

Pax Americana: Sketches for an Undiplomatic History*

I will begin with a declaration that might once have been provocative but may today be received as a statement of simple fact: the American World Order is collapsing.

The symptoms of crisis are unavoidable. Let's start with the most obvious. Last November, the American people elected Donald Trump. Trump is a long-standing critic of international commitments. As long ago as 1987, he published in *The New York Times* a paid advertisement, in which he disparaged America's military alliances as a waste of money.¹

As president of the United States, Trump has appointed seasoned professionals who remain committed to U.S. global leadership. He has also relied upon ethnocentric nationalists who reject international commitments and embrace the mantra of "America First."

The balance of influence within the administration is hard to discern, but the nationalists have not been routed. Released last month, Trump's "National Security Strategy" does not identify the sustenance of a rules-based international order as a strategic priority.² Instead, the document repudiates familiar tenets of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy. "Strong, sovereign nations," it declares, constitute the only legitimate basis for international order.³

Longstanding proponents of American international leadership today emphasize the perils of the moment. Within Trump's party, Senator McCain has warned, in blunt terms, that our international order is under assault from petty authoritarians who "preach resentful nationalism."⁴ The senator's words echo

*This lecture is presented as delivered at the 132nd Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2018. The author would like to acknowledge all of those friends and colleagues who have offered advice, encouragement, and inspiration. Particular thanks are owed to Mark Brilliant, Brian DeLay, Anthony Gregory, Mark Peterson, and Thomas Laqueur, who endured a trial version of this lecture and offered substantive and insightful advice. Laqueur, additionally, contributed the talk's best line.

1. *New York Times*, September 2, 1987, A28. Trump's "open letter" to the American people begins with the declaration: "For decades, Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the United States."

2. Donald J. Trump, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 18, 2017, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

4. John S. McCain, "Remarks to Brigade of Midshipmen at U.S. Naval Academy," Annapolis, MD, October 30, 2017, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/speeches?ID=44FDA6A0-E3FB-444A-B6C8-F215F8288762>.

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the last president of the United States. In his final address before the UN General Assembly, President Obama warned against the prospect of a world dividing along “age-old lines of nation and tribe and race and religion.”⁵

Obama spoke in September 2016. Several months later, the Electoral College made Trump president. The outcome has thrust the United States and the world into uncertainty.

We may, warns the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, be present at the destruction of the American world order.⁶ The proposition inverts the title of Dean Acheson’s memoir, implying that we are living through a kind of historical bookend to the 1940s.⁷ The editors of *The Economist* are no less pessimistic. It is not only the U.S.-led liberal international order that is today imperiled, the journal warns, but the future of the United States as a superpower.⁸

For my part, I would like to pose a simple question, a historian’s question: How did we get here?

Before proceeding further, I will define my terms.

I use the phrase “Pax Americana” as a substitute for what McCain, Obama, and other defenders call the liberal world order, the rules-based international order, or the American World Order.⁹ The Pax Americana, as I conceive it, is: *a hierarchical configuration of international relations, in which the United States exercises singular responsibilities for order.*

Let me unpack this definition. The first key word is *hierarchical*.¹⁰ The Pax Americana is built around relationships of structured authority, in which the United States exercises responsibilities over, and for, foreign nations. The

5. Barack H. Obama, “Remarks to the United Nations General Assembly,” New York, September 20, 2016. From Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* (hereafter *APP*), accessed February 21, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

6. Gideon Rose, “Present at the Destruction?” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 1.

7. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York, 1987).

8. For example: “Endangered,” *The Economist*, November 9, 2017.

9. I adopt the term with apologies to—and in respectful recognition of—the diplomat and scholar Ronald Steel, whose brilliant 1967 book *Pax Americana* has shaped my own thinking, as is clear from both the present lecture and my last book. See Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana* (New York, 1967) and Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York, 2015), esp. chap. 1.

10. My thinking on hierarchy in world politics reflects the influence of David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY, 2011). While I do not in this lecture engage debates on whether the United States is an “imperial” power, my reflections on structured hierarchy also reflect the influence of a broad, comparative scholarship on comparative empire. Especially influential have been Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY, 1986); Geir Lundestad, “Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952,” *SHAFR Newsletter* 15 (September, 1984): 1–21; Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Alfred W. McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power* (Chicago, IL, 2017); and Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power: An Inquiry into the Origins, Currents, and Contradictions of World Politics* (New York, 1974).

provision of military security ranks among the most significant sources of U.S. hierarchical authority in world politics. Hierarchical relationships are often consensual, but the United States also presumes the right to discipline hostile regimes, as leaders from Tehran and Pyongyang could attest.

The second key word is *singular*. The uniqueness of America's global role is a defining trait of the Pax Americana. Subordinate allies, such as Australia and Great Britain, may work on its behalf, but the Pax Americana is organized around a single power center. A less centralized order might, in theory, remain hierarchical, but a solar system with several suns would not be the Pax Americana.

Still, it does not follow that the Pax Americana has to function at the planetary scale. During the Cold War, it coexisted with a Soviet-led system of order. The two blocs resembled each other in some respects, but they constituted separate and hostile systems of order.¹¹

Since the Cold War's end, the Pax Americana has functioned on something more like the world scale. The United States today polices global commons, from cyberspace to the world's oceans. The spatial imagination of the Pax Americana can be glimpsed in the Defense Department's division of the world into arenas of proconsular responsibility, or Unified Combatant Commands.¹²

And, yet, the Pax Americana remains difficult to depict on a map. Unlike the British Empire or even the territorial empire the United States seized in 1898, the Pax Americana is a diffuse geographical construction, not a zone of coherent territorial control.¹³

The invisibility of the Pax Americana enables American leaders to deny its existence. No president has claimed a Pax Americana; to the extent that any have used the term, it has been to deny that one exists.

