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What Donald Trump and Dick Cheney Got Wrong About America

*Jake Sullivan*34-43 minutes

I. A Dangerous Idea

Can America still lead the world? Should it? If so, how? These fundamental questions have lurked in the background for years. Donald Trump brought them front and center.

The knee-jerk response of national-security professionals to such questions is to offer a history lesson on the benefits of the “liberal international order” that America built after 1945. I once used that phrase at a campaign event in Ohio in 2016—I had advised both Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden, and then worked for Clinton when she ran for president—and someone came up to me afterward and said, “I’m not sure what exactly you’re referring to, but I don’t like any of those three words!”

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Right now, everything is up for debate when it comes to the basic purpose of U.S. foreign policy. For me, that’s unsettling. I was raised in Minnesota in the 1980s, a child of the late Cold War—of *Rocky IV*, the Miracle on Ice, and “Tear down this wall!” The ’90s were my high-school and college years. The Soviet Union collapsed. The Iron Curtain disappeared. Germany was reunified. An American-led alliance ended a genocide in Bosnia and prevented one in Kosovo. I went to graduate school in England and gave fiery speeches on the floor of the Oxford Union about how the United States was a force for good in the world.

Times have changed. These days, I’m back on a university campus, now as a teacher. My students have had a profoundly different upbringing. They were in elementary and middle school in the 2000s, children of the global War on Terror—of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, drones and Edward Snowden, and, most of all, the Iraq War. Many of them aren’t naturally inclined to see American foreign policy through a lens of optimism or aspiration. I hear this in my classes, and I see it in surveys that reveal a strong generational divide over the idea of “American exceptionalism.” Large numbers of young people question the merits of a unique American leadership role in world affairs.

This is partly because they have seen the country's foreign policy so frequently fall short. But I suspect it is also because they have been exposed to a particularly arrogant brand of exceptionalism. For example, Dick Cheney and his daughter Liz published a book a few years ago called *Exceptional*, in which they boast of America's unmatched "goodness" and "greatness"—conceding nothing, admitting no error. In their telling, the Vietnam and Iraq Wars were sound strategic decisions. [George W. Bush's administration's use of torture](#) was right; its critics were wrong. And on and on. Young people hear these kinds of arguments and say, *Count us out*.

Meanwhile, older generations are tilting toward a different outlook: the United States as the world's No. 1 sucker. It's time, many believe, to stop shouldering the burdens and letting others enjoy the benefits. This is Trump's vision of "America first." He is hostile toward America's allies and contemptuous of cooperation. He loves to goad and bully (and even bomb) other countries and says alarming and irresponsible things about nuclear war. He has pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris climate agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and more. He is not preaching isolationism; he is preaching predatory unilateralism.

[The Iran deal and the dark side of American exceptionalism](#)

Trump's approach is dangerous, but he has surfaced questions that need clear answers. Those of us who believe that the United States can and should continue to occupy a global leadership role, even if a different role than in the past, have to explain why Trump is wrong—and provide a better strategy for the future.

In doing so, we should not play by his rules. An energized, inspiring, and ultimately successful foreign policy must cut through Trump's false, dog-whistling choice between globalism and nationalism. It must combine the best kind of patriotism (a shared civic spirit and a clear sense of the national interest) and the best kind of internationalism (a recognition that when your neighbor's house is on fire, you need to grab a bucket). And it should reject the worst kind of nationalism (damn-the-consequences aggression and identity-based hate-mongering) and the worst kind of internationalism (the self-congratulatory insulation of the Davos elite).

This calls for rescuing the idea of American exceptionalism from both its chest-thumping proponents and its cynical critics, and renewing it for the present time. The idea is not that the United States is intrinsically better than other countries, but rather this: Despite its flaws, America possesses distinctive attributes that can be put to work to advance both the national interest and the larger common interest.

