
Let them Eat Smartphones: Reflections on the Wealth-Information Paradox

LINCOLN BLOOMFIELD JR.

INTRODUCTION: A NEW ERA OF PROGRESS AND DISRUPTION

The early twenty-first century has brought a transformation in societies worldwide: a rapid change in how people live and work, the rewards for their exertions, how they feel about their lot in life, and where they turn for succor. To consider the hours spent daily by much of humanity staring at lit rectangular screens is to know how different life has become for the human race over the course of a single generation. As with the advent of printing presses, electricity, the combustion engine, and other seminal advances in technology, the consequences of computer and Internet-enabled life are far-reaching, and not all welcome.

The information age dawned after nearly a century defined by no less transformational change. Agrarian economies were disrupted by the rise of industrialization, fueling dictatorship, conquest by large and mobile armies, and war. At the same time, modernity brought historic improvements in basic indices of public health and welfare, including falling rates of infant and maternal mortality, reduced hunger, and greater life expectancy. This was enabled by increased access to potable water, sanitation, electricity, and expanded pathways to economic security.¹

Those improvements continue in this century; but for parts of many societies, despite advances in health and longevity, their prospects for a better life have been diminished by the passing of the industrial era and the

Ambassador Bloomfield (*M.A.L.D.* 1980), a former Director of *The Fletcher Forum*, was Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs and Presidential Special Envoy among other State Department, White House, and Pentagon positions in five Presidential administrations. He is Chairman Emeritus of the *Stimson Center*.

flourishing of the information economy. We know this because, in large numbers and with mounting stridency, citizens have said so.

While people always strive to better their circumstances, the weakening of belief in a better future has been well documented.² Hope is giving way to darker sentiment and can no longer be presumed to be the prevailing leitmotif of human endeavor. A new populism has arisen, in which people see themselves as unjustly disadvantaged—trapped in an inferior stratum, disconnected from opportunities afforded to well-connected elites, and looking to blame them. Their attitudes are increasingly marked by discontent, alienation, and radicalized opinion.

Uprisings in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria a decade ago, signaling tectonic tremors beneath corrupt and autocratic regimes, have been followed by major protests across the globe. Citizens have raised their voices from Caracas and La Paz to Algiers, Beirut, Baghdad, Kiev, Moscow, Minsk, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, and cities throughout Iran. The “street” in every corner of the world has demanded that power be exercised in service of society’s interests. As of 2020, the United States has joined that list.

THE WEALTH-INFORMATION PARADOX

Addressing the sources of this popular vexation, which are economic at heart but inseparable from the very legitimacy of governing institutions, may be the most consequential political challenge the United States and many other governments face. On this issue rests the fate of Rousseau’s social contract, binding leaders and led to the idea of the common good, absent which the Westphalian system of state sovereignty might not long retain its status as humankind’s custodian of order with justice. Leaders and institutions of the state will ignore citizens’ demands for honest, responsive governance at their collective peril.

The populist trend is not a simple reflection of elite prosperity while the general population stagnates. There are two driving factors: growing inequality in economic circumstances and alongside it, an opposite phenomenon of increasing equality in the realm of information and communications, as ever more of the world’s people find a way to access the digital universe. A rich person’s smartphone accesses the same Internet as a poor person’s smartphone. The Internet has forced a democratization of sorts in the capacity of individuals, irrespective of economic condition or location, to obtain, receive or transmit information, and to communicate globally at will.

A small segment of society exercises vastly more economic power than the rest, and its advantage is accelerating, as gains on capital investment

far outpace hourly or even most salaried compensation.³ Meanwhile, the masses are defecting from establishmentarian curators of news and opinion, redirecting their attention to alternative media voices. Disaffected citizens now loyally patronize their own preferred media outlets, featuring commentators who encourage them to embrace their own narratives.

The proliferation of discrete information “communities” is a natural, if potentially destabilizing, phenomenon. While the educated classes use subtly patronizing analytical labels to identify social groups such as “low-income,” “blue collar,” “working class,” “chronically unemployed,” “migrants,” and “refugees,” people so described view themselves not as inherently inferior or chronically blighted, but as *dramatis personae*, heroes of their own quest for a successful life. New broadcast and social media sources cater to this natural human predilection. Like-minded people have formed virtual political constituencies around themes that lionize their struggles, whether tied to race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or as victims of corporate restructuring.