"What kind of peace do we seek?" asked John F. Kennedy in 1963. "*Not a Pax Americana* enforced on the world by American weapons of war."¹⁴ Addressing the United Nations in 1970, Richard Nixon was no less emphatic. "What we seek is *not a Pax Americana*," he declared.¹⁵ And George H. W. Bush

11. Among the Cold War's many historians, Odd Arne Westad has been exceptionally attuned to the structural resemblances of the two superpowers and their respective alliance systems. See, in particular, Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York, 2005); and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (New York, 2017).

12. For the deep historical context, see Carnes Lord, *Proconsuls: Delegated Political-Military Leadership from Rome to America Today* (New York, 2012).

13. My understanding of the distinction between the territorial empire and the Pax Americana reflects the influence of Daniel Immerwahr's field-defining work on the U.S. territorial empire. For a preview, see Daniel Immerwahr, "The Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 373–91.

14. John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University," Washington, DC, June 10, 1963, *APP*, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9266&st=&str1=>.

15. Richard M. Nixon, "Address to the 25th Session of the UN General Assembly," New York, October 23, 1970, *APP*, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2754&st=&str1=>.

in 1991 reassured listeners at the end of the Cold War that: “the United States has *no intention of striving for a Pax Americana*.”¹⁷

Rather than dismiss such protests as self-serving imperial denial, we should recall that the United States does, in important respects, function much like any other nation-state in the international system. Washington sends just one representative to the UN General Assembly. The United States conducts its diplomatic relations on the basis of formal equality among sovereign states.

The paradox of the Pax Americana is that the United States functions in international politics both as a nation-state much like any other—and as a source of hierarchical order on the scale of the international system. A conceptual distinction may help to elucidate the point.

The economist Douglass North makes a helpful distinction between what he calls social institutions and social organizations. Institutions, North explains, are the rules, frameworks, and procedures that constitute the “rules of the game” in social life.¹⁸ Organizations, on the other hand, are corporate protagonists in social competition.

In these terms, the Golden State Warriors and the San Francisco Giants are organizations. The NBA and Major League Baseball are the institutions that frame and superintend their various competitions. North’s distinction illuminates the paradox that both defines—and obscures—the role of the United States in world politics.

The United States is a participant in the competition among states for resources and influence. Yet the United States also performs functions that imbue the international system with order. The United States is an interested player, but it also aspires to set the rules of the game. The United States is an organization, but American power also constitutes an institutional framework for international order. This framework is the Pax Americana.

Having defined the object of my analysis, I will turn to my subtitle. What do I mean when I propose an “undiplomatic history”? The implications are both normative and methodological, but I will emphasize the methodological dimension for now.

Comprehending the Pax Americana, I believe, requires prioritizing structure over agency, endowments over exigency, and constraint over choice. The American order, I believe, has been less the creation of visionary statecraft than it has been a consequence of the ever-changing distribution of resources, or power capacities, in world politics. Diplomats cannot be absent from the Pax

17. George H. W. Bush, “Address to the 46th Session of the UN General Assembly,” New York, September 23, 1991, *APP*, accessed March 8, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=20012&st=&st1=>.

18. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, UK, 1990), esp. 3–6. For a similar point, see Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

Americana's history, for they have been vital agents in its implementation. Yet they have not been its animating force; hence the conceit: "an undiplomatic history."

This point anticipates my normative conclusions. The American superpower, I would argue, has been neither exceptionally virtuous, nor exceptionally vicious in the conduct of its foreign policy. What the United States has been is exceptionally lucky. Fortune—in the form of outlandish endowments—are what enabled the formulation of a Pax Americana. A survey of the historical trajectory will illustrate the point. But let me first linger on an adjective: *exceptional*.

From Alexis de Tocqueville to Ronald Reagan, the question of American exceptionalism has often been debated as an intrinsic phenomenon. For its advocates, American exceptionalism locates in the nation's political culture, its founding documents, and even its virtue. Formulated in such terms, the concept performs more useful ideological than analytical work.

Reformulated in situational or developmental terms, the concept of exceptionalism serves a more useful role.¹⁹ Comprehending the role of the United States in the world requires taking stock of the many respects in which the United States has been unlike other countries. Specifically, the combination of geopolitical scale and early industrial development the United States had achieved by the century's turn made it the twentieth century's exceptional power.

The arc of exceptional development begins with the European encounter with the Americas.²⁰ This singular moment in world history opened the prospect, as European colonists soon grasped, that a new empire would rise in the Americas—and become a dominant world power.²¹

19. The point adapts the brilliant distinction that my colleague David Hollinger makes between what he calls "morally structural" and "morally developmental" modes of historical analysis. See David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 297.

20. For a brilliant exposition of the geopolitical and ecological consequences of 1492, see Donald Worster, *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance* (New York, 2016).