In the wrong hands, American exceptionalism can be a dangerous idea. It can justify too much. It can admit too little. It can offend and alienate. But for proponents of an engaged and effective foreign policy,

failure to own and define the idea—especially when malevolent forces are seeking to own and define so many national ideas—is even more dangerous. Without a sense of greater purpose about the nation's work in the world, the U.S. will lose direction and ambition at a time when it badly needs both. And if that sense of purpose is not grounded in humility, the U.S. will fall victim to hubris and excess.

What follows is a case for a new American exceptionalism as the answer to Donald Trump's "America first"—and as the basis for American leadership in the 21st century.

II. Self-Correction, Self-Renewal

American exceptionalism has meant different things to different people at different times: the unique geographic advantages of the continent, the story of the Revolution and the writing of the Constitution, the legacy of the frontier, the impulse to universalize the American experience. Some have taken this to an extreme, asserting that America is blessed by divine providence.

There is a common thread: the idea that the United States has a set of characteristics that gives it a unique capacity and responsibility to help make the world a better place.

The left and the right have abandoned American exceptionalism

Most people are familiar with the standard story of how those characteristics have guided American foreign policy in the modern era. The United States stopped Hitler's Germany, saved Western Europe from economic ruin, stood firm against the Soviet Union, and supported the spread of democracy worldwide. This story has always been compelling. It is also incomplete. Americans are no longer buying it at face value. What about the mistakes, the complexities, the imperfections—things like covert regime change across Latin America, support for brutal dictators, the invasion of Iraq, and the tragedies (despite the best of intentions) of Somalia and Libya? The Cheney version either ignores this dark underbelly or insists that the United States is "saved," as it were, and therefore cannot sin. It is a self-serving lie that has generated skepticism about America's strengths and virtues.

Still, the exceptionalist idea has proved resilient, no matter how many experts declare it useless or wrong. The expectation that the United States can do, and be, better runs deep—even among America's fiercest critics. One such critic, the journalist Suzy Hansen, used the phrase *broken heart* in her book, *Notes on a Foreign Country*, to describe the way many people feel about the reality of American power. The phrase reflects a perhaps unwitting expectation, a hope, that the U.S. will act differently from other powerful countries. The idea of American exceptionalism speaks to not just who we have been but who we *can be*.

A distinctive part of America's postwar history has been the ability to adjust after failures and follies, which are an inevitable part of global leadership. The Marshall Plan and nato came into being only after a period in which Harry Truman's administration reduced the American footprint in Western Europe and imposed self-defeating conditions on economic assistance. The Bush-era HIV/aids program that saved millions of lives arrived many years after the woeful response to the epidemic by Ronald Reagan's administration. In Latin America, from the end of the Cold War through the Barack Obama years, heavy-handed intervention and support for dictators gave way to mutual respect, engagement as equals, and the normalization of relations with Cuba.

This capacity for self-appraisal, self-correction, and self-renewal separates the United States from past superpowers. It is what President Obama—elected in part because of popular opposition to the Iraq War—meant when he said, on the 50th anniversary of the march to Montgomery, Alabama: “Each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals.”

After Trump, the United States will face its next great readjustment. Part of the challenge will be to repair the damage he has done—to alliances, to treaties, to the perception of American motives, to trust in America's word, and, most of all, to the very idea of America. But the United States must also update its purpose in a changing world.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, U.S. foreign policy was rooted in a single, simple idea: Americans were not willing to endure global war and global depression ever again. The Cold War followed quickly, and provided a clarity of purpose to efforts both at home and overseas. When the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the guiding objectives of U.S. foreign policy. Exceptionalism began to mean, in the words of the political scientist Stanley Hoffmann, nothing more than “being, remaining, and acting as the only superpower.” Then came 9/11. America stumbled into the War on Terror, which started with the justified invasion of Afghanistan but continued with the invasion of Iraq, one of the most catastrophic decisions in American history. The result, a decade and a half later, is an open-ended military commitment that spans multiple countries.

Today, three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the U.S. still hasn't found a durable answer to the most basic of questions: What is American foreign policy *for*?

