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## America's exit from the world stage

*A trio of books displaying an abhorrence for Trump's foreign policy still leave readers hoping for an explanation of the president's world view*

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Shortly before leaving office, Barack Obama wrote a letter for his successor that he left behind on the Resolute desk in the Oval Office. "American leadership in this world really is indispensable," wrote the departing president. "It's up to us, through action and example, to sustain the international order that's expanded steadily since the end of the Cold War, and upon which our own wealth and safety depend."

That letter is quoted in *The Empty Throne* by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay — both of whom have served as senior officials in Democratic administrations. It is their argument that Donald Trump has singularly failed to act upon his predecessor's advice. As a result, they argue, both the world and the US are changing for the worse.

America's allies, they write, have discovered that "Trump had no interest in leading the free world." Its foes, meanwhile, are emboldened — and authoritarians and populists are gaining ground all over the world. The cumulative result is that the "international order" of which Obama wrote is beginning to crumble — as America's alliance commitments are questioned and international agreements on climate, trade and nuclear proliferation fall into disrepair.

Trump may not be an isolationist, in the original sense of the term, but his policies have often left the US isolated. After the Trump administration abandoned the Paris climate accord, the US found itself alone at the G20 meeting. The authors quote the pithy verdict of a French diplomat: "Whatever leadership is, it is not being outvoted 19 to 1."

*The Empty Throne* is a lively and authoritative account of the Trump administration's turbulent encounter with the outside world since the president took office in early 2017. *The Jungle Grows Back* by Robert Kagan takes on similar themes, but from a broader historical perspective. Like Daalder and Lindsay, Kagan, a historian, believes that the US is turning its back on global leadership — and that this decision will have profoundly dangerous consequences.

To make his case, Kagan goes back to the beginning of the 20th century. His argument is that it was only America's decision, after 1945, to become the guarantor of a new world order that provided the conditions for "the past seven-plus decades of relatively free trade, growing respect for individual rights, and relatively peaceful co-operation among nations". The spread of political and economic freedom, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, led many to believe that democracy was the natural state of mankind — an idea that became known as the "end of history" thesis.

Kagan argues that this is a mistaken assumption. If the global role played by the US diminishes, then “the jungle will grow back”. He invites us to consider that: “Authoritarianism may be a stable condition of human existence, more stable than liberalism and democracy. It appeals to core elements of human nature that liberalism does not always satisfy — the desire for order, for strong leadership and, perhaps above all, the yearning for the security of family, tribe and nation.”

If Kagan’s past record is anything to go by, *The Jungle Grows Back* is likely to have a considerable impact on public debate. His 2003 book *Of Paradise and Power*, which argued that America was from Mars and Europe from Venus, made quite a splash when it was published on the eve of the US-led invasion of Iraq, and seemed to capture the essence of the division that had opened up between the Bush administration and many of its European allies. A 2012 article on the “Myth of American Decline” and subsequent book *The World America Made* caught the attention of Obama, who cited Kagan’s arguments approvingly in his 2012 State of the Union speech.

*The Jungle Grows Back* displays the characteristic Kagan virtues of lucid writing and thought — and a strong sense of history that adds drama and sweep to his argument. However, much of the argument for the benign role of US power during the cold war will be familiar for anyone who has read Kagan’s previous work. In a short book of 192 pages, it takes more than 100 pages before the author engages in a sustained fashion with the election of Donald Trump. In an inversion of the normal complaint about rock bands, I found myself wishing that Kagan had spent less time playing his greatest hits — and devoted more time to his new material instead.

When he does turn to the impact of the Trump administration on the world order, Kagan devotes most attention to the way in which America’s retreat from an active role in world affairs has emboldened authoritarians in China, Russia, Europe and elsewhere. He points out, accurately, that a retrenchment in the global role of the US was already noticeable during the Obama years, but argues that: “If Obama’s policies put a dent in the liberal world order, Trump’s statements and actions are driving a stake through it.”

Yet the problem posed by Trump for the liberal world order goes much further than a reluctance to provide American leadership. As Kagan acknowledges in a disappointingly brief section of his book, “the jungle grows in America too” and “liberalism is under attack at home”. So it is not simply that Trump is failing to provide leadership to the world’s democrats and liberals; in an important sense, he is actually leading the assault on liberalism. It is no accident that authoritarians and populists across Europe — such as Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Italy’s Matteo Salvini — are ardent admirers of the US president. The real danger is not just that Trump will allow the liberal world order to die of neglect but that he is actively trying to kill it.

To Jeffrey Sachs, however, this whole debate is based on a false premise. A development economist and public intellectual based at Columbia University, Sachs takes a much less benign view of the use of US power in the 20th century than Messrs Kagan, Daalder and Lindsay. In *A New Foreign Policy*, he argues that the Trump presidency, while undoubtedly dastardly, is characterised more by continuity with its predecessors than by a radical break. For Sachs, the defining characteristic of the US approach to the world in the 20th century has been “American

exceptionalism” — and Trump’s “America First” ideology is therefore merely “a variant of exceptionalism, adding xenophobia, racism and protectionism to more traditional exceptionalist approaches”.

Sachs’s argument is certainly a challenging departure from the Beltway assumption that America has acted as a force for good in the world. His background as an economist also brings valuable input to debates about US power by framing the argument within the context of America’s declining share of world trade and gross domestic product. And it is useful to be reminded that the rivalries of great-power politics may pale into insignificance compared with the common challenges posed by climate change and other environmental issues. Sachs’s insistence on the global nature of the problems facing humanity means that his first five recommendations for a “new foreign policy” involve a much greater commitment to working through the UN, on problems from climate to disease and refugees.

The big flaw in the Sachs approach, however, is that while he is prepared to apply a tough and sceptical approach to US foreign policy, his scepticism deserts him when assessing the rival claims put forward by Russia and China. Thus Sachs largely buys the Russian narrative about the wars in Ukraine and Syria — which involves ignoring the views not just of policymakers in Washington, but also of the countries of central Europe, the Syrian opposition and most of Syria’s neighbours. In a similar vein, Sachs follows a passage that is heavily critical of the Trump administration’s national security strategy with long and uncritical quotes from President Xi Jinping’s speech to the Communist Party Congress in Beijing in 2017.

These three books have very distinct approaches. But they share a general abhorrence for the foreign policy of the Trump administration. Paradoxically, this left me hoping that the next book on US foreign policy that arrives on my desk will be a thoughtful attempt to defend Trump’s approach to the world.

For there is no doubting the radicalism of Trump’s policies or the fact that he taps into legitimate debates about globalisation, America’s alliance system and the rise of China — to name just three key issues. The difficulty is that the president’s own rhetoric is so superficial and offensive that it is hard to engage with the ideas behind them. And the ideologues who have supported him — such as Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller — are more provocateurs than coherent thinkers.

There is definitely room for a thought-through explanation and defence of the Trump doctrine. But I suspect that it may be a long wait.

*The Empty Throne: America’s Abdication of Global Leadership*, by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, Public Affairs RRP\$16.99, 256 pages

*The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, by Robert Kagan, Knopf RRP\$22.95, 192 pages

*A New Foreign Policy: Beyond American Exceptionalism*, by Jeffrey Sachs, Columbia RRP\$17.95 /£13.99, 240 pages

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