The election of Donald J. Trump is a turning point in modern American history. On the domestic front, the 45th U.S. president’s unconventional governing style and use of social media has triggered controversy, as has his professed antipathy toward key democratic institutions such as a free press and an independent judiciary. Donald Trump’s presidency has also coincided with the rise of the so-called “alt-right”—a movement that can best be described as an effort to unify and mainstream disparate elements of the American far right. Certain of the darker nativist themes espoused by the former real estate magnate appear to have energized—and in some cases encouraged—groups that had, in the eyes of many, been relegated to the fringes of American society.¹

The conduct of U.S. foreign policy has been revolutionized in almost equal measure. Although U.S. statecraft has never been entirely insulated from domestic disputes, it has nevertheless been undergirded since the end of World War II by an overarching, bipartisan system of belief. This shared credo has centered on liberal internationalism, American moral leadership and the promotion of free trade.² The current president has repudiated these core principles, articulating an alternative “America First” vision for managing global affairs.³ The language of American exceptionalism has been largely jettisoned, in favor of a more transactional and values-neutral approach to foreign policy and alliance management. Surrounded by a diverse, multi-factional coterie of advisers—some of whom maintain close ties to the alt-right—Donald Trump has repeatedly manifested an aversion to

Iskander Rehman is a Senior Fellow at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University. He can be reached via Twitter @IskanderRehman. The author is grateful to John Bew and Charlie Laderman for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this article.
multilateral free trade arrangements, along with a reluctance to openly criticize the hostile actions of authoritarian powers.

Until now, most detailed analyses of the Trump administration’s foreign policy have focused on the president himself, and on his longstanding and seemingly iconoclastic set of impulses. Others—particularly in the journalistic domain—have delved with unvarnished relish into the theatrical court politics of the White House, attempting to discern which set of advisers wields the most influence over the foreign policy decision-making process. Meanwhile, most treatments of the alt-right have focused primarily on the domestic components of its ideology. This essay makes the case that there is a clear intellectual linkage between the American far right and certain aspects of the Trump administration’s worldview. This should not come as a surprise. After all, there is a robust literature on the complex interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy. Thus far, however, movements such as the alt-right—along with their political champions—had been excluded from the main corridors of power, and provided with little opportunity to shape the trajectory of their nation’s external affairs. With the election of an insurgent, populist candidate in the form of Donald Trump, however, their ideas have seeped into the bloodstream of American power. It is time for Western foreign policy elites to take these formally marginal—but now increasingly mainstreamed—movements seriously.

As the historian David H. Bennett noted in his landmark study of the American far right, this can prove challenging: “With absurd rituals and frenetic fraternalism, with the hint of violence lurking in back of claims of strength and programs for change, with overt anti-intellectualism a common theme, the (far) rightists are not people who will receive a warm response from intellectuals … .But the extremists of the movements of the Right do deserve a measure of dispassionate attention, not because of services they have rendered America but because they have reflected tensions endemic in the entire population and in the very structure of American life.”

This essay aims to adopt an equally dispassionate approach, and is structured in three parts. In the first section, it briefly explores the ideational foundations of the alt-right, and firmly situates it within the troubled history of American far right movements. Many of the U.S. commander-in-chief’s core beliefs—or instincts—are less unique than they may at first seem. In fact, one can argue that they stem from a longstanding reactionary tradition in American politics. The following section examines how key aspects of this ideology have “percolated” into the
Trump administration’s foreign and defense policies. The third and final section argues that while this radical school of foreign policy is currently ascendant, its future is closely tied to an intense ideological battle currently being waged within the Republican Party. The future of U.S. global leadership, and by extension that of the postwar international order, largely depend upon the outcome of this struggle.