Never again will the world experience the industrial-age concentration of media power in the hands of political leaders, the exclusive and all-powerful national microphone through which Hitler, Mussolini, FDR, Churchill, Nasser, and others mobilized mass popular support and created outsized public personas. Today’s leaders and major media outlets, their information monopoly gone, no longer command the public’s undivided attention as before.

The result, even before the pandemic, has been a much greater politicization of less educated people, many seizing on issue-specific content that would never have entered the national discourse even twenty years ago. The prevalence of conspiracy theory-driven beliefs, and the elevation of potent, xenophobic racial and ethnic themes—not only relating to, e.g., globalization, immigration, Black Lives Matter, Antifa, QAnon, and white supremacist movements, but also indiscriminately aimed at Muslims and at China—have energized important population segments in the United States and elsewhere. Not enamored with conventional perspectives, the newly energized citizens have embraced identity politics, exhibiting a “tribal” loyalty to their own political idols and media influencers.

In sum, while a small segment of the population wields massive personal economic power, it cannot dictate the national conversation. Now almost everyone has a voice, reflecting a distinct view of events reinforced by favored media sources. Coping with economic stagnation would be difficult enough for national leaders without the added pressure of widely shared, hostile, and ideological critiques. The new century has brought

economic duress and relative decline for many, but also access to knowledge and the “airwaves” approaching virtual parity with the rich. Call it the wealth-information paradox.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS, POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Only in utopian theory are economic rewards equally distributed. Inequality defined agrarian age economics, as power was concentrated in the hands of aristocrats monopolizing land ownership, religious authority, and protection from external threats and unrest among commoners. Multi-generational social class distinctions resulted.

Out of the injustice of class-based social structures came philosophical theories of equality—ideals aspiring to equal political rights, equal opportunity, and in some quarters, equal outcomes. Yet, during the industrial age, even as organized labor exercised collective bargaining leverage with management and property owners, there was never a pretense that hard-won terms of remuneration for workers could rival those of their bosses.

Legacy notions valuing capital over labor live on in the information era, as soaring corporate compensation, untethered to the economic stagnation in middle class America, has become a political target. Nevertheless, a greater readiness in the new technology sector to challenge old paradigms has seen companies embrace diversity, merit-based promotion, and workforce equity ownership. For people whose technical skills are in demand, barriers have fallen.

Higher education has brought opportunity to one segment of society, while others, lacking comparable access to capital or networks of empowered actors, have seen their skills and labor devalued. Throughout the United States and other advanced economies, once-thriving manufacturing communities have declined, victimized by obsolescence, automated operations, and cheaper foreign labor. According to *The Washington Post*, “Census figures show 59,794 manufacturing establishments closed in the United States from 2001 through 2015, erasing 4.3 million jobs. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show a 4.7 million job loss in the manufacturing industry over the same period.”⁴ For the very rich, the lower marginal expense of top lawyers, accountants, and financial advisors to grow and preserve their net worth has magnified their comparative advantage over the rest.

French economist Thomas Piketty’s 2013 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* spurred a long-overdue debate about the nature and implications of the widening wealth gap between the very rich and the rest of

society in the U.S. and Europe.⁵ The thesis that capital investment gains were inexorably outpacing labor productivity gains, creating a semi-permanent class of ultra-wealthy, spurred detailed rebuttals. Some pointed out that while passive capital investment often brought little social benefit, the more entrepreneurial investors were boosting productivity and growth. Others noted that over time, lists of the wealthiest Americans revealed surprisingly rapid turnover; it seems the richest individuals, at least in America, do not remain so for long. Yet even as economists, and Piketty himself, acknowledged more nuanced trends at play, the issue of economic inequality came to occupy the center of political conversation in America.

Beginning with the 2016 electoral process, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders shaped his political message around the systemic privileging of “the one percent.”⁶ Donald Trump presented his candidacy as a voice fighting for workers left behind in the globalized economy, while Hillary Clinton’s candidacy may have suffered from the perception that she was more attuned to the priorities of the educated, professional class. From opposite sides of the political spectrum, Sanders and Trump harnessed populism to spark voter enthusiasm by pledging to deliver revolutionary change, targeting the status quo power structure.

