

# Unmaking American Greatness: Trump, populism and American foreign policy



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## Overview

In keeping with his promises to put 'America First', Donald Trump has presided over a dramatic erosion of America's leadership in the global community. The unilateralism of the Trump Administration is not unique, however, but represents the most recent version of a theme in American politics that has been bubbling under the surface for decades. This talk offers an historical perspective on the challenges posed by Trump's 'America First' approach and considers the implications it carries for the commitment of the United States to a liberal world order.

# Today's underlying theme: Trump as a wrecking ball & the historical antecedents of his 'America First' approach



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89c1B0RzAHY>



# Outline

1. What is the modern US foreign policy tradition and how is it unique?
2. 'America First' and populist challenges in historical perspective
3. How is Trump unmaking American greatness in the world & what challenges does that present?

# The modern US foreign policy tradition (1)

- Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, 8 Jan 1918—symbolic moment when US put its power & prestige behind quest for a liberal world order
- US as champion of a New Diplomacy based on democracy, self-determination (anti-colonialism), free trade, freedom of seas & collective security



## **President Wilson's Fourteen Points**

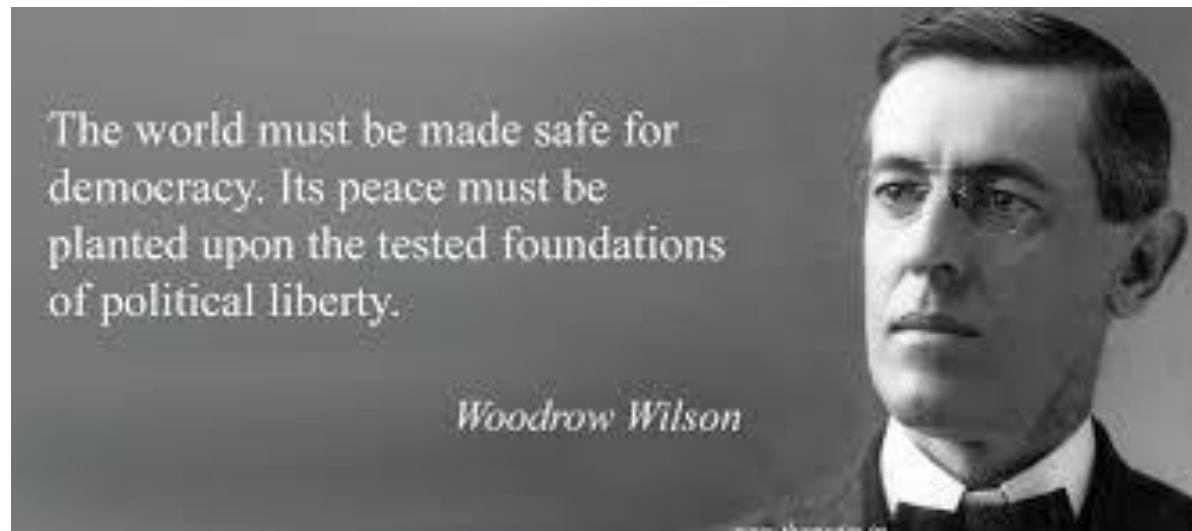
1. Open diplomacy
2. Freedom of the Seas
3. Removal of economic barriers
4. Reduction of armaments
5. Adjustment of colonial claims
6. Conquered territories in Russia
7. Preservation of Belgian sovereignty
8. Restoration of French territory
9. Redrawing of Italian frontiers
10. Division of Austria-Hungary
11. Redrawing of Balkan boundaries
12. Limitations on Turkey
13. Establishment of an independent Poland
14. Creation of an Association of Nations

## The modern US foreign policy tradition (2)

- Wilsonian vision thwarted at end of WWI, but in WWII Franklin D Roosevelt took up Wilson's vision, which guided American leadership of the post-1945 liberal order
- While not adhering consistently to Wilson's liberal internationalism & notwithstanding many imperfections, US has been more successful & magnanimous great power because of Wilson's legacy & this foreign policy approach

