

The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development

Volume 5
Issue 1 *The Journal of International Relations,
Peace Studies, and Development*

Article 3

2019

Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy

Olga Thierbach-McLean

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal>

Recommended Citation

Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019) "Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@Arcadia. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@Arcadia. For more information, please contact hessa@arcadia.edu.

**Between Globalism and America First:
The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy**

Olga Thierbach-McLean

In the spring of 1917, Woodrow Wilson was struggling with the question of whether the United States of America should enter World War I. This was an extremely difficult political decision. After all, it had only been weeks earlier, in late 1916, that Wilson had been reelected as U.S. President based on a campaign that promoted a policy of neutrality towards foreign affairs and was built around the slogans “He kept us out of the war” and “America First.” Nevertheless, Wilson ultimately decided to ask Congress to declare war against Germany, embarking on an activist foreign policy style that is often labeled ‘Wilsonianism,’ and that has been upheld by most U.S. presidents ever since. Particularly from the mid-twentieth century on, the U.S. has been a dominant driving force in creating a multilateral institutional network for global cooperation, including such key international organizations as the League of Nations, NATO, and the UN. Needless to say, these efforts were not motivated only by abstract moral principle but by the practical lessons drawn from two devastating world wars: U.S. policymakers concluded that national interests could no longer be effectively pursued in isolation from what was happening on the global stage, and that “the United States, by dint of its unequalled power, was uniquely and indispensably suited to creating a broader global order that would protect American interests and values in an interdependent world” (Brands, “American Internationalism”).

Today, exactly a century after Wilson’s second election, the motto “America First” has been effectively revived by Donald Trump. But his foreign policy vision could not be further removed from Wilson’s: While the latter identified his position as ‘liberal internationalism’ and supported a multinational approach as a means of promoting global cooperation and coping with challenges to U.S. national security, Trump has adopted an unreservedly populist, nationalist, and isolationist stance. His oft-expressed disdain for NATO and the EU, questioning of existing military alliances with Japan and South Korea, withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Agreement, and rejection of free trade in favor of a return to economic protectionism have marked a dramatic departure from the orthodoxy of U.S. post-war foreign policy.

Significantly, Trump’s political rise has coincided with watershed events on the opposite side of the Atlantic, most notably Brexit and the upsurge of populist movements throughout the European continent. But while the U.S. has traditionally been looked to by Europeans as a stabilizer and guarantor of liberal values in politically volatile times, it is now seen as the posterchild and catalyst of the global swell in populism. Public voices within and without the U.S. have even identified Trump’s election as the most salient indicator of a fundamental crisis of liberal and internationalist values, going so far as to interpret his presidency to be heralding the “End of the West”¹. At times this sentiment has been expressed in rather drastic terms. For instance, French newspaper *Libération*

¹ The cataclysmic sense of the “End of the West” has become a leitmotif in the Western press immediately following Trump’s ascendancy on the political stage. Just to quote a few examples, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled “It’s the end of the West as we know it” (Bildt); the *Independent* likewise announced “This is the end of the West” (Smith); the *Guardian* described “The end of Atlanticism” (Schwartz); and *Der Stern* diagnosed “Das Ende des Westens” (Geiger et al.), as did the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in a guest contribution by former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer.

reacted to the news of Trump’s election with a front page entitled “American Psycho.” In the same vein, German political magazine *Der Spiegel* featured a cover depicting Trump as the assassin of the Statue of Liberty, holding her severed head in one raised hand and a bloody knife in the other. With a similar sense of bewilderment, the British tabloid *Daily Mirror* headlined “What have they done?,” showing the Statue of Liberty covering her face with both hands in a gesture of shock and shame. By contrast, two days after the election, neoconservative U.S. historian Robert Kagan unreservedly applauded the prospect that the “U.S. is, for now, out of the world order business,” asserting that this sentiment “is one shared by many Americans” (Kagan).

But even as the latest U.S. presidential vote has revealed a mass disenchantment with internationalist ideals, there is a puzzling contradiction in current American sentiments regarding internationalism and globalism: While the U.S. electorate has endorsed a presidential candidate based on a decidedly nationalist and anti-internationalist platform, surveys taken during the 2016 campaign by the Chicago Council indicated that most Americans have positive views of globalization, with 65 percent of the interviewees expressing the opinion that it is “mostly good” for the United States (Smeltz et. al 2). “About six in ten Americans say that international trade is good for the U.S. economy (59%), American companies (57%), and their own standard of living (64%). An even larger majority say that international trade is good for American consumers (70%)” (ibid.). As for maintaining alliances with other countries, as many as 89 percent thought of international cooperation as “very or somewhat effective at achieving U.S. foreign policy goals” (Smeltz et. al 29). The numbers also reflect strong domestic backing for the UN and the Paris Climate Change Accord, as well as for U.S. intervention against threats such as the Islamic State. Overall, the data warrant the conclusion that “bipartisan support remains strong for the country to take an active part in world affairs” (Smeltz et. al 6).

