

Quick, Timely Reads  
*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

Foreign Policy, American Narrative Linked  
*Part One*

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*Following is the first of a two-part series of articles on the views of American presidents on foreign policy and religion.*

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There is a national narrative that links most American presidents together in a providential foreign policy. It is derived from several examples. Here are three big ones:

**George Washington:** “The Citizens of America ... [are] to be considered as the Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity” and, “in war He directed the Sword, and in peace He has ruled in our Councils.”<sup>1</sup> Washington was pointing out that America was a favored country that could show the world how government might work with the Supreme Being in charge.

**John Adams’** stirring words: “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the Earth.”<sup>2</sup>

**Abraham Lincoln** said the American institutions contained the germ of freedom, which he believed would grow and expand into the universal liberty of mankind. The nation was embarked on a providential mission that was originated by the Puritan founding of New England. Most other presidents agreed.

We need to find or renew an American narrative in these troubled times when the nation appears to be drifting and fractious. The world needs one, too. Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia said: “Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better ... responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my company, my success [is crucial].”<sup>3</sup> Tim Kreider writes: “I suspect one reason American life spans are plummeting is a deficiency of meaning: We’ve lost the thread of our story. We need someone to

tell us a new one, a new Gettysburg Address or “I Have a Dream” speech — but is there one we could all agree on anymore? Is it going to be the one about a divinely ordained white man’s paradise, a bulwark of Christendom, uniquely blessed among nations; or the one about how we whopped the Axis and then the Commies and became the Greatest Country on Earth; or how we forced this nation to grudgingly become what it claimed to be, truly free and equal, gradually admitting more and more people into full citizenship and humanity?”<sup>4</sup>

The American narrative should be based on our past and future needs. Can we use the past? Despite many selfish, sinful, and jingoistic detours, most presidents have seen America as a providentially favored nation and a promised land to help its inhabitants realize human rights, democracy, rule of law, a haven for persecuted refugees, and prosperity for itself and for the world, and up until recently most Americans agreed.

Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin wanted the exodus motif drawn for the U.S. Great Seal. Both Harry Truman and George W. Bush took the Leviticus 25 inscription on the Liberty Bell, “*Proclaim liberty to all the land*” and changed it to “*all the world*” in their speeches. This alteration of the text is a major shift of emphasis. Israel did not “export liberty” but this is a major factor of the American mission today as was evident in World War I, World War II, and many other instances. John Judis points out that the neocons of 1990 who influenced the Bush Administration produced a version of Protestant millennialism. “They reveled in American exceptionalism, and they defined America’s exceptional role as creating a world in its image”<sup>5</sup> for liberty and prosperity.

The uses of Biblical and Enlightenment justice traditions pursued with realistic hopes and recognition of the value of local cultures and religions can be helpful if we take note that not all nations can manage democracy as some neocons want. There can be a liberation theology (using the ancient Exodus tradition as an example applying it to problems of oppression today) within an oligarchy, such as former elected leaders in Haiti under Father Aristide and Paraguay under Bishop Lugo, both liberation theologians who had their priestly and bishopric offices taken away by the Vatican.

A thriving democracy needs “a local middle class, local experience with limited government, local sentiments of national unity and tolerance for social diversity, and local democratic leaders.”<sup>6</sup> I would add any democracy also needs a constitution that respects minority rights. Some nations can manage as monarchies or oligarchies. Richard Nixon was right to say: “Woodrow Wilson spoke of making the world safe for democracy. Our task today is to make the world safe for liberty ... [which] does not mean establishing democracy everywhere on Earth. It does mean making liberty secure where it exists: secure against overt aggression, and also against externally supported subversion.”<sup>7</sup> So, we should encourage liberty, law and order, and keep strong nations off weak nations’ backs. And we should do this even if some nations “aren’t our types,” i.e., we give due consideration to “(expletive)hole” nations as well as our firm friends.<sup>8</sup> American hands are to be open and fair and we try to “love our enemies” as well.<sup>9</sup>

There are various ways of thinking about how to do American world involvement. Jessica T Matthews, past president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has three categories. **Neocons** want the U.S. to be the world’s policeman emphasizing American values, but force is sometimes necessary. **Liberal internationalists** want the U.S. to act globally but build a strong system in

international cooperation and avoid unilateralism. Realists search for balance of power in the most important world regions and argue for a more limited U.S. involvement in conflicts. No matter where we stand on these, we always need to ask, “why are we doing interventions?” Is it for empire building, hubris, safety, missionary positions, or a genuine desire for deliverance of the oppressed? As Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozurev told Bill Clinton’s aide Strobe Talbott: “It’s bad enough having you people tell us what you’re going to do whether we like it or not. Don’t add insult to injury by also telling us that it’s *in our interests* to obey your orders.”<sup>10</sup>

We have made and still can make the world better or worse. The interventions in the Philippines, Germany, and Japan worked – but look what happened to Vietnam, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. Should we have destroyed Laos with more bombs than Germany and Japan combined?<sup>11</sup> The long war in Afghanistan has alienated millions from the U.S. (though once there we need to stay and clean up the mess we made – “you broke it; you own it.”<sup>12</sup>) Syria is still exploding. Probably with hindsight we should have left Saddam Hussein and Bashar al-Assad in place and tried to contain their military rather than occupy Iraq and sponsor Syria’s rebels, and making hot statements about them not crossing “red lines” but not doing anything about it (Barack Obama).

Robert Kagan claims America can be oppressive, selfish and hypocritical. Nevertheless, without its global reach, the liberal order would be in trouble. There were important efforts by the U.S. to get rid of dictators. “The Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos, Chile’s Augusto Pinochet, Haiti’s Jean-Claude Duvalier, Paraguay’s Alfredo Stroessner, and the South Korean military junta were all forced out by a Ronald Reagan administration that had quickly abandoned the Kirkpatrick doctrine [that we should accept “friendly” authoritarian regimes]. Over the next decade and a half, others followed. In 2003, 2004, and 2005, the post-communist autocrats in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine all gave way to liberal forces that had received training and support from liberal nongovernmental organizations, which the dictators had permitted to avoid alienating the liberal world.”

Of the many countries America has helped, a current one is Guatemala, which was rife with corruption and is the cause of most of the migrants to the U.S. today. “For a decade before President Donald Trump entered office, the United States provided critical diplomatic and financial backing to an extraordinarily effective anti -corruption commission that prosecuted hundreds of Guatemalan lawmakers, officials, and others involved in dozens of criminal schemes and networks.”

But now that aid is threatened by the Trump Administration, which is siding with the regime rather than the commission.

Citations:

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2. Adams, *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law*, quoted by John Diggins. *John Adams*, p 214
3. NY Times Feb 22, 1990
4. Tim Kreider, *America’s War of Stories*, NY Times February 9, 2019
5. Judis, *The Folly of Empire* op cit p 171
6. Tony Smith op cit p 151
7. *The Real War*, p 312-3
8. Provoking words from President Donald Trump in 2019
9. Healing words from Jesus Christ circa 30 CE
10. Constantine Pleshakov, *The Crimean Nexus – Putin’s War and the Clash of Civilizations* Yale, 2017, p 35
11. Joshua Kurlantzick, *A Great Place to Have a War – American in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*



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