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## **Preserving the Positive Legacy of an Empire in Decline**

**Alfred W. McCoy** / [TomDispatch](#), May 24, 2018

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Month by month, tweet by tweet, the events of the past two years have made it clearer than ever that Washington's once-formidable global might is indeed fading. As the American empire unravels with previously unimagined speed, there are many across this country's political spectrum who will not mourn its passing. Both peace activists and military veterans have grown tired of the country's endless wars. Trade unionists and business owners have come to rue the job losses that accompanied Washington's free-trade policies. Anti-globalization protesters and pro-Trump populists alike cheered the president's cancellation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The idea of focusing on America

and rebuilding the country's tattered infrastructure has a growing [bipartisan appeal](#).

But before we join this potential chorus of “good riddance” to U.S. global power, it might be worth pausing briefly to ask whether the acceleration of the American decline by President Trump's erratic foreign policy might not come with unanticipated and unpleasant costs. As Americans mobilize for the 2018 midterms and the 2020 presidential contest, they might look beyond Washington's mesmerizing celebrity scandals and consider instead the hidden consequences of the country's ongoing withdrawal from the global arena. Indeed, this fitful, uncontrolled retreat carries with it such serious risks that it might be time for ordinary voters and political activists alike to put foreign policy, in the broadest sense, at the top of their electoral watch list.

First, let's just admit the obvious. After 18 months in office, Trump's one-man style of diplomacy, though potentially capable of a few “wins,” is clearly degrading American global stature. After surveying 134 countries, Gallup's pollsters [recently reported](#) that worldwide approval of U.S. leadership has plunged from 48% in 2016 to a record low of 30%, a notch below China's 31% and significantly under Germany's 41%.

As Trump has abrogated one international accord after another, observers worldwide have struggled to find some rationale for decisions that seem questionable on their merits and have frayed relations with long-standing allies. Given his inordinate obsession with the “legacy” of Barack Obama, epitomized in a report, whether true or not, of his [ritual “defiling”](#) of his predecessor's Moscow hotel bed via the “golden showers” of Russian prostitutes, there's a curious yet coherent logic to his foreign policy. You might even think of it as Golden Shower diplomacy. Whatever Obama did, Trump seems determined to undo with a visceral vehemence: the Trans-Pacific trade pact (torn up), the Paris climate accord (withdrawn), the Iran nuclear freeze (voided), close relations with NATO allies (damaged), diplomatic relations with Cuba (frozen), Middle Eastern military withdrawal (reversed), ending the Afghan war (cancelled), the diplomatic pivot to Asia (forgotten), and so on into what already seems like an eternity.

As bizarre as all this might be, Trump's four to eight years presiding over what still passes for U.S. foreign policy through such personal pique will have lasting consequences. The American presence on the global stage will be further reduced, potentially opening the way for the rise of those autocratic powers, Beijing and Moscow, hostile to the liberal international order that Washington promoted for the past 70 years, even as — thanks to Trump's [love of fossil fuels](#) — the further degradation of the planetary environment occurs.

## **The Delicate Duality of American Global Power**

To fully understand what's at stake, you would need to reach back to the dawn of U.S. global dominion and try to grasp the elusive character of the power that went with it. In the closing months of World War II, when the United States stood astride a partially wrecked planet like a titan, Washington used its extraordinary clout to build a new world order grounded in a "[delicate duality](#)" that juxtaposed two contradictory attributes. It fostered an international community of sovereign nations governed by the rule of law, while also building its own superpower dominion through the raw Realpolitik of economic pressure, crushing military force, unrestrained covert action, and diplomatic leverage.

Keep in mind that America had emerged from the ashes of that world war as a behemoth of unprecedented power. With Europe, Japan, and Russia in ruins, the U.S. had the only intact industrial complex left and then accounted for [about half](#) of the world's entire economic output. At war's end, its military had swelled to more than 12 million [troops](#), its Navy ruled the seas with more than [1,000 warships](#), and its air force commanded the skies with [41,000 combat aircraft](#). In the decade that followed, Washington would encircle Eurasia with hundreds of military bases, as well as bevy of strategic bombers and warships. In the process, it would also confine its Cold War enemies, China and Russia, behind that infamous Iron Curtain.

Throughout those early Cold War years, Washington's diplomats walked tall in the corridors of power, deftly negotiating defense pacts and trade deals that gave the country a distinct advantage on the world stage. Meanwhile, its clandestine operatives maneuvered relentlessly in the shadow lands of global power to topple neutral or hostile governments via coups and covert operations. Washington, of course, eventually won the Cold War, but its tactics produced almost unimaginably dreadful costs — brutal military dictatorships across Asia and Latin America, millions of dead in Indochina, and devastated societies in Central Asia, Central America, and southern Africa.

Simultaneously, however, the U.S. victory in World War II also brought a surge of citizen idealism as millions of American veterans returned home, hopeful that their sacrifice had not only defeated fascism but also won a more peaceful world. To ensure that the ravaged planet would never again experience such global death and destruction, American diplomats also began working with their allies to build, step by step, nothing less than a novel architecture for global governance, grounded in the rule of international law.

