

## Quick, Timely Reads

### *Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

Foreign policy: The point is not just to compromise, but to appreciate others  
*Part Two*

By: Reverend Charles Brock  
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*This is the last in a two-part series on American foreign policy and how it dovetails with and departs from the American Narrative.*

Today history is starting to repeat itself in the rise of authoritarianism. Some Americans still believe in the inevitable march of progress, though others celebrate the demise of white capitalist exploitation.

Some quotes: “In the [Trump] White House and on the American and European right, [the Administration] is seen as an international elite conspiracy working against the interests of ordinary people.” “Today we know that Vladimir Putin has grand ambitions ... and reveres Joseph Stalin.” An authoritarian China is on the rise. “Make no mistake. The liberal order is as precarious as it is precious It needs constant tending lest the jungle grow back and engulf us all.”<sup>1</sup>

David Brooks claims the current Democrats are no help – they concentrate on health care at the expense of the national and international picture. “We’ve learned a few things about the Democratic Party. First, it is still fundamentally a materialist party. The Trumpian challenge is primarily a moral and cultural challenge. But the Democrats are mostly comfortable talking about how to use federal spending to extend benefits.”<sup>2</sup> Trouble is, the American public is not primarily interested in America’s role in the world – except when there is an international crisis.<sup>3</sup> There is a task here for both politicians, churches, and other organizations that help form public opinion. It should be argued in colleges, too, and there are such courses.<sup>4</sup>

And we should not neglect our friends. As former Director of the CIA Director Michael Hayden says, our loyalties run deep – or should. “Almost within hours of the [9/11] attack, the heads of Britain’s intelligence services came to the United States. ... The instructions to our guests from their prime minister were clear: help the Americans however you can.”<sup>5</sup> We need to do this for our friends, too, and not ignore or disdain them.

Sensitivity to other cultures and histories is also crucial. It has been convincingly argued that the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the regime in 2003 was a huge mistake partly because the religious differences and the history of the land were ignored. George Santayana’s wise words were left aside: “The humanitarian, like the missionary, is often an irreducible enemy of the people he seeks to befriend, because he has not imagination enough to sympathize with their proper needs or humility enough to respect them as if they were his own. Arrogance, fanaticism, meddlesomeness, and imperialism may then masquerade as philanthropy.”<sup>6</sup>

There are other problems. There is much material on how America tacitly ignores various nations’ wishes and imposes the rule of “corporatocracy.” This means

American corporations and their national surrogates have enormous undemocratic power in deciding poorer nations' futures. John Perkins lists numerous examples. They go back to the 1800s when the United Fruit Corporation became one of the most powerful forces in America. In the 1950s, Jacobo Arbenz won the Guatemalan presidency on a platform that sounded like the American Revolution – freedom from foreign oppression. But when he tried to gain sovereignty for the nation, United Fruit convinced the American public and Congress that Arbenz had turned Guatemala into a Soviet satellite and there was a Russian plot to destroy capitalism in all of Latin America.

The CIA orchestrated a coup in 1954 and a brutal right-wing dictatorship took over. Hundreds of thousands of Mayas were slaughtered. This pattern has been reproduced in many Latin American countries, and the rhetoric of freedom and democracy has been undercut by the hard driving tactics of the CIA essentially working for the American corporations sponsored by Congress, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund which are basically controlled by the USA.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that 80 percent of South Americans voted against American-backed corporatocracy presidents but they mainly won the “elections” with only a few exceptions such as Venezuela.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. used the so-called drug war to undermine the socialist governments. Allegedly “the drug game is a smokescreen” to protect oil and smash socialism.<sup>9</sup> There are many other examples all over the world where American corporations, often backed by the CIA, have taken advantage of the fight for freedom and subjected small nations to bad practices. These are contentious points, but they should be in the public fora.

Today both the chief rival of the U.S. is China, and despite all our yelling and screaming they are *not* going to change to an American style of democracy. They have a “Confucian democracy” that emphasizes local control underneath the overarching central government.<sup>10</sup> We need sensitivity to what China is doing and not sit on the sidelines condemning them for what they are achieving. The signs are not good considering their persecution of the Buddhists in Tibet and the Muslims in Western China as well as their penchant for closing Christian churches. But we enter the fray, not standing aloof regarding deals. We need to work incrementally dealing with any nation or situation and sudden breakthroughs Hollywood style are never what they seem to be. We cannot substitute showmanship for diplomacy, but diplomacy needs to be both fair and realistic. We cannot throw away Tibetan Buddhists and Chinese Muslims for the sake of a better trade deal. And we should not turn a blind eye to Christian persecution. But World War III is the end of civilization as we know it and must be resisted.