Justin Fantl

III. The Purpose

The foreign-policy community's traditional response to that question has been to describe America as the world's "indispensable nation." That is no longer sufficient. By itself, indispensability is more wearying than energizing—it's the boy in the Hans Brinker story, holding back the flood by putting his finger in the dike. It speaks to fulfilling others' needs, not one's own. And it comes with no limits.

The core purpose of American foreign policy must be to protect and defend the American way of life. This raises the obvious challenge that the very definition of the American way of life is currently up for grabs. No vision of American exceptionalism can succeed if the United States does not defeat the emerging vision that emphasizes ethnic and cultural identity and restore a more hopeful and inclusive definition: a healthy democracy, shared economic prosperity, and security and freedom for all citizens to follow the paths they choose. This requires domestic renewal above all, with energetic responses at home to the rise of tribalism and the hollowing-out of the middle class. Foreign policy can support that renewal, while dealing effectively with external threats.

These fall into two categories. The first emanate from other countries, specifically the major powers: There is China's long-term strategy to dominate the fastest-growing part of the world, to make the global economy adjust to its brand of authoritarian capitalism, and above all to put pressure on free and open economic and political models. And there is Russia's pursuit of a related strategy to spread neofascist ideology and destabilize Western democracies. The threats in the second category are those that transcend national borders: the spread of weapons of mass destruction; deadly epidemics like Ebola; irreversible planetary harm caused by climate change; another global economic meltdown; and massive cyberattacks.

All of these have the potential to cripple America as we know it. Here's the kicker: None of them can be effectively confronted by the United States alone, and none can be effectively confronted if the United States sits on the sidelines.

The U.S. must mobilize a common response to these threats. In some cases, the response needs to be global, bringing the U.S. together with its rivals—including China—to face shared challenges such as nuclear proliferation and climate change. In others, the U.S. should work exclusively with its friends and allies to resist the spread of aggression, authoritarianism, and malignant corruption.

Cooperation of this kind does not happen spontaneously; it requires some actor to step up and lead. The U.S. has historically served this function, a reality I experienced firsthand during my time in government. If the U.S. had not led the charge, the Paris Agreement—which rallied 195 nations to pledge to reduce carbon emissions—would not have come into being. If, after a sluggish start, the U.S. had not led the response to the Ebola outbreak in 2014, an epidemic could have swept across Africa

and proved difficult to contain. And even when the U.S. makes mistakes at home, its leadership abroad can come to the rescue: If the U.S. had not coordinated a global response, the 2008 financial crisis could easily have spiraled into a second Great Depression.

Consider what would happen if America gave up its leadership role. Might China fill the gap? I have not seen anyone make a persuasive case that China would or could, and in any event China sometimes *is* the threat. The Europeans cannot replace America either, given how preoccupied they are with holding their own union together.

How does exceptionalism fit into this analysis? The United States cannot keep leading if it starts being seen by others as a “normal” power, interested exclusively in its narrow self-interest. America has to keep demonstrating that it is an unusual power, in terms of its attitudes, habits, methods, and ideas. Being exceptional means putting these core attributes to work for America’s own interests, yes—but also for the common good. Similarly, at home, the public will accept major investment in foreign policy only if it believes the United States is not just a normal country, with normal responsibilities. Exceptionalism is how you reconcile patriotism with internationalism.

IV. The Attitude: Enlightened Self-Interest

A national idea like American exceptionalism will fail, however, if it is neither plausible nor well defined. We should therefore identify the distinctive attributes of the United States, explain how to revive and reinforce them, and prescribe how to put them to work in foreign policy.

The first of those attributes has been a recognition that the best and most durable solutions are ones in which America’s gain also contributes to gains by others. From the republican ideas of the Founders—in particular, from their notion of interdependence—flows an attitude. Alexis de Tocqueville called it “self-interest rightly understood.” Today, we might call it positive-sum thinking.