21. The deep roots of America's twentieth-century global role may remain an underappreciated theme among historians of twentieth-century U.S. foreign relations. On this theme, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987), a classic and field-defining account; and Donald White, *The American Century: The Rise and Decline of the United States as a World Power* (New Haven, CT, 1996). Both books emphasized the deep roots of U.S. ascendancy and argued for the inevitability of U.S. relative decline in the twenty-first century, as the margins of relative advantage that had sustained U.S. ascendancy in the twentieth century closed. Both books encountered pushback from critics who envisioned U.S. ascendancy stretching far beyond the horizon. For an example, see Henry R. Nau, *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York, 1992). Twenty years later, it is the declinists of the 1980s/1990s who today look more prescient, as more recent analyses of the prospects for U.S. global power conclude.

Still, the continental republic was not an inevitable destiny. The consecration of a viable federal union resulted from sustained struggle, waged by actors who grasped the stakes of their confrontations. Federation, Alexander Hamilton argued, would ensure that Americans did not emulate early modern Europe, where interstate conflict had nurtured the rise of coercive governments. Federation, advocates like Hamilton argued, would preserve American liberties and, somewhat paradoxically, permit the creation of a federal government strong enough to dictate what Hamilton called: “the terms of the connection between the old and the new world.”²²

The Constitution created a framework for governance, but realizing the continental republic required a century of warfare. Two interstate conflicts—the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War—eliminated the obstacles standing between the United States and the Pacific Ocean. In a longer and more diffuse struggle, U.S. forces waged a century of warfare against indigenous polities to secure North America for white colonization.²³

Territorial expansion widened internal divisions over slavery, but the Civil War secured the geopolitical unity of North America. A contrast with nineteenth-century Great Britain may be suggestive. After 1815, Great Britain pursued a counter-hegemonic strategy in Europe. No single power, Britain insisted, should dominate the European continent. In North America, in contrast, the United States waged a century of pro-hegemonic warfare in order to ensure that there would be no balance of power.

What resulted was a Great Power unlike its peers. Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan conquered overseas territories during the nineteenth century, but their national territories remained compact. Canada, Brazil, China, and Russia were larger than the contiguous United States at the twentieth century’s turn, but America enjoyed crucial advantages over these mega-states. Its temperate plains were more conducive to agrarian and industrial development than were arid steppe, frozen tundra, and tropical jungle.

Seizing the opportunities that scale and ecology conferred, Americans built the world’s preeminent industrial economy. Crude data on gross domestic production indicate the rise of American capacities. The United States during the 1870s surpassed Great Britain to become the world’s largest economy. By the

See, for example, Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (New York, 2005); and, especially, McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century*.

22. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, no. 11. For an influential analysis of the U.S. Constitution as an international settlement, see David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, KS, 2003).

23. Here, of course, I signal my strong concurrence with my friend and colleague Brian DeLay, who has argued, persuasively, that the nineteenth-century history of U.S. engagement with indigenous polities must be understood as international history, not as a sub-theme of U.S. domestic history. On this point, see Brian DeLay, “Indian Polities, Empire, and the History of American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 39, no. 5 (2015): 927–42.

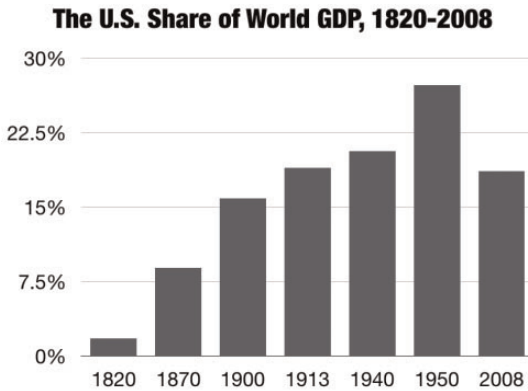


Figure 2: U.S. Share of World GDP, 1820–2016

nineteenth century’s end, the U.S. economy was larger than the British and French economies combined.²⁴

The United States, Brooks Adams declared in 1902, “is now the heart of civilization and the focus of energy.”²⁵ Yet productive preeminence did not make the United States predominant in world politics, far less hegemonic. International order, for now, remained Great Britain’s responsibility.²⁶ While Britain performed hegemonic functions in world politics, the United States functioned as an exemplary developmental state.

The United States was a net recipient of transnational capital in the nineteenth century and a free-rider on the maritime security that British taxpayers financed. American industrial prosperity was made in the world, but the nation’s relationship to globalization would remain dependent for so long as the U.S. government lacked the institutional capacities necessary to play a managerial role in international affairs.²⁷

With the coming of the Progressive era, a series of domestic reforms prefigured a historic transformation in the relationship of the American state to globalization. Slowly, but inexorably, the U.S. federal government acquired the

24. Comparisons of economic production here, and elsewhere in this lecture, are based on the Maddison Project Database, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2018>.

25. Brooks Adams, *The New Empire* (Norwood, MA, 1902) xv.

26. On the transition from British to U.S. hegemony, see Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); and, for a rather different view, Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916–1931* (New York, 2014).

27. On the global context for U.S. economic and social development in the nineteenth century, see, *inter alia*, Eric Rauchway, *Blessed Among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York, 2006); and Kevin O’Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson, *Globalization and History* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

institutional capacities necessary to mobilize domestic resources for the purposes of international power projection.

