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# **BIDEN'S BURDEN**

## **THE POLITICAL OCCLUSION OF POLICY**

July 2021

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## Executive Summary

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The essence of American politics today is that the formerly semi-autonomous domain of policymaking has collapsed into the political maelstrom. Trump, a man who uniquely in American history saw the presidency as a vehicle for serving his personal interests as opposed to the commonweal, neither saw nor acknowledged any distinction between the state and the personal, nor recognised the centrality of rule-of-law in principle or practise. All policy, domestic and foreign, was liable to be bent to his narrow conception of the personal-political if Trump thought he could get away with it. In this respect he modelled an unusual type of political debasement: He knew exactly what he was doing and barely bothered even trying to disguise it; yet he could not imagine it conceptually.

In a polarised and closely divided polity, Biden has no choice but to also reduce the policymaking function to its political impact: lose the political battle in 2022 and then 2024 and the policymaking function becomes moot.

Moreover, because many and perhaps most Republicans -- political class elites and rank-and-file voters alike -- see the Democrats not in "loyal opposition" to Republicans but as evildoers whose political triumph would mean the extinction of Republican political power and hence the destruction of the country as they understand it. Democrats must therefore do all they can to prevent another four years of Trumpist government, for they doubt that America's classically liberal, law-based order could survive GOP exertions to take control of the United States as a minority party. In other words, because the Republicans have turned US politics into a existential binary ideological battle, the Democrats get pulled into the roiled current whether they like it or not.

Foreign and national security policy have little impact as sources for the current predicament, but they will be profoundly affected by its outcome. Three basic vectors of that impact can be foreseen, with a fourth less likely possibility worth mentioning.

First, the longer the deep and increasingly uncivil philosophical divide between the sides endures, with neither able to emerge as the settled victor for an eight or twelve year period, as has been typical in most of American political history, the more unstably oscillatory and hence unpredictable and unreliable US policies and pledges will be. Adversaries will be tempted and allies will hedge, leading many regions to behaviours that will be both more fluid and accident-prone. Any residua of the former US grand strategy of providing common security

goods to the global commons in order to temper local arms races, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and violence will be shredded, even if formal US alliances and alliance structures endure on paper.

Second, if the Republican Party in its current form prevails in 2022 and hence likely in 2024, the United States may become a rogue superpower -- mighty and selectively covetous, but tied to no close allies or liberal-internationalist norms and institutions. Common global problems, like zoonotic disease and environmental challenges, will become far harder to manage; violence and even hegemonic wars will be more likely.

Third, if the Democratic Party in their present form -- meaning its more traditional "liberal international order" dispensation -- prevails, the post-Cold War status quo may linger in outward form, but changes in the world and the lack of US constructive imagination will make that posture an increasingly wasting and hollow asset for the world at large. The situation may give the appearance of continuity to those disposed to lazy and superficial thinking, but the substance will mainly have gone missing. This is an ideal formula for surprise, and shock, when those who know what they want seek to seize it.

Of the three most likely outcomes, this is the best, for it buys time for improvisation and eventual wise adjustment. None of the three, however, is cause for celebration.

Finally, if "woke" leftwing Democrats prevail in due course, however unlikely, we are bound for an idealist, even millenarian foreign policy focused overwhelmingly on end-of-the-world climate paranoia, global anti-"racist" crusades, and "human rights" campaigns defined according to the basic criteria of critical theory. This would cause counterproductive chaos by inciting Hobbesian wars of aggrieved groups against other groups wherever it touches ground worldwide, in accord with its core view that human social nature is only and ever conflictual. True believers would get their fights for absolute social justice and then be forced to ask themselves, Goethe-like, why they ever wanted them in the first place.

## It's the Culture, Stupid

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Deep beneath the high-drama turbulence of recent American politics, fissures in the crust of the political culture have gradually opened up. These fissures manifest differently and their timelines vary, but they all have one source in common: civilisational ageing that has gone largely unnoticed and unrepaired.

Some of the ageing strains concern structural elements of the American constitutional order, especially concerning the integrity of representation in the republican form of mediated democracy the Framers designed.

Some concern the paradox of success: The better a liberal society does in achieving certain long-term goals, the more grating and unacceptable remaining flaws tend to appear. This is particularly true with respect to the equality principle -- of which more below.

As or more important, some have to do with gradual changes in the quotidian habits of the population. Please bear with me; what follows may seem esoteric but it is absolutely critical to understanding what is really going on in the US as the Biden Administration tries to grapple with an unprecedented, qualitatively different array of challenges.

The Constitution was written as a guide to limited and self-limiting government, said John Adams, that would work only for a religious people whose discipline resided within individual character and community -- he meant religious of a specific sort: Anglo-Protestant. It was written at a time, in a still-rural agricultural political economy, when traditional virtues like patience, providence, God-fearing honesty, and expectations of personal and family self-help were dominant within a communal identity defined mainly by Anglo-Protestant hearth cultures brought from Britain. Praxis shaped the population's affinity with the principles embedded in the political order, for the society preceded the state, and the principles embodied in the political order in turn reaffirmed the common sense of daily praxis.

But We the People are no longer religious in the same way, no longer rural and agricultural but machine-dependent and urban-interdependent, no longer patient or provident but lovers of instantly gratifying entertainment and leveraged debt, no longer balanced well between communalism and individualism. When praxis and principles do not reinforce one another, when institutions and attitudes do not align, something ultimately must give way.

The American ageing process has manifested most vividly in a change of attitude within, and far beyond, much of the American political class -- politicians, staffers, consultants, pollsters, policy journalists, and others. It concerns a tectonic shift ongoing in the very conception of human nature, or what the French would term a shift in cultural mentality.

The Enlightenment conception that underlies the Lockean social-contract political enterprise the United States has always been sees human nature as consisting of both competition and cooperation. The latter resides in reason as the font of mutually beneficial partnerships that form the organic, voluntary social order beneath and necessary for good, thus limited and self-limiting, government. Like Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', political self-interest can generate a greater good so long as the institutional set up of the civic order -- the dialectic between law and norms -- conduces to it. At the Enlightenment's very centre, then, is a positive-sum conception of human nature, and it is implicitly an idealist (or what we would call today a phenomenological) species of thought -- meaning that the human social order is largely autogenic: It is what we make it. As Erving Goffman put it: "Social life takes up and freezes into itself the conceptions we have of it."

This differs sharply from the older Hobbesian conception of social life as only competitive and conflictual, and being that way indelibly and eternally as a fact of nature regardless of what human beings think and do. From Hobbes flowed the very old idea of social life as a zero-sum proposition; he simply reshaped it for a world without the divine right of kings. There were winners and losers, as individuals and as groups. Resources and riches were finite; one found them, one did not create or produce them. It was always that way and would always be that way, no matter what philosophers or anyone else thought.