The political season leading to the 2020 U.S. election confirmed the salience of economic inequality as a defining issue in American politics, with candidates like Trump, Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, and others speaking to the economic insecurity of the working masses. Some self-described “progressives” directed their messages against the very wealthy; Senator Warren proposed a confiscatory “wealth tax.”⁷ Economists argued over whether the rich could, if heavily taxed, pay for the needs of the rest. Regardless, a key narrative in American politics was now established, centered on the perception that government has not adequately responded to the needs of the majority.

Political rebellion in other countries reflected similar, if locally relevant, grievances. In Venezuela, economic hardship was a paramount concern. In Beirut, Baghdad, Kiev, and Kuala Lumpur, the focus was official corruption. In Syria, Iran, and Belarus, it was the brutal suppression of freedom and opportunity. In Hong Kong, citizens mobilized to protest new and oppressive controls by Beijing, and in Russia—indeed, to some extent, in most places—it was a combination of all these hardships. Across the globe, masses defied the authorities, taking to the streets day after day, risking harsh reprisals, to demand change. All were sending a common message: power is being exercised for the advantage of the few, and to the detriment of the rest.

As the coronavirus pandemic paralyzed global activity throughout

2020, the advantages of more affluent, educated people over the rest of society suddenly became acute. In the U.S., entire sectors of employment

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were paused indefinitely. Many businesses closed, leaving a large segment of the population dependent on government assistance or charity, struggling to earn enough revenue to pay essential expenses while trying to avoid potentially deadly infection. The disproportionate burdens on those least able to endure a shock only added to the

combustible dynamics of inequality in America.

Those able to exercise their professional skills from home in the on-line medium survived and even prospered under quarantine. Freed from the time and expense of commuting to offices or traveling to in-person meetings, the “knowledge” sector gained in productivity. Video conference calls quickly became the essential conduit for business. Technology companies supporting web-enabled communications, commerce, and entertainment reaped a windfall. At some point, when the pandemic threat has receded and people feel safer traveling and working in fully staffed offices, the culture of business may have changed, with many preferring to work remotely more of the time and traveling to attend in-person events only as necessary. The lasting impact on lower-paying service jobs supporting urban office work and business travel is not yet known.

Recovery from the pandemic will not turn back the clock. How the future workforce maximizes its value under a ‘new normal’ featuring precautionary public health practices, increased virtual connecting, and widespread reliance on automation, robotics, big data, and artificial intelligence, remains to be seen. If economic inequality was a potent societal concern before the pandemic, that concern has only been magnified under the pressure of COVID-19.⁸

It matters not that standards of living for all but the poorest Americans in 2020 likely include common conveniences that for many would have been considered luxuries two or three generations earlier: indoor plumbing, appliances, television, fluorinated water, credit cards, fashionable clothes, perhaps an automobile, and other common features of American lifestyle, notably including smartphones that can access the Internet. The dissatisfaction of many workers is not tied to a static baseline of amenities. It is a function of economic distress, starting with the inability to earn enough to maintain a stable existence.

More than that, it is the perception of no pathway to future economic security, even as others prosper. Governments can subsidize essentials for the poor and send assistance payments to quarantining workers or farmers harmed by tariffs. This will not, however, alleviate people's perception that they are slipping behind, even as a charmed echelon attains stunning heights of success.

What matters is not just what people need—as urgent as that may be—but what they believe they should have. Aspirations are being frustrated and hopes dimmed. Whether in the street or the voting booth, the populist fuse is now lit. People feeling that their destined place of honor in society has been usurped are receptive to the message that this should not have happened, and that others are to blame. They are energized, and they will be heard.

UNMET EXPECTATIONS, IDEOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

To point solely at growing disparities in economic rewards, whether in the United States or elsewhere, is to miss the strategic significance of twenty-first century populism. Activists and protestors in cities from the Americas, to the Levant, to the Pacific Rim are not saying that more should be given to them by the powers that be. In this, they differ from the crowds seen decades ago in the streets of Cairo and Tehran protesting reduced bread or gasoline subsidies. Even under duress, with collapsing currencies in some places, depressed job markets, falling wages, heavy student debt, opioid addiction, and other stressful conditions, their complaints are not entirely, or even primarily, economic. Something deeper is driving their political activism.