At the Bretton Woods resort in New Hampshire in 1944, Washington convened 44 nations, large and small, to design a comprehensive economic regime for a prosperous post-war world. In the process, they formed the International Monetary Fund, or IMF (for financial stability); the World Bank (for postwar reconstruction); and, somewhat later, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (for free trade), the predecessor of the World Trade Organization.

A year after that, in San Francisco, Washington led 850 delegates from 50 allied nations in drafting the charter for a new organization, the United Nations, that aspired to a world order marked by inviolable sovereignty, avoidance of armed conflict, human rights, and shared prosperity. In addition to providing crisis management through peacekeeping and refugee relief, the U.N. also helped order a globalizing world by creating, over the next quarter century, 17 specialized organizations responsible for everything from food security (the Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO) to public health (the World Health Organization, or WHO).

Starting with the \$13 billion Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, Washington also supplemented the U.N.'s work by providing billions of dollars in bilateral aid to fund reconstruction and economic development in nations old and new. President John F. Kennedy globalized that effort by establishing the U.S. Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)) that today has a budget of \$27 billion and 4,000 employees who deliver humanitarian assistance worldwide by providing, for instance, \$44 million in [emergency relief](#) for 700,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

Washington was careful to weave this new world order into the web of international law it had been building assiduously since its debut on the world stage at the Second Hague Conference on peace in 1907. Under the U.N. charter of 1945, the General Assembly convened the International Court of Justice, which took its seat at the grandiose Peace Palace in The Hague built by steel baron Andrew Carnegie years before to promote the international rule of law.

Just months after its founding, the U.N. also formed its Human Rights Commission, [chaired](#) by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, to draft the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in Paris on December 10, 1948. In addition, instead of firing squads for the defeated Axis leaders, the U.S. led the Allies in convening tribunals at Nuremburg and Tokyo in 1945-1946 that tried their war crimes under international law. Three years later, Washington joined the international community in adopting the four modern Geneva conventions that laid down the laws of war for future conflicts to protect both captives and civilians.

During the 70 years that Washington led many of these international institutions, half the world won national independence, economic prosperity spread, poverty declined, hunger receded, diseases were defeated, world war was indeed avoided, and human rights advanced. No other empire in world history had presided over so much progress and prosperity for such a significant share of humanity.

## **Citizen Diplomats**

Some scholars of international relations remain [confident](#) that the international institutions America has long promoted can survive its demise as the globe's dominant power. But Trump's control over foreign policy and his erratic leadership make that prospect at best uncertain. While scholars place their hopes on the internal resilience of the liberal world order, an equally important source for its potential survival lies with the millions of U.S. citizen-diplomats who have served, for the past 70 years, as adjuncts in its promotion and remain, as activists and voters, potential advocates for its preservation — and these even include one group that might normally be considered unlikely indeed: the very evangelicals who, in recent times, have backed Donald Trump in [startling numbers](#).

Unlike the genteel elite exchanges and government programs that marked Europe's old empires, America has influenced billions of people worldwide pervasively through mass communications and directly through citizen initiatives. While in Britain's imperial heyday, elite circles communicated with each other via telegraph, newspaper, and radio, America has freed the flow of information for uncounted billions through television, the Internet, and cell phones — making grassroots activism a global reality and citizen diplomacy a major force in a changing world.

Although much less visible than those cellular towers lining rural roads and the computer screens dotting desktops in every city, the global impact of U.S. citizen initiatives has been no less profound. Despite a foreign policy that frequently retreated into isolationism or hyper-nationalism or brutal wars, since the end of World War II a surprising number of Americans have immersed themselves in the wider world, arguably far more deeply than any other people on the planet. The old European colonial empires were state enterprises, but the U.S. imperium has been, in significant ways, a people's project (as well, of course, in Washington's coups and wars, as an anti-people's project).

If Europe's missionary efforts were generally state-sponsored, the spirit has moved millions of individual American evangelicals to "go on mission," often to the most remote, rugged parts of the planet. From the Civil War to World War II, mainline Protestant denominations sponsored small numbers of career missionaries who made the conversion of China the aspiration of the post-Civil War generation. But since the Boeing Corporation introduced cheap jet travel in the 1960s, countless millions of evangelicals have launched themselves on short-term missions. While religious conversion has certainly been their prime goal, providing medicine, food, and education to remote areas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America has also been a key part of that endeavor.

As a way to count these countless evangels, in my own small family circle a cousin, a Harvard-trained pediatrician, has made several medical missions to West Africa; the real-estate agent for my mother's house repeatedly slowed the

sale by going on education missions to Cambodia; friends from my Anglican parish travel regularly to Haiti on a development mission to a sister church; and my father-in-law's old army buddy for years flew his private plane down to Central America on gospel missions.

Whenever global disasters strike, the [Mormons](#), along with the 5,000 employees of [Catholic Relief](#) and 46,000 workers of the Protestant [World Vision](#), mobilize what has become billions of dollars annually to send massive shipments of relief goods to the farthest corners of the Earth.