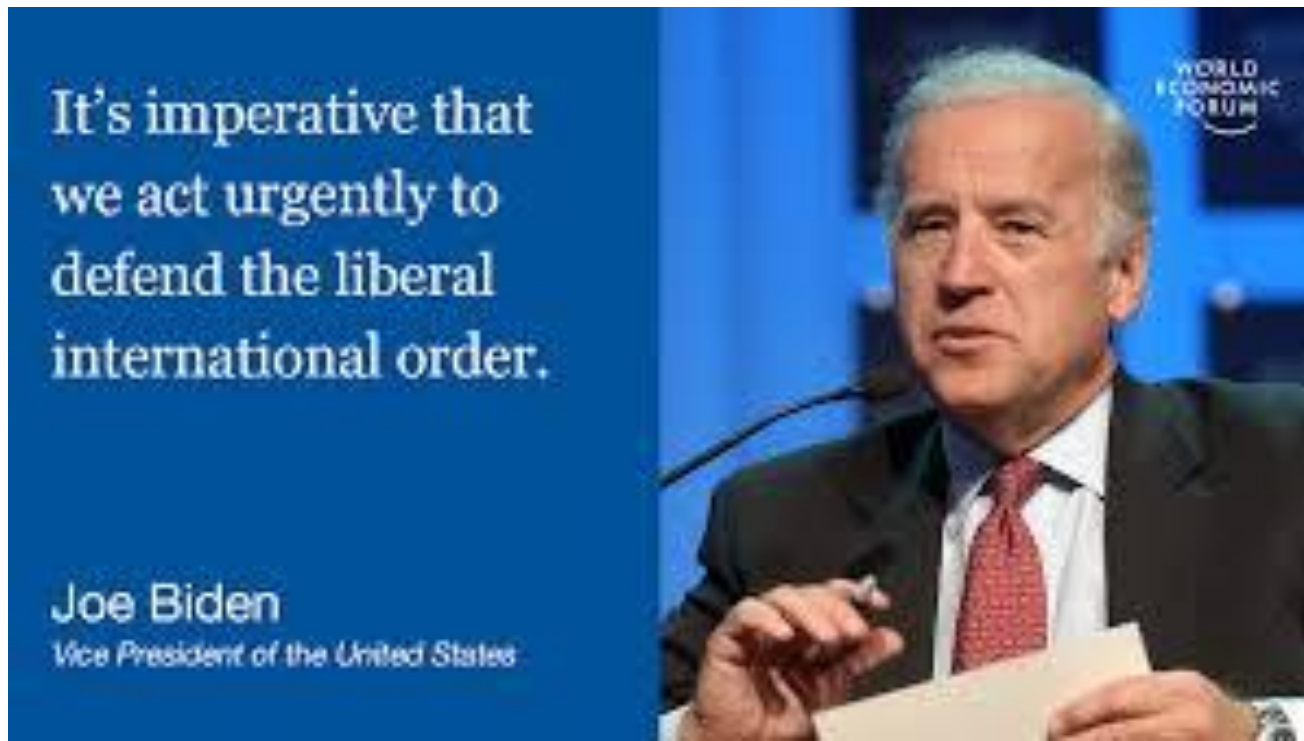
# The modern US foreign policy tradition (3)

- Key elements of this US foreign policy tradition
  - US as security guarantor & steadfast ally in many parts of world—incl. through force deployments
  - US as champion of democracy, human rights—a values-inspired & (sometimes) values-driven diplomacy
  - US as supporter of free trade, global economic integration & development
  - Advocate for rules-based order & for open world economically & politically, with universalism prevailing over spheres of influence



# The modern US foreign policy tradition (4)

- Unique threefold role of US in international system
  - Nation-state pursuing its national interests
  - Superpower shaping world order
  - Ideological champion of liberal capitalism





# The modern US foreign policy tradition (5)

- Only other power to seek similar balance of roles was USSR, but failed utterly
- Even for US, balance between three roles has always been shifting & much of American history suggests stronger support for first & second roles over third
- Trump's 'America First' approach is about embracing first two roles based on national interest & power but either downplaying or undermining third more systemic role as a bastion of rules-based arrangements for a liberal international order