This ancient attitude, embodied notably in rigid hierarchical social institutions like India's caste system and the pre-19th century global normality of slavery, is what the Enlightenment strove to overcome and what the American Founders firmly rejected along with monarchy and the mercantilist "war system" of European empires. It is why American chattel slavery was an issue from the start, and why most slave owners knew that the institution had to be wound down and ultimately ended for American principles of government to be fully validated. The "constructed" positive-sum conception of social life is the very lifeblood of every American institution; no nation, especially a civic-nationalist as opposed to a bloodline nationalist contraption like America, is more Enlightenment drenched than the United States. Lose that conception and American institutions lose their foundation.

Withal, the zero-sum mentality has gradually crept over and through the institutions of government and society alike, displacing the positive-sum disposition of America's core Enlightenment inheritance. A dour, pessimistic, and even cynical attitude has shoved aside and is now in the process of trampling what has traditionally been a more energetic and ultimately optimistic disposition toward public life. Nearly everywhere we look in American culture, but especially to the further Left and Right, we see the erosion of the core Enlightenment premise in favor of an often inarticulate but unmistakable regression back to dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest, zero-sum images and metaphors. This is the cultural moment that both produced the populist Trump phenomenon of 2016-2020, and its massive afterwash has set the conditions for the Biden Administration going forward toward 2024.

Biden and his associates and supporters would like to pretend that the four Trump years never happened, and pretend, too, that the reasons they did happen have disappeared; but they are not magical thinkers and so know they can't. They thus find themselves in a disconcertingly unfamiliar situation, as if the very ground they had stood firmly on their whole lives has become fluid and tenuous, as if they have to pinch themselves every now and then to make sure they are not flailing about in a nightmare.

This is certainly not the place to delve into the reasons for the ongoing shift in attitude from positive- to zero-sum, but without illustrating its recent impact on events it is impossible to properly set the stage for any useful analysis. We start with general principles and move quickly to pertinent examples.



## The Divide That Matters: Positive-Sum, Zero-Sum

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The Enlightenment conception, as noted, sees human nature as consisting of both competition and cooperation, the latter being malleable to institutional design that, if properly done, can conduce to the greater good. In this conception, law is critical to the erection of institutions enabling, stabilising, and protecting positive-sum partnerships because it builds trust and predictability.

Owing to the importance of social trust as the underpinning of sound government, the positive-sum conception also assumes a connection between the education, character, and moral integrity of leaders on the one hand and their fitness for office on the other, since leaders must take others' interests into account in a positive-sum civic order. Since elected democratic leaders gain legitimacy from the consent of the governed, it is better for them to be respected than feared, so better if leaders meet political challenges with persuasion than with threats and bombast.

The positive-sum disposition admits the possibility over time of qualitative progress, moral as well as material, and tends to see history overall as a glass half full. Individuals and societies can learn. They can also regress.

The Enlightenment view on balance is an optimistic one, friendly to tempered idealism and patient hope, but also prone to produce utopian temptations at its margins. This is true not despite but because of classical liberalism's nature as a secular procedural framework for adjudicating conflicting interests. It is unfriendly to the heroic idealist personality -- what the Greeks called *thymos*, and particularly *megalothymos* -- but cannot totally squelch it despite inciting it. Liberalism at its best is a shield to protect the conscience and spiritual lives of individuals, families, and communities, where the true substance of life dwells. But classical liberalism at its best is not best for those whom it bores. And this gives rise to Tocqueville's Paradox as democratic orders progress but age. As he put it in 1835: "When inequality is the common law of a society, the strongest inequalities do not strike the eye, but when everything is nearly on a level, the least of them wound it. The desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater."

Classical Enlightenment liberalism is thus sensitive to accusations of underachievement, overreach, and especially hypocrisy, because it knows the shame of imperfection and credits the possibility of atonement and moral advancement. (Religious language is appropriate here because the Enlightenment could not have set roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries without the pro-modernist reforms in Christendom that accompanied the aborning Age of Reason.)

Finally in the order of general themes, while cooperation applies more readily within civil societies than in international relations, even there Enlightenment-formed adepts believe that positive-sum partnerships are possible, from deep alliance ties to multilateral functional concerts. The Western idea of a liberal international order, then, is a projection or an enlargement of its idea of a positive-sum civic order.

Contrarily, the zero-sum conception admits only competition and, inevitably in this perspective, conflict not only among individuals but also among groups, varyingly defined. It denies the possibility of true partnerships where interests differ, seeing only the potential for transient transactional relationships.

It sees law as leverage that the powerful use against the weak. Since the zero-sum conception sees morality as a pious hoax or a cover for selfishness, it grants no necessary connection between the education, character, or integrity of leaders and their fitness to hold office; it cares only about efficacy, as defined by one's own side. Others' interests are relevant only to the extent that they harm or hinder one's own; there is no obligation to accommodate them as a matter of principle.

Zero-sum thinking ridicules the principle of the consent of the governed. Legitimacy ultimately rests on strength or the appearance of strength; elections are contests to see who can better manufacture the symbols and tokens of consent, since the typical voter is no more sentient than a moist robot. Good government by nature is neither limited nor self-limiting; it is about crowning the most successful predator group and individuals within that group, and so tends to authoritarian styles. Thus, it is better for leaders to be feared than respected, which is why every challenge to leadership must quickly be met with reciprocal vigor. It is why it prefers spectacle as a medium of political communication to rational discourse and debate.

The zero-sum's view of history is cyclical if not nightmarish. The glass is not half empty and certainly it is not half full; it was long ago broken and lost if it ever existed in the first place. It is Hobbesian in its attitude toward temporal authority -- necessary but necessarily harsh, as required by circumstances. Its austere realism is prone to pessimism and fatalism, and to an acute dearth of empathy. It is unmoved by accusations of hypocrisy because its view of truth is solely instrumental, and it is capable only of pride, not of shame.

To those of the zero-sum perspective, positive-sum relationships are strictly limited in civil societies to select kinship networks, but are altogether illusory in international relationships: “The strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must.” One likes to think Thucydides wrote that line in sorrow, but contemporary zero-sum proponents utter it with aplomb as a preemptive excuse for their own contemplated programme of exclusionary self-advancement.

In short, the positive-sum perspective rues the existence of adversaries at home and abroad but is resigned to their existence as evidence of Kant’s “crooked timber of humanity”; the zero-sum perspective needs adversaries for its worldview to make internal sense, and so it finds them, by manufacture if necessary. The positive-sum perspective seeks maximum feasible unity for the sake of cooperative enterprises in which the sum of the parts exceeds the whole; the zero-sum perspective seeks to stoke and then harvest division, caring not about the whole or the commons, but only about the size of its own share of status and lucre.

## The Divide Illustrated

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Let's be clear and blunt: There is no way to imagine how Donald Trump could ever have been elected President of the United States, and nearly elected twice, were this not so. Go down the list of zero-sum characteristics just laid out and you will have little trouble matching Donald Trump's behaviour as President to each and every one of them, and increasingly over time the behaviour of what has become the Republican Party. But consider some of the most striking examples.

Without understanding the zero-sum mentality there is no way to explain the Trump White House's wholly instrumental attitude toward facticity, the incessant lying and spinning and tampering with the record in many cases even before the ink had dried.

