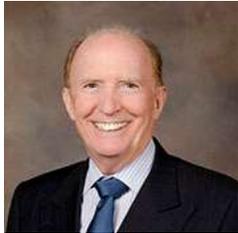


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A popular rebellion to fulfill America's promise, at home and abroad



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On June 6, 1944, American and allied forces stormed ashore at Normandy, beginning the liberation of Europe. Tom Brokaw labeled those who took part in this effort "[The Greatest Generation](#)." On June 6, 2020, hundreds of thousands of Americans "stormed ashore" in our own cities, voting with their feet to try getting American society to address endemic racism.

At the same time, for months many Americans have been risking their lives to succor the nearly two million who have contracted COVID-19. The heroes are first-responders, doctors, and nurses, plus those who keep the vital service sectors working. The rest of us rely on the medical personnel to save lives and their service sector counterparts for our basic necessities.

A large fraction of all these people are either black or other minorities. Together, they are the New Greatest Generation. So, too, a disproportionate number of COVID-19 victims are urban blacks. Awareness of these inextricably-linked facts has helped fuel the protests following the murder of George Floyd.

What does this have to do with U.S. foreign policy? First is how the United States is regarded by governments abroad, potentially translating into their confidence in America. Others competing with us, notably [China](#), or locked in confrontation, notably [Iran](#), have been cackling over America's problems. Leaders of close allies shake their heads that the United States is led by a president who seems insensitive to the needs of the nation and its people.

Yet in foreigners' hardheaded assessments of relations with the United States, these factors are likely ephemeral. Inherent American power remains; they will judge us largely by what we do abroad, where much of the damage done by this administration can be reversed. One key indicator is that savvy governments and private sector investors continue viewing the United States as the ultimate safe haven, the place to "park their cash."

The trifecta of U.S. challenge

There's no question that, like many other societies, the United States is under great stress. The pandemic shut down large parts of the U.S. economy and ruptured social relations. Under the

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best circumstances, recovery will be slow, and some things will never return to “normal.” And even with last week’s surprising increase in employment, the black community [did not benefit](#).

At the same time, the scab covering the great sore of historic racial injustice has been ripped off and has led to a startling response: huge and mostly peaceful protests across the nation, involving whites as well as blacks and especially a young generation.

Further, there is little doubt that the U.S. government is dysfunctional, most obviously the administration and Congress, but more subtly the Supreme Court, with decisions like [Citizens United](#), which opened the floodgates of money in politics, and the Court’s [weakening](#) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

The mainstream media also are not covering themselves with glory. Cable TV is a shouting match. Some great national newspapers decided three years ago that Donald Trump was an illegitimate president and has to go.

Taken together, this is a trifecta of challenge. In the past, the U.S. has overcome one or two major challenges at the same time; it has never been faced by three at once.

But people abroad are wrong to foresee erosion of the structure and ethos of U.S. government and society, and hence its capacity to be effective abroad. Unlike those cackling at America’s problems — notably China and Iran — The United States has a greater capacity to change and, as seen last week, doesn’t kill military leaders who get out of line. However difficult and long it takes, America has always been able to surmount its problems and renew itself. Thus current protests show not weakness but strength.

Lessons

As has been obvious to astute observers since the end of the Cold War, after which U.S. allies no longer had to shelter under the U.S. wing and new political and especially economic competitors emerged, U.S. foreign and domestic perspectives and policies can no longer be separated. Succeeding abroad has to start with succeeding at home.

The United States needs to reassess what truly matters to it in the world, a task not done properly since the end of the Cold War as a central organizing principle. Notably, if the American people are going to support an active U.S. role in the world, it has to work for them. That includes stimulating the private sector to return jobs to the United States and to stop globalization from being seen as an end in itself, but useful only as it enables people and societies, beginning in the U.S., to benefit. It means heavy investment in infrastructure, which unwisely did not happen after the 2008 financial crisis. It means deciding where U.S. military power needs to be deployed abroad for the security of the United States and allies, and where it should be reined in. Budgets need to go up for diplomacy and other non-military forms of foreign policy, while defense spending needs to be taken off autopilot. All elements of power and influence — both public and private sectors — need to be evaluated together. Today, that’s not being done.

The American people and their leaders also need to abandon some shibboleths. One is the common belief that, in the abstract, there is value in being “Number One.” Except where needed for some practical purpose, that’s meaningless. So too is the idea that the U.S. needs to continue being an imperial power, aspiring to be hegemon in one region or another. It should project power and influence where needed, but not as a matter of national pride.

“Strategic thinking:” the key

The next administration, Democratic or Republican, needs to reintroduce a long-lost art: genuine “strategic thinking.” Washington’s institutions are good at tactics, but poor at seeing the “big picture” across regions and functions, relating different elements to one another, and making trade-offs. Unless the president who takes office next January brings into government people adept at these skills, major foreign policy failures are inevitable.

With Pearl Harbor, the United States was forced out of isolation; with 9/11 it learned that insulation would never again be possible. Cleaving to alliances and international institutions is not an “optional extra” or challenge to American power, as the current administration believes. They are indispensable to securing U.S. interests and well-being.

President Trump campaigned on an effective slogan: Make America Great Again. But he went about it backwards. He has hammered on core elements of what the United States is all about, favoring extremes that corrupt the bases of American democracy. Yet perhaps he has done the country a favor, since one result has been popular rebellion, at the moment centering on race, by people who care about America’s promise. That can help create a solid basis for better foreign as well as domestic policy.

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