

As of 2020, the American Century is Over

Once the American* voters elected the amoral, narcissistic reality TV star, Donald Trump as President, the writing was on the wall. Racist and xenophobic, Trump explicitly promised an isolationist foreign policy, getting out of 'endless wars', making America's allies 'pay their share' and ending conflict with America's long time rival, Russia.

The term 'American Century' was coined in 1941 by the American publishing tycoon, Henry Luce. According to Luce, the British Century had stretched from the 1815 defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo to the quagmire of World War One. America had resisted entering both World Wars, but in each case, once it entered it tipped the balance of the War decisively.

Once the boots of American youth landed on French soil in April 1917, the War was indeed brought to a rapid end, an event also marked by a flu epidemic which would take 50 million lives. And just as America stepped up to its world-historic role, its nemesis was born in the October 1917 Russian Revolution.

Luce was one of those urging that the US enter the war on the side of the Allies before the Japanese settled the question by attacking Pearl Harbour. He urged America to enter the War for the "triumphal purpose of freedom," and to go on to "create the first great American Century."

Throughout the English Century, America had extended its influence over Latin America and at the end of the 19th century began to intervene directly in the Caribbean and across the Pacific, booting Spain out of its territories. Having built up its formidable industrial might while protected from European invasion by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, America stepped on the world stage in 1917 with the youthful arrogance which would characterise its entire century of dominance of world affairs.

It is easy to forget that until the 1950s, America was widely seen as a liberator by the peoples of the colonised world. Ho Chi Minh, for example, looked first not to Mao or Stalin but to Truman to guarantee the independence of a post-colonial Vietnam. It was Kwame Nkrumah in 1963 who coined the term "Neo-colonialism" for the American road to global hegemony. While possessed of unconquerable military might, America no longer tried to displace the European powers from their colonies by force of arms, but, like the early British Empire, used their economic power, to undermine their rivals and foster allies among the local people. Unlike the old colonial powers, instead of installing their own direct control (or by moving populations, like the British), America supported corrupt strong men or other forces within the country with economic, political and low

* Throughout this article I will use the word "America" to refer to the USA, for the sake of style.

intensity armed support. This did not exclude the use of armed force; indeed, there is hardly a country outside of Western Europe that has not at one time or another been subject to American bombing and invasion. Nonetheless, the Americans normally relied on their economic might, never developed an equivalent of the British Foreign Service and always avoided so far as possible the need for “boots on the ground.”

By the end of World War Two, all the old colonial powers and the Soviet Union had been devastated and bankrupted. At Bretton Woods, America launched a set of institutions – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the US Treasury Department. The US Dollar became the reserve currency of the world, and almost all the world’s gold, industrial power and surviving military might, not to mention the first atomic bombs and the right to print as many dollars as they liked. The United Nations was created under conditions where the US believed it could control it, and America reshaped the world to a great extent just as America saw fit.

Not only did America dominate the world by its economic and military might, but its music (largely the product of African Americans), its movies, its fashion, its literature and so much of ways of everyday life penetrated the minds of all strata of society across the world. Rock bands and hamburgers became subversive weapons.

From when do we mark the decline of American power? From 1957, when the Soviet Union beat the US into orbit with Sputnik? the partial collapse of the Bretton Woods arrangements in 1968-73? defeat in Vietnam in 1975? the Iran hostage crisis in 1978? the failure to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 1991? George Bush’s invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001/3 where they remained bogged down to this day?

It could be argued that it was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 which marked the beginning of the end. From 1948 to 1991 we had a bipolar world, and as soon as one power collapsed the entire system of shared hegemony was destabilised. Always unable to directly rule the nations it dominated, the USA relied upon the competition with first the old colonial powers, and then the “Communist Bloc,” to stabilise their domination in their own sphere of influence.

Whether or not there is a critical event, America faced ever increasing difficulty and costs, not to mention insults and humiliation and increasingly lost confidence and the will to carry on as before. Isolationist sentiments in relation to foreign affairs was encouraged by the stagnation of living standards at home, ever-growing economic inequality and poverty, generating downward class resentment directed against the latest waves of immigration.

Ever since its Founding Fathers arrived as refugees from the persecution of the Puritans in 17th century England, America was populated by wave after wave of

refugees fleeing war and religious persecution, landing in dire poverty, invariably facing a hostile reception from the generation of settlers who had preceded them, and in legendary fashion hauling themselves up and making a life in the New World. Long after slavery had been eliminated in Europe, it continued in the American South where vast fortunes were accumulated. Like the plebeians of ancient Rome, the “white working class” mediated between the Southern Aristocracy and the Slaves. This class survived the Abolition after the Civil War and institutionalised racism in America. Even after Jim Crow’s back was broken by the Civil Rights Movement, all politics in America has ever since been *racialised* by the experience of slavery. This is the main reason that America never managed to build a Labour Party and lacks the kind of Welfare State which European workers have achieved, and the standards of housing, education, health and public safety experienced by the poorer half of America remains that of a ‘third world’ country.