There is no other way to explain the President's "perfect" absence of empathy, or his failure to acknowledge that some facets of government, like the military and intelligence community, not to speak of an independent judiciary, are supposed to be free from politicisation pressures. Trump never recognised any distinction between his personal interests and predilections and those of the state. That even extended, as far as he could push it, to property and money. He did not know how to be President and he wasn't interested in learning. His campaign was, as one of his sons has admitted, the biggest infomercial for a sagging corporation ever staged. They were shocked that they won.

But that did not change Trump's perspective: He never recognised the larger purpose of being President, to lead on behalf of a common good, whether that was defined as the American nation alone or something greater yet beyond it. Perhaps his most revealing remarks in this regard concerned the US military. John McCain was a "loser" because he got captured; that he put himself in harm's way for the sake of a greater good never occurred to Trump. He later mused out loud at a Memorial Day ceremony that he didn't understand any motive for bravery and heroism in battle: "What was in it for them?" he asked, referring to those who died in war, seeming genuinely perplexed and unable to answer.

The deeper reason for the absence of any distinction between what is public and what is private is that in the zero-sum mentality, by definition no neutral space can exist in what is by definition a totally conflictual environment. In Trump's case it smelled of Randian logic: Virtue, as conventionally understood, was weakness. Everything is potentially weaponisable, so subject to being politicised, with the result that for any given engagement there can be only winners and losers.

That is why the Trump Administration had no qualms about inventing a Schedule F category for government employees aimed essentially at end-running the Pendleton Act and politicising the Civil Service, or setting the likes of Richard Grenell over the intelligence community, or politicising even the Centers for Disease Control. Law as a neutral space or instrument is as devoid of sense in his zero-sum brain as the notion of a “loyal” opposition. Just as there is no opposition, only enemies, there is no law, only lawfare.

It has not been just about one man, one President. There is no way, other than zero-sum thinking, to explain the farcical Senate Republican behavior at Trump’s first impeachment trial, in which Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell openly proclaimed that partisan interests took precedence over his oath of office, so that no witnesses or evidence need be heard. And the people of Kentucky re-elected him anyway.

There’s no other way to explain how one side in the November 2020 election was devoted to playing by the rules while the other was not only willing to lie but even to admit it was lying -- no shame. The Trump campaign was stunningly open about its readying an outlandish litigation strategy to throw the outcome, if necessary and possible, into the Supreme Court. When the strategy didn’t work, Trump doubled down on the Big Lie that the election was stolen, and when the time was right instigated an insurrection at the Capitol to prevent the Electors from certifying Biden’s victory. That didn’t work either, but it did insure that for the first time since the onset of Civil War the transition of power in the American democracy took place neither smoothly nor without violence. Neither Trump nor his staunchest supporters have expressed any regret about this. The zero-sum mind does not respect higher principles, only narrow interests. The former are for suckers, losers, and weaklings.

The bizarre antics of the White House and most of the Republican Party, again conducted in full-frontal lying mode with no shame exhibited whatever, showed that the combination of law and traditional norms concerning election conduct, concession gestures, and so on had no meaning not only for Trump and senior Republican politicians, but also for most Trump voters. This is critical: Trump and his inner-circle could not have gotten away with this sort of stuff unless the rank-and-file approved. Evidence: Most Republican voters -- 77 per cent as of late December 2020 -- believed or feigned to believe that the election was fraudulent. Many millions of American voters now see politics as being fundamentally about the willingness to exert raw power as opposed to playing by fair rules of the game. That’s the zero-sum mentality contrasted to the positive-sum in a streamlined nutshell. The rot is with We the People; Trump and company read the mood and harvested the decay.

That the post-election conduct of many senior Republicans has already sowed violence and may sow more is of no concern either, for Trump's supporters are more than enablers: They are pawns to be duped and bilked of cash in Trump's ongoing campaign to advance his interests, narrowly defined. Grifting, after all, is by nature a zero-sum avocation. It's a petty form of exploitation.

## One Hand Doesn't Clap

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Speaking of which, on the other hand, there is also no other way to explain the rapid rise of “wokeness”, the more extreme, simpleminded expressions of critical race theory with it, which is based on the premise that all human social relations exude exploitation in one form or another. Like the zero-sum types on the Right, the “woke” crowd shares the same base conception of human nature as a condition defined only by competition, conflict, and ultimately coercion and violence. This shows that the zero-sum termites eating away at the positive-sum Enlightenment foundation that has defined America since its founding are deep in the culture, manifesting today at both ends of the political spectrum.

Thus the Black Lives Matter platform from 2016 claimed that America's riches were and remain a consequence entirely of white people exploiting black and brown people from 1619 to date. Or consult the Jacobin magazine website, where one can find pristine zero-sum primitiveness unchanged from the days when Karl Marx drew breath uttering the surplus theory of value: “The working class . . . collectively make up a class of people who are exploited to create profits for the few. Understanding how class works and on what basis class positions are determined help to reveal the structures of power and exploitation in our society.” Or consult any feminist rant about heterosexual marriage being a cover in effect for rape, since in this version of the zero-sum mind there cannot be genuine love or intimacy in relationships that are inherently dominant-submissive in nature. As with race, as with class, so with gender: It's all about power, conflict, exploitation, and the never-ending production of victims, fueling outrage and the passion for revenge.

Whatever the issue or group, the zero-sum conviction on the Left is that general circumstances never improve from learning, conciliation, or compromise among those with differing interests based in group identities. Only confrontation -- hurting one's adversaries and forcing them to concede -- ever brings progress, and in confrontation no shared rules or norms exist. Everything here, too, is politically weaponisable, not to exclude ultimately violence itself.

The main difference between the two varieties of the zero-sum is that the anti-Enlightenment Right thinks in terms of winning individuals while the Left version thinks in terms of loser, victimised groups. The combined result is a near-continuous replaying of a classic Prisoners' Dilemma game in which all sides choose the selfish alternative that leaves everyone worse off. It's a perfect zero-sum match made anywhere but in heaven.

Meanwhile, the clickbait-dominated US mass media profits by echoing and exaggerating the prevalence of this confrontation. Few Americans actually hold to or even understand the extreme views of either Right or Left, and the hope is that their basic moderation and pragmatism will prevail at next election time. But party activists dominate the primary process in the United States, so typical voters often find themselves without convivial choices. This is part of the representation problem of an ageing democratic regime, and it is not a trivial part.



## The Current Scene

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It is tempting for many to see the current Trump-dominated Republican Party as the party of the zero-sum and the Democrats, led by the Biden-Harris Administration, as the party of the classical Enlightenment positive-sum resonant with most of American history -- the decade of Bloody Kansas and the Civil War excepted (1855-1865). That is not wholly wrong but it is too simple. As already noted, toward the left of the Democratic Party zero-sum radicalism has a home, and it is adding new rooms under the banner of zero-sum critical theory and variations on that theme.

Analysts of American politics therefore argue over how much and to what extent President Biden bends to the leftwing of his party, even if he himself does not share most of its core views. Some say a lot and it's worsening as his energy levels wane due do the pressures of the job on a 78-year old man; others say Biden has successfully coopted the left and kept the main themes of policy in the centre as he tries above all to re-attract both working class socio-economic echelons and the corporate world to the Democratic Party banner. I tend to the latter view, but the President and his inner circle have made errors not directly related to ideological proclivities, but rather that have turned on temperament and simply bad tactical judgement -- more on that below.