The Alt-Right: Old Wine in a New Bottle

It is important to note, first of all, that the term “alt-right” is a highly contested one. Indeed, some have perceived it as inappropriately euphemistic, and as a transparent effort by otherwise radical militants to “rebrand” their ideology and appear more moderate—and therefore palatable—to the political mainstream. Even within far right circles, some well-known activists have sought to cast off the nomenclature, for fear of being automatically associated with white supremacist or separatist movements. Others still have viewed it as being too accommodating toward traditional conservatism, and as insufficiently revolutionary. In many ways, this semantic squabble is a reflection of the inherently fractious nature of reactionary right wing politics in the United States, and of the longstanding debate among nationalist thought leaders over whether the road to power lies in “mainstreaming” (i.e. adopting more socially acceptable behaviors in order to exert broader appeal) or in “vanguardism” (focusing on smaller groups of more fervent cadres that then act as an ideological spearhead). The American far right has never been a unified political force, bound by a monolithic corpus of beliefs.

That said, one can nevertheless point to three major themes—or characteristics—of right wing extremism that cut across its varied subcurrents, and span different epochs in American history: nativism, conspiracism, and authoritarianism. All of these tendencies are clearly apparent within the modern alt-right movement, and have also featured heavily in Donald Trump’s own political messaging.

Nativism

From the crude anti-Catholic sentiment relayed by groups such as the mid-nineteenth century Know Nothings to the domestic terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, rabid nativism and anti-immigration rhetoric has been a hallmark of American far right movements since the nation’s inception. As one historian has noted, specific nativistic antagonisms may, and do vary widely in response to the changing character of minority irritants and the shifting conditions of the day; but through each separate hostility runs the connecting, energizing force of modern nationalism. In the United States, this nativism has often been overtly racialized, religiously inspired or both. In times of war, tension, or socioeconomic
upheaval, nativist sentiment has been directed toward specific categories of the population, sometimes resulting in violence and bloodshed. One such example (among many) would be the gruesome series of attacks conducted against Chinese workers in the western United States throughout the late nineteenth century. Nativism and ethnotribalism targeted at religious and ethnic minority populations were, and continue to be, at the heart of Donald Trump’s political messaging—as well as that of the alt-right.

In many ways, however, the intellectual godfather of contemporary American nativism is Pat Buchanan, rather than Donald Trump. The fiery paleoconservative, whom the current president once derided and half-heartedly challenged for leadership of the Reform Party, was the first to articulate many of the most iconic themes later adopted by the Trump campaign—from his proposal to construct a continent-straddling border wall to his resurrection of an “America First” brand of nationalism. One can discern an even clearer ideological affinity between Donald Trump and “Pitchfork Pat” on matters of foreign policy. Both men have sought to break with the American internationalist tradition, are profoundly hostile to free trade and multilateral organizations, and relay a “spenglerian,” declinist vision of the West.

Conspiracism
Conspiracism is another defining characteristic of far right movements—and of political extremism more broadly. When the historian and public intellectual Richard Hofstadter famously first wrote about the “paranoid style in American politics” following the fevered 1964 presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater, he was referring to the “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” that had, according to him, characterized American reactionary movements since the arrival of the Mayflower.

For example, the activism and second amendment absolutism of America’s growing militia and survivalist movements have long been tied to conspiracy theories over the alleged existence of a “New World Order,” a clandestine global government that aims to establish totalitarian rule across the globe. Like the “anti-System” ideologies so prevalent in Germany at the time of the Weimar Republic, “New World Order” conspiracy theories have often been colored by racism and anti-Semitism. This was the case, for example, during the Midwestern farm crisis of the 1980s, when large and powerful militias such as the Posse Comitatus repeatedly attributed their members’ economic woes to an “international Jewish banking conspiracy.” During the Cold War, the John Birch society, which at its heyday in the mid-1960s could boast up to 100,000 members, was consumed with fears of communist subversion, to the point when it accused President Dwight Eisenhower of being an agent of the Kremlin. In many ways, the so-
called “Birther movement” that Donald Trump and alt-righters spearheaded, which contested the citizenship and allegiance of former president Barack Obama, mirrored the equally eccentric accusations hurled against his Republican predecessor.