In the late 1950s, political scientist Daniel Lerner famously chronicled the “revolution of rising expectations,” illustrated by the story of a rural Turkish village where citizens first encountered modern culture—a grocer with a radio, wearing a necktie—and began to migrate to the cities in pursuit of a better life.⁹ Today's evocative window on the future is not a faint radio transmission, but Internet-connected smartphones in the hands of billions of citizens in every corner of the world. Even villages lacking grid power may have cellphone transmission towers powered by renewable energy, guarded around the clock by people dependent on remittances from their relatives working in wealthier countries.

Today, in the United States and countries on almost every continent, the effect of ever-expanding Internet access on rising expectations is profound. No longer are average citizens mere spectators in the national

policy conversation once reserved for lettered elites. No longer must they depend on theorists like Marx and Weber, or even Piketty, to give their plight visibility with empowered decision makers. No longer do they

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Liberated as never before by the ability to generate their own video, audio, and print content, common citizens are inexorably becoming more connected and politically self-aware. The message in some countries reflects the denial of basic freedoms under repressive rule, or anger at official corruption while citizens are facing economic duress.

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 perhaps, as it is not so readily explained by a nexus to authoritarianism or blatant corruption. Democracies are by no means immune to the politicizing effect of the wealth-information paradox.

There is palpable discontent in the rhetoric of activist groups, heard in their online postings, videos, talk radio programs, and other fora echoing the grievances of various constituencies in the population. Even if determined to redress these grievances, do governments understand their root causes? Will struggling workers be content with the modest effects of a growing economy, even if the rich are seen to be reaping gains on a far grander scale? Or is there an ideologically-driven requirement to curb the most successful—to narrow the wealth gap by somehow leveling outcomes—in a capitalist economy? Proposals abound to tax the rich. Would a far more progressive tax code be sufficient to mollify the populist masses?

Perhaps not. In America, what may be more offensive to many is not the specter of a lucky few reaping outsize rewards, but the belief that the system—the government, Congress and the courts, the corporate executive class, and the established media—caters to its own vested interests ahead of the common good. Disparagement of the “mainstream media”, commonly found on social media and other ideologically branded outlets in the U.S., reflects a conviction that average people have been abandoned by the governing class. The progressive left accuses the centrist establishment of being “corporatist”—controlled by big business—while the “Trumpist” right has promoted divisive conspiracy theories radically at odds with what the rest of the society believes to be true, starting with the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.¹⁰ Such views can rapidly gain visibility,

credence, and self-appointed advocates in the information sphere, where some are more readily attracted to sensational revelations from anonymous on-line avatars than to the views of credentialed thought leaders.

At any point in history, unmet expectations would have sat uneasily with common citizens. The perception that one's community is being blocked from access to the fortunate circle surrounding those who wield power—proverbially locked out of the fortress and relegated to a life of serfdom—is contrary to not just the American dream, but human nature. Is it any surprise that widening inequality in the information age has spawned revolutionary impulses?

In light of the activist, tribal turn that politics has taken in the United States and elsewhere, it is not unreasonable to conclude that inequality of incomes and opportunity are one, but not the only, explanatory feature in the shifting dynamics of contemporary societies. Epochal disruption, as advanced societies have been shifting away from labor-intensive industrial production to information technology-enabled economic life, has given rise to politics with an existential sense of urgency, treating the pursuit of demands as a zero-sum game. If protestors in different geographies have not as yet forged a common ideology promoting righteous rebellion, they could do so, and quickly, with the power of social media.

The populist grievance, accordingly, is not only about the maldistribution of material spoils. The conversation about inequality must expand beyond economics. Whether in the United States or elsewhere, the message today is

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about power, who holds it, how it is being exercised, and for whose benefit. There can be no meaningful debate about redressing populist grievances in the twenty-first century without talking about power, conditions for its legitimate exercise, and policy implications when governments serially abuse their sovereign privilege. With disaffection being fueled by provocative falsehoods and ideological incitement throughout the digital domain, some governments may find that no amount of reform can ever be enough.