This attitude guided America’s grand strategy after the Second World War, as the U.S. rebuilt vanquished foes, protected the sea lanes, and responded to natural disasters halfway around the world. For centuries, European states waged war with grim regularity. The fact that the major powers have not returned to war with one another since 1945 is a remarkable achievement of American statecraft. Meanwhile, China’s extraordinary development was the result not of failures in U.S. foreign policy but of its successes. The U.S. maintained the security that helped drive remarkable economic growth across the Asia-Pacific region.

This is why so many observers around the world fear American retreat more than they fear American domination. During my time in the Obama administration, when I talked with counterparts in the Middle

East or East Asia, I often heard a litany of complaints about things the United States had done—punctuated by a demand that the United States do more. It reminded me of the classic restaurant joke: “The food here is terrible ... and such small portions!”

At some level, most of the world knows that America’s positive-sum approach is valuable and unusual. At a gathering of Asian nations in 2011, I heard the Chinese foreign minister address the issue of Beijing’s ambitions in the South China Sea this way: “China is a big country, and other countries here are small countries. Think hard about that.” This is China’s way, and Russia’s way. It generally has not been America’s way.

[The souring of American exceptionalism](#)

That is, it wasn’t until Trump came along. He treats foreign policy in simple terms: us against them. He sizes up the European Union and nato and sees a bunch of smaller countries banding together to take advantage of the United States, on trade, security, migration, you name it. Trump’s worldview is one of grievance and victimization: “They’re laughing at us.” The U.S. must reject the mafia logic—“Pay up or else”—that Trump has applied to America’s alliances. The country’s allies are a special national asset. The U.S. can rely on dozens of strong, independent nations to help thwart terror attacks, resist aggression by adversaries, and more—in a way no rival can. China’s spending spree around the world has failed to buy it a single reliable ally.

Yes, burden-sharing is important. But we need a richer conception of burden-sharing than arbitrary funding targets or cutting the margins of trading partners. A new American exceptionalism would shift from absorbing the lion’s share of the costs to distributing them more fairly. This does not mean less leadership but rather a different kind of leadership, giving others a greater voice along with greater accountability. The U.S. knows how to do this. Building institutions to spread responsibility for shared problems is part of America’s DNA. And on the global stage, institution-building enhances American power and effectiveness.

V. The Habit: Problem-Solving

The second key attribute of American exceptionalism is a can-do spirit. We live in a country full of problem-solvers, in a world full of problems. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous “frontier thesis” described Americans as having a “practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients.” For the past 70 years, a habit of problem-solving has defined America’s role in the world.

I saw this problem-solving streak at every level of government, including the very top. Once, during climate-change negotiations in Copenhagen, in December 2009, heads of state met in a tiny room until

2 o'clock in the morning. When the meeting finally broke up, a blizzard was raging outside. Only a single motorcade could pull up at a time. The result was a bizarre taxi line: world leaders queuing in a Danish conference center in the middle of the night, waiting for their cars to arrive. Eventually, Nicolas Sarkozy, then the president of France, stepped forward and shouted, "I want to die!" But President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton were energized. They raced around the conference center the next day, twisting arms and ultimately salvaging the Copenhagen Accord, which, while flawed and incomplete, helped pave the way for the 2015 Paris Agreement. By the time Obama left office, he had reached an unequivocal conclusion: "If we don't set the agenda, it doesn't happen."

America's can-do approach is sometimes naive. It often fails to come to terms with structural causes or foundational flaws. The U.S. is better at addressing the poor quality of roads around Kabul (which officials know how to fix) than regime rot and corruption (which they do not know how to fix). Even so, at a time when solutions to global problems demand cooperation among governments and the private sector—including faith communities and philanthropies, mayors and activists—the U.S. possesses the creativity and boldness required to assemble unlikely coalitions.

Some people will not unreasonably ask why, if America is any good at problem-solving, the world is such a mess. U.S. foreign policy has certainly failed to solve a lot of problems, and created more than a few. These skeptics are operating from the wrong baseline, though. A nation's foreign policy is the total of imperfect decisions made by imperfect people facing imperfect choices with imperfect information. Mistakes are inevitable, and even successes beget new problems.