On the Republican side, too, things are not so simple. It is clear from the aftermath of the 6 January Capitol insurrection that the Republican Party remains in thrall to Trump and his sycophants. Both the senior Republican Senator, Mitch McConnell, and House Minority Whip Kevin McCarthy, were quick to publicly blame Trump for what happened, expecting the higher tide to turn against the disgraced President. And then it didn't, as state Republican organisations in particular doubled down in support of Trump, and told massive lies about lies about lies -- some sincerely but most out of fawning cynicism. Not only would the Republicans not support an investigation of the insurrection, but many tried to argue that it never really happened, or wasn't all that much, really, of an insurrection after all....while still others, self-described Trumpist "intellectuals" clotted around a magazine called American Greatness, have even embraced the insurrection, applauded it, and suggested that its participants run for Congress.

Only a tiny fraction of elected Republicans at the level of the Federal government really believe that Trump won the November 2016 election and that the election was stolen by “deep state” agents; but very few of them will say so publicly. When they do, like Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger did, they instantly become targets of abuse, censure, punishment, and ridicule. The result is that the current Republican Party has for practical purposes become the persona of the insurrection and the Big Lie that propelled it.

If we dissect the current Republican Party on the Federal level (what is true at the grassroots differs, as we'll see), we come out by dint of educated intuition with a ratio of roughly 5-7 per cent truly irrational people, some of whom believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory, about 5-7 per cent of whom are “normal” Republicans of the pre-Trump era, and all the rest are hedging, afraid of their own constituents, old constituents, and especially afraid of the newly mobilised populist constituency. They have abdicated responsibility to actually be leaders.

At that grassier level, the truly irrational -- the QAnon crowd, the anti-vaxers, the wearers of “Camp Auschwitz” t-shirts, and the rest -- probably come to 25-30 per cent, possibly more; after all, polls showed that even in March that somewhere between 50 and 70 per cent of those who voted for Trump still believed his Big Lie that he had won the election. This was despite the fact that only a lunatic pillow salesman still claimed there was any evidence of the theft, none of which he or anyone else--like the recount fantasists of Mariposa Country, Arizona -- has produced because there isn't any. Now consider: 70 per cent of 74,223,369 Trump voters is almost 52 million people, and of the over-18 US population that's about a quarter of the total of those who voted and those who did not. That's a large percentage of a body politic to be for practical purposes true believers in evidence-free conspiracy delusions.

The percentage of “normal” pre-Trump Republicans who managed in their heads somehow to either normalise Trump over four years or so fear the Democrats that they remained loyal GOP voters in November 2020, probably comes to another 25 percent despite large numbers of desertions to independent status or even to the Democrats. That leaves about half thoroughly ambivalent, disturbed by Trump if they are at all rational, yet not knowing what to believe about policy issues from an increasingly polarised and fact-free media.

That's a lot of ambivalent people, and they matter because within the next year, as Trump is very likely to be indicted on New York State charges of tax evasion and several flavours of fraud, and as he gets wackier and wackier by the day, his grip on the GOP could wane. (The Trump Organisation has already been indicted; the indictment, designed to extract iron-clad evidence concerning what Trump himself knew and when he knew it, is prelude to the big show to come.) A lot of Americans who do fear the Democrats and give the benefit of doubt to those who believe the "woke" left is ascendant in the Democratic Party hope this will be the case. But hope is not data any more than it is a policy, and McConnell, McCarthy, and all the other willful liars about the Big Lie will not move away from Trump until they think it makes political sense to do so. Their tactics are entirely instrumental, as usual.

We'll just have to wait and see what happens, but it is possible that a shift away from Trumpian lunacy will occur, especially as the pandemic and its stresses continue to fade -- if, in fact, that actually happens. To the extent it happens it will aid the normalisation process, and if it happens it could cascade. It is the nature of such shifts that they sometimes move very fast. We may never reach COVID-19 herd immunity in the United States with vaccination rates under 50 per cent, but we certainly have herd behaviours in spades.

## Policymaking as Prisoner to Politics

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The point is that a lot is now in flux. Uncertainty reigns in American politics. And that means that policymaking as a semi-autonomous zone, one that could traditionally abide logrolling, compromise, incrementalism, and some experimentation, has collapsed into the political maelstrom. With the Senate divided 50-50, everything is so close that the slightest inflection of opinion this way or that can throw the whole system to one side or the other.

Of course policymaking has always been affected by politics, but it has not typically been entirely consumed by it. There have always been domains insulated from raw politics by common agreement -- until now. The Trump Administration tried to politicise the Justice Department, the Defence Department, the State Department, the intelligence community, the radios and more. Now the Democrats, instead of returning to the normative status quo ante, are themselves trying to politicise parts of government heretofore mostly free from such pressures. That includes even the Federal Reserve, which is now mandated to take “equity” racial issues into consideration when it makes decisions. It includes the Defence Department is a new way, where a search for “extremists” in the ranks has come to include obligatory re-education sessions in which readings by Ibram X. Kendi are mandatory. We have been witness to a CIA recruitment ad in which an identified transgender woman speaks on behalf of the “human beings of the CIA”, not as always before of the “men and women of the CIA”.

In short, the culture wars on steroids are now front and centre in the political rhetoric pouring from the Democrats, and the Republicans are eagerly responding in kind. Party elders and leaders used to police themselves to keep their wild ones under wraps; now they are as often featuring and promoting them in hopes of whipping up a frenzy of ideological outrage they think will help them politically. This is not the kind of political craft the country needs right now, and the Democrats are not helping.

Everyone is focused on the midterms in November 2022, and rightly so. If the Republicans take the Senate or the House, or both, they will endeavour to set the stage for a soft coup in case the Republican candidate in 2024 doesn't win clearly. In other words, they will do from a position of likely greater strength what they tried to do haphazardly and unsuccessfully after the November 2020 election. How would this work?

The Framers were imperfect when they wrote the Constitution. Perhaps the key structural flaw concerned their hopes that parties would not form, so they arranged things so that the second-place finisher in presidential elections would become Vice-President. This was a formula for divided government at the very top, and everyone soon realised the mistake. The unexpectedly convoluted election of 1800 led to the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment, passed in 1803, and ratified in 1804.

But the 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment was written at a time when the Federal system was far less centralised than it became after the Civil War, at a time specifically when State Houses elected a state's two US Senators. (The 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment changed that only in 1913.) The 12<sup>th</sup> Amendment states that if the Electoral College cannot meet or come to a valid conclusion for one reason or another, then the State Houses, with one vote each, elect the President. Since there are more Republican State Houses now than Democratic ones, and may be still more after the 2022 midterms, that means the Republican candidate would be elected. So if states with Republican majorities and Republican Governors refuse to certify the popular vote in their states for whatever genuine or manufactured reasons, and if conservative dominated courts let them get away with it, then they can as the minority party as regards both the popular and true Electoral College vote in effect pull off what would in essence be a soft coup.

