quoted above. However well such rhetoric has played in patriotic U. S. circles, it is received in a very different spirit in many other parts of the world, all the more so after 2016. Arguably this kind of attitude—together with the policies it endorses—already has done much to promote the international diffusion and cooperation among authoritarian regimes with which the IDCAR project has been centrally concerned. However that may be, with the liquidation of so much U. S. “smart” power in the wake of 2016, such national arrogance has become both

untenable as well as counterproductive. Those Americans who still believe in the virtues of democracy and who wish to encourage its extension elsewhere in the world hardly can expect to continue pursuing that goal effectively through the methods counseled by the exceptionalists. But an alternative strategy is still available to them: to conduct an honest evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of past democratic performance (both domestic and international) and then, in the light of these APD insights, to reconstruct and restore the normative attractiveness of U. S. democracy. That is both a worthy objective, in its own right, and an indispensable prerequisite for American democracy-promoting alliance strategies in the post-Trump era.