

OPINION

A Distracted America Still Leads the World



GLOBAL VIEW
By *Walter Russell Mead*

China and Russia to Iran, Venezuela and North Korea is trying to undermine American security and break American power. In the U.S., the foreign-policy establishment in both political parties is widely discredited, but populist isolationism offers little in the way of constructive alternatives. Meanwhile, culture wars and bitter polarization have distracted and divided the one country that can lead the world back toward a more peaceful path. If the potential consequences of this mix of global crisis and American incapacity don't trouble your sleep at times, you haven't been paying attention.

Many factors contribute to this distressing situation, but the economic and social disruptions brought on by the Information Revolution are the heart of the matter. As social media upends political parties and systems across the world, and technological change transforms industries, political leaders are struggling to maintain the authority and legitimacy necessary for far-sighted for-

These are terrifying times. As a technological revolution propels the most dangerous arms race in human history, a coalition of powers ranging from

foreign policy. At the same time, advances in drone warfare, artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles and cyberattacks are changing the nature of war and international competition. Global problems are getting more urgent and difficult even as political leaders in the U.S. and elsewhere are losing their ability to lead.

The U.S. remains the key actor in the international system, but American society is less focused on dealing with foreign challenges than in resolving economic, political and cultural issues at home. This has happened before. In the late 19th century, Americans were focused on managing the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, such as the rise of conglomerates, the centralization of financial power in Wall Street banks, and mass migration from Europe to the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest. All the while, an agricultural crisis was unfolding as the economics of family farming became less favorable. International events commanded scant attention even as Europe drifted toward the disaster of World War I. In the 1930s, the Great Depression similarly led the U.S. to focus inward despite dangers beyond its borders.

Seeing a polarized America sliding toward less effective global engagement amid international conflict and crises, our adversaries in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran and Pyong-

yang believe the clock is running out on the American Century. Their efforts to lower the curtain on the Pax Americana are growing more ambitious as Americans lose their sense of unity and purpose.

But the Pax Americana is more robust than it looks. Historically, these periods of internal dissent and social upheaval haven't signaled the collapse of American power so

Rivals see the U.S. as polarized and waning but underestimate the power of capitalism.

much as prepared its resurgence. Between the Civil War and the early 20th century the inward-focused, polarized Americans created a massive industrial economy and a powerful financial sector that made us irresistible when we entered World War I. Ditto in World War II.

American power is grounded in capitalism, the most disruptive and revolutionary social system in the history of the world. Our openness to capitalism makes the U.S. quick to gain the benefits that capitalist development brings, and also quick to suffer the displacements effected by technological and economic change. Amid the struggle in American domes-

tic politics today, we can still see the emergence of new industries, new forms of social organization, new technologies that are likely to make us a decisive actor in the 21st century.

Even as our politics descend into chaos, our farms and factories are becoming more productive. Our financial markets are becoming more sophisticated. Our computers are getting faster and more complex, our software more capable. More enterprises are harvesting productivity gains from new technology. Our struggles aren't the death agonies of terminal decline. As I've written elsewhere, they are the awkward lunges of a butterfly struggling to escape a cocoon.

Those who expected a permanent peace and a long calm after the Cold War were profoundly mistaken about the impact of American power. America's victory in the Cold War didn't end history but accelerated it.

America's internal dissensions are reaching a peak even as the world slides toward chaos. This is an explosive conjunction, and there is no guarantee of a smooth ride ahead. But if America remains a dynamic society filled with raucous, ambitious and impatient people, we are likely to continue to surprise ourselves and the rest of the world with the wealth we create—and the power that flows from it.