# **‘America First’ in historical perspective**

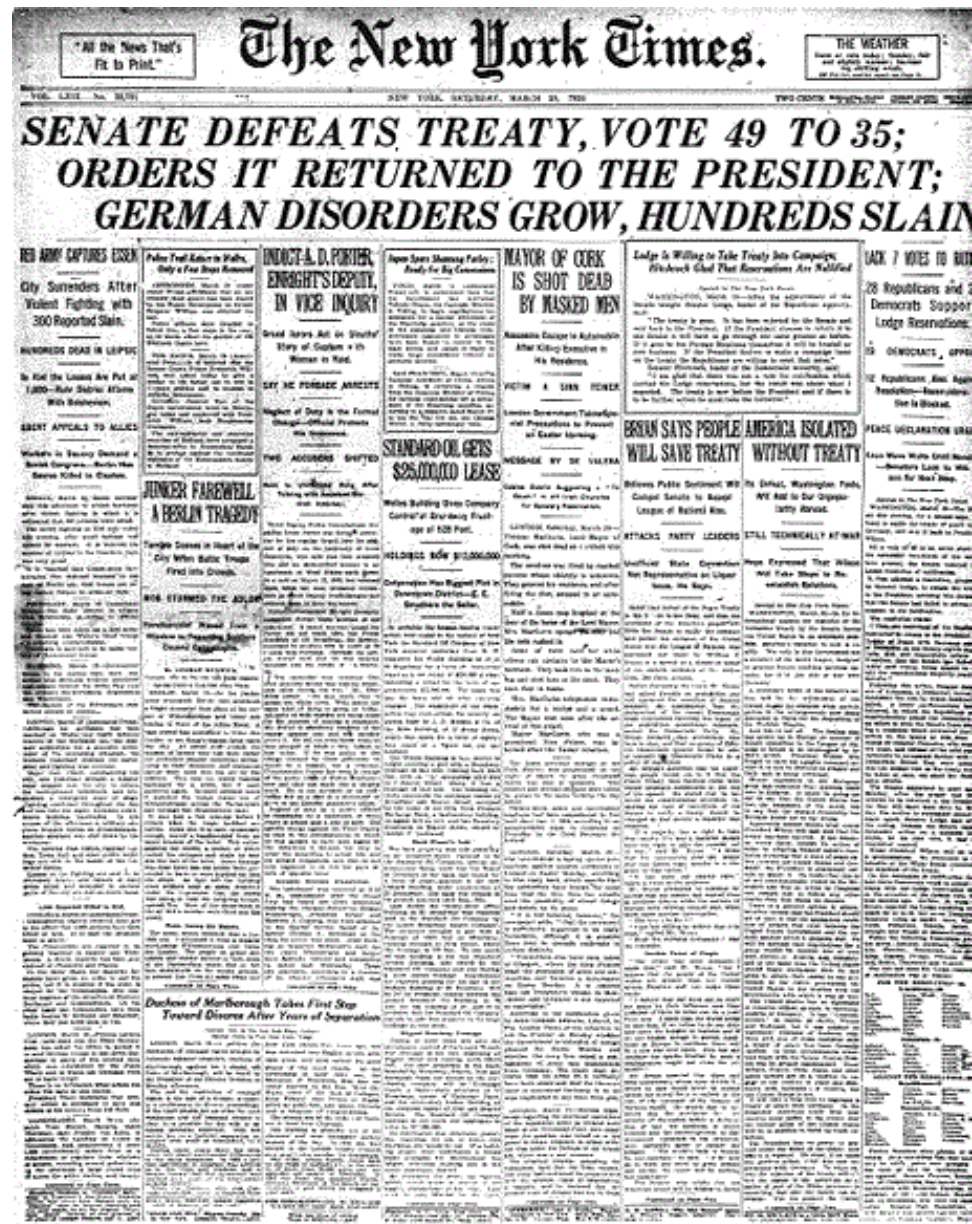
- Quick romp through history of populist/nationalist strain in US politics & implications for foreign policy



# First 'America First' challenge to Wilson's vision

Wilson's vision frustrated at outset:

- In part by European powers interested in a victors' peace rather than Wilson's peace without victory
- Republican congressional opposition
- Absence of US in League of Nations especially devastating blow for US internationalism



# **‘America First’ in the 1920s & 1930s (1)**

- US involved in world in various ways but not as systemic liberal champion or as a proactive leader
- At home, social change in 1920s & economic depression in 1930s:
  - anti-immigrant sentiments & associated laws;
  - racism part of mix (KKK had over 3 million members);
  - in 1930s, populist voices like Huey Long, Father Coughlin, railed against banks & Jews—blunted by FDR who put together New Deal coalition





# 'America First' in the 1920s & 1930s (2)

Externally, tariffs & aversion to entanglement in European power politics:

- Neutrality Acts
- America First Committee, 1940 to oppose US involvement in war—Charles Lindbergh most famous member (anti-Semitic & FDR likened him to Goebbels)
- But AFC had 800,000 members, including Gerald Ford & Sargent Shriver



# Non-interventionism & 1940 Election

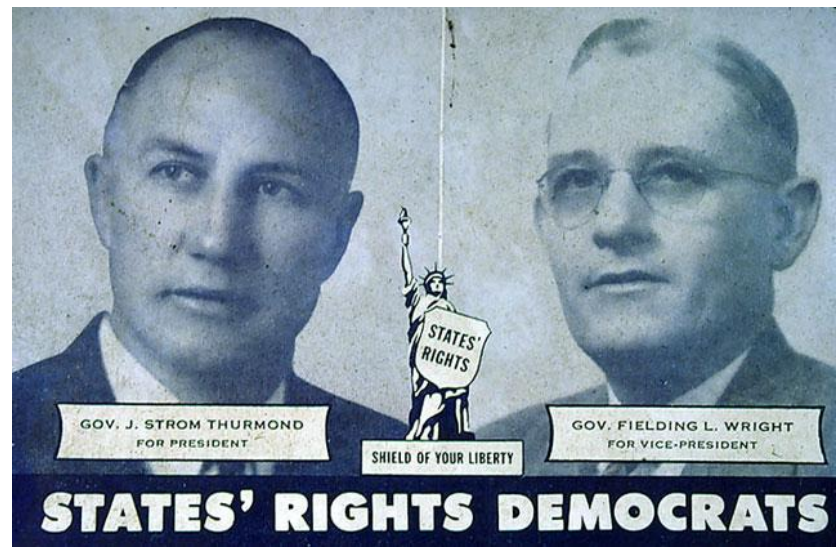
- As world plunged into war, non-interventionist nationalism to fore, not internationalism
- Republicans: “When your boy is dying on some battlefield in Europe . . . —don’t blame Franklin D. Roosevelt because he sent your boy to war—blame YOURSELF, because YOU sent Franklin D. Roosevelt back to the White House!”
- FDR had to ease US into support for UK by stealth until could swing public opinion through Axis excesses & Pearl Harbor—helped by election interference <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/when-a-foreign-government-interfered-in-a-us-election-to-reelect-fdr-214634>)

# **Liberal internationalism triumphant**

- War provided opportunity for FDR to articulate internationalist vision, which US acted on after WWII, helping shape key institutions of rules-based order, especially UN
- Cold War key factor in explaining this high point of internationalism—enabling linking of US national interests with liberal internationalism
- Years from 1940s to 1960s—glory years that coincided with Trump's childhood & adolescence—were period of 'liberal consensus'

# Populist & non-interventionist twitches

- Yet even in these years, some expressions of anti-Washington populism & of non-interventionism
- In 1948 presidential election, Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond won 39 Electoral College votes (then served in Senate from 1954 to 2002, first as Dem than as Rep, retiring at 100)
- In 1952, Robert Taft, leader of non-interventionist wing of Republican Party, almost won nomination over Eisenhower





# Shattering of liberal consensus

- More twitches as liberal consensus disintegrated during Civil Rights, Vietnam War protest, feminism & other movements of social change
- In 1968, George Wallace received 13.5% of popular vote & 46 electoral college votes
- Issues of race & identity prominent in movements challenging Washington & liberal elites
- Nixon's appeal to 'Silent Majority' & Agnew's memorable critique of 'nattering nabobs of negativism'—precursor of Trump's 'enemy of the people' & 'fake news' memes
- Began white South's shift to Republican Party & that party's response to Wallace's constituency