There are important political/philosophical/theological points we also need to face. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger introduced “realism” to the Nixon White House and America. Kissinger had a sense of tragedy most Americans did not share and saw how Germany and its democracy went disastrously wrong. “The task for policymakers in his view is a modest, essentially negative one – not to steer the world along some preordained path to universal justice but to pit power against power to rein in the assorted aggressions of human beings and to try, as best they can, to avert disaster. This is a perspective shaped by pessimism.”<sup>11</sup>

For columnist Roger Cohen, realism is a troubling idea: “Realism is an essential starting point for American foreign policy. It was absent on Iraq: The result was mayhem that ... cost America several trillion dollars. Realism brought the Iran nuclear accord, a signal achievement. More of it might help on Israel-Palestine. But this is more a time to acknowledge the limits of realism — as a means to deal with the evil of ISIS, the debacle of Syria, or the desperate European refugee crisis — than to cry out for more or suggest that it is underrepresented in American discourse.”<sup>12</sup> This helps preserve the balance between idealism and realism that is badly needed. The late columnist Charles Krauthammer tried to get a balance as well saying that interventions should occur when it serves America's strategic purposes. We cannot enter every battle for righteousness around the world. There would be nothing left of our economy. But we can carefully choose winnable fights attacking oppression especially when it goes against our interests.<sup>13</sup> World War I and World War II were big examples, but there are many smaller ones. General David Petraeus said how imperative American leadership is to resolving world conflicts. He strongly believes in creating coalitions and partnerships to overcome those challenges. “For the major problems, we are going to have to lead the way. ... I know what it takes in terms of time and effort to do coalition maintenance. It's a serious undertaking, but, at the end of the day,

it's worth it." The United States needs to create Islamic partners and include these partners in the war against terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

There is much we can do modestly for the American mission. Individuals have a thousand ways they can help,<sup>15</sup> but so can the state. Short of invading countries for "regime change" which can be reckless and a cover for imperialism, we can speak out and apply various economic pressures, publicize the persecution of religious minorities, discuss world income inequality, better use the IMF and World Bank on nasty countries that treat their people dreadfully, publish and shame evil acts, strive for human rights, protect women in patriarchal countries, etc. And, according to Ambassador Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations: "Bolster weak states that cannot contend with terrorists, counter authoritarian powers' interference in the democratic process, etc. ... Such efforts will necessarily involve a mix of compromise, incentives, and pushback."

<sup>16</sup> Former President Barack Obama spoke stirring words when he said "When you see a genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia or in Darfur, that is a stain on all of us, a stain on our souls. ... We can't say 'never again' and then allow it to happen again, and as a president of the United States I don't intend to abandon people or turn a blind eye to slaughter."<sup>17</sup> Alas, these fine words often did not lead to action in countless situations.

It does not have to be regime changes as neocons argue. There are "little" things that can be done. Sometimes it is a simple act of charity. Guidelines for intervention have been suggested by many which include preparing the ground, bridging disagreements from the past, looking for gradual progress, making compromises, perhaps repenting in the form of truth commissions could be arranged, security considerations must be provided, new or changing constitutions considered, and strong ethnic and religious considerations need to be dealt with.<sup>18</sup> Gideon Rose, Editor of *Foreign Affairs*, states that from the start that the U.S. "was understood to be both country and cause ... the standard-bearer of a global political revolution." But along with that Rose quotes Franklin Roosevelt, who quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The only way to have a friend is to be one."<sup>19</sup>

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, America's best-known poet of the 19th century, saw the possibilities for America moving itself and the world. Though he wrote about the Civil War, these words can apply today as well:

*Sail on! Sail on! O Ship of State!  
For thee the famished nations wait!  
The world seems hanging on thy fate!*

It is a terrible thing to go to war and it must be the last resort. "And if the angel of death is not yet abroad in the land, we can hear the beating of his wings – and see them, too, filling our old familiar sky" (Denis Brogan). Not only are there horrible losses of life and wounding on both sides, but often the objectives and strategies aren't well thought out. War can be the fault of the "masters of men, everywhere, who subconsciously thrust others into suffering in order to advance their own powers" (T.H. White).

Perhaps starting with the Founders might help individuals get back our original calling. The emphasis on equality is still relevant and necessary, and we need to discuss and even argue what this means today in a corporate America that is quite different than the 18th century agricultural nation. What a great summary of this FDR made with his concept of the Four Freedoms. As Ronald Reagan said: "Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely?" Nativism, racism, sexism, and corporatocracy are betrayals of our highest ideals as a nation. And there must be something positive. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1942: "We must resist tyranny and help to establish justice without hatred or bitterness. This can only be done if we avoid self-righteousness; for hatred is the fruit of a one-dimensional moral fervor. Moral fanatics understand the distinction between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between democracy and tyranny; but they do not know the God in whose sight no man living is justified."<sup>20</sup>

