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The United States: Between Isolation and Empire

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Theodore Roosevelt stands with the First Cavalry Volunteers on San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War. (WILLIAM DINWIDDIE/Getty Images)

By [Rodger Baker](#)

Since taking office less than two weeks ago, U.S. President Donald Trump has moved quickly to put his policy directives into practice, from placing a temporary ban on the admittance of some migrants and refugees to lengthening the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. He has also withdrawn from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and is reportedly reviewing proposals to cut the United Nations' funding and to potentially withdraw from select multinational treaties. The flurry of activity has drawn criticism and support alike, reflecting the deep divides in U.S. politics that were thrown into sharp relief during the campaign season.

Trump's actions are not without precedent, even if their pace and scope are fairly unique in U.S. history. Is banning immigrants from a particular country new? Look at the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. What about the potential detention of dual citizens? Tens of thousands of Japanese-Americans were intentionally interned (along with Chinese- and Korean-Americans) during World War II. How about the Mexico City policy, or withholding funds from the United Nations? Ronald Reagan's administration first instituted the ban on aid to overseas relief organizations that included abortion among their family planning options and cut off U.N. funding to coerce changes in its administration. The list goes on. This is not to condemn or justify the current president's acts. For better or worse, American history is filled with examples of decisions that, to some, are contrary to the nation's values, while to others they are consistent with the country's immediate moral and national security needs.

Finding the Past in the Present

If we step back from the politics of personality — something that isn't always easy to do when they hit so close to home — we can see where and how Trump's tactics fit into the evolution of U.S. policy as a whole. In Stratfor's decade forecast for 2015-2025, we predicted two major elements in U.S. behavior moving forward: a partial disengagement from the international system, and a domestic political crisis triggered by the decline of the middle class. Neither of these behaviors was dependent on the outcome of any particular U.S. election; in fact, we identified them as trends that lie beneath the day-to-day

vagaries of politics. Two years ago, we said the first behavioral shift was already in motion. At the time we believed the second shift wouldn't manifest until after the coming decade had ended, but now it is clear that both are unfolding before our eyes.

With this context in mind, it's useful to look at the origins of U.S. activism abroad, and the two diverging paths it often takes. Henry Kissinger held up Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as models for comparison, contrasting the former's pursuit of U.S. interests through economic, political and military means with the latter's quest for an international solution, a concert of nations working together to keep the global peace. More recently, their respective analogs — George W. Bush on one hand, and Bill Clinton and Barack Obama on the other — followed roughly similar paths. But the initial directives of the Trump administration don't fit neatly into either category. Rather, they show an odd mix of the assertion of U.S. interests abroad and reversion to an earlier form of semi-isolationism. In the 19th century, the United States looked out upon a world full of empires, and though some Americans harbored ambitions to follow their lead, Washington generally sought to avoid any entanglements in Europe. Instead, the United States adopted a mercantile model in which it primarily used its military might to support the activities of American businesses around the globe.

Now, we are only a week into the Trump administration, and it will take years to form a clear assessment of its strategy. So far, though, the president appears to be refining the often-mixed set of messages and visions he laid out over the course of his campaign. Trump has chosen the phrase "America First" to define and guide its path forward, but as with his reuse of "Make America Great Again" (much like Reagan's "Let's Make America Great Again"), it isn't entirely clear how the president intends to apply historical precedent to the present. Intentional or not, his choice of "America First" — the name of the committee that lobbied to keep the United States out of World War II — as his policy slogan reflects isolationism. (At the time, the committee argued that an isolated America would be impregnable to the chaos spreading across Europe and that Washington's first priority should be to secure its own defenses at home, rather than supplying materiel to antagonists abroad.)

Abdicating the Throne

Should the United States be heading, even briefly, toward more isolationist policies, it would mark a wide swing toward an extreme version of our existing forecast — a shift that isn't unexpected, but more rapid and overt than we predicted. The United States is in the process of reviewing its role and responsibilities abroad. Most of the world considers the United States an engaged actor in the international community; at times countries balk at the notion, and at times they advocate it. But the attention paid to U.S. elections and policies worldwide reflects the underlying truth that since World War II, the Cold War and beyond, the United States has emerged (perhaps unintentionally) as the center of an informal global empire. Today it remains the largest single economic and military force in the world, and it boasts massive cultural and social influence across the globe.

What the Trump administration seems to be advocating, if taken to the extreme, is the abdication of that role, or that the United States should give up its sense of responsibility for balancing international interests in favor of resuming its station as one nation among many. If European states can place restrictions on immigration and refugee flows, why should it be unusual for the United States to do the same? If foreign countries can adjust their currencies and regulations to gain the economic advantage, why can't the United States? The counter to extreme globalism and internationalism is the argument that the United States has a right to keep its own interests in mind, decline to act as the first responder on international crises, and protect its national priorities without having to first consider their global ramifications.