So how can these findings be reconciled with the fact that Trump’s isolationist platform had such mass appeal? Is it merely an anomaly, a kind of political ricochet? Numerous commentators have suggested just that, in large part attributing Trump’s success to a combination of exceptional circumstances. These included the unpopularity of Trump’s rival Hillary Clinton, the lingering disillusionment with recent American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the distrust of global elites in the wake of the recent financial crises, and also the transformations currently unfolding in the labor market which – even where they occur due to increasing automation and the transition to a postindustrial economy – are commonly blamed on globalization. In other words, the strong resonance of Trump’s nationalistic message is considered an aberration triggered by a perfect-storm constellation of more or less random factors.

From a cultural studies perspective, I would like to offer a somewhat different reading of the recent sea change in U.S. politics by arguing that Trump’s triumph is not a black swan event in American politics, but is in fact congruent with an existing cultural pattern. This is not to deny that his ascendancy was facilitated by a set of *sui generis* conditions. Among them are the mundane fact that he had the financial means to fund his own campaign, his status as a pop-cultural figure, and not least former FBI Director James Comey’s timing in reigniting the Clinton email controversy.² Hence, my argument is not so much contradictory as complementary to existing interpretations in that it acknowledges the weight of specific momentous circumstances, but at the same time explores how

² Comey announced his decision to reopen the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s use of her private email server for official communications on 28 October 2016, less than two weeks before election day.

they align and are made sense of within a broader ideological framework. More specifically, I seek to show that the strong resonance to Trump’s foreign policy agenda is informed by the ambiguous implications of the powerful individualist tradition of the U.S..

For, even as the concept of the individual as an independent political and moral agent constitutes the very core of liberalism and is thus customarily assigned to the arsenal of liberal values, in the U.S. it has proven to be a deeply ambivalent cultural force. On the one hand, the reverence for personal judgement and conscience has greatly advanced democratic freedoms and provided an apt language for challenging oppressive collective structures. Epoch-making liberal reform campaigns such as the Abolitionist, Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, Anti-War, Gay Rights, and LGBTQ Movements in large part owe their success to being able to draw on the individualist axioms of the intrinsic worth of individual personality and every person’s entitlement to self-realization. On the international level, this celebration of differences has fed into a mindset that embraces cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism. But on the other hand, the stress on intellectual as well as practical self-reliance has come with a limited perspective centered upon personal experience, opinion, and interest. Compared to other Western democracies, which are shaped more strongly by social democratic intellectual currents, Americans are less sympathetic to the idea that a person’s range of choices may be determined by external parameters. The famous American can-do optimism is firmly rooted in the belief that ultimately any obstacle can be overcome through personal resourcefulness and initiative.

Consequently, there is a cultural tendency to conceive of collective issues in terms of purely individual responsibility and performance. This bias plays out in domestic debates on various issues ranging from the reasons for poverty, to teen pregnancies, to gun violence. More often than not, the public discourse is preoccupied with how to counteract such problems based on strictly individual self-betterment and moral suasion in lieu of structural revisions.³ When examining this pervasiveness of individualist creeds in U.S. culture, political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset has stated that to “understand the American ideology, we need to see individualism not as a dimension of individual character, but rather as a *moral* standard by which social institutions and practices are judged” (Lipset, *American Exceptionalism* 64). Proceeding from this observation, a closer scrutiny of popular individualist tenets may yield at least part of the explanation for why Americans seem to be embracing globalism and isolationism at the same time.

Unlike Europeans, who have commonly perceived current U.S. foreign policy as political abandonment if not outright hostility⁴, the aforementioned survey shows that many Americans do not

³ When it comes to the problem of poverty, much of the debate revolves around establishing the correct criteria for distinguishing between “deserving” and “undeserving poor” as opposed to developing new structural approaches for eliminating the phenomenon per se. Likewise, campaigns to reduce teenage pregnancies are often aimed at changing personal feelings and behavior instead of implementing broad-scale pragmatic measures, such as providing sex education in schools or making contraceptives available to teenagers at risk. Incidentally, that does not only apply to religiously motivated crusades like “True Love Waits,” but also to other popular campaigns like “Think Your Life Won’t Change.” In a similar manner, in response to the national epidemic of gun violence, the scientific community in the U.S. has prominently suggested various individual-based approaches aimed at private self-reflection and betterment, often completely foregoing the legal option of tightening gun laws (see Butts; Hemenway).

⁴ As a notable example, German chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly expressed the new sense of alienation with a directness that marks a clear departure from her usual rhetorical tactfulness. Thus, following the difficult negotiations with the U.S. at the 2017 G7 summit, she stated in a speech on 28 May 2017 in Munich that the “times when we could fully rely on others are gone.” Even more explicitly, she stated at the traditional Summer Press Conference in Berlin on 20 July 2018 that “we cannot any longer rely on the USA as a peacekeeping power.”

share the same sense of antagonism. This may be because, according to the logic of the traditional individualist paradigm, there is no fundamental contradiction between the commitment to a thriving global community and the isolationist strategy as propagated by Trump. To the contrary, there is a well-tread pathway in U.S. intellectual history of thinking of the general good as individual separation. It is this culturally ingrained concept of reform as individual accountability that now provides the ideational undercurrent for the isolationist turn in U.S. politics. To illustrate this point, I will first outline the significance of individualist ideals in mainstream American attitudes regarding politics and social reform, and then go on to show how they manifest on the international plane.

