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# An enfeebled America stands alone

**Economic change has affected other countries, but they have managed globalisation**

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The greatest challenge posed by Donald Trump's presidency is not that he will deploy American strength against the global common good. It is that he demonstrates how weak the US has become.

Recall Mr Trump's inaugural address. The phrase that has resounded around the world is "America first". But the more significant phrase he used is that other, more inward-looking one: "American carnage". What sort of country describes itself, in the words of its highest leader no less, in such terms? Not one that feels strong.

Some Americans may not recognise the dystopian conditions his speech described. But a large group surely does. **American decline is not a figment of Mr Trump's imagination.** The US economy has left large numbers of people with stagnant wages for decades. It is an economy in which millions fewer people have a job than at the peak in 2000, and which still leaves tens of millions without secure, decent healthcare.

It is an economy dotted with towns that were thriving within living memory, but have been devastated by the loss of factory jobs — lost because automation made plants too productive to need as much human labour as before, or because a failure to automate made them uncompetitive against rivals.

Above all, it is an economy in which centuries-old progress against mortality has gone in reverse for middle-aged low-educated Americans, who are dying from the afflictions of broken lives and broken communities: drug overdoses, liver disease and suicide.

Deep economic change has affected other advanced economies too. But others have not let globalisation get in the way of managing it. **The US is weak not because it has uniquely been cheated out of a golden age of factory jobs by foreigners, but because it has failed to create a prosperous new future for all at home.**

Mr Trump's railing against Washington is therefore not without foundation. Economic dysfunction has long been matched by glaringly inadequate governance. The devastation of the global financial crisis — which was at its core a US financial crisis, unsuspected by its regulatory

system — followed the gross incompetence of the George W Bush administration's handling of Hurricane Katrina and its adventurism in Iraq.

Mr Trump's speech in Poland before the G20 summit was the international version of his American carnage speech. Just like the US, in his telling, is a landscape of decay at the mercy of corrupt leaders, he presented the western world as mortally threatened by destructive forces because of decadence within.

But while he may be a fiery prophet of US decline, he is wrong about the wider world. If other western countries display a quiet confidence vis-à-vis Mr Trump, it is because they have reason to. Their unrepentant globalism is striking. Canada's reconsecration of its globalist destiny matches its ambitious welcome of refugees. Europe and Japan are creating one of the world's largest free trade areas. The EU vows not to withdraw from globalisation but to shape it to its values of solidarity. Japan is leading the other spurned partners from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Mr Trump has pulled out of, in an effort to complete trade liberalisation without US participation.

**What lessons can we draw from this contrast?** **First**, take the theatrics of populism seriously. Populism paradoxically mixes machismo with an incessant focus on weakness — but blames weakness on elements that must be expelled, allowing the true representatives of the forgotten people a free hand.

**Second**, this worsens the problem populists promise to solve. It deepens existing divisions and paralyses democratic politics. For aspiring totalitarians that may be part of a plan. For others, it is simply a self-fulfilling prophecy. Look no further than Britain for a nation that has acted on a mistaken belief that its strength has been sapped by the global liberal order (in the form of the EU), only to throw itself into true political disarray and indecision.

**Third**, the clash between populism and globalism is theatrical all right, but it is a theatre of the grotesque that expresses reality by transmogrifying it. Those who most try to project strength are those with the most domestic weakness to hide. Leaders of harmonious countries have no need to brag.

**Fourth**, it is in countries where US-style social and economic decay is most visible that the global liberal order is most contested: above all the UK, but also France and Italy. The rest of the west must redouble efforts to improve the social protections that have kept decay at bay for now.

Germany is of particular importance: its labour reforms 15 years ago have produced a worrying increase in inequality and precarious work. It must not repeat the US's mistakes.

Finally, the global liberal order is more than the US. Its remaining supporters aim to carry on by forging the unity of purpose collectively that the US cannot even muster at home. A few

decades ago that would have been unthinkable. Today, it may just be true that US isolationism will most harm the US itself.

The US president used to be thought of as the leader of the free world. America's western friends are finding that they can no longer rely on it. But the truly transforming change is that they may find they no longer need to — and that the US needs the world more than the other way around.