The creation in 1913 of the Federal Reserve System was a vital step. Without a central bank (or an approximation thereof), the United States would have been unable to build a system of international monetary relations around the dollar. Passed in 1913, the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution was no less foundational. Direct taxation enabled the creation of expanded federal capacities, including the professionalized military that Elihu Root sought to create.²⁸

Direct taxation also permitted tariff liberalization. The departure from a century of protectionist tariffs expanded foreign access to the U.S. domestic market. The shift facilitated the transition of the United States from developmental state to prospective global hegemon. The Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934 confirmed the shift. Making the executive branch responsible for the negotiation of trade deals, the law foreshadowed the key roles that both trade concessions and presidential power would play in the post-1945 Pax Americana.

Progressive reforms laid the foundations, but the Second World War was the Pax Americana's crucible. The war produced both a domestic political basis and a strategic rationale for American global leadership. Crucially, the moment of genesis occurred precisely when U.S. material capacities were at their all-time relative apex. Figure 3, below, compares U.S. GDP to the world's next eight largest economies. As it shows, the United States in 1945 produced almost as much economic output as did the next eight combined.

Explaining this predominance is not difficult. U.S. industrial capacities were the world's greatest before the war began. War mobilization resolved the dilemmas of under-utilization that had plagued the U.S. economy in the 1930s, while the industrial centers of Eurasia experienced catastrophic wartime damage. What all of this meant, though, was that the margins of primacy the United States enjoyed in the 1940s were destined to be transient.

And yet, Americans could delude themselves in the war's warm afterglow into thinking that vast prosperity was a birthright. Henry Luce anticipated the point in his "American Century" essay.²⁹ David Potter made a similar point in

28. On Elihu Root—an overlooked, albeit unforgotten—figure in the making of the Pax Americana, see Warren Zimmermann, *First Great Triumph: How Five Americans Made Their Country a World Power* (New York, 2004), chap. 4. It is striking that no biography of Root has appeared since 1954. Historians, in the interim, have published at least ten biographical studies of Dean Acheson. The contrast evokes our guild's tendency to prioritize the history of decision making choice over the deep sources of American global ascendancy.

29. The famous essay was published in 1941 in Luce's own *Life* magazine but is today most readily accessible as Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 159–71.

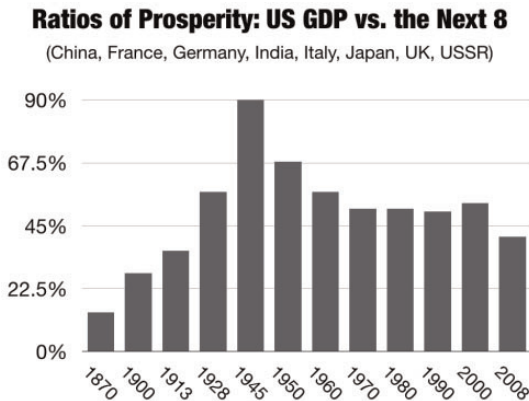


Figure 3: Ratios of Prosperity: The United States vs. the Next Eight Global Economies³⁰

his Walgreen Lectures of 1950, which proposed that unrivaled abundance made Americans a unique “people of plenty.”³¹

Outsized prosperity became a foundation for the Pax Americana. Prosperity performed both ideological and material work. In crude material terms, prosperity enabled the organization of an international order around the dissemination of American resources.³² In ideological terms, prosperity substantiated Luce’s boast that Americans surfed history’s leading edge.

The United States, the boosters could argue, was not just the world’s most powerful nation-state but the most advanced society in human history. From here, it was a short hop to the conclusion that destiny, if not providence, had anointed Americans to spread the gospel of their modernity and to refashion world politics in their own self-image.

Still, the Pax Americana resulted in practice not from a singular act of creation but from a series of creative improvisations. These occurred under circumstances that policymakers did not anticipate. What American wartime planners envisioned was a planetary international order based upon universal institutions and parliamentary precepts.³³

What the Truman administration ended up creating was a more hierarchical, and more militarized, system of international order. What catalyzed the transformation of utopian visions into a workable Pax Americana was the division of

30. The next eight are based on relative positions in 2000. The group comprises China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, UK, and the USSR/CIS.

31. David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, IL, 1954).

32. As Ronald Steel put it: “Unlike Rome, we have not exploited our empire. On the contrary, our empire has exploited us.” See *Pax Americana*, 17.

33. Robert Latham, *The Liberal Moment: Modernity, Security, and the Making of Postwar International Order* (New York, 1997); and John Gerard Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era* (New York, 1996).

the postwar world. Estrangement between the United States and the Soviet Union animated the American acceptance and pursuit of escalating hegemonic responsibilities.³⁴

The history of postwar improvisation is familiar, but the landmarks are telling. The Marshall Plan and the Treaty of Rio in 1947; NATO in 1949; the intervention in Korea in 1950; and the bilateral security treaties concluded with allies in East and Southeast Asia. These foundational acts both resulted from and contributed to a widening East-West division. Similar dynamics unfolded within the East Bloc. Across the Cold War's frontiers, geopolitical division propelled the consolidation of alliance systems that functioned as hierarchical systems of international order.

Within the West, a logic of dissemination defined the Pax Americana's political economy.³⁵ To thwart Soviet power and to reassure its allies, the United States deployed globe-spanning military capabilities. To protect against the contagion of Communism, as American decision makers perceived it, the United States committed resources to support economic and social development worldwide. These resources included not only direct transfers, like Marshall Aid, but also trade agreements that gave foreign exporters privileged access to the U.S. market. An international monetary order that precluded dollar devaluation while permitting foreign countries to pursue trade advantages via currency devaluation compounded the generous terms of postwar trade.