There are other issues: "This sense of mission has often made Americans arrogant, and somewhat dangerous to be around. But it has also made us anxious. The country was built amid a wail of jeremiads: "Providence assigned us a mission to serve the whole planet, but we, in our greed and sin, are blowing it!"<sup>21</sup>

And there is the problem of America's role in the world. "As Americans reckon with — and fret about — their country's diminished position in the world, we need to understand that the United States is not, in fact, beloved as a beacon of freedom, democracy, and human rights. From Argentina to the Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor to Iran, millions of people are skeptical of Washington's intentions, even if they have no particular desire to emulate China's government, either."<sup>22</sup>

And can America keep up its function of leading the world when the current White House is anti-European and seems to want to break down the alliances forged over the past 70 years? Josef Joffe writes: "Europe should view Trump as an anomaly." John Bolton, Mr. Trump's defrocked national security adviser, told the German magazine *Der Spiegel*: "It is not going to be that hard to get back to normal." Amen, if they are correct.

"Home alone" has not been the American way, certainly not since 1945, when the United States took on the responsibility for the liberal world order. Even Mr. Trump's base would rather be at the helm than hunker down in the hold.<sup>23</sup> If we cannot rise to the occasions demanded of us by our founding ideology, and if we refuse to have an honest democracy at home, perhaps we should ask the United Nations to intervene in America. Peter Beinart: "For many Americans, raised to see the United States as the natural leader of the "free world," it may be hard to imagine requesting foreign intervention against tyranny in our own land. But as historians like Gerald Horne and Carol Anderson have detailed, there is a long history of Black Americans doing exactly that."<sup>24</sup>

There is no way to predict outcomes. But here are some words from an American hero, the late Senator John McCain: "We are blessed, and we have been a blessing to humanity in turn. The international order we helped build from the ashes of world war, and that we defend to this day, has liberated more people from tyranny and poverty than ever before in history. This wondrous land has shared its treasures and ideals and shed the blood of its finest patriots to help make another, better world. ... We are the custodians of those ideals at home, and their champion abroad."<sup>25</sup> That is what I mean by the American mission today.

Here we have a powerful political and religious narrative tested through the 400-plus years of our nation's existence. It can still be used and has tremendous ramifications for the future of our world. It is amazing that these points are not in general discourse. When I was in the Army and colleges no one ever discussed what America was *for*. I would have been happier had it been thought about at any level.

**The Future:** What about the American mission tomorrow? Columnist David Brooks said that the Exodus tradition was our American narrative, but largely forgotten. "The Puritans came to this continent and felt they were escaping the bondage of their Egypt and building a New Jerusalem."

This was picked up by the founders and used extensively in much of the American reflection on itself. Recently he has changed his mind. He said that these days that multiculturalism is leading the way of seeing America, and the old verities of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and Enlightenment values that ruled the U.S. for so many years have taken a back seat. I agree that we must value multiculturalism, but I do not want to lose the importance of the Exodus tradition – I see it as our major narrative. Nevertheless, we can add counterparts to it. Having taught World Religions for years, I suggest that they have much to add – Daoist yin-yang theory appreciates non-binary interrelationships (and we sure need a lot of help in being less binary in religion and politics); the Hindu theology of Oneness (all is one and one is all) can help see the world and others as part of oneself. You are me and I am you, and if so, it follows that we should look after each other. Christ's sacrifice for forgiveness is necessary for good relations (who can live without forgiveness?); the Buddhist search for serenity is lifegiving; and the intensity of dedication in Islam can set good examples. Gaia brings sensitivity to a tortured Earth that may give up on us unless we treat it tenderly and with love. It would take a book to give a full appreciation of these notions.

The point is that we need each other, and the riches and wonders of world religions can help enhance our own. No need to argue who is "right" – take them

in, digest them, and watch what splendors might come forth. Some explanation of the above is needed, especially the importance of the yin-yang concept. If American politics can be criticized for its binary thinking, so, too, can Western religion. It is hard to know what is the chicken and what is the egg and they may be both infecting each other with spiritual E. coli over many centuries. One of the ways beyond this dichotomy is the Taoist notion of yin-yang, which has been around in China for 2,500 years. The general idea is that there are no binary opposites that cannot interact creatively. It was originated by Zou Yan in the Third century BCE and fits nicely in with Daoism. Yin-yang represents the ancient Chinese understanding of how things are. The black and white shapes within the circle represent the interaction of two energies, called "yin" (black) and "yang" (white), which describes the universe and how it works. Yin = negative, moon, female principle in nature, earth, water, below, cold, growth. Yang = positive. David Brooks has since changed his mind and now calls for a multicultural narrative ("The Unifying American Story," New York Times March 21, 2017). "I used to think that America had to find a new unifying national narrative. Now I wonder if not having a single national narrative will become our national narrative." Countless other applications arise. These balance each other just as things in life are not completely black or white but cannot exist without each other. One should note that yin-yang is not contrasting good and evil – but it is evil is to claim that this figurative representation does not exist.

