US self-belief tested by tardy return to being ‘great again’

The myths that are central to the American psyche have come under repeated challenge

JAMES CURRAN

America is exhausted. The US is tired and somewhat forlorn as it endures yet another bout of painful introspection about its national character and role in the world. In the year since his election Donald Trump has only intensified the cultural crisis that has gripped the country in the past two decades, sapped its energy and brought its calling into question.

This is a crisis of confidence that goes to the core of what America stands for. A nation built on optimism, with a national mythology that extols its special mission to redeem the world, is beset by pessimism across multiple fronts: suffering from war weariness, decades of wage stagnation, crumbling infrastructure and a broken political system that is failing to produce viable solutions. Trump has yet made no headway in delivering on the vision of domestic renewal he promised in the campaign. Even if his tax bill passes, it would benefit only the top 1 per cent of American earners, doing virtually nothing to alleviate the inequality that propelled him to office.

Instead, $1.5 trillion will be added to the federal deficit across the next 10 years. Still, his base holds and the Republican Party is steadily being remade in his image. That floating mass of anxiety, stress and bitterness that roils the American heartland has clear implications for the conduct of US foreign policy. Reeling from catastrophic failure in Iraq, marooned in Afghanistan, perturbed by North Korean belligerence and nervous about China’s rise, middle America has withdrawn its consent for an ambitious US posture overseas.

Trump, however, has presided over no recrudescence of the “America First” isolationism of the 1930s. As the Republican candidate, he identified the slogan as a “brand new, modern term” that was “never related to the past”.

Notwithstanding his withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris climate accords, his airstrikes on Syria and deployment of more troops to Afghanistan scotched fears he would indulge in widespread retreat.

Recently he approved a “persistent campaign of direct action” against countries where Islamic militants are operating, thus dispensing with the stricter vetting processes in place under Barack Obama. US alliances in Europe and Asia, though under some strain, are still live. Trump even wants to adopt a Bastille Day-style show of the nation’s military strength, parading the Pentagon’s hardware through Washington on American Independence Day.

There is a strange myopia, too, to the claim that Trump is endangering the liberal international order. What of the grave damage already done by the US-led preemptive strike on Iraq in 2003?
And as Harvard scholar Joseph Nye observed earlier this year: “Even when its power was greatest, Washington could not prevent the ‘loss’ of China, the partition of Germany and Berlin, a draw in Korea, Soviet suppression of insurrections within its own bloc, the creation and survival of a communist regime in Cuba, and failure in Vietnam.” For all the bluster, Trump does have a historical view of America’s role in the world. In his recent speech to the UN he talked of “nations that are rooted in their histories”. For him, America’s uniqueness lies in its origins — not in a spread-eagled mission to save humanity. He sees the revolution of 1776 as the font of American patriotism — an event not signifying the country’s destiny to export democracy but providing a shining example of the “people taking ownership of the future”. His language on the period when America was more expansive in its global ambition is striking: the country that launched the Marshall Plan to rebuild a war-shattered Europe and created NATO to contain the Soviet bear was a “different America” — a nation “respected” and not “pushed around” because “we’d just won a war”. Contrast this with his mockery of the “idiocy” in Iraq where anything the US built was “blown up”. America, he says bluntly, doesn’t have the “luxury of doing what we used to do.”

But the questioning of America’s world role did not begin with Trump. Indeed, this dilemma dates back to the end of the Cold War, when a frantic search began in Washington for a doctrine that could match the galvanising clarity of that conflict. For some, that search ended with 9/11, but disaster in Iraq poisoned the well-springs of America’s egotistical altruism. Obama’s much maligned strategy of “leading from behind”, along with his admission that the US would have to learn that it couldn’t “fix every problem” in the world, represented a more prudent case for retrenchment: a recognition that in the wake of the failed attempt to remake the Middle East, Washington had to recognise the limits of its transformational capacities.

Obama was trying to fashion a more sustainable American foreign policy, overseeing a tactical retreat from the over-extension of his neo-conservative predecessor, George W. Bush. Obama too, albeit briefly, challenged the notion of American exceptionalism — arguing on one occasion early in his presidency that the British and the Greeks would also see themselves in such terms. It seemed to suggest that America did not sit atop an elevated moral plane; that it was not necessarily uniquely blessed. After the firestorm of criticism those comments provoked, Obama spent much of the rest of his presidency — rhetorically at least — trying to out-exceptionalise everyone else.