# Foreign policy implications

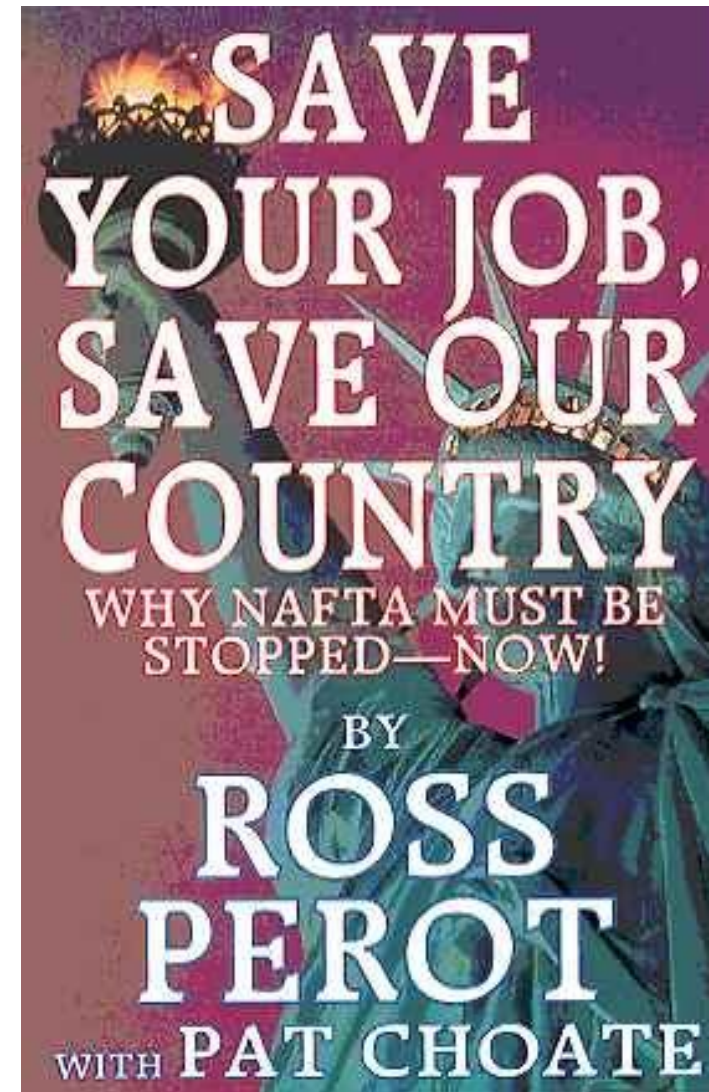
- Populist strains also carried international implications
- Disillusionment with Vietnam war threw into question domestic support for active international role by US
- The Nixon 'shocks' (almost no consultation with allies):
  - 1969 Guam Doctrine re burden-sharing, culminating in Vietnam syndrome & US reticence re intervention
  - 1971 Détente with China, Soviet Union
  - 1971 de-linking dollar and gold
- All have echoes today

# 1970s and 1980s

- Concerns re Japan as No. 1—and resentment against unfair trade provides fertile ground for Trumpism
- Donald Trump in 1988: “They come and they talk about free trade. They dump the cars and the VCRs and everything else. We defend Japan for virtually nothing, which is hard to believe.”
- Same rhetoric as today: Outcompeting US by cheating, while US provides security on the cheap— ‘bad deal’
- Reagan & Second Cold War with USSR helped reinstate idea that US national interests & internationalism coincided
- Even then, Trump’s views not unique & some populist murmurs

# Ross Perot, 1992: A Texan Trump?

- At one point outpolled both Bush and Clinton
- 19% of the vote in the 1992 presidential election
- Voters should listen for the “giant sucking sound” of US jobs heading south to Mexico should NAFTA go ahead