THE INTERNET: AN UNTAMED FORCE FOR GOOD OR EVIL

For most of the digital age, as information technology has spurred innovation, productivity, and human progress on many fronts, this domain

has also been weaponized for undemocratic and subversive purposes. In the Middle East, social media has been the prime means used by violent non-state actors like al-Qaeda and ISIS for spreading extremist ideologies and inspiring random terrorist acts by adherents. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has supported the clerical regime in Tehran in part through its promotion of thematically approved movies and television content, and allegedly wields extensive cyber controls inside the country while supporting the regional media operations of proxy Shia militias such as Hezbollah¹¹.

Perhaps the most strategically dangerous threats to the United States in the information space come from rival powers China and Russia. China has been building a massive population surveillance system with cameras and facial recognition software, accessing data on all its citizens.¹² Online activity is monitored and citizens are graded under a "social credit" system.¹³ This totalitarian denial of freedom is antithetical to rights-based governance and represents a mounting danger to the American way of life, even more as other autocrats follow suit and deploy high technology to perpetuate their own rule.

Russia poses a different kind of threat to American and Western interests, reflecting its mature military and intelligence capabilities but also the limitations of a weak economy. President Vladimir Putin has faced protests, exposure of information he wanted kept from the public, and critical commentary. Influential critics have been poisoned or shot, some fatally, under circumstances leaving the Kremlin a measure of deniability, although not 'plausible' in the estimation of Western intelligence services. Ill-equipped to challenge America's military might head-on, Russia has pursued a doctrine it calls "New Generation Warfare," using non-lethal means—notably in the information domain—to wage "culture" war rather than war with weapons, and to use direct influence in lieu of destructive measures.¹⁴ Clandestine election meddling in the U.S. and Europe is but one manifestation.

Just as advertising once focused on newspapers, radio and billboards, today's prime arena of marketing opportunity is the digital domain. A greater share of humanity's attention span is likely to be directed toward television, the Internet, and social media than ever before, and not solely because people find the experience pleasurable or rewarding. Health professionals cite social media addiction as a common condition.¹⁵ Companies, governments, and extremist non-state actors all advance their agendas by attracting like-minded followers via the Internet. In repressive societies, where communications are monitored, information is censored, and

propaganda is omnipresent, people will inevitably seek access to unfiltered sources of information. It is hard to imagine a future where dictators can indefinitely stop them from getting it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

History has no reverse gear, but at times it may not seem that humanity is moving forward. For close to a century, as modernity and Western education have brought greater productivity and possibility to underdeveloped regions, the world has become accustomed to a generally benign and generous American identity. The latter has, albeit imperfectly, embodied in word and deed the promise of progress, and the conviction that all people are endowed with unalienable rights. Today, that American voice is uncharacteristically muted.

After well more than a half-century of preeminent influence over the international community, one now finds in America a striking deficit of geopolitical appetite at either end of the political spectrum. Where John F. Kennedy once called on the United States to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty,” politicians and the public sixty years later appear more in tune with the notion that “forever wars” are unwinnable and unaffordable. Pentagon leaders are calling for modernizing U.S. defense capabilities in the face of major power competitors, but President Trump saw political advantage in pulling American troops out of foreign deployments—the sooner the better—regardless of the impact on the mission. Allies and adversaries have taken note.

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President Trump’s “America First” posture was but the latest reflection of alienation and mistrust of the establishment within the U.S. population, encompassing not only domestic affairs but international trade and foreign policy. Trump signaled the shrinking of the U.S. role in his 2018 address to the United Nations General Assembly, stating, “America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control,

and domination.... The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship. We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return.”¹⁶

As Mohammed Anwar E. Al-Sadat, an Egyptian political party leader, remarked during the 2020 U.S. election process in an online policy discussion, his countrymen now have high hopes for a revived American role because a “maestro” is needed to “conduct the world symphony.”¹⁷ As uplifting as that thought may be, it will not happen so long as the U.S. section of the symphony is discordant and uninterested in playing its part.

What are the options for American policy to address inequality and the rise of populist unrest? No list would be honest or complete without considering the option of doing little or nothing. Partisan gridlock arising between the White House and Congress can inhibit change. In purely economic terms, halting the juggernaut of uber-wealth creation in the technology sector and the investor class would be difficult, even if ideologically palatable. Guiding the remainder of the economy—the “99 percent”—to a sustainable level of prosperity poses a still greater challenge. Enacting measures intended to address the inequality issue within the United States alone may consume the political capital of the Biden administration and the 117th Congress.