With the advent of the internet and social media, far right conspiracy theories have become more pervasive, and have found powerful propagators in the form of media-savvy alt-right provocateurs. In some cases, unfortunately, these individuals have not only been granted interviews and press access at the White House, but have also been retweeted by the 45th president. For example, Infowars, the conspiracy machine run by the famed internet fabulist Alex Jones, was granted temporary White House press credentials in May 2017.20 Donald Trump has also retweeted figures such as Jack Probosiec, one of the lead promoters of the “Pizzagate” and Seth Rich conspiracy theories.21 It is worth noting, in passing, that Donald Trump’s pugilistic public communications strategy—with its emphasis on the use of social media and memetic themes—bears a striking resemblance to that of the alt-right, whose dark appeal resides in a singularly feral online culture.22

As law professor Mark Fenster has noted, conspiracy theories can be viewed as a “populist theory of power”—their dissemination by demagogues helps federate a targeted audience against “the imagined other, represented as a secretive power bloc.”23 As we shall see in a following section, the alt-right’s conspiratorial worldview is reflected not only in the Trump administration’s domestic policy, but also in its disposition toward multilateralism and—most troublingly—in its attitude toward the United States’ own national security apparatus.

Authoritarianism

Nativist and conspiratorial ideologies naturally intersect with authoritarian leanings. Far right movements structure their existence in opposition to political liberalism, whose perceived inadequacies, in their mind, have led to cultural entropy and national decline. Anti-egalitarianism, misanthropy, and social Darwinism have historically furnished the ideational pillars for reactionary authoritarianism.24 If the only road to power lies through the traditional political route, far right extremists may initially respect the democratic process and govern in cooperation with traditional conservative elites. This usually only lasts for a time, however. As they steadily exert greater control over the state apparatus, their behavior habitually becomes more classically authoritarian.25

Modern alt-right literature is profoundly illiberal as are its international, somewhat more cerebral, sources of inspiration such the French New Right movement or Russian Eurasianism.26 Anti-democratic sentiments are often cloaked in anti-
system terminology: the “managerial state,” “administrative state” or “deep state” are thematic staples in American alt-right writings, which invariably call for their deconstruction—most often in favor of establishing a more direct, and authoritarian, form of rule.27

The West is viewed not as a community of nations but a geographically bounded ethno-cultural bloc.

Last but not least, for reactionary ideologues everything is subordinated to a larger metaphysical struggle, with the language of identity taking clear precedence over the language of rights. In their mind, the West is not so much a community of nations tied by liberal political principles as a geographically bounded ethno-cultural bloc.28

The current U.S. president has, for his part, repeatedly manifested authoritarian tendencies. In addition to lambasting the press, and lamenting the independence of the judiciary, Donald Trump has questioned the electoral process and called for physical violence against political opponents.29 Over the decades, he has praised foreign autocrats for the “strength” of their leadership—even following the massacre of civilian populations—and has called on the U.S. military to commit war crimes, most notably by threatening to “take out” terrorists’ families.30 His vision of the West, as we shall see in greater detail below, is narrowly defined, exclusionary, and deemphasizes the shared intellectual inheritance of the Enlightenment. Constitutional checks and balances may have succeeded—for now—in curbing some of his more egregious efforts at executive overreach, but it remains evident that the 45th president remains an authoritarian at heart.31

The Reactionary Elements in Trump’s Foreign Policy

The first section of this essay sought to demonstrate three things: First, that despite the diversity of far right movements throughout history, there are certain constants in American reactionary thinking. These constants—which act as unifying impulses—are nativism, conspiracism, and a tendency toward authoritarianism. Second, the alt-right—withstanding the protestations of some of its contemporary flagbearers—is firmly situated within this school of thought. In effect, the alt-right can be viewed as an umbrella movement that aims to better amalgamate formerly atomized far right groups via the use of internet and social media.32 As one excellent recent study noted, “the ability for far-right individuals to network, collaborate, and come together quickly around breaking news issues, and their knack for creating spectacle that appeals to news media,” has made it
possible for the alt-right to better “surface propaganda and effectively spread misinformation.” Finally—and perhaps most controversially—Donald J. Trump is clearly something of a vessel for this counter-enlightenment tradition.