That is all in addition, of course, to the many efforts at the state level to curtail access to voting aimed at minority groups, justified sometimes as necessary for voting integrity and security, but fairly obviously meant to advantage the Republicans. This is of a piece with the Trump White House blatantly trying last autumn to politicise the USPS to curtail voting by mail to minimise the “blue-shift” in the November 2020 election, something Trump admitted out loud again to no evident embarrassment. Winning is all that matters to the zero-sum mind; how one wins doesn't matter.

Alas, the Republicans are not alone in trying to finesse and fiddle with structural elements of governance. The Democrats' effort to make Washington, DC a state (even Puerto Rico, too) was a bald-faced effort to counterbalance the Republicans' natural advantage in the Senate. It is also plainly unconstitutional, for the nature of the Federal district, and even its size, is stipulated explicitly in the Constitution. The Framers never imagined in 1789 the existence of so many sparsely populated Western states, each with two Senate seats. We have a situation where approximately 47 per cent of the electorate elects 53 per cent of the Senate, with all that implies about judicial appointments and ratifications.

That advantage would have been offset over time by an expanding House of Representatives, but in 1911 the size of the House was capped at 435, which means that the ratio of voters to representatives has risen greatly with population growth. If the House were expanded (but not necessarily sited in Washington) it would increase the franchise power of urban majorities, which would balance off the Republican advantage in the Senate. But under current circumstances such a major reform has zero chance of passage, or even of being raised. The Democrats have also talked about packing the Supreme Court to dilute the current 6-3 conservative majority, as Franklin Roosevelt threatened to do in 1933. Some have demanded that California be divided into three states, yielding six Senators instead of two.

None of this can happen with the political order as polarised and closely divided as it is. But it's not for lack of trying, and the trying is both inevitable under the circumstances and also the problem. The upshot here is that when the main parties devote most of their energy to torquing the electoral system to give themselves permanent structural advantages, they are ignoring by default legislating on actual public policy issues. They are seeking power, not solutions to problems. That is a quintessentially zero-sum way to think and act, and it is historically prequel to civil war. But it's an "invitation" from Republicans that Democrats cannot refuse, for if they refuse they lose. That, in essence, is where we are as of late June 2021.

## Gratuitous Error

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That said, the Democrats have made gratuitous mistakes. Without going into detail, it was a mistake to pass the stimulus package as part of the budget process without a single Republican vote, when ten Republican Senators pleaded with Biden in his first Oval Office meeting to cut down the stimulus amount and remove some partisan provisions from the bill unrelated to the stimulus. Ten Senators plus fifty caucusing with the Democrats (has to be put that way because two of the fifty are independents, not members of the Democratic Party) is filibuster-proof, and that would have set a triangulation precedent that could have assured passage of other legislation. And that, as important, could have helped drag the Republican Party at least some distance away from Trump and back toward the sane centre.

Instead, the infrastructure bill was also larded originally with partisan elements, as was H.R. 1, the so-called voting rights bill. That's why the latter has been blocked, and would have been blocked even had Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, from West Virginia, not told the truth about its blatantly partisan nature. If even the State of Kentucky could pass a bipartisan bill that guaranteed access to voting for all and also took up the issue of voting security, then the Congress of the United States, in theory anyway, could have done it, too. But for that you need wise positive-sum inclined leadership, not zero-sum-minded leadership making policy a hostage to raw politics.

Apparently, Democratic strategists convinced Biden that a Trumpian GOP, not pulled back toward the responsible centre, would be easier to beat in 2022. That may prove correct, or not. But it apparently is what is leading the President to try to pass most major legislation with simple majorities. He did agree to shave down the infrastructure bill and seek bipartisan support for it. But all the rest of the domestic agenda speeding soon to a reconvened Congress in a few weeks is being prepared on the basis of an assumption that all bills will need to pass with zero Republican votes in the House or Senate. This means that all bills will require a preliminary vote to make them budget resolutions so they can avoid a filibuster. That in turn means that spending levels will need to be attached to all the bills, not typically the case. But some of these bills are still so vague and open-ended that no one really knows what various far-reaching measures would cost to render them permanent policy. There is a requirement that no new law can project deficit spending to finance it beyond ten years, so there is a limit on dissembling about costs.

Moreover, with the Senate split even and the Democrats holding only a four-seat majority in the House, agreement on priorities and spending levels needs to be almost perfect. But the Democrats are divided. Some want to spend yet another US \$6 trillion on aspirational programs having to do with global warming abatement, education, immigration, and more, while others are willing to go only barely beyond US \$2 trillion. All of this has to be decided as a package, and quickly, and all of the pledges concerning votes for the pieces of the package have to be fully redeemed lest the whole deal come apart.

Then there is the question of how to pay for all this new spending, depending on the level decided. The left wants basically to “eat the rich”, meaning sharply raise taxes for corporations and wealthy individuals. The centre is leery of alienating the corporate sector at a time when populism in the Republican Party is driving corporate interests (not the same as Wall Street financial interests) toward the Democrats for the first time really since the early 1980s. The recent framework agreement reached by 130 countries on a minimum corporate tax, hailed by the administration, is supposed to support that approach by shutting off corporate tax evasion escape routes; it will take years, however, to iron out the details of an effective agreement, if it ever happens at all.

The residual problem of financing the new spending thus again becomes raw intra-Democratic Party politics. Biden and the centrists would rather risk cutting ambitions and borrowing instead of than taxing; the left wants to bring the corporate tax levels back to where they were before the Reagan Administration, back to the much higher levels of, say, the Eisenhower era. But that was before the corporate world figured new ways to avoid paying the upper brackets by manufacturing limited liability corporations in place of standard ones, and before it perfected the techniques of internationalising its financial record keeping through practises such as transfer pricing.

If the Democratic legislative strategy works as planned, the spending levels finally determined will tell us much about the current balance of power within the Democratic Party. If the figure ends up being closer to \$6 trillion than to \$2 trillion, then it will show that Biden has become a presidential cuckold to the left. And if not, then not. My bet is then not.

It was a mistake, too, albeit at a lesser level, to open up an investigation of the Trump-Barr Justice Department. Sure it acted in an over-the-top partisan manner, everyone knows that. But it's still a mistake to criminalise political judgement, however outrageous, because nothing is so certain to come around and bite one in the ass than that. If someone broke laws they could have been indicted without fashioning blaring headlines.



It was a mistake to seek a Wuhan lab report on the origin of COVID-19. This not only plays into refurbishing Trump's reputation -- now he can say, "See, told you; I was right, even the Democrats say so" -- but it creates a needless irritant in Sino-US relations, as if more were necessary. It would have been vastly wiser to have created an international effort, co-chaired with Japan as I suggested to the Japanese officials preparing the 16 April Suga-Biden Summit, to study, manage, and control for future zoonotic diseases. Invitations from a US-Japanese sponsorship could have been extended to China and many other countries. That would have been a far more constructive approach, but the Democrats preferred another red-meat political headline.