Put simply, the United States functioned in the Pax Americana's first decades as a great disseminator to its friends and allies. Broad margins of prosperity enabled Washington to pump resources outwards in order to sustain, nurture, and defend the Pax Americana as a hierarchical alliance system, under U.S. hegemonic leadership.³⁶

This Pax Americana was from the outset an elite project. American elites convinced themselves of its necessity, and they collaborated with foreign elites to nurture the client relationships that sustained it. From the Bilderberg Club to the Harvard International Seminar, conclaves of transnational elites became a source of cohesion for the Pax Americana.

34. The literature is vast, but the defining account is Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Palo Alto, CA, 1992).

35. The imperial order the Soviet Union built in the East Bloc manifested a similar logic of dissemination, the Red Army's pillage of East Germany notwithstanding. More representative of the East Bloc's longer-term political economic logic was the post-1950 intervention in China, on which see Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Washington, DC, 1998). What the Soviet Union and the United States built after 1945 were imperial systems without precedent in world history, in which the balance of the material benefits flowed from metropole to periphery.

36. The historian Charles Maier calls this project an "empire of production." See *Among Empires*, chap. 5.

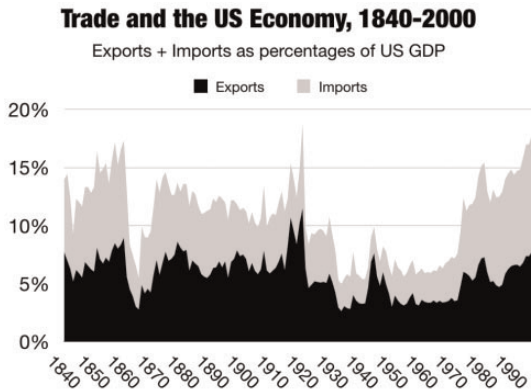


Figure 4: Trade and the U.S. Economy, 1840–2000

Ordinary Americans were bit players, for the most part, but they did not revolt against the Pax Americana’s accumulating burdens. Opinion polls indicated strong support for foreign entanglements—at least until the escalation of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s divided the populace. Crucially, soaring military expenditures did not imperil middle-class prosperity. Millions of Americans found work in defense industries. Nor did the trade concessions that held the Pax Americana together exert a significant drag on domestic prosperity.

With its vast domestic market, the United States remained in the early post-war years one of the least export-oriented economies on earth. Exports in 1960 counted for about five percent of U.S. GDP—about half their value to Japan’s economy and one quarter their value to Britain’s economy. Taking a broad view, which [Figure 4](#) presents, we can see that the Pax Americana’s advent coincided with a historical phase when American prosperity was not only exceptional but also relatively autonomous from the broader global economy.³⁷

The Pax Americana functioned as a distributive system until the late 1960s, when the American World Order entered its first systemic crisis. I will emphasize the economic dimensions of the crisis here, although the military and political aspects were also highly significant.

Data on the balance of payments, which I present in [Figure 5](#) in a schematic form, provide clues to the larger picture. Until the late 1960s, the United States relied upon its exports to offset both government expenditures overseas and outbound flows of foreign investment. The international payments did not quite balance, however, and a series of annual deficits resulted in a steady

³⁷ I elaborate on this point in “Globalization’s Paradox: Economic Interdependence and Global Governance,” in *Outside In: The Transnational Circuitry of U.S. History*, ed. Andrew Preston and Doug Rossinow (New York, 2016), 36–54.

The US Balance of Payments: 1890-1998

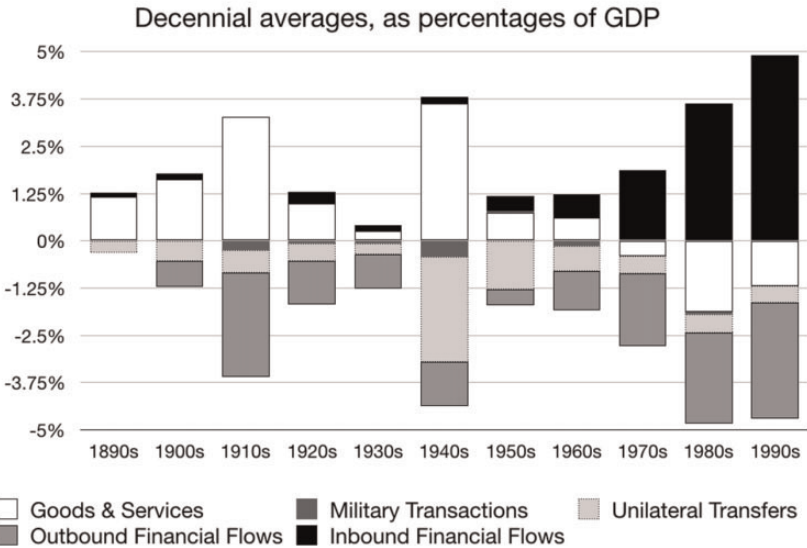


Figure 5: The U.S. Balance of Payments, 1890-1998

hemorrhaging of U.S. gold reserves. Ordinary Americans did not concern themselves, but high-ranking officials fretted that payments deficits imperiled the structure of economic order that had emerged from the Second World War, the so-called Bretton Woods system.³⁸

Significant changes in the international distribution of economic capacities underlay the monetary turmoil of the 1960s. The U.S. economy grew more slowly after the Second World War than did its competitors. The result was a shrinking U.S. share of the global economic pie. The shrinkage destabilized an international settlement organized around the paramount material capacities of the United States.