How does this domestic political reality affect the U.S. approach to foreign and defense policy under the Trump administration? The academic literature shows that the prior assumptions, beliefs and prejudices of political leaders play an important role in the legitimation and conduct of grand strategy. This is especially true within the American system, where the executive branch holds considerable sway over crafting the nation’s external affairs. To what extent, therefore, can one detect a reactionary component to this administration’s foreign policy? How have certain ideational constructs from the far right begun to filter—or migrate—into contemporary American statecraft?

The following section briefly charts this ongoing process, first by explaining how the motive power of American nativism has led to a revived focus on protectionism and to a more transactional approach to alliance management. This attitudinal shift has been accompanied by an effort to abrogate U.S. moral leadership, largely by downplaying the language and history of American exceptionalism. Meanwhile, the conspiratorial character of reactionary politics has been reflected in the president’s rejection of the scientific consensus regarding climate change, in his suspicion vis-à-vis preexisting multilateral arrangements, and in his conflictual rapport with the U.S. national security bureaucracy. Last but not least, the president and certain of his closest advisers have sought to promote their own ideology overseas, by embracing a body of thought known as traditionalism.

**The End of American Exceptionalism**

There is a long history of isolationism in American foreign policy. As one French historian has aptly noted, the United States has almost incessantly oscillated between “protection and projection.” Indeed, prior to the catalytic experience of World War II, it was the young republic’s isolationist proclivities that often ended up prevailing over the budding internationalism of presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. At first glance, Donald Trump’s candidacy may seem like a return to this tradition. In the course of his campaign, the business mogul promoted a narrower and more mercantilist approach to U.S. foreign policy, savaging almost every aspect of America’s postwar project—from NATO to NAFTA. During his inauguration speech, the 45th U.S. president
painted a grim picture of a ravaged nation that had been misled and thoroughly taken advantage of. Trump said that the United States had made “other countries rich,” while its “wealth, strength and confidence” had “disappeared over the horizon,” and it had subsidized “the armies of other countries” at the expense of its own military.39

It would be a mistake, however, to frame Donald Trump’s assault on the postwar order as just another swing of the pendulum, and as a grand strategic homecoming after decades of imperial overextension.40 His brand of isolationism—along with that of some of his intellectual fellow travelers in the alt-right—is infused with nativism, and leavened by illiberalism. Unmoored from the nation’s founding principles, it differs sharply from earlier forms of American isolationism, which still sought to erect the young republic as a democratic role model, and as a “shining city on the hill.”41

These nativist tendencies differ sharply from earlier forms of American isolationism.

The nativist tendencies have been most apparent in the administration’s restrictive attitude toward both legal and illegal immigration, and in its—thus far unsuccessful—attempt to completely bar entry to the United States to millions of individuals based on their country of origin. With regard to international trade, it has been evident via the president’s repeated threats to initiate trade wars and engage in acts of economic reprisal against geopolitical competitors, and by his immediate withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).42 Unabashed mercantilism, or “economic nationalism,” has been accompanied by a more transactional approach to statecraft, and by a habit of linking a partner or ally’s value to the nature of their trade balance with the United States.43