Trump has repeatedly repudiated the language of Pax Americana and nation-building. His populist nativism pumps the American veins with a powerful adrenalin of negative emotions. Along with his volatility and the chaotic dysfunction of his administration, the perception that America’s role and purpose is under challenge has only deepened. But the novel point at issue in America’s present predicament is just how much more damage Trump might do to US credibility and prestige, and especially to its role as an alliance leader, during his remaining three, or perhaps seven, years in office. The question is whether the deep socio-economic and cultural grievances — which he rode to power, and which he has since fuelled himself — will withstand Trump’s wilder policy impulses and chief of staff John Kelly — with Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and chief of staff John Kelly — will have been able to control Trump’s esoteric policy impulses. The Russian foreign policy establishment clings to this theory with grim desperation.

The second is the institutional system of checks and balances on the presidency: congress’s rebuke
to Trump’s legislative agenda; the courts’ blocking of his travel bans; the multiple inquiries into Russia’s meddling in last year’s election; and the relentless media scrutiny of his administration.

A third is to be found in the faith that if only the right message — and messenger — could be found, Americans might once more support an activist foreign policy. Thus Henry Kissinger told The Atlantic that “Cold War American exceptionalism is gone” and “an appropriate adaptation is a principal task of the new administration”. He believes the public can still be convinced of this higher calling for the US but would require a different explanation from that given in the 50s.

Similarly Jake Sullivan, a former adviser to Hillary Clinton, wrote this year that “those of us who believe in US global leadership haven’t offered the American people a clear rationale for our role in the world since the end of the Cold War”.

Like Kissinger, Sullivan believes all that is required is a refashioning of the message to “convey to people that a principled nationalism and internationalism are not incompatible”. Many analysts prescribe the same remedy.

Such quasi-biblical pronouncements from inside the beltway do little, however, to acknowledge the crisis that defines this era, and the longer-term doubts about America that Trump is sowing.

A quick reality check: the US is not about to abandon the creed that defines its national identity; it runs too deeply in the American bloodstream. It is unlikely, then, that America becomes a “normal nation”, but what we may see is a process of exceptional normalisation: the early stages of a long era of retrenchment. As historian Neville Meaney observed, “at the heart of the dilemma is what happens when a national mythology loses its virtue”.

What then is required to deliver America from this period of drift? According to Ed Luce of the Financial Times, previous shocks to the national psyche in the 20th century — Pearl Harbor, Sputnik, Japan’s economic challenge in the 80s — all acted as a catalyst for unity. But, Luce adds, the crises today are more subtle and multifaceted, paralysing the political system rather than reviving it: recall that at the time of the global financial crisis not one house Republican voted for Obama’s economic recovery plan.

Another question worth bearing in mind is: what kinds of societies keep their balance amid such turmoil? Sure, Trump rarely appeals to the better angels of American nature — witness the viciousness in Charlottesville, Virginia. But despite the rancour and the open feuding between the White House and congress, the courts and the media, the US is steering a relatively steady course through the political turbulence. Trump will face yet more spirited resistance but, absent a serious catalyst for impeachment, he will serve a full term and perhaps, should his base keep the faith, be re-elected.

The temptation to highlight the discrepancy between this imperious American President and the seemingly untouchable command of his Chinese counterpart should therefore be resisted. Even if China continues to rise at the present rate, the question remains as to how would it handle the unrest arising from a serious economic downturn. That possibility lurks behind the ever-tightening authoritarian grip of Xi Jinping.

Even so, Trump’s style ensures that doubts about the US will persist. As a result, allies will think about American staying power differently. But the more critical question — far more important than the daily Twitter diatribes — is the fate of the country’s self-image.

“More than other modern societies,” Michael Vlahos wrote at the end of the Cold War, “America relies, even depends, on myth to cement its confidence in current policies.” Right now, the US has a leader who brandishes the country’s fatigue with both mythological and military overstretch. After one year, just quite how Trump plans to make America “great again” remains something of a mystery.

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Donald Trump's historical view differs from past presidents'