# Internationalism revived

- But Clinton did win 1992 election & end of Cold War breathed new life into US internationalism
- Outflowing of confident catchphrases about a looming new American Century: new world order, unipolar moment, end of history, indispensable nation, Washington consensus
- Economy was thriving; IT revolution; US at heart of globalisation & democratisation: populism seemed destined for dustbin of history, like USSR
- From 2000s, War on Terror created another rationale for international engagement as linked to national interests— analogous to Cold War & commanding similar domestic support

# Second thoughts about being indispensable

- But actual wars in Middle East evoked memories of Vietnam
- By time of Obama years, widespread fatigue about messy Middle East, rise of China, resentment at costs of globalisation with changing economy, frustrations in some quarters about changing demographics, uneven economic growth, dynamic coastal cities vs. stagnant heartland America, deep political polarisation
- By 2016, free trade out of favour & even Hillary Clinton questioned TPP

# Trump in historical context (1)

- When Trump came on political scene was drawing on nationalist strain that has been there during entire century since 14 Points
- Comes to fore especially during periods of social dislocation, demographic change & economic anxiety—in domestic politics, has cultural/racial edge, with polarisation of electorate echoing polarisation in politics
- Usually means forsaking internationalism & seeing US not as liberal internationalist champion but as an ‘ordinary’ nation fighting its corner in a zero-sum game; American greatness defined not by its magnanimity but by its power, its prosperity and its ability to protect interests of its people (over others)

## Trump in historical context (2)

- Internationalism has been strongest when appears aligned with US national interests and when US is thriving
- External pressures & Cold War helped justify liberal internationalism—undergirded bipartisan consensus, in part through idea of existential threat
- What happens when you do not have that sort of international context and, instead, you have political polarisation reflective of a divided society, unlike years of liberal consensus?
- In the case of China (or Russia), not sufficiently threatening to elicit Cold War-style consensus—not an existential threat



# Trump in historical context (3)

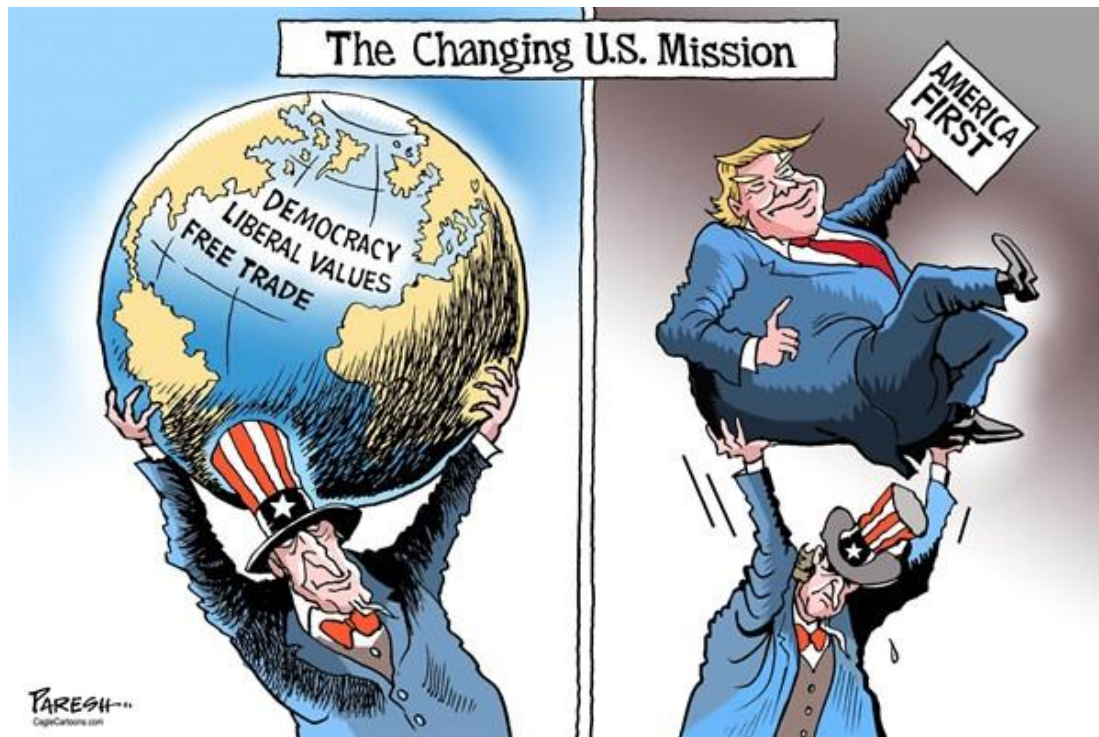
- America First idea has been around a long time in different guises as a rallying catch-cry for US nationalism—has been constrained or channelled in particular directions because of external factors; and because successive cohorts of US political leaders have assumed congruence between US national interests & liberal principles of world order
- At all times, many in US have failed to see that congruence and have questioned costs of internationalism, as have tried to show with this quick romp through US history