In a 1990s study of the effects of competing national ideologies on U.S. foreign policy, a group of political scientists suggested—somewhat counterintuitively—that nativists, while most likely to be “concerned about foreign intrusions, whether through immigration or investment,” might also be more prone to military action against perceived threats to the American homeland.44 This finding seems to have been borne out by some of the early actions undertaken by the Trump administration. Despite running on a platform promising greater disengagement from the world, the 45th president has deployed additional forces in Afghanistan, upped the tempo and force levels of the counter-ISIL campaign in the Levant, and loosened the rules of engagement for covert kinetic operations.45 He has not hesitated to provide vivid demonstrations of American military prowess, ordering punitive cruise missile strikes against the Assad regime following its reuse of chemical weapons, and dropping the MOAB—or “mother of all bombs”—on cave-lurking militants in Afghanistan. Interestingly, it is some of
these recent initiatives that have generated the most criticism within an alt-right online community usually supportive of the administration.\textsuperscript{46} As we shall see in the next section, how Donald Trump manages these competing tendencies—a desire to reduce American overseas involvement on one hand, with a noted taste for military action and pageantry on the other—will prove critical.

Perhaps an even more important question, however, is how the more illiberal aspects of reactionary thought have begun to affect Washington’s rapport with both its allies and its great power competitors such as Russia and China. In May 2017, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn penned an op-ed for the Wall Street Journal, titled “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone.” They stated that their commander-in-chief had “a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a global community but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”\textsuperscript{47} The article should no doubt be viewed as an awkward attempt to reconcile the two writers’ own, more traditional internationalist leanings with their commander-in-chief’s narrow vision. Nevertheless, it was interesting in what it chose to omit in its ardent defense of sharp-elbowed competition. As in a multitude of other foreign policy speeches and statements since the advent of the new administration, the language of exceptionalism was absent, and there was no reassertion of a desire for America moral leadership on the international stage.\textsuperscript{48} Democracy and human rights promotion have drifted to the periphery of American statecraft, which appears to have been abruptly shorn of its messianic dimension in favor of a desiccated realism.

One cannot decouple this troubling evolution from the reactionary ideology that propelled Donald Trump to victory. The billionaire populist’s disavowal of the founding principles of the American republic—its creedal nature and basis in civic rather than cultural nationalism—has naturally also transmogrified into a renunciation of its international mission. After all, both are intrinsically linked. America’s unique sense of political community and acceptance of pluralism has historically lent ballast to its postwar internationalism and “ethical egoism”—to borrow an expression initially coined by Henry Kissinger.\textsuperscript{49} It has also provided the “ideational glue” to its alliances with like-minded democratic partners, and the intellectual foundations to its refusal to let authoritarian powers carve out exclusionary spheres of influence.

Since assuming the presidency, Donald Trump has systematically devalued some of the United States’ most important alliance relationships, presenting them as little more than drains on U.S resources.\textsuperscript{50} He has demonstrated a reluctance to fully endorse NATO’s Article V, and has done little to conceal his hostility toward the European Union and United Nations.\textsuperscript{51} At the same time, he has repeatedly expressed a desire to reach some form of grand bargain with Moscow, and has displayed an attitude toward Beijing that can best be described as erratic.\textsuperscript{52}
The U.S. commander-in-chief has also perpetuated his longstanding habit of praising the alleged “efficiency” of brutal autocrats and human rights violators, ranging from Vladimir Putin to Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte. This tendency—to disregard the role of democratic values when establishing the United States’ hierarchy of relationships—should be viewed in the same light as Donald Trump’s moral equivocation when urged to condemn neo-Nazi groups more forcefully than their opponents. Whether in the domestic or international arena, illiberalism operates within the same normative void.

Conspiracism and Paranoia

One should not assume, however, that this narrowing of America’s foreign policy vision under Trump has been accompanied by a greater—albeit colder—form of rationalism. As noted earlier, reactionary thought is inherently conducive to expressions of conspiracy and paranoia. As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin once noted, a reactionary is someone who subscribes, first and foremost, to the “primacy of the given, not of the analytic intellect, (...) the free imagination, not logic.”

The American far right’s elaborate conspiracy theories regarding the U.S. federal government (and particularly its intelligence agencies) and multilateral organizations have, to a certain extent, been mainstreamed by the Trumpian wing of the Republican Party. This has occurred, most notably, through the spread of the narrative of a so-called “deep state” that aims to undermine Donald Trump’s foreign and domestic policy agendas. More commonly employed in reference to “states within a state” in countries such as Egypt and Turkey, the expression has long been popular within the online communities of the alt-right and militia movement.