“Thy Love Afar is Spite at Home”: Insularity as Initiative

There is a wealth of research suggesting that the individualistic mindset is *the* major feature that sets U.S. political culture apart from that of other Western democracies. From the eighteenth century on, domestic and foreign commentators have described Americans as a people with a fiercely self-reliant mentality. The first one to elaborate on this trait was French American writer J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, which appeared in 1782, he portrayed American society as guided by the values of personal autonomy and equal opportunity. Half a century later, in 1835, French author Alexis de Tocqueville published his study *De la démocratie en Amérique*, which remains a milestone of American Studies to this day. Therein, he noted that Americans are more prone to challenge authority and follow their private conscience than members of European societies. He also observed a general tendency to greater economic initiative as well as to psychological and physical distancing from the community. It was Tocqueville who coined the now common term ‘American exceptionalism’ to highlight the unique social atmosphere in the American colonies.

The proliferation of individualistic attitudes described by these authors was facilitated by a unique combination of geographical, political, and cultural factors. They included the purely spatial feasibility of retreating from the community as well as the decentralized, permeable societal structure which, in absence of a feudal past, was characterized by a high degree of social mobility and flat status hierarchies. Intellectually, the call for maximal driveback of political authority in favor of individual responsibility can be traced all the way back to the Puritans. These religious dissidents, whose cultural legacy would become such a dominant part of the national experience, regarded introspection, private soul-searching, and the sensitization for the inner voice as an essential part of their spiritual practice. Their pursuit of a pious life within a well-ordered, homogenous community thus already carried the hidden seed of non-conformism.

Individualistic tenets were also championed by the political founding fathers. Already Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) popularized the motto that the best government is the one that governs least. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) insisted that private conscience is the only legitimate authority for moral judgement, and saw the need for state control as a degenerative symptom, “a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world” (Paine 6). James Madison (1751-1836) was similarly distrustful of political authority and emphasized the necessity of creating means for curtailing government power. Their individualistic values have found an enduring expression in the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Bill of Rights*, in which the right of the individual is specifically defined as the right to defy collective power structures.

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/>
 (Please cite this paper as the following: Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019). Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 5.

Concomitantly, self-reformation as the key to shaping a better society was promoted in early classics of American literature, most notably Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Ralph Waldo Emerson's numerous essays and lectures, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*. All of these works were formative in creating a specifically American iconography. And while the respective brands of individualism these thinkers developed are far from homogenous – for example, Franklin's utilitarian individualism with its systematically planned pursuit of material and intellectual self-perfection is quite distinct from Emerson's romantic ideas of spontaneous insight and inspiration –, they all shaped national identity by defining the quintessential American personality, with personal independence as its most salient quality.

Emerson, who is widely recognized as the main architect of American individualism and “teacher of the American tribe” (Kazin 3), has famously declared that the “appearance of character makes the State unnecessary” (3:126) and “the union is only perfect when all the uniters are isolated” (3:157). His negative view of formal political associations is expressed throughout his work. As a famous example, in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” which still stands as the literary manifesto of American-style individualism, he attacks the involvement in public reform campaigns as a thinly veiled flight from personal responsibility. Referring to Abolitionism, the most important reform movement of his time, he reflects:

If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, "Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home. (2:30)

Here, it is important to note that Emerson himself played a central role in the Abolitionist struggle.⁵ His criticism is therefore not aimed at the cause itself, but rather at the method of furthering it. To him, focusing on issues in far-off lands is nothing more than a self-serving distraction from one's actual moral obligation, namely the reformation of one's own character and circumstances. He is convinced that “society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him” (3:154).

Subsequent generations of Americans have shared this sentiment. As Robert N. Bellah et al. found in their landmark study *Habits of the Heart: Commitment and Individualism in American Life*, ‘self-reliance’ makes the top of the list when Americans are asked about their basic ethical guidelines (Bellah et al. 55 ff.). Despite the diversity of U.S. society, there is a remarkably broad consensus that the personal sphere is the proper starting point for tackling public challenges. This recipe for social reform is fostered by political conservatives such as Jordan Peterson, who lists “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” as one of the fundamental tenets in his 2018 self-help bestseller *12 Rules for Life*,⁶ as well as by political liberals like Barack Obama who encourages Americans to heed the “simple maxim: that we will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and privately” (159). This individualistic spirit has been identified as “both a source of vitality and the wellspring of many of the differences

⁵ Emerson's antislavery activism and the deep conflicts that arose for him between the need for public political action in the face of an urgent social problem and his individualistic beliefs about reform are discussed in depth by Len Gougeon in *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*.

⁶ Peterson is a Canadian clinical psychologist and professor of psychology who has become widely successful in the U.S. as a right-wing celebrity.

between the U.S. citizens and other people” (Kohut and Stokes 43), and at the same time as “a fundamental aberration from the historically typical norm” (Lodge 15).

