
The Global Need for a Revitalized United States

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ABSTRACT: *In reflecting upon America's role in the new century, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasizes the need for a broader U.S. strategic vision that entails short-term economic sacrifice for long-term revitalization, and embraces collective, global self-interest. He illustrates a vision of an economically revitalized America, leading and uniting a broader "West" that includes Turkey and Russia, and mitigating inter-Asian conflicts as a necessary power. Ultimately, he calls for America to fulfill the expectations of Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote that America uniquely embodies the principle of "self-interest properly understood."*

Alexis de Tocqueville understood earlier and interpreted better than anyone the uniqueness of the American experiment—in its social, political and cultural dimensions. In 1831, his voyage to America was to a captivating, but remote world—an undertaking more risky and less predictable than today's explorations of outer space—and his judgments are to this day remarkably prescient and incisive. To understand America, one still has to read and absorb de Tocqueville.

I was struck on rereading recently de Tocqueville's work how well he understood—175 years ago—the essence and the distinctiveness of America's emerging power, both as a novel social experiment and as a sovereign state. And also, alas, how well he anticipated the potential vulnerabilities of that

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historically unique country, which was taking shape as de Tocqueville journeyed throughout America's vast and open spaces and pondered about its future.

Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize winning economist, recently drew attention to the fact that Alexis de Tocqueville correctly perceived the major source of the peculiar genius of American society: its respect for what the French observer called "*self-interest properly understood*." Stiglitz noted that everyone is motivated by self-interest in its narrow sense, but that de Tocqueville's emphasis on self-interest "*properly understood*" was his recogni-

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percent own around 25 percent. It should be a source of perhaps even greater concern that the majority of all currently serving Congressmen and Senators, and similarly most of the top officials in the executive branch, fall in the category of the very rich, the so-called top one percent.

The foregoing observation is especially relevant to our understanding of the challenge facing contemporary America. Though a democracy, it is becoming a country of socially ominous extremes between the few super rich and the increasingly many who are deprived. In America today the top one percent of the richest families own around 35 percent of the entire nation's wealth, while the bottom 90

At the same time, though still a unique super-power, America finds it difficult to cope with the consequences of the increasingly accelerating global changes that are spinning out of control, both on the socio-economic and on the geopolitical levels. Socio-economically, the world is becoming a single playing field in which three dynamic realities increasingly prevail: globalization, "internetization," and deregulation.

Today instant financial transactions involving billions of dollars occur literally in seconds; often essentially speculative in character and unrelated to either technological innovation or new forms of employment, they create instant wealth on an unprecedented scale for only a few. Investments and

employment opportunities abroad, guided largely by opportunistic self-interest, now transcend national interests.

Politically, that very same world—despite the seeming concentration of global power in the hands of the very few states with enormous economic and military capacity—is witnessing the dispersal of power. The West is declining because it lacks the will to unite, while the East is rising, but faces the danger of selfish rivalry and potential conflicts among its principal states. Neither existing national governments nor rudimentary regional arrangements are capable of providing effective discipline, not to mention asserting control, over the autonomous financial-economic universe so recently shaped by globalization, “internetization,” and deregulation.

The foregoing crisis of global power is further complicated by the appearance of the sudden phenomenon of mass political awakening. Most recently in the Arab world, the now universal reality of political awakening is the cumulative product of an interactive and interdependent world connected by instant visual communications and of a demographic youth bulge composed of the easy to mobilize and politically restless university students, as well as the socially deprived unemployed present in the less advanced societies. Both groups resent the richer portions of humanity and the privileged corruption of their rulers. That resentment of authority and privilege is unleashing populist passions with explosive potential for large-scale international turmoil.

America’s ability to respond to this volatile world is complicated by another socio-political feature that de Tocqueville presciently noted and of which he warned: public ignorance. When discussing the influence of the majority in America he wrote, “I know of no country where there is generally less independence of thought and real freedom of debate than in America.” That despotism of ignorance, which de Tocqueville said, “leaves the body alone and goes straight to the spirit,” has the unfortunate effect of quite often diminishing the quality of political leadership in America. Again he wrote, “Some vexing effects are evident in the American national character. I think that the presence of the small number of remarkable men upon the political scene has to be due to the ever-increasing despotism of the American majority.”

Today, such “despotism” is manifested in the public’s ignorance of the world and its reluctance to demand and accept short-term and fairly distributed social sacrifice in exchange for long-term renewal. That same ignorance—or, more accurately, indifference—handicaps America’s capacity to deal with the external world, and specifically with the dilemmas to which I have referred.