The president and his allies, whether in the alt-right or elsewhere, have promoted the deep state narrative, openly accusing elements of the U.S. national security bureaucracy of working against their own country’s interests. Meanwhile, former chief strategist Stephen Bannon—now back at the helm of the alt-right publication Breitbart—has argued that the Trump administration is engaged in the “deconstruction of the administrative state”—another expression whose origin is to be found at the far right of the political spectrum. To the extent that personnel is policy, Bannon’s claim appears to be grounded in facts. As of now, a record number of senate-confirmable positions in the field of national security have yet to be filled, and the U.S. State Department is grappling with mammoth cuts to its budget and personnel.

Conspiracism also lies at the heart of some of the more poisonous factional disputes that have erupted within the White House over the past year, between reactionary advisers and their more moderate counterparts, who have been accused by
the alt-right of being “globalists” intent on sabotaging Donald Trump’s nationalist agenda. 58

**Traditionalism**

To the extent that there is some form of transnational ideology guiding the Trump administration’s actions, it is traditionalism. Spearheaded by far right intellectuals such as the Frenchman Alain de Benoist or the Russian Alexander Dugin, traditionalism is anti-cosmopolitan, anti-secular, illiberal, and suffused with decadentism—a warped, *fin de siècle* romanticism that centers on the West’s supposed civilizational decline. 59 This declinist persuasion is accompanied by “heritage populism” and by a desire to return to a nebulously defined set of traditional values. 60 Traditionalists are convinced that the “Judeo-Christian West” has been almost fatally weakened by the forces of postmodernism and ethno-cultural pluralism, and is ensnared in an existential struggle with rival civilizational units such as the Muslim world. 61 This is not an expression of classical political conservatism, with its prudent focus on tradition and continuity, but something more febrile and irrational—characterized by an attachment to “lifeless roots, contrived by romantic nostalgia.” 62 Domestically, this has expressed itself via the administration’s decision to wade into the culture wars surrounding the continued existence of confederate monuments, and in its propagation of the so-called “mythology of the lost cause”—an alternative (and flawed) reading of the history of the Civil War, which eulogizes Confederate generals such as Robert E. Lee and deemphasizes the centrality of the struggle against slavery. 63

It is also through this ideological prism that one should view Donald Trump’s July 2017 speech in Poland, a country where, to paraphrase the political philosopher Ivan Krastev, “the language of liberalism is increasingly exhausted.” 64 The West referenced in the U.S. president’s speech was defined almost exclusively as a cultural unit, rather than as a likeminded community of nations dedicated to the advancement of political liberalism. 65 Described by one sympathizer as an “extrapolation of America First to the international level,” the speech stressed the importance of tradition and faith, but also—interestingly—the supposed threat posed by “the steady creep of government bureaucracy that drains the vitality and wealth of our people.” 66

Traditionalism is also at the root of Vladimir Putin’s popularity within U.S. far right circles, where he is revered as a symbol of Christian tradition, white nationalism and martial virility—a personality cult that is actively encouraged by the
The potency of the traditionalist mythos surrounding Putin may also partially explain Donald Trump’s surprising levels of *bonhomie* towards him.68

In short, there is a clear interrelation between certain long held ideas and impulses within the American far right and the foreign policy of this administration. It is tempting to look at the commander-in-chief’s rambling speeches, multiple pirouettes on social issues, and history of support to the Democratic party, and conclude that the movement he leads has no ideological core—and therefore no clear stance on foreign affairs.69 Such a line of thinking—while no doubt intellectually reassuring—is also glib and misguided. This essay has shown that there is a clear historic lineage to the Trumpian vision of foreign policy. Its roots are buried deep in the dark undersoil of American reactionary thought. It is a nervous and conspiracy-driven worldview—one that depreciates alliances, scoffs at multilateralism, and accommodates authoritarianism. Most importantly, it is at profound odds with the GOP’s own strong tradition of conservative internationalism.