1971 was the pivotal year. That year, the United States ran its first trade deficit since 1893, and a severe balance of payments crisis prompted the Nixon administration to abandon the gold standard. By unhappy coincidence, domestic oil output began, more or less simultaneously, to decline. The loss of the nation's position as the world's dominant oil producer symbolized the passing of America's singular material abundance. As U.S. armed forces waged relentless, but futile, counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam, the Pax Americana's foundations were subsiding.

Globalization, for the Pax Americana, was part of the problem. The rise of offshore financial markets facilitated the currency speculation that prompted

38. See, *inter alia*, Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958-1971* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

the abandonment of the gold standard and then fixed exchange rates in 1971–1973.³⁹ In a deeper sense, though, multinational corporations and foreign direct investment facilitated the diffusion of industrial modernity that propelled the relative decline of U.S. productive capacities. By the late 1970s, foreign-made automobiles were becoming a common sight on American roads, and American industrial workers were beginning to fear losing their jobs to low-wage competitors overseas.

Yet globalization was also the solution that enabled the Pax Americana to transcend its first systemic crisis. From the late 1970s, as the balance of payments data in Figure 5, above, again indicate, the United States began to mobilize the savings of foreigners to resolve two deficits: the international balance of payments deficit and the deficit in the federal budget that opened under the Reagan administration. Crudely, what turned upon the 1970s was a historic recalibration of the Pax Americana's political economy.

Until the 1970s, the United States had functioned as a great disseminator to its allies, pumping resources outwards in order to sustain a U.S.-led international order. From the 1980s, the United States became the world's paramount consumer: the global economy's deepest sinkhole for foreign investment and the world's leading importer of traded goods. Whereas the United States had in the 1950s mobilized resource outflows to support the Pax Americana, the United States from the 1970s became dependent upon resource inflows to sustain its predominant position and institutional responsibilities in world politics.⁴⁰

The form of a U.S.-centered international order endured, but the material dynamics that underlay the Pax Americana had been reversed. Meanwhile, the United States assumed new institutional responsibilities for sustaining and policing a globalizing international economy.

Oil encapsulates the larger dynamics. The United States was until the 1970s the world's largest oil producer. Yet, as domestic oil consumption soared and domestic oil production flagged, the United States in the 1970s became dependent on imports of foreign oil. The predicament exposed the United States to supply shocks, but instead of bringing consumption under control, as President Carter urged, Americans undertook to ensure the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the global market. To this end, the Reagan administration in 1983 created United States Central Command—a kind of military pro-consulate for the Middle East.

The provision of regional security by U.S. forces has benefitted industrial economies worldwide. Persian Gulf oil today represents the lifeblood of industrial prosperity from Shanghai to Stuttgart, but the costs of maintaining regional security have not been evenly shared. China, which became in 2015 the

39. This is a technical point, but I substantiate it in *Superpower Transformed*, 108–30.

40. Charles Maier characterizes this shift in terms of a transition from an “empire of production” to an “empire of consumption.” See *Among Empires*.

world's largest importer of oil, has, in a sense, become a free-rider upon a system of international order that the United States upholds—much as the rising United States in the nineteenth century rode freely upon public goods that the Pax Britannica provided.

The assumption of U.S. security responsibilities in the Persian Gulf illustrates the symbiotic relationship between the Pax Americana and late twentieth century globalization. Flows of transnational resources, including oil, today sustain the Pax Americana. In return, the United States upholds and defends a system of economic globalization that nurtures American power.

The circle may appear virtuous, but the circle is closing. The symbiotic relationship between American power and globalization that emerged in the late twentieth century is becoming unsustainable. To recapitulate my opening question: how did we get here?

The most succinct version of my argument goes like this. Continental conquest and early industrialization combined in the mid-twentieth century with the disparate impacts of the Second World War to make the United States exceptional. Over the twentieth century's second half, the United States became less exceptional. The modernity that America once modeled has diffused. Other societies have matched and surpassed American achievements.⁴¹

Yet our institutional framework for international order continues to reflect a conception of world politics in which the United States predominates. Transnational resources for several decades masked the widening chasm between hegemonic responsibilities and dwindling capacities. They will not perform this bridging function forever. As the global distribution of power capacities continues to shift, the United States appears less and less capable of exercising leadership responsibilities. The advance of globalization, meanwhile, is undermining the domestic social and political bases for U.S. internationalism, sealing the Pax Americana's fate.

America's deepening incapacities result, in part, from internal political and, especially, institutional dysfunctionalities.⁴² The Pax Americana may have been an elite project, but democratic majorities once rallied to support it. Robust majorities voted in Congress to support Marshall Aid and to ratify the foundational Cold War security treaties. Since the Vietnam War, Americans and their elected representatives have wearied of international burdens.