It has been a mistake, too, to leave Trump-era punitive tariffs against Canada and Mexico and other countries intact, hoping to use them as "leverage" in future trade negotiations. This reeks of hypocrisy and bad faith with allies. But it plays well politically as the Democratic version of Trumpian mercantilism, and has become part of the "foreign policy for the middle class", as Secretary of State Antony Blinken says, and CIA Director Bill Burns put it some months ago in an Atlantic essay, which really means the Democrats are wooing the working class.

## The Politics of Foreign Policy

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Note that with the exception of this latter comment, none of this has to do with foreign and national security policy. That is because American politics doesn't ever turn on foreign and national security issues except under two related high-profile conditions: body bags are coming home; and people think the government is reaching into their pockets to pay for wars that produce the returning body bags.

So focused on domestic political competition is the Biden Administration that, again seeing no choice in the matter because of what its predecessor did, it is for all practical purposes funnelling nearly all foreign policy decisions through the prism of domestic political optics. The United States, as a superpower with a lot of discretionary elbow room on foreign policy, used to have a foreign and national security policy only tangentially related to domestic policy choices except in the odd case of international trade -- and sometimes even there. Now we have only domestic policy-qua-politics with appendages made to seem as though they are foreign and national security policy related.

That explains the virtual climate summit extravaganza in April, which played well to the targeted domestic constituencies but had no impact internationally. It explains the language used to talk about China, which is deranged and misleading as to the nature of the rivalry, but plays well politically in several ways. (Whether administration principals know in their private counsels that the language is in fact exaggerated and potentially accident-prone is unclear; I hope so, but suspect not.) It explains the equivocations about the mini-Gaza war in May, and much of the Afghan withdrawal decision, which was staged for political consumption. Again, politics has always played a role in major peacetime foreign policy decisions and how they have been spun, but it has never had an all-consuming role until Trump, and because of Trump now with Biden.

Absent a major crisis with a military dimension, foreign/national security decision-making will not affect the November 2022 election. No one cares even more than usual, since COVID turned the nation inward more than usual. That frees the relevant officials to do what they think is best without having to worry too much about the political optics. So we Americans do now have some genuine foreign and national security policies, so long as they are buried so far below the political radar that almost no one pays attention to them. That's good, because it enables the restoration of normal processes within the US Government and between it and other governments that, all else equal, can forgive a lot of sins and most failures of imagination, at least for a while. So some healing is taking place from the deliberate disintermediating disruptions of the Trump "middle finger" zero-sum approach to allies and others.

But that doesn't make everything all right. The world has moved on and a restoration policy alone won't cut it. The Biden group has quickly learned that if it did not already realise it on 21 January. Still, it did take a while for its senior folks to realise that, for example, many Asians have not seen US policy toward China in the Trump era the way they did. It took a while for them to realise that European attitudes toward China were not "let's fight a New Cold War" in orientation. The European allies don't ignore or much like the mercantilist vectors coming from the White House either. And, led by the Germans, they just don't trust the Biden people to last long enough amid US political dysfunctionality to be reliable allies again.

It took very little time for the new administration to realise that "human rights" could not by itself a Saudi policy make, and that getting back into some constraining arrangement with Iran without alienating every US ally and associate in the region would not be so simple after all. Language deployed whilst in campaign mode is often general, soaring, and analytically lazy because it is mainly a form of advertising. Once in office, a huge funnel appears, floating in the rarified air of the Oval Office and the Seventh Floor of the State Department, and into those funnels all the rhetoric and speechwriting effluvia of the pre-election period gets poured. What can come out of the bottom of the funnel is but a tiny and tortured fraction of what goes in. So much, then, for the pre-administration's promises of an "immaculate conception" form of human rights policy.

Meanwhile, the accompanying rhetoric since the Inauguration has been largely tone deaf. Biden and Blinken have excelled at Manichean two-valued stuff, dividing the world between freedom and autocracy. It has sounded to those with an historical memory under their caps like the Truman Doctrine redux. But the meaning of what constitutes a democracy and what constitutes autocracy and authoritarianism is less clear, and the categories are less useful in practice, than they ever were. The tone is one of secular evangelism, which is hardly anything new in the history of US foreign policy. But whenever it flourishes, usually at a time of heightened emotion and anxiety, I cringe, because we've all seen that movie genre before: We get "a war to end all wars", or a wildly oversold United Nations, or a crusade in the jungles of Vietnam, or a predictably counterproductive "forward strategy for freedom" in the Middle East, and that's just a summary from the highlights reel.

Otherwise, we hear Biden, Blinken, Sullivan, and others talk endlessly about "rules-based" orders and US dedication to a rules-based system. We know what that means when it comes to trade and World Trade Organization rules, and that, in the current Asia-first context, is what it mainly means as far as anyone knows. But otherwise the principals have been vague. What rules? Whose rules? Where are they written? It can't mean standard international law, for the United States has consistently been on the margin of the evolving international consensus for decades, in my view for good reasons. So it's not clear what they mean outside of the domain of trade.

One perhaps should not take the rhetoric too seriously. Having written major speeches for two Secretaries of State, I know from experience how detached from policy reality rhetoric can be. Sometimes, if there is no deliverable to shape a speech, it can be just filler. But I also know what can be gleaned from the instructions that principals give their speechwriters, and in Biden's case there is a glaring omission in what really should be an obvious observation.

Some say Biden is channelling Harry S. Truman, others that he is channelling Franklin D. Roosevelt in trying to reassemble the domestic coalition that proved so stable and politically successful for the Democrats. Some say -- many say -- he's channelling two-termer Barack Obama, and some that he's channelling Bill Clinton for his "Blue Dog" centrism. All of this ignores a sturdy lesson well known in the study of political history, that of the "seminal, generational experience".

Biden was 18 years old in 1960 when John F. Kennedy (JFK) was elected President. JFK, a fellow Irish Catholic, was Biden's seminal experience. Overwhelmingly, when he realises it and when he doesn't, Biden is channelling Kennedy. The Manichean foreign policy language is lifted directly, whether consciously or not, from that famous Theodore Sorenson-penned Inaugural: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." It sounded great at the time. It sired the Peace Corps and, after the somnambulant second Eisenhower term, it filled young American hearts and minds with idealist ambition like no President since.

Alas, how it sounded and what it led to (read: war in Vietnam) are two different things. Kennedy became a prisoner of his own rhetoric, attested to when he quipped, after debating the neutralisation of Laos in 1961, "I don't know where the non-essential areas are."<sup>1</sup> Biden's borrowing of the rhetorical cadences puts him inadvertently in the same boat. The Administration talks tough about China and Russia, but won't pressure Iran as the Trump Administration did and so worries its Middle Eastern allies in the process. As with Obama's notorious 2013 "redline demurrals" in Syria, if the Chinese, Russian, North Korean, and Iranian leaderships, invariably taking "the measure of the man", sense US weakness in the Middle East, US efforts to persuade of strength and resolve in East Asia and Europe will surely suffer.