In fact, many aspects of American exceptionalism have been attributed directly to the individualist tradition, among them the fact that the U.S. has proven to be such a hostile terrain for socialist ideas. Despite being the most developed capitalist society in the world – and thus destined for socialism according to the assumptions of historical materialism – socialist parties, trade unionism, and class consciousness remained conspicuously weak in the U.S.⁷ Unlike in other countries, where the unions and labor movement represents the vanguard of the left, the “American labor movement is not and never has been socialist, despite having socialists within it” (Glazer 178). It is characteristic that Samuel Gompers, the leader of the American Federation of Labor for almost forty years, “emphasized that what the state can give, the state can take away, and concluded from this that workers must rely on themselves” (Lipset 23). Gompers also attacked the socialist “belief that government had to be called in to ensure workers' welfare” (Wolfe, *Future of Liberalism* 7). To this day, the American working class strongly identifies with individualist, anti-statist, and capitalist ideals, and is therefore notoriously suspicious of collective efforts to expand the welfare system and workers' rights.⁸

A similar emphasis on personal responsibility and individual input can also be observed in present-day social activism. The ubiquity of slogans like ‘One at a Time’, ‘Close to Home’, ‘Not in my Backyard’, or ‘A Thousand Points of Light’ reveals a widely shared assumption that meaningful social change can ultimately only occur on a one-by-one basis.⁹ It reflects the collective notion that reform is best promoted in a de-centralized manner, with a gapless social network being ensured for the very reason that every person refrains from ambitious political projects and instead strictly limits their attention to their immediate private sphere. As Nina Eliasoph has pointed out, the motto “It all starts with the individual” (55) has become the go-to approach for virtually every major collective challenge, whether it be environmental protection, poverty, gun violence, homelessness, or drug abuse. This speaks to the notion that individual success and happiness are the precondition for a healthy community – not the other way around. In consequence, Americans are inclined to “think that what is shared is oppressive” (Eliasoph 128). And so it often appears as if many U.S. citizens are so weary of political instruments that what they value as their main democratic privilege is not the right to participate in collective decision-making processes, but reversely to withdraw from them altogether.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe has characterized this privatist outlook as “morality writ small,” since it dictates that “not only should our circles of moral obligation never become so large that they lose their coherence, but morality should also be modest in its ambitions and quiet in its proclamations, not seeking to transform the entire world but to make a difference where it can” (Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* 290). According to this worldview, which espouses maximal autonomy and self-reliance, the community is served best when everybody strictly ‘tends to their own business’ instead of getting

⁷ For a thorough discussion of the reasons why socialism remained underdeveloped in the U.S., see Seymour Martin Lipset & Gary Marks. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*.

⁸ As Boris Groys has pointed out, capitalist-individualist values have been held up by the U.S. working class even in the wake of the 2007/2008 collapse of the capital markets when, in the congressional elections of November 2, 2010, even those voters who depend on state support have voted for lowering taxes for the rich and for reducing social welfare. As Groys stresses, this is an indication that the choice is based not on rational economic, but on ideological considerations.

⁹ For a further discussion of individualist tenets as a defining factor in U.S. social activism, see Thierbach-McLean “Close to Home, One at a Time, Not in My Backyard: Individualism and the Mantras of Depoliticization in U.S. Reform Discourses.”

entangled in elusive collective dynamics. And it does not take a great conceptual leap to transfer this familiar problem-solving strategy to the level of international relations. Trump’s foreign policy agenda intuitively made sense to Americans because it resonated with a culturally entrenched concept that the common good ultimately depends on the radical self-responsibility, and even isolation, of individual members.

“Taking Care of Ourselves”: Nationalism as Political Self-Reliance

In a public climate dominated by individualist-meritocratic values, the maxim of “every person for themselves” can readily be broadened to mean “every country for itself.” This isolational paradigm, combined with a strictly dichotomic view of domestic prosperity versus international commitment, represents a standard feature of Trump’s public statements. For instance, in his foreign policy address before the Center for National Interest in Washington, D.C. on April 27, 2016, he pledged that, should he become president, he will “no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down” (Trump, “Foreign Policy”). More recently, at a rally for Senator Ted Cruz in Houston, Texas, on October 22, 2018, President Trump declared:

We’re taking care of ourselves for a change, folks. [...] But radical Democrats want to turn back the clock for the rule of corrupt, power-hungry globalists. You know what a globalist is? A globalist is a person who wants the globe to do well, frankly, but not caring about our country so much. (Trump, “Texas” 1:28:35–1:29:11)

Thus postulating an innately antagonistic relationship between national and international interests, Trump went on to say that he embraced an “old-fashioned” word to describe his political stance. “I am a nationalist,” he proclaimed to chants of “USA! USA!” erupting from the crowd. Insisting that there is “nothing wrong” with this term, he even urged his audience to “use that word, use that word” (Trump, “Texas” 1:28:16–1:29:40).

In Western Europe, where the memory of the nationalist and militarist totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century is still fresh in the collective consciousness, such statements would be entirely unacceptable for public discourse, even on the right side of the political spectrum. And while Trump’s escalatory rhetoric is certainly also eliciting alarm and sharp criticism within the U.S., there is evidently still a significant voter base that is willing to go along with their president’s historically illiterate definition of nationalism. By utterly disregarding that nationalism was the main push in the eruption of two catastrophic world wars, Trump casts the term in a dangerously naïve light, namely as a kind of expanded localism, where everyone just diligently ‘looks after their own affairs’. In doing so, he taps into the popular notion that focusing on improving your own designated territory is the most efficient and authentic way to achieve common good. In short, nationalism is interpreted as wholesome self-reliance on the state level.

