

Preparing the Republic for a Re-Structured Global Order

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Abraham Lincoln did not believe that he was behaving like a boastful nativist when he observed that the American republic could not be undone by foreigners—he assumed that this claim was so obvious as to need no extended elaboration. For Lincoln, if we were going to fail as a nation, it would have to be as a result of our own neglect and incompetence. Even in an age of nuclear weapons, the greatest likely danger to the United States comes from within the republic and not from the outside.

The war that is devastating Ukraine may well result in a restructuring of the global order. While it is not entirely clear what the global order will look like when all the dust settles, there is a good chance that it will not look like it did on January 1, 2022.

It would be foolhardy for the United States to assume that the global order that arises out of the ashes, policies and rhetoric of the current war will anoint us as the principal driver of global affairs. There are likely to be no “pure” winners, just middling winners and middling as well as serious losers.

While there is no way to predict what the restructured global order will look like or what influence the United States may enjoy, it is possible to predict that our global standing will be impaired if our own house is in disarray. And, in fact, the one thing that Americans have real control over is the state of their own house, although we often act as if that is far from the case.

From schools that are failing too many children, to mental health and drug addiction crises, to runaway deficits and debts, to a culture that confuses licentiousness with defensible exercises of liberty, to homicide and violent crime rates that are at epidemic levels, the American republic is in serious need of rehabilitative care. If we wish to be the leader of the free world, then the state of the republic must be worthy of the elevated stature that the American people should want their country to enjoy.

The fact that America’s house is not in better shape is a reflection of how difficult it is to create and then preserve a decent and competent political community that affirms the sovereignty of the people and entrusts them with considerable control over their own affairs. As Founders like George Washington and James Madison understood all too well, a decent and competent democracy is inherently fragile, and the fragility is magnified in heterogeneous societies.

Lincoln repeatedly reminded the American people that responsible self-government is hard work. That work, he believed, is made easier to the extent to which we protect and adhere to our constitutional as well as our civilizational identity. That identity, in his opinion, is reflected in a civic culture that prioritizes humility, moderation, law-abidingness, collaboration, and even conciliation. This was the message he delivered in his Second Inaugural Address.

While it is bad enough that Americans have permitted the republic of the Founders to fall into disrepair, what makes matters worse, and makes repairing the republic especially difficult, is the conviction (especially among the “elites”) that humility, collaboration, and the healing of

ideological differences are not virtues or desirable “habits of the heart,” but represent flawed value preferences that end up empowering the ‘wrong’ side in the culture war that rages in virtually all of the nation’s nooks and crannies.

Regrettably, anger, indignation and distrust threaten to become our principal legacy. Instead of nurturing self-disciplined and moderate citizens by seeking to tame factious impulses, critical formative institutions are encouraging young Americans to associate exemplary behavior with the release of those impulses.

Lincoln understood the corrosive force of ideological politics, and so he fought hard to elevate constitutional politics above power politics, even if it meant temporarily going along with the “law of the land” as set out in the Dred Scott decision. While critical of the decision, Lincoln’s persistent commitment to a collaborative political resolution of the slavery controversy designed to save the Union is one reason why statues of Lincoln have been desecrated and his name is being removed from schools and streets.

The campaign to “cancel” Lincoln is fundamentally a rejection of what he called the “cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason” behind his defense of a civic culture that prepares fallible and flawed beings for the tough and chastening job of self-government.

Lincolnian reasoning, elevating constitutional politics above ideological politics as well as making decent and competent self-government the overarching goal of our politics, remains as sound today as it was during his lifetime. The republic that the Founders bequeathed to us is a gift too valuable to squander and too important to global stability to neglect.

Repairing the republic so that it is equal to the aspirational ends set out in the Preamble of the Constitution, “the blessings of liberty” that make human flourishing possible, will be critical to protecting the long-term interests of the American people and of freedom-loving people everywhere.

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