# Trump in historical context (4)

- Should not forget power of contingency in averting or empowering populist nationalism, with some near-run outcomes: Taft's narrow loss; Trump's narrow win; and what if Perot had sought & won major party nomination?
- What happens when contingency actually delivers a president who is in that populist/nationalist camp and who is always focused more on domestic politics, who labels CNN 'enemy of the people' and who sees Nancy Pelosi as more of an adversary than Vladimir Putin?

# Trump & the US foreign policy tradition (1)

- At present, Wilsonian legacy seems rejected & replaced by:
  - ‘America first’ ethos & unabashed pursuit of national interests
  - Economic, political and security interests separated, with decoupling of interests & values
  - More selective, transactional approach to rules-based order
  - ‘Principled realism’ (National Security Strategy)



WHAT  
PROMOTION OF  
VALUES?  
I BELIEVE IN  
PURSUIT OF  
INTERESTS!

FOREIGN  
POLICY

DEMOCRATIC  
PEACE  
THEORY

RESPONSIBILITY  
TO PROTECT

DEMOCRATIC  
TRANSITION  
THEORY

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CagleCartoons.com



## Trump & the US foreign policy tradition (2)

- Trump's transactional approach privileges the strong and disadvantages the small & weak—what matters most is zero-sum competition for international advantage between nation states, especially great powers
- “We’re America, bitch”, as one senior Trump adviser told *Atlantic* when summarising Trump Doctrine
- Such a vision wilfully blind to challenges of an interconnected world, so many of which (above all, climate change) transcend borders and require cooperation across the global community—building walls won’t solve these



# Trump & the US foreign policy consensus (3)

- Greatness defined in terms of nationalism makes the US 'ordinary', not exceptional
- If the United States is just another great power pursuing its own narrow national interests in a perceived zero-sum game, why should it expect more international respect, credibility or support than China, Russia, Turkey or Iran?
- Where is American greatness in this approach? And what does it augur for responding to challenge of China's rise?

# The silver lining

Beneath transactional gloss & sensationalist tweets, some continuities:

- Trump is not alone in determining US foreign policy: Cabinet Secs & advisers (“axis of adults”), Congress, bureaucracy & military—great inertia in US system
- Some of Trump’s own diplomatic & military advisers remain wedded to US traditional approach to international order
- Like Trump himself, Trumpism as a transformational doctrine for US foreign policy is shallow and selective in application; continued partial commitment to rules-based order in politico-security realm (e.g. Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision), though less clear on trade

# **The challenge:**

## **Rethinking American greatness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (1)**

Regardless of Trump, the US cannot revive past greatness of 1940s to 1960s or 1990s or any other era:

- World has changed: globalisation; multi-polarity & rising powers, especially China; climate change; rapid technological change, especially looming impact of AI
- US has changed: Multiculturalism; partisan polarisation; relative 'decline' in economic, political & military power

# The challenge:

## Rethinking American greatness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2)

- While not completely subverting US diplomatic traditions, Trump's 'America First' instincts and transactional approach weaken American greatness as a form of shared greatness
- To rediscover American greatness, means rethinking how US can bolster liberal international order in a globalised era
  - by bolstering regional & global institutions
  - by not solely privileging nationalism & narrow views of national interests
  - by once again embracing the liberal principles that linked US greatness to a greater good globally
- A shared challenge in which we all have a stake