Trump’s public statements – regarding foreign policy and otherwise – have often been dismissed as erratic and incoherent.¹⁰ And while it is fair to say that other U.S. administrations have also grappled with inconsistencies and conflicts of interest in the multifarious realm of American foreign relations, the lack of a clear doctrine has probably never been quite as glaring. For example, it seems impossible to square Trump’s assurance that the U.S. is going to be “a great and reliable ally” (“Foreign Policy”)

¹⁰ However, there are also commentators who argue that Trump does have a coherent foreign policy approach (see Brooks; Wright).

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/>
 (Please cite this paper as the following: Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019). Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 5.

with his statement that “Americanism, not globalism, will be our new credo” (“Economic Speech”). Likewise, his ardent assertion that his country “will continue and continue forever to play the role of peacemaker” (“Foreign Policy”) is in stark contrast to the aggressively militarist and imperialist language he has been known to use, for instance when repeatedly threatening to “bomb the shit out of [ISIS in Iran and Syria]” as a viable way of fighting global terrorism, or publicly flaunting the possibility of the U.S. looting Iran’s natural resources by simply “taking the oil” (see Ward).

Given the abruptly switching opinions Trump has expressed on a wide range of issues, it is debatable whether trying to discern a systematic political rationale behind his remarks is actually worthwhile. As a matter of fact, the chaotic fluctuation of his priorities has led to speculations whether they have “everything to do with the last person he spoke with” (Fernholz), or whether his “foreign policy has enough coherence to merit the label of any ‘ism,’ [...] it certainly isn’t realism” (Pillar). The most consistent way to describe his political style would probably be as transactional or mercantilist, with the value of international alliances being measured in purely monetary costs and gains, and political decisions involving complex strategic and moral considerations being reduced to the Manichean categories of good versus bad deals. Thus, when pondering U.S. commitments in East Asia in 2013, Trump’s concerns seemed to be of an exclusively financial nature as he publicly wondered, “How long will we go on defending South Korea from North Korea without payment? [...] When will they start to pay us?” (qtd in Power). He reiterated his grievances about this ‘defense dole’ alliance in a 2016 NBC interview, complaining that the U.S. has “28,000 soldiers on the line in South Korea between the madman and them. We get practically nothing compared to the cost of this” (qtd in Heo and Roehrig, 250). By now, “We have to be reimbursed” (Trump, “Texas” 1:30:50–1:30:52) has become one of his main mantras.

And yet, despite Trump’s well-known habit of framing international relations as simple pecuniary transactions, his approach reveals a plain ideological substructure. This does not mean that Trump’s conflicting arguments can somehow be tidily organized into logical coherence, but rather that they readily fit into an already conflicting cultural blueprint: In the context of an intellectual tradition that is accustomed to pursuing collective amelioration by eclipsing shared environments in favor of spotlighting individual accountability, internationalist and isolationist impulses can easily be interpreted as two manifestations of the same cultural source, quasi opposite swing directions of the same ideological pendulum. After all, a common credo that encourages people to think that positive social change consists in transforming one’s private sphere smoothly translates into the notion that the sole attention of politics should be at home.

This belief that political responsibility should essentially end at the national border implies a sharp dividing line between endogenous and exogenous factors, between “us” and “them.” Based on this premise, U.S. national interests are deemed principally discrete from and at the same time in competition with those of the global community. Seen from this angle, Trump’s infamous plan to build a wall at the Mexican border is just a natural consequence of his individualist perceptions, a drive to manifest the abstract truth of separation as material fact. The same denial of interconnectedness also lies at the core of Trump’s routine of depicting his country as the global martyr who is “being ripped off by everybody in the world” (qtd in Daalder and Lindsay 30). This complaint only makes sense against the backdrop of the solipsistic conviction that, unless it yields concrete and immediate financial revenues, international cooperation can never amount to anything more than a wasteful draining of resources.

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/>
 (Please cite this paper as the following: Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019). Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 5.

Of course, such a U.S.-centric view does neither take into account “the financial contributions of allies, the benefits for both military and trade which emerge out of multilateral alliances nor the historical factors that precipitated the emergence of an American-led LIO [...] that ensured the United States became the global economic hegemon, nor the strategic advantages inherent to having military bases all over the world” (Dryhurst). And while Trump is correct in pointing out that other NATO countries have failed to meet the official guideline to spend a minimum of 2 percent of their GDP on defence as stipulated in the Wales Summit Declaration of 2014, it is telling that his first instinct is to abandon international cooperation instead of renegotiating it. Such a reaction is entirely consistent with the individualistic tactic to aim for maximum disengagement from collaborative structures as the most effective means for achieving individual as well as collective advancement.

But when it comes to making sense of the intricate nexus in an interconnected world, simplistic strategies based on narrowly defined national objectives are becoming increasingly inadequate. Challenges associated with global economy, terrorism, mass migration, public health, environmental protection and climate change defy being tidily contained and solved within state borders. At least initially, the Trump administration seemed to be making concessions to this fact. As Brands observed in 2017, “Trump has had to roll back some of the more radical aspects of his ‘America first’ agenda since becoming president — tearing up the North American Free Trade Agreement, declaring NATO obsolete, launching a trade war with China — he seems to be adjusting to [...] reality” (“U.S. Internationalism”). However, two years later, NAFTA is pending to be replaced by USMCA, the U.S. has been engaged in a trade war with China since 2018, and the ongoing combative rhetoric does not bode well for NATO.