The Battle for the Soul of the Republican Party

Prior to 2016, every far right presidential candidate—from George Wallace to Pat Buchanan—had been vanquished at the ballot box. When future historians debate the reasons behind Donald Trump’s capture of the White House, they will no doubt point to a variety of factors: from the corrosive polarization of U.S. politics and media to the legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the 2008 financial crisis. The main story, however, will be the struggle for the soul of the Republican Party in the face of the rise of the reactionary right. This philosophical battle mirrors, in many ways, one waged by European social democrats against the Communist left in the early decades of the Cold War.70

Since the 2009 emergence of the Tea Party, a fiery populist movement, the GOP’s proud internationalist tradition has been increasingly challenged from within. With the victory of Donald Trump, mainstream conservatives now find themselves locked in an ideological battle with a newly aroused reactionary wing that hails from an altogether bleaker tradition. Indeed, the most hot-blooded ideological foot soldiers within this intellectual sub-current readily confess that they are part of a “post-conservative” or “anti-conservative” tradition that seeks to forcibly reconfigure the ideational DNA of the Republican Party.71 Leading far right theorists invoke the work of Antonio

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**The GOP’s proud internationalist tradition has been increasingly challenged from within.**
Gramsci, an Italian Marxist theorist, and his writings on “cultural hegemony,” arguing that they need to overcome the more temperate, Burkean conservative tradition through a sustained “metapolitical” assault. In so doing, they do not hesitate to express their willingness to cooperate with far left activists and thought leaders, either for purely tactical reasons or out of the hope that they can eventually be brought into the illiberal fold.

As we have seen in the course of this essay, this cannibalistic assault on American conservatism has clear foreign policy implications. The toxic domestic aspects of the alt-right’s ideology have had equally noxious second-order effects on U.S. statecraft. These effects have been amplified by a U.S. commander-in-chief who not only shares but also seeks to amplify these reactionary worldviews. Sanguine observers might point to the fact that Donald Trump is surrounded by a good number of more moderate aides, who can work to dampen his most damaging impulses while keeping the flame of American internationalism and moral leadership alive. This does not seem to have been the case thus far, however.

More broadly, leading international relations theorists have demonstrated that in order to radically reshape how their nation deals with the world, groups need to first succeed in deeply institutionalizing their ideas, primarily by overturning the preexisting consensus. Strategic readjustment then usually only occurs following a profound and collective reformulation of national identities and interests. By any measure, the American far right is far from achieving this goal. The Trump administration continues to be riven by factional disputes between reactionaries and internationalists. Some of the leading figures connected to the alt-right such as Stephen Bannon and Sebastian Gorka have, of course, left the White House, while others—such as Stephen Miller and Michael Anton—remain firmly ensconced in the building. However, mere physical proximity to the Oval Office has never appeared to guarantee influence within this White House, whose chief resident has preserved a habit of regularly soliciting advice from an eclectic grouping of outside advisors. In a case such as Bannon’s, leaving the White House seems to have proven empowering, as it has allowed him to more openly indulge in media-driven influence campaigns—all while retaining the ear of the President. Within this byzantine setting, the balance of influence seems to shift on an almost weekly—if not daily—basis.

There is evidence to suggest that, at least on some fronts, the internationalist faction has prevailed—for instance by preventing the president from precipitously exiting NAFTA or completely wrecking the Iran nuclear deal—while on others it has floundered, as witnessed by the announced withdrawal from the Paris climate accord. For the time being, the GOP-controlled Congress—while reluctant to openly criticize the President on most issues—also seems reticent to embrace some of the more controversial aspects of an America First foreign policy. Its decision to levy a new series of sanctions against Russia provides one such
indication of its unwillingness to break with the United States’ historic struggle against authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{78} As mentioned earlier, Donald Trump has also signed off on certain military initiatives—such as the Syrian missile strikes or the mini-surge in Afghanistan—that have angered the reactionary elements of his base.\textsuperscript{79}