41. On the global diffusion of modernity, see Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, and the Origins of Inequality* (Princeton, NJ, 2015); and Steven Radelet, *The Great Surge: The Ascent of the Developing World* (New York, 2016). For an alternative assessment, emphasizing both the contributions of postwar U.S. development initiatives and the deleterious effects of neoliberal policies in the later part of the twentieth century, see Alice H. Amsden, *Escape from Empire: The Developing World's Journey through Heaven and Hell* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

42. My thoughts on this theme reflect the influence of Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York, 2014).

Congress has made little effort to revitalize the institutional framework for international order since 1994, when its members grudgingly approved the NAFTA Treaty. Instead, Congress has repeatedly thwarted initiatives that might have reinvigorated the institutional framework for world order. Ratification of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS); participation in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change; and U.S. membership of the International Criminal Court (ICC) created in 1998 all faltered on Capitol Hill.

More recently, bipartisan obstruction torpedoed President Obama's efforts to conclude trade deals that might have bolstered an international economic order centered on the United States. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) would have diminished the likelihood that China will reorganize Eurasia's economies around a new Silk Road. Instead the United States is ceding the geopolitical field.

In the absence of broad-based domestic support, responsibilities for maintaining our international order have devolved onto two American institutions: the presidency and the military. The nation's armed forces, it can at least be said, have handled their increasingly insurmountable responsibilities with honor and professionalism.⁴³

The record of the presidency has been less consistent. President Obama worked to sustain a liberal world order even as he worked to recalibrate the burdens of international responsibility. Yet his predecessor waged a war of choice that confirmed the capacity of decision-makers to exacerbate adverse structural trends. And today the responsibilities of the presidency are located in the hands of Donald Trump.⁴⁴

A longtime skeptic of responsibilities, Trump positioned himself in 2016 as the tribune of the Pax Americana's left-behinds. Defying postwar taboos, he questioned commitments as fundamental as NATO. Should prosperous allies not bear the costs for their own security, Trump asked? Why should Americans build nations overseas when their infrastructure resembled a third-world country? Why defend a liberal international trading order and not the interests of American businesses?

Trump's questions reverberated with voters across the Pax Americana's rust-belt. While Trump exaggerated the costs of globalization, his simple-minded caricature resonated with citizens who perceive only the Pax Americana's

43. On the militarization of U.S. global engagement since 9/11, see the brilliant first-hand analysis in Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York, 2016).

44. The first survey of presidential "greatness" to include Donald Trump ranks him the absolute worst president in American history, on the basis of his first year in office. Obama, after two terms, ranks as the eighth greatest president in U.S. history. The results may not reflect ideological bias: even self-identified conservative respondents rank Trump close to rock bottom. See Brandon Rottinghaus and Justin S. Vaughn, "Official Results of the 2018 Presidents & Executive Politics Presidential Greatness Survey," Boise State University (February 2018), accessed February 21, 2018, <https://sps.boisestate.edu/politicalscience/files/2018/02/Greatness.pdf>.

burdens—and do not grasp its advantages. What difference does it make, after all, to an unemployed steel worker or to the mother of an opioid addict that the U.S. Treasury is able to borrow in its own currency, and at low interest rates?⁴⁵

Ordinary Americans may lack sophisticated understanding of geopolitics, but they grasp that the United States is no longer so preeminent as it once was. Back in the 1940s, after all, the United States topped most international indices of social wellbeing, from life expectancy to infant mortality. Today, the United States is hurtling towards the middle of the league, and yet Americans continue to bear disproportionate burdens for the welfare of the world. American carnage, for many of our fellow citizens, is more tangible than American exceptionalism.⁴⁶

Donald Trump's achievement, such as it is, has been to unravel the Pax Americana's contradictions and to forge a winning political movement from the results.

If we treat Trump as a freak of history—an unwelcome and fluke event whose effects will soon dissipate—we will misunderstand and underestimate him. Our mad king, as he sometimes appears, appears to grasp a reality that escaped many of us. An international order centered upon the singular capacities of the United States is today unsustainable.

Improbable as it may sound, Trump may be the world-historical figure of our times. Trump may very well be the superficial and ignorant man he appears to be, but Trump appears to grasp, and evidently yearns to overthrow, the outmoded structures of the post-1945 *ancien régime*. Contemplate, if you will, the spirit of history on a golf cart, as Hegel might have put it.

To put the point somewhat differently: we cannot naturalize the configuration of international order that emerged from the 1940s. That configuration was a function of transient historical circumstances. Should we persist in trying to recreate the Pax Americana, we shall choose a tragic fate: beating on, as F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, like “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”⁴⁷

Having identified our preoccupation with the midcentury moment of creation as a source of our present malaise, I will conclude, somewhat counterintuitively, with a question that nonetheless preoccupies me, as it did my late mentor Ernest May.⁴⁸ What useful lessons, if any, can we learn from the history of the Pax Americana? I will offer just three quick suggestions.

45. For a thoughtful exposition of the advantages the United States derives from its hegemonic position in the international economic order, see Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: U.S. Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge, UK, 2010).

46. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “Mortality and Morbidity in the Twenty-First Century,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/casetextspr17bpea.pdf>; Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York, 2013); and Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York, 2016).

47. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London, 1990), 172.

48. See, especially, Ernest R. May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1973); and Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking In Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York, 1986).



Figure 6: The Spirit of History on a Golf Cart?