“Great Again, Winning Again”: Individualistic Apoliticism and Nostalgic Patriotism

With the unsettling effect the new U.S. foreign-policy direction has had on international relations, it is easy to overlook that it does not only represent a setback in the realm of external connections, but also impoverishes political culture on the private level. After all, an atrophied paradigm transfixed by the myopic rallying cry of “America First” yields little insight when it comes to situating one’s personal experiences in a broader causative context. It simply takes too narrow of an angle to capture the larger global forces that impact and shape individual lives. To instance an obvious example, the strict focus on personal proficiency within the imagined scenario of an isolated national landscape is not conducive to understanding and navigating a job market which – whether one likes it or not – is subject to the dynamics of a worldwide economy. Conceptually rejecting global interdependencies does not factually make them go away; it just impairs people’s ability to reflect on aspects of their professional, financial, and private life in a cohesive manner – and thus ultimately undermines their capacities for self-determination.

And as traditional ideas of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency thus increasingly clash with political reality, those who identify most with individualist tenets are also most prone to feeling dissatisfied and overwhelmed with the growing intricacy of global ties. Even before Trump spectacularly scored political capital by “harking back to what America supposedly once was” (Westacott), scholars detected a psychological counter-reaction to the demands of modern mass society in Americans, namely a tendency to revert to the model of the small town as the main reference point for their political mindscape. This collective drift towards a “rehabilitation of the values of rural America” (Lévy 72) is directly hinged on the individualistic disposition as it reflects a preference for small-scale, personal forms of civic membership, with the traditional town meeting as the template for democratic decision-making (see Bellah et al. 204). The underlying sentiment seems

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/>
 (Please cite this paper as the following: Olga Thierbach-McLean (2019). Between Globalism and America First: The Ambiguous Resonance of Individualist Values in Current U.S. Foreign Policy. *The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies*. Volume 5.

to be that “if we get the government off our backs [...] healthier voluntary participation of the face-to-face community might return as the most prominent mode of our political life” (ibid.). Even more to the point, such a rudimentary scope of political interaction appeals to many Americans for the very reason that it is often not perceived as political action at all, but au contraire as a possibility to secede from the body politic by retreating into privatism. This impulse is typically accompanied by a nostalgic longing for a hazy image of ‘the good old days’ when everything was allegedly still clear and straightforward. By thus applying “their belief in small-scale morality as a guide to what should happen in politics, [Americans] succumb to a romantic vision of society quite at odds with the one in which they actually live” (Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* 311).

The collective urge to withdraw from the mechanisms of formal politics into a nebulous romantic past has been further fueled and validated by Trump’s rhetoric. In this context, Emrys Westacott has suggested that the prominence of the word “again” in the President’s slogans is indicative of his backward directed political program:

That little adverb carries a lot of weight, implying that things are worse now than they once were, and evoking a powerful political nostalgia for a past — whatever that past may be — that was allegedly better. But no matter how far back you look, someone is always yearning to look back *further*, to an imagined better time.

This romanticized, regressive notion of the good life comes with a concomitant ideological ingredient, namely an unpolitical brand of patriotism as a vital element of the imagined American idyll. For, despite their aversion to government and the world of politics, the concept of the nation has a clearly positive connotation to most Americans who “make a distinction between America, which they love, and the government, which they distrust” (Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* 172). In fact, the U.S. is considered by far the most patriotic among Western nations (Kohut and Stokes 45). Demonstrations of national loyalty are firmly established in everyday public life, whether it be the ever-present American flag, the *Pledge of Allegiance* that is obligatory at many schools, or the expression “God bless America” that has become the standard closing formula for public speeches. Even the fact that the term “un-American” is habitually employed by members of various political camps to effectively discredit the positions of their respective opponents underscores the significance of patriotism as a key American value. The patriotically charged social climate is not least reflected in the positive image of the military, with a majority of 62 percent of Americans considering military service to be the chief expression of the love for one’s country (see Morales).

At first glance, it may seem contradictory that a nation with such pronounced anti-statist tendencies exhibits a degree of patriotism that is often perceived as aggressive and even grotesque by other Westerners. However, here one has to bear in mind that the affirmation of national identity has a different significance for the mental economy of a classic immigrant nation than it does for countries that have traditionally defined themselves as nation states. Given the different cultural backgrounds of U.S. citizens, American patriotism has an crucial identity-establishing function as it practically represents the only common denominator that serves to consolidate the heterogeneous mixture of diverse cultures and heritages into a national unit. “Americans identify with their national community partly because there is little else that we all share in common” (Bellah et al. 153). In a societal topography characterized by ethnic, ethnic, and cultural diversity, the appeal to common ideals seems the only way to sustain the bond as a nation. Yet significantly, when asked about the concrete sources of their national pride, many U.S. citizens fail to provide a clear answer (see Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* 174.) This implies that American patriotism is inspired less by consciously perceived, precisely

identifiable facts than by the abstract principles of the American Creed and the myth of America as the “Land of the Free.”