This is not to say that there isn't considerable room for improvement, especially when it comes to setting priorities. Americans may like to solve problems, but which problems should they be trying to solve? The answer cannot be all of them, everywhere. As the Harvard economist Michael Porter has pointed out, "The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do." America's priorities should consist of the list I outlined earlier—challenges that legitimately threaten its way of life. Americans should throw every ounce of their problem-solving weight against those threats.

Even with clearer priorities, the U.S. needs to adopt the foreign-policy version of the serenity prayer: Grant us the wisdom to know the difference between those things we can change and those we cannot. Too often, the U.S. succumbs to the temptation to go toe-to-toe with adversaries in situations where they have an advantage. For example, when the Chinese military started building on rocks and reefs in the South China Sea, the U.S. jumped up and down even though it could do little to stop the construction short of using military force, which it was not prepared to do. The U.S. ended up looking weak. Worse, it let the measure of success become something other than its vital interest, which is not those rocks and reefs. Its vital interest is the freedom of navigation for commercial and military ships. The U.S. can

enforce that interest by increasing naval operations in the area and getting its partners to do the same, demonstrating that the world rejects China's claims to these waters and forcing Beijing to decide whether to stop us. Sometimes, the answer is not to try to solve the problem created by others, but rather to make others contend with realities created for them. This was what Truman was up to with the Berlin airlift, which then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson later wrote "gave the Russians the choice of either not interfering or of initiating an air attack, which might have brought upon them a devastating response."

Finally, the relationship between America's interests at home and its interests abroad must always be kept in mind. Obama, listening to his national-security team ask for more money for Afghanistan, would shake his head and point out that he was the only person in the room who had to think about all the things we were not spending money on at home. This should not be about guns versus butter, but about what will position America to compete effectively—especially with China, which is now poised to out-invest the U.S. in technological innovation and R&D.

It should also be about where the middle class fits into America's foreign-policy priorities. The erosion of America's middle class is sapping the nation's strength. The main causes lie in domestic policy, but foreign policy bears responsibility as well.

During the Obama administration, when the national-security team sat around the Situation Room table, we rarely posed the question *What will this mean for the middle class?* Many other countries have made economic growth that expands the middle class a key organizing principle of their foreign policy. The American people want their leaders to do the same: to focus on how strength abroad can contribute to a strong economic foundation at home, and not just vice versa.

And they're right. The country's entire national-security strategy—the resources it allocates, the threats and opportunities it prioritizes, the events and circumstances it tries to shape, the relationships it cultivates—should more explicitly be geared toward reviving America's middle class. As a starting point, the U.S. must define what counts as its "economic interest," looking beyond generic GDP growth in order to understand the impact of specific policies on corporations and communities. Who are the real winners and losers? I recall working on a diplomatic effort for an American firm that wanted to close an energy deal in Europe, which the State Department saw as a potential "win." We later learned that the company planned to import materials from other countries, not the United States. Whose interests, exactly, were we serving? Whose interests are we serving by putting diplomatic muscle into helping companies like Walmart open stores in India?

America's trade and investment strategies should place less emphasis on making the world safe for corporate investment and more emphasis on international tax and anti-corruption policies that target drivers of inequality. Jennifer Harris, a former State Department colleague, posed an arresting question when I spoke with her recently: How is it that the domestic economic agenda of the Obama administration could be so different in its values and priorities from President George W. Bush's—so much more focused on the needs of working people—while its international economic agenda was nearly identical? The answer is that both political parties came to treat international economic issues as somehow separate from everything else. U.S. internationalism became insufficiently attentive to the needs and aspirations of the American middle class. Changing that is a prerequisite of an effective and sustainable foreign policy that enhances the American way of life.