When the center of an empire turns its gaze inward, when it ignores the periphery, and when it seems to arbitrarily use or withhold its strength and resources, the edges of the empire begin to fray. Other centers of power rise up, some with local or regional aspirations and some with grander visions of usurping global power. Our long-term forecast anticipated greater global chaos, and the United States' willingness to accept it for a time. "It will be a disorderly world, with a changing of the guard in many regions. The one constant will be the continued and maturing power of the United States — a power that will be much less visible and that will be utilized far less in the next decade." The Trump administration has followed this pattern, albeit more blatantly than we imagined, and Washington's fatigue in serving as the world's sole arbiter is clearly starting to show.

The Battle of Interests

But step back and look at the full sweep of U.S. history. America was semi-isolationist throughout its first century of existence, if not longer, steadfastly avoiding taking sides in the clash of empires across the pond. Of course, this was in part because of its comparative weakness and physical isolation, as well as its westward expansion and its own civil war. Washington flirted with direct intervention in Latin America, thanks primarily to U.S. business interests, and in Asia. But for the most part it stayed preoccupied with North America.

That changed with the spirit of westward expansionism that emerged alongside the American Indian Wars. Across the nation a reawakening to an active international mission gained momentum as the United States struggled to cope with the political and social chaos of Reconstruction and with a navy that lay moldering. The country began to define its interests in global terms rather than continental or hemispheric ones. In the age of Darwinism, when "survival of the fittest" applied to both the individual and the nation, the reinvigorated and youthful America was eager to break from its past and forge a better future. In 1898, the United States made its first major foray into international affairs with the Spanish-American War, offering a glimpse of the true empire it would someday become.

Yet the United States was also reticent to test its growing power, and it tried to draw back inward, only to be pulled into the fray of the first World War as it stretched beyond the bounds of Europe. It was then that the Wilsonian ideals of internationalism began to take hold, loosening the grip of nationalism. But

the United States did not share Wilson's readiness for change, and once again it withdrew, leaving global issues to Europe to handle. Calls for isolationism grew even louder among the America First camp in the lead-up to World War II.

The United States was drawn not only into the conflict but also into shaping the peace that followed as the Cold War began. With the Cold War's end, true internationalism — as opposed to activism for the sake of furthering national interests — sprung forth, reviving the ideals of global peace and cooperation. Globalization in the post-Cold War era represented a new frontier, where global values transcended place and culture, while trade and economic growth outweighed parochialism and tradition.

A Global System in Flux

Now we have reached another inflection point. Trump's policies are not causes but merely symptoms of it, no less than the Brexit, China's construction of artificial islands, or Russia's annexation of Crimea were. His election reflects a deep popular resistance to the current international system, and the United States' role in it. Whether justified or not, many Americans believe the United States subordinates its national interests to other countries', spends its money on other populations, and overlooks actions that challenge its power or cheat it of economic opportunity. Now America is questioning whether it really needs to play the world's policeman, whether peace really is always beneficial, and whether far-off conflicts really are worth wading into.

At the end of World War I, Halford Mackinder — one of the fathers of modern geopolitics — pointed out that, "In ordinary society, it is notoriously difficult for people of very unequal fortune to be friends in the true sense; that beautiful relationship is not compatible with patronage and dependence." As has been made clear since Trump's election, that sentiment is just as true within the United States as it is among nations. Persistent inequality among countries will continue to drive competition worldwide, and if Washington is either more inward-looking or spurred to support mercantilism, it cannot be counted on to resolve it. Instead, conflict, collaboration and co-management at the regional and subregional levels will become the new norm.

As multilateral treaties are gradually replaced with bilateral understandings, the United States will gain the upper hand. After all, it is much larger than any of its foreign partners, an advantage China has used to its own benefit in its relationships across East Asia. Washington will take the opportunity to reshape its defense agreements in a way that requires allies to have more skin in the game (or at least live up to their end of the bargain), losing some friendships along the way, overhauling others and making new ones. And as the United States combs through and recasts its international relationships, other countries will turn to their neighbors for greater assurance and support.

We sit at a pivotal point in U.S. history, one that wasn't caused by Trump but reflected in his very election. If what we're seeing isn't just noise in the system, or the overly ambitious attempt by a new president to overturn the policies of his predecessor, then we face a global system in flux. For now at least, the United States seems willing to shake off its global responsibilities, a mantle few are eager or able to take up in its stead. It will leave behind a fragmented world, still connected by trade, transport and telecommunications links but distracted by national and regional issues that take center stage, sidelining aspirations for global solutions as a quaint notion of a bygone era.

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