There really ought to be no question that Biden's foreign policy/national security policy instincts are those of the Cold War Democrats, extending back to Truman through Kennedy and forward to Hubert Humphrey and a bit beyond, until the McGovern detour changed fundamentally the party's direction in foreign and national security policy. That was the elder company in which Biden was reared. Everything he has learned or thinks he has learned since is a variation on a basic theme. The problem is, there is no more Cold War and there can be no replay of one with China, because China is not the USSR. The security environment is more complex and diffuse; we have no towering ideologically-driven peer competitor like the USSR to provide a "one-stop-shopping" organising template. So while we can hear Kennedy's words when Biden speaks, we can no longer discern Kennedy's world. And that's a problem.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Dial Press, 1983), p. 328.

## The World to Come

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What will happen in November 2022? No one knows, of course, which is why prophecy, like eschatology, is not for the meek. Everyone does know, or thinks they know, that 2022 will shape the playing field for 2024. They are indelibly linked, not just because of the soft-coup scenario sketched above that becomes the more plausible the more Republican state houses there are, and not only because the reapportionment mandated by the 2020 census seems to give a slight advantage to Republicans, but also because of political momentum. No major public policy problems will be solved between now and November 2022 amid all the maneuvering to score structural victories.

That points to another system-ageing problem: We have Federal elections too frequently--every two years for the entire House of Representatives. In the late 18th, 19th, and even 20th centuries that was not too frequent given the technological/media realities of the times. In the wired polarised environment we have at present, it portends a continuous campaign in which politics always takes pride of place over policy solutions, and so is a formula for paralysis. As already noted, the Democrats now hold only a four-seat majority in the House, and which party controls the House matters enormously. So it all comes down to which party machinery, with its consultants and pollsters, can spin the media and the electorate to victory, and then work its will as soon as possible before politics again swallows the political system whole. That is why, too, the Democrats are front loading the legislative calendar: They know they have to use a kind of "shock and awe" approach before the political squirrels come out to play and silly season is again upon us. The window of policy opportunity does not stay open for long.

Basically, all the serious polling tells us that the US electorate is moderately left-of-centre when it comes to economic issues, moderately right-of-centre when it comes to cultural issues. Democrats should try to define the main issues as economic if they want to win, and Republicans should try to define them as cultural if they want to win. Republicans are better disciplined than Democrats in this. But all else equal, a midterm election next November that gets defined more by way of economics should help the Democrats. But will that happen?

Aside from the timing of Trump's indictments by New York State prosecutors -- and timing is almost everything in politics as well as comedy -- which issues will become radioactive, and which will the major parties be able to spin in their favour? Assuming that COVID does not recur as a major national health crisis -- and that remains a good bet but an uncertain one as of this writing -- two issues seem sure to qualify: the economy, especially inflation; and immigration, especially the mess at the Southern border. A third issue, that of rapidly rising violent crime in urban areas, could also become decisive in a close race.

Many observers, economists among them for whatever that may be worth, think the Biden Administration is overheating an economy already making a comeback anyway. There are serious worries from serious people about inflation, and that is triply problematic for the Democrats.

First, if people think Biden is trying to politicise stimulus to reap the benefits from giving people free money, that will ultimately hurt him. People scoffed when Trump insisted on having his name appear on stimulus cheques. But Biden's White House sent form letters to millions announcing his \$1,400 per person free money, and more form letters heralding child-credit cheques. Is the latter less fawning than the former? Biden has so far escaped direct criticism on this score, but the Teflon on his skillet is only so thick. If inflation becomes a political problem sooner than later, Biden will get bashed for all those letters.

Second, destabilising the economy is the surest way to lose elections, and major inflationary pulses do just that because the credit crunches needed to staunch them sire recessions. So the hope is that the bright side of stimulus and a job-creating economy will help, before any longer-term negative consequences kick in. Again, timing, if not everything in politics, is a lot. Problem is, no one can fine-tune the timing of macro elements of a huge economy: too many moving parts, not enough reliable data.

Some people, Biden among them, are old enough to remember the Carter/Blumenthal wrecking of the US economy in 1977-1978, and know that's the main reason Carter was a one-term President. So when Jerome Powell at the Federal Reserve says there's nothing to worry about — that these are “price pops” we see due to residual effects from supply-chain disruptions from COVID, not signs of structural inflation — a lot of people just don't trust or believe him. When he says that US \$6 trillion pumped into the economy is good because it will bring jobs to the most disadvantaged communities and the ones hurt most by the pandemic, some don't think that is technically accurate. Others see a deeper seed germinating: the aforementioned politicisation of the Fed. Blithely dismissing the danger of significant inflation while trying to make political hay from giving people free money reminds one not of John Kennedy, but of Juan Perón! That's not a complimentary comparison, and it's not meant to be.

Third, the tide of anti-corporate populism is still rising fast among the Republicans. We saw this when several corporations stated that they would boycott the State of Georgia after its State House passed an unabashedly racist voting restriction bill, and the Republicans reacted by declaring a boycott of those corporations. This is the Tea Party sounding through the years. It gives Democrats an opportunity to re-attract corporate support, even as it tries to woo working class Americans back to something resembling the old FDR coalition. But screw up the investment environment because of rampant inflation, and corporations will not be your friends for long.

As to the Southern border, the Biden Administration has compiled a mixed record, quickly letting everyone know that it was not about to remove all the Trump-era restrictions and arrangements with Mexico designed to reduce the pressures on the border. This outraged the leftwing of the party that basically supports open borders and all sanctuary jurisdictions. Biden does not agree, and he firmly stiffed them. (He also stiffed them on the size of the defence budget, the quest to seek massive college loan forgiveness, and more; those depicting Biden as a hapless gerontological mumbler conveniently ignore all this.)

On the other hand, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Treasury Department) has basically stopped functioning. It has been ordered to review its mission. There are now more undocumented immigrants gaming the asylum system flowing into the country and fewer deportations than ever. Some Republican Congressmen in Texas are grandstanding, declaring the situation an invasion. Some demanded that Vice-President Kamala Harris visit the border and have a look for herself — she has thanklessly been tasked with the problem by the President. She did travel recently to Texas but she avoided the border proper, and when asked tough policy questions she deferred them all to her travelling companion, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.



This problem is complex, to say the least, and cannot be fixed fast. The legislative pieces needed to fix it would be difficult to devise in normal times, and the Republicans, seeing the issue as an open sore to salt Democrats' wounds with, are in no mood to help solve it. They know that immigration, and especially illegal immigration, is the great, electrified third rail of American politics and has been for years. They know that, more than anything else, it's what got Trump, with his bombast about "carnage", elected in 2016. Of all issues, this one has the greatest potential to help the Republicans in 2022. The Democrats, divided within over aspects of the problem, seem dead in the water, unable to make progress or change direction.

The fact that Biden gave Harris the immigration/Southern border portfolio is curious. Since she is the party's heir apparent for 2024, why saddle her with one of the most difficult problems on the planet? Just so she can earn her foreign policy chops learning about Guatemala and Salvador? That would be like trying to teach someone to swim by throwing them in a mud hole.