My first—and least diplomatic—point. We should not celebrate the Pax Americana’s passing. We diplomatic historians are well-practiced at exposing the failures and hypocrisies of American foreign policy. To grasp the stakes of the present moment, we must also contemplate the Pax Americana’s successes. For seventy years, the United States upheld a stable, peaceful international order while facilitating the diffusion, in an uneven fashion, of modernity.⁴⁹

49. The case for U.S. hegemony begins by asserting the vital work that hegemonic powers perform in the production of systemic stability, especially in the international political economy. Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley, CA, 1973) offers a classic statement of the case for hegemonic stability, formulated in terms of the interwar failures of hegemonic stability. On post-1945 hegemonic stability, see Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984). It is worth noting that even writers in an anti-capitalist tradition have often concurred that hegemony is necessary in order for a capitalist international economy to function. See, for example, Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (New York, 2010). On the career of U.S. hegemony, stressing the (mostly) benign effects, see G. John Ikenberry,

The results, on balance, have been more positive than negative. Our species is today healthier, wealthier, and more numerous than ever. Rational men and women, as President Obama has observed, would not chose to be born at any other time.⁵⁰ For sure, we can—and should—debate the premise that an industrial modernity based upon fossil fuels is sustainable at the global scale. It is not, and our century will have to resolve the adverse ecological consequences of industrial modernity's diffusion.

But for the Pax Americana we can say this. The mid-century United States did not seek to hide the lights of its achievements under a bushel. By encouraging the diffusion of modernity, the American world order served a broader good and, ironically, hastened its own demise.

Second, history reveals no good alternatives to hierarchical international order. Donald Trump may have diagnosed the Pax Americana's shortcomings, but he has no solutions. His meanderings about a "beautiful vision of a world of strong, sovereign, and independent nations" are as ignorant as they are incoherent.⁵¹

Nationalism, even in its democratic varieties, has seldom produced the perpetual peace that the Enlightenment's idealists once envisioned. Across history, state systems based upon untrammled sovereignty have produced more violence and instability than have international systems organized around the institutionalization of hierarchy.⁵²

The Pax Americana, in the context of the bipolar schism that followed the Second World War, preserved peace in the international system's core. For sure, we should not disregard the violence that wreaked the periphery of the Cold War world—and for which both superpowers bear responsibility. But nor should we overlook the remarkable phase of peace among the great powers that the Pax Americana has upheld and preserved.

If we are returning to a world politics organized around multiple, conflicting centers of power, such as the first half of the twentieth century witnessed, any reasonable reading of history teaches us that we should be fearful of what the future may bring.

Third, and final, our best hope may be the reorganization of our international order as a more collaborative institutional framework for hierarchical order. I will return here to my initial definition of the Pax Americana: *A*

Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of The American World Order (Princeton, NJ, 2011); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government* (New York, 2009); and Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and its Crisis Today* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

50. "Barack Obama and Brian Cranston on the Roles of a Lifetime," *New York Times*, May 6, 2016.

51. Trump, "National Security Strategy."

52. The comparative historical study of international systems begins with the English School. For an introduction, see Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (New York, 1992); and Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (New York, 2000).

hierarchical configuration of international relations, in which the United States exercises singular responsibilities for order. The question for the present is whether our international order can be de-centered from the singular power of the United States so that its sustenance becomes more collaborative?

History offers some instructive precedents. Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Jimmy Carter all strived in the 1970s to substitute cooperation among the industrial democracies for U.S. predominance.⁵³ Senator McCain has proposed fuller institutional coordination among the world's liberal democracies.⁵⁴ President Obama labored for eight years to wean our international order from its dependence on singular American power—and to revitalize an American society that had faltered under the Pax Americana's burdens.⁵⁵

Visionary leaders have made sincere efforts, but we should not underestimate the difficulties ahead. None of these attempts in the end succeeded in producing a meaningful reallocation of responsibilities.

International orders, like other social institutions, are sticky—and prone to produce path dependence. The broad historical panorama suggests that catastrophe is often required to shake existing configurations of order loose—and to permit creative reconstruction.⁵⁶ Whether such reinvention can be achieved in the absence of major war is altogether uncertain.

What seems clear to me is this: our young century has found its Napoleon. If some semblance of international order is to be rescued from the present crisis, it may also have to find its Metternich.⁵⁷

53. I assess the record of these efforts in *Superpower Transformed*, esp. chaps. 6–8. On the diffusion of international order in the 1970s and 1980s away from its post-1945 dependence on U.S. hegemonic power, see Richard J. Barnet, *The Alliance: America, Europe, Japan: Makers of the Postwar World* (New York, 1985); Stanley Hoffmann, *Primacy or World Order: American Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (New York, 1978); Keohane, *After Hegemony*; and, for a rather more critical view, Holly Sklar, ed., *Trilateralism: The Trilateral Commission and Elite Planning For World Management* (Boston, MA, 1980).

54. John S. McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom," *Foreign Affairs*, 86, no. 6 (2007).

55. For appraisals of Obama's foreign policy that emphasize the underlying strategic coherence of his efforts, see Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York, 2016); and McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century*, esp. 214–17.

56. See E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (New York, [1939] 2001); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York, 1981). On the origins of major (or systemic) wars, see Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY, 2013). Graham Allison assesses the likelihood of such conflict in *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston, MA, 2017). On the remaking(s) of international order after systemic wars, see Kalevi Jaakko Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989* (Cambridge, UK, 1991); and G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

57. The question still lingers: which Metternich? For contrasting visions, see Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22* (Boston, MA, 1957); and Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (New York, 1994). For Kissinger's reflections on the perils and opportunities facing the twenty-first century, see Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York, 2014).