Liberalism needs a new Cold War mentality

Kowtowing to dictators and appeasing autocrats, classical liberalism in the 21st century is once again in the fight for its life

By Finn Judge, Editor (2017)
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After becoming an unrivalled global hegemon at the turn of the information age, adversaries of America and its allies are turning to troll factories and dangerous, nationalist propaganda that pervades ideological cleavages across the globe. Militaries stand for nothing: information is everything.

The past 15 months under President Trump have been dizzying, norm-defying and deafening from thousands of tweets. Redeemed bureaucrat James Comey, no matter his image-defining motives, hit the nail on the head when he described the Donald as not medically, but “morally unfit” to serve as president – ignoring the values and institutions that made America ‘great’. The crisis of confidence within the American deep state is more than a self-serving conspiracy for the alt-right: it’s liberalism’s last stand against those who would destroy its global standing for the sake of some tariffs and a few more oil rigs.

America first, they profess. Yet when it comes to the global race, they concede to the bigotry of ‘strongmen’ Putin, Erdogan, and Xi. It leaves little to the imagination as to why Trump values these leaders: no checks or balances, freedom to enact the ‘will of the people’, and not to mention self-aggrandisement. Perhaps if he understood diplomatic norms, Trump would have adhered to the memo “DO NOT CONGRATULATE” upon Putin’s re-election. It’s bad politics for America, but worse for the Donald: the despots are literally laughing at him.

Britain’s divorce from the EU and its own economic standing is fair game: Putin and his army of cyber-
trolls not only intervened in the Brexit referendum, but also in favour of Corbyn’s campaign – as recently uncovered by The Sunday Times. Far-right Eurosceptics Orban, Le Pen and Alternative für Deutschland make natural bedfellows with the Russian bear. With democratisation in decline, China’s President Xi assumes presidency for life. Trump comments: “Maybe we’ll give that a shot someday.”

The lines between ideology and realist power politics are blurred. The EU was set up to prevent war on the European continent; America’s role in NATO and on the continent served the same purpose. Hillary was a pro-NATO hawk and Macron was a pro-EU Russophobe, who sought to fight back. One was subject to political assassination (metaphorically); the other survives, seeking to temper the replacement. No one should envy Macron’s long game – not least because, with Trump’s threat of tariffs and continual bad-mouthing of the EU, it appears to be going terribly.

This is what happens in the absence of values. Once the world is confirmed as a scary, dark place of outsiders, everybody is equally distrusted. No longer foundations of common ground, the institutions that bound liberal allies together – the EU, NATO and the UN – have all, at some point, been derided by Trump as being set up to “take advantage of” the US. Aspiring to despotism, he sees no resemblance of himself in these bodies; no mutual goals. While it shouldn’t need stating that dictatorship is generally awful, this ‘America First’ agenda seems to put morality last.

If there was ever a doubt that liberalism required morals, recent memory should put it to rest. The assault on freedom and geopolitical unity is too evident to allow for hesitation. If we don’t reclaim our norms, institutions and democratic integrity, someone else will reframe them for us – to be unrepresentative of our objective interests. Diplomatic norms are underpinned by realist necessity, not airs and graces existing in a vacuum. It’s time to engage in the war on freedom: not with weapons, but with ideas and integrity. This begins with restoring the home front.
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