With such nostalgic aspirations as the baseline against which political action is measured, the most promising way of building a better future seems to be by returning to the past. What thus emerges is an ideological feedback loop in which individualistic tenets, disenchantment with politics, romantic glorification of America, and patriotic impulses interlock and amplify each other: The expectations that are raised by the interpretation of society as a small-town idyll are frustrated and lead to growing disillusionment with the reality of a globalized society and an increasing alienation from the ‘dirty’ world of politics. This in turn creates an even stronger longing for the ideal of the pastoral, innocent America, and even more fervent patriotism that is fixated upon a nebulous idea of American greatness and superiority.

It is exactly this cocktail of individualism, anti-statism, and nostalgic patriotism backed by militarism that Trump has been able to capitalize on. By promising to ‘Make America Great Again’ and vowing to bring back old – and often obsolete – jobs, he tapped into a latent collective desire to return to ‘the good old days’ by extricating the U.S. from complex global structures and alliances that are perceived by many Americans as unnecessarily complicated, cumbersome, and ultimately detrimental. At the same time, his strong-man stance and the expansion of the armed forces’ role in foreign affairs sends the message of national strength and sovereignty, as does the shift from multilateral to bilateral diplomacy.¹¹ In analogy to the individualist narrative that a person’s full potential can only be realized by maximal self-sufficiency and mobilization of inner resources – and decidedly *not* through the interaction and cooperation with the social environment –, Trump set out to “make America win again” by embracing isolationism and nationalism.

Of course, over-simplification and nostalgia have been staple ingredients of populism in general. But in its current American incarnation it also falls on the fertile substrate of an intellectual history that from its very inception has been promoting the idea that positive change equals individual isolation, and that zero-sum thinking is just a necessary intermediate step to arrive at a win-win situation. In light of this fact, Trump’s emergence as U.S. President has been facilitated not only by the alignment of outside circumstances but even more so by his ability to hit all the ideological reflex zones of a cultural mainstream primed with individualistic mores. And even though a deeper engagement with American individualist thought reveals a rich world of ideas that defies being reduced to the simplistic formula of individual versus society, the popular interpretations of selfhood derived therefrom did not retain the same level of nuance. Instead, they have been revolving around truncated concepts of individuality which favor isolation over participation, competition over cooperation.

All this keeps reinforcing the notion of an inescapably antagonistic relationship between individual and society, and analogously also between individual countries within a global society. But isolationist readings of what it means to be a productive member of the international community are less apt than ever when it comes to developing viable solutions to commonly faced challenges. As Woodrow

¹¹ The summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy sets out the explicit goal to emerge from a “period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding” in order to “preserve peace through strength.” (Mattis 1). In parallel, the newfound preference for bilateral relations has been interpreted as a strategy to “harness U.S. strategic and economic heft to press other countries into one-on-one trade deals, a sharp reversal from recent U.S. policy to negotiate sprawling regional agreements that cover broad swaths of the global economy” (Mauldin).

Wilson once said, “We are all citizens of the world. The tragedy of our times is that we do not know this” (qtd in Ropaport 20). It is troubling that, in a world more interdependent than ever before, these words have gained a new urgency. Whether American internationalism will be able to overcome its current crisis and continue to play a leading role in fostering global cooperation will also depend on the capacity of U.S. political culture to reinvent American individualism for the new globalized age.

Olga Thierbach-McLean is an independent researcher, author, and literary translator. After studying North American literature, Russian literature, and musicology at the University of Hamburg and UC Berkeley, she earned her doctorate in American Studies at UHH. She is the author of various articles on US politics, as well as of the book Emersonian Nation which traces the resonance of Emersonian individualism in current US discourses on personal rights, identity politics, and social reform. Her main research interests are in US political culture and particularly in the intersections between politics and literature, in American Transcendentalism, and the intellectual history of liberalism. Currently, her projects are focused on the cultural appropriation debate as an aspect of American political exceptionalism as well as on reinterpretations of traditional individualist tenets in contemporary US cinema.

Works cited

- Bellah, Robert N. et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- Bildt, Carl. “It’s the end of the West as we know it.” *Washington Post* 15 November 2016.
- Brands, Hal. “Can U.S. Internationalism Survive Trump?” *Foreign Policy* 25 May 2017. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/25/can-u-s-internationalism-survive-trump/>>.
- Brands, Hal. “Is American Internationalism Dead? – Reading the National Mood in the Age of Trump.” *War on the Rocks* 16 May 2017. <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/is-american-internationalism-dead-reading-the-national-mood-in-the-age-of-trump/>>.
- Butts, Jeffrey A. et al. “Cure Violence: A Public Health Model to Reduce Gun Violence.” *Annual Review Public Health* 7 January 2015. <www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122509>.
- Daalder, Ivo H. and James M. Lindsay. *The Empty Throne: America’s Abdication of Global Leadership*. New York, NY: Hachette, 2018.
- Dryhurst, Andrew. “Crisis or Continuation? The Trump Administration and Liberal Internationalism.” *E-IR* 20 Mar 2019. <<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/03/20/crisis-or-continuation-the-trump-administration-and-liberal-internationalism/>>.
- Eliasoph, Nina. *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1998.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Joseph Slater et al. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard U P, 1980.
- - - *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Joseph Slater et al. Vol. 3. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard U P, 1984.
- Fernholz, Tim. “Donald Trump’s shifting positions have everything to do with the last person he spoke with.” *Quartz* 13 April 2017. <<https://qz.com/957867/donald-trumps-shifting-positions-on-the-economy-health-care-and-north-korea-have-everything-to-do-with-the-last-person-he-spoke-to/>>.
- Fischer, Joschka. “Das Ende des Westens.“ *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 12 December 2016. <<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/transatlantische-verbundenheit-das-ende-des-westens->

1.3289483>.