Public opinion polling also appears to show that, by and large, the American populace remains profoundly committed to internationalism and to living within an open democratic society.\textsuperscript{80} That said, on closer examination it also reveals some troubling trendlines, particularly among Republican voters. For example, it has become apparent that now close to 32 percent of Republican voters have a positive image of Vladimir Putin, while during the election 62 percent (compared with 47 percent of Democrats) stated that they favored “letting other countries deal with their own problems.”\textsuperscript{81} An October 2016 poll also indicated that more and more Americans—across the political spectrum—are skeptical of global economic engagement.\textsuperscript{82}

It is around these issues that the future of the Republican Party’s foreign policy will be decided. With a man of the far right occupying the highest office in the land, internationalist conservatives will have their work cut out for them. As one historical overview of Republican foreign policy has noted, “Presidents have acted as focal points for their party, and Republican presidents have been given remarkable leeway to redefine not only conservative foreign policies but what it means to be a conservative in the United States.”\textsuperscript{83}

What will happen, though, now that the Republican president is not a mainstream conservative, but a rabble-rousing reactionary? The answer to that question will prove critical, not only for the GOP, but also the future of the international order.

Notes

3. This was first clearly laid out in then-candidate Trump’s speech at the Center for the National Interest, in April 2016. See “Donald Trump Delivers Foreign Policy Speech,” (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, April 27, 2016), https://cfrni.org/recent-events/donald-trump-delivers-foreign-policy-speech/.
8. Leonard Zeskind has described these differences as “somewhat akin to the distinctions between reformists and revolutionaries. They both seek the same goal but differ over the manner in which they work toward it.” Leonard Zeskind, Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2009), pp.ix-x.
22. For a dissection of the role of this online culture in the 2016 election, see Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2017).


27. The term “administrative state” originated in traditional conservative writings, where it was used to describe the overly rapid expansion of the federal bureaucracy. It was then reappropriated by more reactionary thinkers, who depicted it as an existential threat, and as a “perversion of constitutional self-government.” See Steven F. Hayward, “The Threat to Liberty,” *Claremont Review of Books*, February 1, 2017, http://www.clairemont.org/crb/article/the-threat-to-liberty/.

28. In far right circles, this is commonly referred to as Occidentalism—and articulated around a virulent opposition to the ethno-religious pluralism that characterizes most Western societies. For a sampling of such thinking, see Tom Sunic, “The West Against Europe,” *Occidental Observer*, June 2, 2013, http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/2013/06/02/the-west-against-europe/.


40. This has been the defense proffered by some of the more intellectual supporters of Trump’s foreign policy, some of whom have since come to regret their decision. See, for example, Julius Krein, “I Voted for Trump. And I Sorely Regret It,” The New York Times, August 17, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/opinion/sunday/i-voted-for-trump-and-i-sorely-regret-it.html?r=0.


52. See Ely Ratner and Samir Kumar, “The United States is Losing Asia to China,” Foreign Policy, May 12, 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/12/the-united-states-is-losing-asia-to-china/.


62. According to the political theorist Peter Viereck, the true conservative must be able to distinguish between “living roots” (traditions that stem from the past but continue to hold relevance) and “lifeless roots, that either never existed or no longer exist.” See Peter Viereck, *Conservatism Revisited: The Revolt Against Ideology* (New York: Scribner, 1949), 143.


68. Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman have pointed to a broader phenomenon that they term the “de-Europeanzation” of the American strategic mind, whereby the U.S. no longer attaches as much importance to preserving the transatlantic bond. Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (London: Endeavour Press, 2017), Chapter 4.


71. For one such example, see Kevin DeAnna, “The Alternative Right and the Impossibility of Conservatism,” *Taki’s Magazine*, July 26, 2009, http://takimag.com/article/the_alternative_right#axzz4qhJE49FO.