Donald Trump was elected President on the back of sentiments of class resentment and resentment directed against the rest of the world. “Why should we try to help these people? What thanks have we ever got?”

When Trump won the 2016 election, much to almost everyone’s surprise and probably his own, some people may have thought that this was it. America was done for. But most of us, I think, were prepared to watch and see.

As soon as he was elected he tried to ban anyone from a list of Muslim countries from entering the US – a clear message to billions of people that they were not wanted, antagonising allies and enemies alike, but applauded by his domestic base.

Heads of State around the world wondered how they should ‘deal with him’ and his bizarre behaviour alarmed political leaders among both America’s allies and their erstwhile enemies. But just like many people within the US, we could comfort ourselves with the certainty that America has a long and unshakeable institution of Presidential elections on the first Tuesday in November every 4th year, and if we could only hang on until November 2020, a ‘normal’ US President would replace Trump and we could all return to the way things were before.

But then Trump’s behaviour on the international arena became more and more feral. He abused NATO, thwarted agreement on climate action in Paris, launched a trade war with China and imposed tariffs on a number of countries, supposedly allies, supplying US industry and agriculture. Trump unilaterally reneged on a Treaty with Iran and other world powers and placed sanctions on Iran and then placed sanctions on European governments who attempted to honour the agreement. Then he placed sanctions on German companies who worked on a gas pipeline vital to Germany’s economy, and Germany responded by leading a project to make arrangements for European companies to avoid US sanctions.

America's weaker allies were fed to the lions. The handful of American troops who provided a largely symbolic thin red line between Turkey and America's Kurdish allies in Syria was peremptorily withdrawn leading to an immediate Turkish invasion and leaving US soldiers wandering aimlessly in hostile territory.

And then there was poor Ukraine, on the Eastern borders of the EU, with half its country already occupied by Russia. Trump withheld \$500m of US military aid until the Polish President agreed to help him frame up a domestic political opponent.

The message was clear: no America ally, whether a vulnerable national movement or a nuclear armed European ally, could rely on American support when the chips were down.

And America's enemies? Who can forget the humiliating display of North Korea's Kim Jong Un playing Trump for a fool, getting him to run around the world to meet him in the DMZ and then Singapore, with ludicrous banter about who had the bigger button, while Korea finalised their membership of the Nuclear Club. Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, Xi Jiping, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi and other authoritarian leaders, formerly seen as representing the opposite of America's objectives, were praised as 'great leaders'. Not that America had not *always* supported dictators from petty Latin American puppets to mediaeval rulers like the Saudi king. But Trump was holding these authoritarian leaders up as role models. America was no longer on a mission to bring democracy and freedom to the world (as it had thought) but rather sought to emulate everything in the world that was not freedom or democracy. But even America's supporters in Latin America could expect no help from America. They were on their own.

Trump's call to follow up his rejection of the Paris Climate Agreement with the withdrawal of US Funds from the World Health Organisation in the middle of the worst pandemic since 1919 was the decisive proof that America had departed from its world role. America had lost the respect of its allies and the leadership of international institutions. Given the continued domestic support of Trump, allies and enemies alike could not count on a return to normal in 2021. American hegemony had been broken already. International financial and diplomatic organisations had already built work-arounds for the absence or sabotage of America and these would remain in place. The prospect of a 77-year-old Joe Biden in the Oval Office was not sufficient grounds for world leaders to hang out for a return to *pax Americana*. America was no longer feared by its enemies or trusted by its friends, and indeed no-one was sure any more who was friend and who was enemy. Israel knew it was a friend, but once America had thoroughly and finally alienated the Palestinian cause, it could actually offer little to Israel that Israel could not do perfectly well for itself. In any case, no Arab country harboured any fear of America now.

So America is now effectively absent from the international scene. It has enough nuclear weaponry to annihilate life on Earth, but this is of no practical use. But to declare an end to the American Century says more than the absence of America. A world can continue on for a time in the absence of its hegemon. What the “end of the American Century” implies is a transformation and re-alignment of the world system and a discontinuity in the direction of world history.

The Napoleonic Wars and the two World Wars marked such discontinuities, though the first was limited to the European continent. The Coronavirus Pandemic constitutes such a moment of world crisis which will bring about a reset in world history. It is the absence of America in this time of a reordering of the world which will mark the end of the American Century.