- Geiger, Raphael, Mark Goergen, Jens König, and Jan Boris Wintzenburg. "Das Ende des Westens: Recherche auf vier Kontinenten - welche Welt kommt da auf uns zu?" *Der Stern* 23 December 2018. <<https://www.stern.de/wirtschaft/news/donald-trump-und-china--das-ende-des-westens---welche-welt-kommt-auf-uns-zu--8502646.html>>.
- Gougeon, Len. *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1990.
- Groys, Boris. "The American Way of Scheitern." *Die Zeit Online* 13 November 2010. <<http://www.zeit.de/2010/46/America-Kapitalismus>>.
- Hoe, Uk and Terence Roehrig. *The Evolution of the South Korea-United States Alliance*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2018.
- Hemenway, David. "Preventing Gun Violence by Changing Social Norms." *JAMA Internal Medicine Journal* 8 July 2013. <<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/1710104>>.
- Kagan, Robert. "Trump marks the end of America as world's 'indispensable nation'". *Financial Times* 19 November 2016. <<https://www.ft.com/content/782381b6-ad91-11e6-ba7d-76378e4fef24>>.
- Kazin, Alfred. "The Father of Us All." *The New York Review of Books* January 1982, 3–6.
- Kohut, Andrew and Bruce Stokes. *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked*. New York: Times Books, 2006.
- Lévy, Bernard-Henri. *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Gary Marks. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.
- Lodge, George C. *The New American Ideology*. New York: Knopf, 1975.
- Mattis, J. (2018). "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge." 19 January 2019. <<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>.
- Mauldin, William. "Trump's Big Gamble: Luring Countries Into One-on-One Trade Deals." *The Wall Street Journal* 27 January 2017. <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trumps-big-gamble-luring-countries-into-one-on-one-trade-deals-1485483628>>.
- Morales, Lymari. "Nearly All Americans Consider Military Service 'Patriotic'". Washington, D.C.: Gallup, 3 July 2008. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/108646/nearly-all-americans-consider-military-service-patriotic.aspx>>.
- Nathan Glazer, *The Limits of Social Policy*. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard U P, 1988.
- Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.
- Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Interpretations*. Ed. J. M. Opal. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012.
- Peterson, Jordan B. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2018.
- Pillar, Paul R. "Trump is No Realist." *National Interest* 27 May 2017. <<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/trump-no-realist-20887>>.
- Rapoport, Anatoli. "Challenges and Opportunities: Resocialization as a Framework for Global Citizenship Education." *Globalisation, Ideology and Politics of Education Reform*. Ed. Joseph Zajda. Cham: Springer, 2015. 11-23.
- Schwartz, Madeleine. "The end of Atlanticism: Has Trump killed the ideology that won the cold

- war?" *The Guardian* 4 September 2018.
<<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/04/atlanticism-trump-ideology-cold-war-foreign-policy>>.
- Smeltz, Diana et al. "2016 Chicago Council Survey: America in the Age of Uncertainty – American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy."
<https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/america-age-uncertainty?utm_source=homepageandutm_medium=postandutm_campaign=ccs-report>.
- Smith, Andreas Whittam. "This is the end of the West – but the Western establishment only has itself to blame." *Independent* 15 February 2017. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/end-of-west-western-establishment-wolfgang-ischinger-munich-security-conference-blame-a7582081.html>>.
- Thierbach-McLean, Olga. "Close to Home, One at a Time, Not in My Backyard: Individualism and the Mantras of Depoliticization in U.S. Reform Discourses." *European Journal of American Studies* 29 July 2019. <<http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14663>>.
- Trump, Donald. "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech." *New York Times*, 27 April 2016. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>>.
- Trump, Donald. "Trump campaigns for Ted Cruz in Texas." *PBS NewsHour*, 22 October 2018. <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-trump-campaigns-for-ted-cruz-in-texas>>.
- Trump, Donald. "Read the Full Transcript of Donald Trump's Economic Speech." *Fortune* 8 August 2016. <<https://fortune.com/2016/08/08/trump-economic-speech-detroit/>>.
- Ward, Alex. "Trump's anti-ISIS war keeps killing huge numbers of civilians." *Vox* 26 May 2017. <<https://www.vox.com/world/2017/5/26/15701262/trumps-civilian-mosul-iraq-syria-mayadin>>.
- Westacott, Emrys. "Why Trump's 'Make America Great Again' nostalgia is a dangerous political tool." *Timeline* 25 July 2016. <<https://timeline.com/false-nostalgia-donald-trump-e935ef77018c>>.
- Wolfe, Alan. *One Nation, After All: What Americans Really Think About God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, The Right, The Left and Each Other*. New York: Viking P, 1998.
- Wolfe, Alan. *The Future of Liberalism*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- Wright, Thomas. "Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy." *Politico Magazine*, 20 January 2016. <<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>>.