Tweaking the tax code to require more from businesses and upper income brackets, further deficit spending to fund job-creating infrastructure projects, and appealing for national unity and reconciliation would appear to be realistic priorities within the Washington Beltway in 2021, presuming as well a concerted focus on addressing the public health emergency. Would these be enough to tamp the domestic fires of unrest?

A more expansive American strategy to restore national unity could entail enhanced civics education, workforce retraining in depressed areas, strengthened ethics rules to limit the influence of special interest money in Congress, and incentives for companies to retain supply chains and work shares in the United States. Consensus norms guiding content management on social media platforms would be desirable if they could reliably filter false information and personae without censoring free expression or imposing political bias. Regardless of such measures, freedom of speech ensures that all segments of American society will have a platform enabling them to convene and amplify their concerns. Even with a robust and comprehensive effort, government and corporate policies may fail to moderate the incendiary tenor on various media platforms of the intramural political warfare now rampant in the United States.

Assume, in any case, that the cultural divide implied by what some on the American far-right have approvingly dubbed their “new confederacy”

will recede in intensity and salience. Assume further that the United States somehow manages to adopt domestic policy measures that meaningfully improve the circumstances, and the outlook, of the general population. Social media platforms may even succeed in developing broadly accepted means to screen toxic, false, and malicious content without exercising political bias. Such an example by America, for societies elsewhere facing similar challenges, could be salutary.

America's example alone will not, however, moderate the fires of populist discontent in other countries, or the repressive responses of their rulers. Trump's America First stance was a clear signal of official American disinterest, a *laissez faire* attitude toward governance and respect for human rights beyond its own borders. Today, with a new President entering office, the rest of the world awaits a signal from the United States. Do Americans still care to reflect, in Thomas Jefferson's timeless words, "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind"? How should the American interest be defined? What does the United States still stand for?

AMERICAN INFLUENCE AND THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

Here is where the policy challenge requires an appreciation of whether and how America's future is tied to that of others. If populism around the world, spurred by Internet-enabled awareness of shared economic inequality and the injustice of high-tech authoritarianism, spawns similarly seditious tendencies abroad, the rules-based order upheld for so long with the dependable support of the American superpower will drift in a fractious and far less stable direction.

Like Americans, much of the rest of the world has experienced the progressive effects of modernization lifting millions of people out of poverty, with elites benefiting disproportionately. It has similarly witnessed, in varying degrees based on level of development, the explosion of popular access to the digital universe via smartphones. While societies exhibit differing political cultures, the wealth-information paradox is not unique to any one system. Growing economic inequality within a country, heightened awareness of stifled opportunities and unresponsive governance, and virtual communities of like-minded citizens bound by a common narrative of grievance, constitute a new brand of twenty-first century populism.

The threat to political elites from energized citizens has been mounting for much of the past decade, if not longer. With the further pressure of the global pandemic, governments now face intense pressure to act. Some will do better than others, and difficult times lie ahead in many countries, as

they are not equally equipped to respond effectively. The disorderly U.S. pandemic response and the uncontained contagion in some other Western countries, when compared to China's strict but apparently more successful domestic public health campaign, may have been taken by some as a sign of relative systemic weakness on the part of the U.S. and other democracies. Yet the opposite is closer to the truth.

For all its current tribulations, the United States has options unavailable to its dictatorial rivals and adversaries. Indeed, the United States and other democratic countries were constitutionally designed to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. They can take meaningful steps to

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empower and accommodate the aspirations of their own people, and in the process revalidate the legitimacy of their political systems.

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 than consent are not only illegitimate, but certain to be revealed and understood by all to be so. Down the path of dictatorship, later if not sooner, lies revolt. This immutable reality has strategic implications.