This helps us understand how Communist China was able to take in some aspects of capitalism and become the financial powerhouse they now are. They understand that communism and capitalism are interrelated – they are different and, in many respects, opposite but when they interact there is progress. As one of its leaders said, what they need is "socialism [i.e. communism] with Chinese characteristics [i.e. capitalism]." With any version of communalism, the trick is to integrate it with individualism without the extremes that we often find in the West. Basically, the point is not to be unwaveringly ideological on one side or the other. Be both and push both for your country. Doing yin-yang is not just to compromise, but to appreciate the role and benefit of the opposite. According to recent reports, China needs to learn this again for itself with their outrageous persecution of religious minorities of Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity.

It must be said that this isn't easy. There are deep divisions in America that appealing to good will won't overcome. There may even be genetic predilections that lead us in ideological ways and this has been stated by many political scientists, this includes genetic material: "There's little doubt that ideological orientations are genetically influenced, and to a surprisingly high degree — studies consistently estimate roughly 40 to 60 percent of the population level variance in ideology is under genetic influence."

So, we work on the other percentages that may well be open to change. There is one other aspect of Eastern religion that might be helpful for the West. It takes a lot for a Westerner to understand because of our binary background and we are brought up on the "I-Thou" dichotomy – i.e. God is to some extent an object and we are subject. Other people are separate from us. We thrive on individualism. It is me and you and you and me. Whereas much of Eastern thinking posits that there is no final distinction between subject and object. The famous Hindu formula taken up by Buddhism and Daoism in their own ways is "I am you." God is not only "in you" but you are God. God is you. God is me. God is that table. The Divine is everywhere and there is no distinction between God and me; me and you. That is extremely hard for Westerners to grasp but look at the potential consequences. If I am you, then I have a responsibility for you as I would for me. And then theologize it, corporatize it, politicize it – we just might have a new theological and political ball game that can inform the West without losing our Exodus tradition.

The work of two columnists come to mind: Nicholas Kristof ("China's Orwellian War on Religion," New York Times, May 23, 2019) and Thomas Edsall ("How Could Human Nature Become This Politized?" New York Times, July 8, 2020).

There are some dualists in Hinduism that strongly disagree with monism. Madhva argued that Shankara championed Oneness because he was so stupid that he could only count to one. And there are some monists in Christianity – e.g. my teacher Paul Tillich, who called himself "panentheistic," which means God is in all things but also beyond all things.

Why not apply this to politics and religion in the West? As Republicans and

Democrats, Jews and Christians, Muslims and other believers begin to love and appreciate each other and talk together and even confess their national and religious sins together, despite our ethnicities and/or our genetic predictivities, life will be much better. Not all problems can be solved this way – for example it is a binary issue between Western liberalism and authoritarianism. We had nothing to gain and everything to fear from the fascists, racists, sexists, or white nationalists. But Richard Nixon saw China as reasonable and Ronald Reagan saw that reconciliation between America and the Soviet Union was possible and did it. There are still many huge issues to solve: immigration, income inequality, health care, voting rights, foreign affairs, and constitutional interpretation. Some attempts at a “Third Way” were made by President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair as they tried to merge conservative (but not fascist) and liberal (but not communist) philosophies.

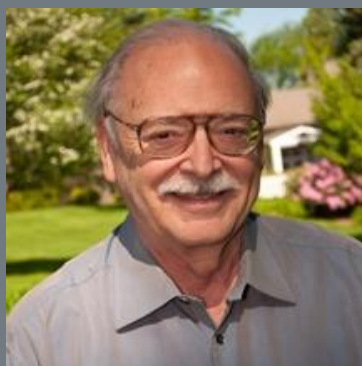
We could use a bit more of that. But the point is not just to compromise, but to appreciate others, even though opposite of oneself. It is a question of love – love thy neighbor but also love the opposite of yourself and views – love the enemy as commanded by Jesus, and love your “shadow self.” Merge beliefs together for progress and truth. One of China’s holy pictures shows Confucius, Lhotse (the founder of Daoism), and Buddha talking together, and if you look closely, they are smiling.

We don’t have anything like that yet with Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad but we sure could use it. It might help bring the world closer together. And it might help avoid another holy war. To do these things will enhance the American covenantal mission and bring new life from the old verities. Nothing could be finer for the world today. We do have a nation born in a war against oppression like Israel, and we are a nation that has been given a calling with just laws and a manifest destiny to bring people up in the world to their high-test potentials with God and their fellows. It is a gift. Let’s use it and give back.

What better ending to all this than 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.”

Citations:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues



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