The pandemic is being experienced differently in different countries. Populations are experiencing the strengths and (mostly) weaknesses of their own leaders and their own polity in intense circumstances. The Neoliberal orthodoxy which has governed economic life since Thatcher and Reagan is publicly exposed as hogwash. As soon as the shit hit the fan the “market” had mud all over its face and all the most powerful corporations rushed for assistance to the state. Paragons of liberal economics were drafting up laws for a Universal Income (while making sure to victimise this or that marginal group), “fiscal discipline” turned out to be a hoax. Those who formerly saw themselves as “strong leaders,” having achieved power by dividing the nation and managing to corner 51% now had to unite the nation. Leaders who had lied and lied, now found that trust was gold and they had none. Those who had poo-pooed science in the service of the fossil fuel industries now begged the “so-called experts” to share the platform with them and lend them some of the credibility that they lacked. The “national heroes” and “essential workers” turned out to be not soldiers, policeman and sporting stars, but nurses, doctors, delivery drivers, supermarket workers and cleaners – including some of the lowest paid and formerly least respected workers in the economy. Meanwhile, bankers, hedge fund operators, administrators, accountants and “symbolic analysts” of all kinds could “work from home” and no-one noticed their absence.

At the time of writing, just about the only economy which is anything like fully functioning is China – the workshop of the world at the moment. Europe and America have gone begging to China for medical equipment they are no longer capable of producing themselves. And not only China, Bangladesh, India and other Asian countries where Western manufacturing has been “off-shored” are now being begged for assistance. Different countries are having different experiences with COVID19, but being a wealthy, post-industrial country has been far from a security against the virus. It is early days at the moment (April 2020) and barely 1% of the world has yet had the virus and it seems likely that the virus will eventually infect most of the population of the world. A vaccine will eventually be found but it is unlikely to arrive soon enough to mitigate this

trauma. Treatments will be developed and the death rate will lessen, but in the meantime millions will die and everyone is rethinking in what kind of world they want to live. It turned out that there was a hell of a lot more choice about how a country can be run than had been admitted. It turned out that governments have a lot more power to do things if they chose to use that power than we have been led to believe.

The coronavirus is a *world perezhivanie*, that is to say, it is an experience in which the entire world is participating and which the world will process and overcome together in a collective *catharsis*. The fact that it will be experienced differently in different countries and by different classes and social groups does not detract from this. On the contrary. There will be a thousand formative experiments under way, and everyone will be watching each other and learning from each other.

It is ironic indeed that this will all take place behind high quarantine walls, because in a pandemic this is not a left-right issue. Only a mad person wants to open the borders in a pandemic, so the liberal refugee advocate has for the moment to agree with the xenophobe that the borders have to be closed. We will all be walled up our separate cantons but we will be looking over the fence with intense interest. And as bad as things may get, generally speaking we are going to get to solve things on our own. If are lucky and we ask nicely, China might send us some ventilators and India might send us some PPE. But we are also thinking that all that off-shoring and just-in-time delivery was the load of dangerous nonsense we always said it was. Maybe it doesn't matter if we have to pay a liveable wage to have medications made here? Maybe it would be better to give everyone a basic income and let anyone who is available and wants to, do some essential work for more money?

And just by the way, until a few short months ago we were being told that the very conditions for life on Earth were being eroded by the burning of fossil fuels and other unsustainable practices and despite the breather we have given the Earth, that crisis has not gone away. When it came to the crunch, it turned out that even our political leaders turned to the "so-called experts" when we were faced with an *immediate* threat from the natural world. Isn't it likely we should listen to what these "so-called experts" have been telling us about the sickness affecting the entire world?

In short, there is going to be a lot of rethinking going on and a lot of trial and error, real life experimentation.

As things stand at the moment in America, the Divider-in-Chief has split the country in two just at the moment when national unity is needed like never before. The President who has lied more than 14,000 times since taking office now needs to ask people to sacrifice for the public good. Public trust – trust in government and trust in other people – has been in decline for decades in

America but has now been destroyed entirely. The President openly encourages his supporters to defy the law and make themselves into superspreaders of the virus to boot. As the pandemic has peaked in New York, it is just taking off in the Mid-West and this virus will wash back and forth across the continent in successive waves. At the moment, outside of some big cities, people are still largely in denial, but so long as people realise they are going to get sick by going to work or shopping or to movie or a bar, the economy is not going to pick up. There will be no economic revival until the virus is under control and there is absolutely no sign of that happening. What this means is that the seeming insatiable capacity of the American consumer to buy whatever the world could produce and generate the demand which has kept the world working, is over.

Suddenly the ever-growing multi-trillion dollar US government debt is thrown into question. So long as America could buy everything the world could produce their debt was safe, but once America can no longer back up that debt with productive power and purchasing power then that debt threatens to crash. Likewise the relation with China depends on the ability of America to buy what China produced, and if this is threatened then the entire world system is in danger.

As leader, policeman, moderator, style-setter and buyer America has left the field at just the time when the world is rethinking itself and reorganising. Who knows what's coming next, but whatever it is, will not be decided by America.

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