VI. The Method: Comfort With Power

A third attribute of America's exceptional role is that the country is more willing than other advanced democracies to wield power in all forms. This is in no small part because Americans see themselves (rightly or wrongly) not as *choosing* to act but rather as *called* to act, by circumstances or by other nations.

Dick Cheney's approach revolved almost exclusively around hard power: F-35s, battleships, tanks. Donald Trump has exacerbated this problem, boosting the military's budget while depleting the diplomatic corps. A new American exceptionalism would recognize that the country's durable power comes from creative, credible, and tenacious diplomacy backed by the threat of force, not force backed by the eventual hope of diplomacy.

First, the U.S. has to wind down its participation in the forever wars of the Middle East. This doesn't mean abandoning the region or shutting down the counterterrorism mission. But it does mean finally bringing the war in Afghanistan, which has now gone on for more time than any other war in American history, to a responsible close. Military engagement in other parts of the region needs stricter limits. The blank check for military action that Congress gave the president in 2001 should be transformed into a much narrower authorization, one that excludes participation in counterproductive missions, such as the ongoing one in Yemen, whose only clear outcome is a humanitarian crisis.

In addition, the U.S. should rebalance its priorities among the various forms of American power—defense, diplomacy, development, trade, investment, and technology. One idea is to group them all into a unified national-security budget, which would allow for shifting money from outdated military systems and bloated line items to, say, investments in artificial intelligence and resilient infrastructure. Building that budget requires asking hard questions. For example, the U.S. has historically been the least

vulnerable nation in the world, thanks to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans; are enough resources going into a strategy to deal with the fact that, in cyberspace, it is now among the most vulnerable? And in the strategic competition with China, is the United States underweighted on the military dimension or in the realm of technology and economics?

Finally, the U.S. must get better at seeing both the possibilities and the limits of American power—and match its means to its stated ends. As Walter Lippmann observed, “In foreign relations, as in all other relations, a policy has been formed only when commitments and power have been brought into balance.”

Syria is a tragic case of the means-ends gap. The American president declared that the Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad, had to go, but the United States didn't make that happen. Hundreds of thousands of people were slaughtered, millions fled the country, and a civil war continues to rage. As a participant in many of the debates about whether to intervene, I have struggled to determine where we went wrong. My tentative conclusion is that we should have done more to try to achieve less. Those of us who advocated for using substantial American means in Syria also argued for maximalist ends (a swift transition to a new government in Damascus) that proved unachievable. Meanwhile, those who advocated for more limited objectives also argued that we should use very modest means, or not get involved at all. Nobody was arguing to both increase the means (more and earlier pressure on Assad) and temper the ends (give up the demand that Assad leave and focus instead on curbing his worst behavior). That would not have solved the deeper problem, but it might have reduced the overall level of violence, death, and displacement, and set the stage for a better long-term outcome.

VII. The Ideas: The Common Good

The fourth and final attribute emerges from a historical fact: The United States was fashioned not from a territory or tribe but from a set of ideas. The Founders proclaimed the values of liberty and equality. They established the supremacy of “We the People.” Although their worldview incorporated racist and sexist elements—the legacy of which continues to roil American society today—they also anticipated progress toward “a more perfect union.” Establishing a state based on ideas was itself exceptional. Europeans pursued independence based on nationality: as Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians. America's story is different.

Crucially, the Founders believed not just in individual rights but in the common good. They were not small-*d* democrats but rather small-*r* republicans. They embraced the notion of interdependence—that human beings have shared interests and need institutions to pursue those interests, and that liberty can be preserved only through such institutions. They believed that a good society is the product of active

citizenship combined with responsible and virtuous leadership. And they viewed these truths as universal—the United States was not coming into existence to rise and fall as other powers had, but rather to transform the world.

These founding principles coalesced into an American creed, which eventually served as the basis for the country's postwar influence abroad. But in recent decades, that foundation has cracked. Many (mostly white) Americans are looking not to the nation's founding ideas but to Donald Trump's very unexceptional version of nationalism as a channel for their frustrations and hopes. America's friends are taking note of the divisions, while its competitors are exploiting them. Franklin D. Roosevelt once spoke of the United States as an "arsenal of democracy"; today, an arsenal of autocracy is forming as authoritarian states seek to put pressure on America's political and economic model.