The political remedies that are necessary for America to overcome its current domestic troubles are obstructed by yet another shortcoming that in 1835 de Tocqueville could describe only in general terms: namely, political gridlock and hyper-partisanship. Our political parties of today seem deserving of the criticism leveled by de Tocqueville against what he then called, “small parties.” He wrote, “their character is imbued with a selfishness which obviously colors each of their actions... their language is violent, but their progress is timid and over-cautious. The means they employ are despicable.” This current political stalemate must be overcome in order for America again to look outward with its customary historical confidence.

But such national confidence requires a broader strategic vision and a sense of historical purpose pointed towards an eventually global acceptance of the principle of, “self-interest properly understood.” I do feel strongly that unchecked financial speculation has both economic and social consequences that urgently require wider and stricter national and international

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political supervision. Effective global political cooperation can only emerge out of a broader consensus—one that must be promoted both on a regional, and eventually, on a global basis.

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Hence a more ambitious strategic vision should not be limited only to America and Europe. In my soon forthcoming book, I argue that in the longer-run—in the course of the next two or three decades—it should be possible to engage Russia as well. Note what de Tocqueville wrote in 1835,

when concluding Part I of his “Democracy in America;” “Today, two great nations of the earth seem to be advancing toward the same destination from different starting points: the Russians and the Anglo-Americans... All other nations appear to have reached almost the upper limits of their natural development and have nothing left to do except preserve what they have, whereas these two nations are growing.”

To be sure, he did note correctly the dramatic contrasts between America and Russia: Americans, with, “freedom as their main mode of action,” would use their belief in the principle of self-interest and their common sense to occupy and civilize their vast continent, overcoming natural obstacles to build a strong American democracy. The Russians, with “slavish obedience” as their main mode of action, would employ the “soldier’s sword” at the command of “a single man” to conquer civilization. And he warned that while “the point of departure is different, their paths are diverse but each of them seems destined by some secret providential design to hold in their hands the fate of half the world at some date in the future.”

It is now clear that Russia’s destiny is no longer the exercise of control over “half of the world.” Rather, it is how its can survive its internal stagnation and depopulation within the context of a rising East and a richer (even if perplexed) West. That is why a western policy that encourages Ukraine’s closer ties with the EU is the essential precursor to, as well as stimulus for, Russia’s eventual closer engagement with the West. That may not happen under a President Putin, but the internal preconditions for democratic evolution in Russia are growing and, in my view, will eventually preponderate. Russians are more open to the world now than ever before.

The same strategic goal of a revitalized and larger West should also apply to Turkey. It is most desirable for three key reasons that Turkey should see its future as part of the West. First, Turkey’s internal democratization and spreading modernization is evidence that neither democratization nor modernization is incompatible with Islam. Second, Turkey’s commitment to peaceful cooperation with its Middle Eastern neighbors is consistent with the security interests of the West in that region. Third, a Turkey that is increasingly western, secular, and yet also Islamic could undermine the appeal of Islamic extremism and enhance regional stability in Central Asia not only to its own benefit but also to that of Europe and Russia. Additionally, a democratic, secular yet Islamic Turkey can be most influential in encouraging the Arab states towards stable democracy.

While of less immediate consequence for Europe, America’s longer-term role in the rising new East can be equally important—both in

avoiding conflict and in engaging China and Japan in more active global roles. U.S. policy in the new East must not be confined solely to a China-centric concentration on the otherwise mutually beneficial special partnership with Beijing; it must also encourage a genuine reconciliation between Japan—a democracy and America’s principal Pacific Ocean ally—and China, as well as seek to mitigate the growing rivalry between China and India. Only through a balanced approach and abstinence from mainland Asian conflicts can the U.S. promote lasting stability in Asia and assist Asia’s own quest for social and political modernity.

Let me conclude by noting that the global role I feel America should play ultimately depends on the capacity of its society to live up to the expectations that de Tocqueville so brilliantly and insightfully expressed 175 years ago. Like him, I too believe in the powerfully redeeming potential of America’s democracy. And I have especially in mind the universal relevance to the now politically awakened world of America’s early embrace of the revolutionary concept of, “self-interest properly understood.” ■

POSTSCRIPT: *Dr. Brzezinski delivered this speech on Friday, October 14, 2011 in Normandy, France upon receipt of the de Tocqueville Prize, bestowed upon him by M. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, President of du Jury du Prix Tocqueville.*