Harris hurt the Democratic ticket in 2020 in the aftermath of the "George Floyd" violence; she is one of the reasons the Democrats lost ground in the House. She would be an inherently weak presidential candidate in 2024, but replacing her would be politically risky in other ways. It's not her skills or views or personality that will hurt her if she is the candidate; on the contrary. But she's a dark-skinned woman (with a Jewish husband, no less) without much experience or track record, almost no one here has the slightest idea what a Tamil is, and American populism, when it rises, always brings noxious clouds of irrational xenophobia with it. It's a sad truth, but it is a truth. So even if the Democrats hold their own in the midterms next year, it's no guarantee that they can win the White House again in 2024 if Kamala Harris is the candidate.

Finally, the violent crime portfolio. The data is clear and need not be recited here: Violent crime has been rising fast in most major urban areas, particularly in poorer neighborhoods. As is predictable in an ideologically polarised environment, a consensus on why this is happening eludes us.

On the further left, COVID-magnified revelations of inequality and racism, along with economic desperation, are cited as the main reasons. This theory supports efforts to defund or even abolish the police, based on the radical sociological tenet that crime is a natural and often justified defensive reaction against systemic exploitation. It aligns with the graffiti once common in some American cities that showed billboards stating "Shoplifting is theft" overwritten with spray paint to read "Shoplifting is survival" or "Shoplifting is justice".

Others contend, with more evidence on their side, that policing in affected areas has retreated. Why? Because, some aver, for a confluence of reasons it has become more dangerous to be cop in edgy neighbourhoods, and new constraining operating rules in many jurisdictions have made it an even more dangerous, as well as a more thankless, task. Also, budgets have already been slashed in many places. For that and other reasons, unusually large numbers of policemen are retiring early or quitting their jobs. Not a few police chiefs, too, have set out to prove that lighter policing will not reduce crime as communities police their own--the chic theory on the left--but rather the contrary. They want to make the case that cities need police and so should be willing to pay for them. Which of these reasons best explains the police retreat in many places? No one really knows, and different cases may have different sets of explanations.

Whatever the reasons for the spike in violent crime, two things are clear. First, both sides will politicise the issue in the midterms, as they politicise nearly everything whether in offense or defense. That will involve the usual exaggerations and spleen spilling, magnifying existing social divisions in the nation at large. Second, whatever the Democrats do, they will be on the defensive here. The spike will help Republicans in the midterms, as crime waves always help more conservative and vested political constituencies.

If the issues of inflation, the Southern border, and violent crime come together in a perfectly awful political storm for the Democrats, they may well lose control of both the House and the Senate in November 2022. None of these wedge issues are playing to Democratic advantage, as least as far as the reliable polls go. If November 2022 turns out to be bad news for the Democrats, it will reshape present strategies on both sides looking toward 2024. All else equal, which it of course never is, a Republican rout in the November 2022 midterms will strengthen the Trumpist grip on the Republican Party. Then we will find out in November 2024 if the Democratic legislative strategy of ruling by its thin congressional advantage, instead of through triangulation with willing non-Trumpian Republicans, was wise or not.

# The Impact on Future US Foreign and National Security Policy

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As already noted, foreign policy plays little to no role in all of this by way of a causal vector. But it will be affected by the outcome in the mid- and longer run. Three basic vectors of impact can be foreseen, with a fourth less likely possibility worth mentioning.

First, the longer the deep philosophical divide between the sides endures, with no one side the victor for an eight or perhaps twelve-year period, as has been typical in US political history, the more unstably oscillatory and hence unpredictable US policies in the world will be. Adversaries will be tempted and allies will hedge, many going shopping for alternative protective arrangements. Fluidity, uncertainty, and accidents will happen. Any residua of the former US grand strategy of providing common security goods to the global commons in order to temper local arms races, WMD-proliferation, and violence will be shredded, even if formal US alliances and multilateral alliance structures like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Australia, New Zealand and United States Treaty (ANZUS) endure on paper.

Second, if the Republicans in their current form prevail in 2022 and hence likely in 2024, the United States may become a “rogue superpower” -- mighty and covetous of deference, but tied to no close allies or normative rules of the international road. Common global problems, like zoonotic disease and environmental challenges, will become harder to manage; violence and even hegemonic war will become more likely.

Third, if the Democrats in their present form -- meaning the more traditional “liberal international order” dispensation -- prevail, the post-Cold War status quo may linger, but changes in the world and the lack of a constructive US elite imagination since 1992-1993 will make that posture an increasingly wasting asset. The situation will give the appearance of continuity to those disposed to lazy or superficial thinking, but the substance will have mainly gone missing.

Of the three most likely outcomes, this is the best, for it buys time for improvisation and eventual wise adjustment. None of the three, however, is cause for celebration.

Finally, if “woke” leftwing Democrats prevail in due course, however unlikely that seems, we are bound for an idealist, even millenarian-tinged foreign policy focused overwhelmingly on end-of-the-world climate paranoia, global anti-“racist” crusades, and “human rights” campaigns defined according to the basic zero-sum mentality and criteria of critical theory. This could and likely would cause counterproductive chaos by inciting Hobbesian wars of groups against other groups wherever it touches ground worldwide in accord with its core view that human social nature is only and ever conflictual in nature. The true believers would get their fights for absolute social justice and then be forced in due course to ask, Goethe-like, why they ever wanted them in the first place.

Such a US foreign policy would resemble in some ways a new Children’s Crusade, but the key to its confusion would be no secret. Aristotle had it right: “Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in one respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal”, and thus: “The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal.” In other words, ageing democracies conflate ideals that are best kept separate, and, recalling Tocqueville’s Paradox, fail to correct for the tendency of the thymotic disposition to radically discount social and moral progress for what it has failed to rectify through the sins of imperfection.

It is ironic that the common mingling on the Left of the “social justice” mindset and postmodernism should produce this result. In the latter, nearly everything is said to be “constructed”, but the social justice mindset insists on the supposedly indelible and objective facts of racist and other kinds of never-ending exploitation. But racism in the United States, for all its heinous residual reality, is constructed, too.<sup>2</sup> It is, without doubt; but that is not the same as saying that it also is as it seems to the thymotic idealist.

A “woke” foreign policy would arise from a simple, straightforward extension of its critical theory paradigm on the US domestic social level to the globe as a whole. It would be the class struggle raised from the national to the global level -- by now a very old chestnut -- combined, ironically, with binary, zero-sum, group-essentialist struggles, mainly those having to do with ethnicity and gender.

The possibility of a “woke” US foreign policy cannot be ruled out, for no one knows the future. But it seems unlikely to arise for lack of significant political support in the nation, and even more unlikely to long persist if ever it were somehow kindled. So this is nothing to lose sleep worrying about, when there are far more likely outcomes very much worth worrying about.

<sup>2</sup> See Eric Kaufman, *The Social Construction of Racism in the United States*, Manhattan Institute Report, April 2021.

## About the Author

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**Adam Garfinkle** was engaged at RSIS as a non-resident Distinguished Fellow when he wrote this essay. Aside from being Founding Editor of *The American Interest*, he has served as Editor of *The National Interest*, as Principal Speechwriter to the US Secretary of State while attached to the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, was chief writer of the Hart-Rudman Commission reports, and has taught at several institutions of higher education including SAIS/Johns Hopkins. His PhD in International Relations is from the University of Pennsylvania.

## About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

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