The current moment calls for a new form of patriotism—for citizens of all political stripes to embrace a sense of national pride based on America's founding ideas. In the current climate, this is a task of daunting proportions. But I believe that most people are eager for an inclusive and welcoming patriotic spirit—one that, as the historian Jefferson Cowie put it, refuses to surrender the American story "to the voices of exclusion and avarice." Winning this battle will require enormous work at home, where much of the emphasis must lie.

It will also require a renewed belief in the power of American values in the world. I can imagine two types of readers rolling their eyes. One group will ask why we should make values a priority at all, rather than simply securing our interests. But as the late John McCain once noted, "It is foolish to view reason and idealism as incompatible or to consider our power and wealth as encumbered by the demands of justice, morality, and conscience." A place for values in the conduct of foreign policy is built into the character of a country founded on ideas. It is also essential to our interests, because freer, less corrupt, more open societies are less likely to threaten America's way of life. Moreover, the U.S. cannot expect to lead if it is offering only pragmatism, and not aspiration. It can't necessarily outbid China, which has much more cash to spend abroad, but it can out-persuade and out-inspire.

The other group will call out the many times that the United States has not acted on its asserted ideals. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us why this will always be so: "Hypocrisy and pretension are the inevitable concomitants of the engagement between morals and politics," he wrote, adding, "They do not arise where no effort is made to bring the power impulse of politics under the control of conscience." American leaders after Trump do not need to make categorical claims that place values above every other consideration. They should be more honest and more precise, but no less proud. Values have been a genuine consideration in the weighing of interests, and the U.S. has tried far more than other great powers to take them into account. This is rare and impressive enough. Proceeding from this basis,

a new American exceptionalism can more consistently, if more modestly, secure a place for values in the conduct of foreign policy.

VIII. The Black Box

Some argue that the United States is fractured beyond repair—that Donald Trump is destroying American credibility and, with it, all possibility of renewed American leadership. Some also contend that you can no longer make arguments to the American people based on higher purpose—they are too angry or too cynical.

I see it another way. Let's not forget that, throughout American history, the path forward has been determined not in times of disruption but in their aftermath. The New Deal followed the Great Depression, just as the Marshall Plan followed the Second World War. When Donald Trump exits the White House, the United States will once again have a chance to chart a new course. Its friends will not give up on the country in the interim, at least not until the next election clarifies whether Washington's abdication is the work of a rogue president or the will of the country. They *want* to be America's partners. As for the American people, I believe that they would welcome a renewed form of exceptionalism that addresses their concerns, speaks to their aspirations, and restores confidence that their country can be a force for good in the world.

America as a force for good in the world—who talks like that anymore? Is this all just the “gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians,” as Robert Hayden put it in his poem “Frederick Douglass”? Well, I believe we *should* talk like this. Our greatest leaders through history talked like this. And America's most principled critics, like Douglass himself, have been among its greatest patriots. They understood, as we must, that American exceptionalism is not a description of reality but the expression of an ambition. It is about striving, and falling short, and improving. This is the essence of a patriotism that every American can embrace.

Reclaiming America's place in the world will be an extraordinary challenge. For decades, the country neglected needed updates to the international system. Now Donald Trump is blowing that system up. The saying goes that when a natural disaster hits, “build back better.” The same applies to foreign policy. Not since 1945 has the U.S. had the chance to go back to basics and decide which parts to keep, which to scrap, and, above all, which to reinvent. After Trump, it can do just that.

When I was Joe Biden's national-security adviser, we paid a visit to Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, who expressed admiration for America's famed “black box.”

“Black box?” Biden asked.

"You know, the black box that the Americans have buried that contains the secret for how they can constantly reinvent themselves."

We need to find and unlock that black box.

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