America's concern for the world beyond its borders also has a no-less-vital secular side. Paralleling the rise of Washington as a world power, the Chicago-based [Rotary International](#), for instance, has grown into a global network of 33,000 clubs in 200 countries. Since 1985, its 1.2 million members have donated nearly two billion dollars to inoculate two billion children worldwide against polio. As someone who still limps from this childhood disease, I was delighted to learn a few years ago, when I spoke before my local Rotary Club in Madison, Wisconsin, that my speaker's fee had been automatically donated to the worldwide fight against polio.

When I spoke to the local Kiwanis chapter, I found that they were crisscrossing the state collecting antique foot-pedal Singer sewing machines for shipment to rural co-ops in Central America without electricity — [catalyzing](#) this small city's Sewing Machine Project that has [sent](#) 2,500 machines worldwide since 2005. In a similar fashion, recent immigrants to the U.S. have often sponsored schools and medical care in their former homelands; military veterans have promoted humanitarian efforts in old battlegrounds like Vietnam; the 230,000 returned [Peace Corps volunteers](#) have been voices for a people-oriented foreign policy; and the list only goes on.

Whether passing the plate down the pews or logging onto the Internet, millions of Americans send billions of dollars overseas every year through their churches or activist groups like [Doctors Without Borders](#), [CARE USA](#), and [Save the Children USA](#), whether for the Ethiopian famine, Indonesia's tsunami, or the Rohingya crisis.

This tradition of what might be thought of as citizen diplomacy and the ingrained internationalism that goes with it were manifest in the extraordinary eruption of mass protest that occurred when, in his first week in office, President Trump tried to [ban travellers](#) from seven Muslim-majority nations. Within a day, a [small crowd](#) of 30 people with placards at JFK international airport in New York swelled into impassioned protests by thousands attending demonstrations across the city. Over the next week, there would be parallel protests by tens of thousands in some [30 cities](#) nationwide, including [Los Angeles](#), [San Francisco](#), [Houston](#), [Detroit](#), [Philadelphia](#), and [Portland](#), Maine. It is these ardent demonstrators and the millions more with their own

international causes who seem mindful of what might be lost as America heads for the exits from the world stage.

## **China Rising**

Yes, CIA coups, the Vietnam War, and untold other horrors of empire will long remain troubling memories of U.S. hegemony, not to speak of the twenty-first-century war on terror, those CIA black sites, drone strikes, and so on, so why should anyone, liberal or conservative, who harbors doubts about America's global power be concerned with its accelerating decline? At its core, the U.S. world order has rested, for the past 70 years, on that delicate duality — an idealistic community of sovereign nations and sovereign citizens equal under the rule of international law joined tensely, even tenuously, to an American imperium grounded in the grimmest aspects of U.S. military and economic power.

Now, consider the likely alternatives if Donald Trump succeeds in withdrawing the U.S. from any form of idealistic internationalism. While the downside of Washington's harsh hegemony of the last almost three-quarters of a century was in some part balanced by its promotion of a liberal international order, both Beijing and Moscow seem inclined to the idea of hegemony without that international community and its rule of law. Beijing accepts the U.N. (where it has a seat on the Security Council) and the World Trade Organization (a convenient wedge into world markets), but it simply ignores inconvenient aspects of the international community like the Permanent Court of Arbitration, recently dismissing an adverse [decision](#) there over its claims to the South China Sea.

Beijing has quietly challenged what it views as pro-Western organizations by beginning to build its own parallel world order, which it naturally intends to dominate: the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) instead of NATO, its [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank](#) in lieu of the IMF, and the [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) to supplant the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact. The trillions of dollars in trade and development agreements that Beijing has doled out across [Asia](#), [Africa](#), and [Latin America](#) in recent years are the epitome of commercial Realpolitik, devoid of any concern for the environment or for workers' rights. Putin's Russia is even more dismissive of the restraints of international law, expropriating sovereign territory, invading neighboring nations, assassinating domestic enemies abroad, and blatantly manipulating elections overseas (a subject in which, of course, the United States once showed a certain [expertise](#)).

Although overshadowed in recent years by its endless counterterror operations and its devastatingly destructive wars across the Greater Middle East and Africa, the United States has nonetheless had a profound and often positive impact upon the world, in terms both of its high politics and its mass culture.

Long after the damaging excesses of Washington's hegemonic power — the CIA coups, the [torture](#), [the drone killings](#), and [those never-ending wars](#)— fade from memory, the world will still need the more benign dimension of its dominion, particularly the very idea of global governance through international organizations and the rule of law, especially as we face a planet similarly in decline. The loss of all of that would be a loss indeed.

If the world experiences a slow, relatively peaceful transition away from U.S. hegemony, then the subsequent global order just might maintain some of the liberal international institutions that still represent the best of American values. If, by contrast, the golden-shower diplomacy of Donald Trump continues, while the Chinese and Russian versions of hegemony only gain strength, then we will likely witness a harsher world order based on autocracy, Realpolitik, and commercial domination, with scant attention to human rights, women's rights, or the rule of law. At this critical turning point in world history, the choice is still, to a surprising degree, ours to make. But not for long.

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