In the age of universal access to information, authoritarian governance sits on the wrong side of history. Rulers maintaining power by coercion rather

The world's more repressive authoritarian states—China, North Korea, Iran, Russia, Syria, and others—preside over extreme inequality and widespread discontent. Their response is to suppress free expression and constrict the flow of information to and between citizens. In recent years, some countries traditionally aligned with the United States, including allies, have also answered their domestic political critics and rivals with harsh reprisals. It is hard to conclude that autocrats—be they allies or adversaries—are on the right side of history. The global information reservoir is destined to bypass any physical, political, or cyber barriers.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from twenty-first century populism, it is that members of the general public around the world are now more connected, in some respects more so even than their governments, and the weight of their interests must be respected. A traditional *realpolitik* approach would take for granted that existing regimes are durable and ought to be treated as the primary, if not only, useful interface to advance American interests with other societies. The wisdom of this approach is no longer self-evident in an era where populism is feeding off viral online revelations and criticism of despotic and corrupt governance.

Washington has been burned by its recent armed interventions, and

exhibits an appropriate aversion to any policy prescription appearing to favor military action for the purpose of “regime change.” Yet this does not mean that the United States should resign itself to sustaining normal dealings with whoever holds power, irrespective of how they rule. Such a posture would concede a great deal of undeserved influence and implied legitimacy to some of the world’s most destructive actors, potentially delaying their natural demise.

The time has come for the United States to learn from its failures, shed its phobias, and seriously recommit to upholding the universal norms that sustain its way of life in a turbulent world, for generations to come. There is a new *realpolitik* in the information age, where the inconvenience of perturbing some bilateral ties is outweighed by the imperative of standing in defense of rights that the United States has always held to be unalienable. It is ever harder to see what the United States can gain by averting its official gaze from the reality that millions of Syrians, Iranians, Chinese, and North Koreans among others, desperately want what they see elsewhere, namely, the freedom to thrive—and to express their views—without fear of brutal reprisals by the state.

If America were to reconfirm its commitment to strive for individual rights, justice, good governance, accountability, and advancing the human potential of all people irrespective of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, or creed, its principled stance would resonate globally. Many governments would add their voices, and their message would touch the aspirations of restive populations everywhere. Undemocratic leaders, their excesses exposed amid resurgent democratic norms, would find it harder to surveil, brutalize and exploit their citizens. This is the foreign policy pivot that can empower a long-term security strategy and turn the tide of influence back to the United States and like-minded countries.

America’s inherent geopolitical advantages run still deeper. As autocratic states are, invariably, an all-male club, such a rights-based posture has the advantage of leveraging women’s full and empowered participation in our own national life while attracting the sympathies of fully half of our adversaries’ populations. A similar strength can be tied to a government and society accessing the talents of all its citizens, free of discrimination. A government that embodies the aspirations of all its citizens, embracing their ambitions by standing for the republic’s foundational ideals, will more readily inspire national pride and continue to attract many of the most capable young Americans to pursue careers in public service.

Just as past generations of U.S. policy makers won the Cold War by being clever—by exercising the power of ideas and norms, and other

non-kinetic tools, knowing that military hostilities could risk escalation to the brink of nuclear war—today’s leaders and planners must again recognize that effective engagement need not equate to hemorrhaging national blood and treasure. The challenge of inequality requires accepting change, helping Americans find a surer path to security and fulfillment, and riding the tide of history that empowers individuals and favors those governments that earn their citizens’ consent.

The ecosystem of politics around the world responds to power, malign or benign, including the perceived values and intentions of those states wielding greater military and economic leverage. Further retreat from a position of superpower influence by the United States would condemn the international system to a darker future marked by instability and lost human potential, and exact a price on America’s future. By embracing anew a defining commitment to justice and good governance, by pledging to help mediate and end conflicts, by working to bring accountability to individuals responsible for committing atrocities against innocents, by actively seeking to reduce the transnational dark economy trafficking in illicit weapons, narcotics, counterfeit goods, and persons—and by leading in these and like endeavors with as much collaboration as other countries are willing to pledge—the United States can better shape a twenty-first century environment hospitable to American interests and values.

Decades ago, anti-war protestors on American streets drew attention chanting “power to the people” and “the whole world’s watching.” They were universally portrayed as radicals, not reflecting the attitudes of the average citizen. In retrospect, the readiness of these protestors to stand so stridently against the establishment was uncommon. Their slogans, however, were not so much radical as prescient. They were ahead of their time. *f*

ENDNOTES

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