

American Affairs and U.S. Foreign Policy

A new journal, *American Affairs*, offers a compelling critique of Republican foreign policy, but its prescription for a conservative nationalist alternative would cause more problems than it would solve.

By Jack Thompson

Donald Trump won the 2016 election thanks in part to his foreign policy agenda. The voters who supported Trump prioritized issues such as international trade, immigration, and terrorism – all of which were integral to the president’s promise to put “America First”.¹ But it has been difficult to find an expert, of any political persuasion, willing to endorse it as a plausible way to make the U.S. safer and more prosperous.

Into the breach strides *American Affairs*. This new publication offers a powerful defense of Trumpism – the worldview, if not the man. And, judging from the attention it has attracted during its brief existence, *American Affairs* is already one of the most influential voices in the conservative firmament. The journal demonstrates that Trump’s criticism of the liberal world order, and his “America First” credo, though inconsistent and often incoherent, nonetheless leverage ideas that resonate with many Americans – a point which many critics of the president may wish to consider.

However, the new journal also underscores the fact that the conservative nationalist approach to foreign policy, no matter how skillfully presented, is flawed. This should serve as a warning to those who believe that the U.S. can be strengthened through a process of even partial withdrawal from the vicissitudes of international politics and trade.

The Context for the Founding of *American Affairs*

American Affairs seeks to transform the Republican Party. It views the GOP – and, incidentally, the Democratic Party – as hopelessly beholden to a set of “globalist, neoliberal” policies that benefit members of the political and financial elite, but few others. It seeks to revive the party by abandoning the long-standing conservative commitment to limited government, free trade, and internationalism. Instead, it pursues what it characterizes as a populist approach that champions a set of nationalist policies beholden to neither the prevalent conservative or progressive paradigms, nor the elites who champion them. Reforming the GOP’s foreign policy is an integral part of this mission.

KEY POINTS

- Conservative internationalism is losing its dominance in the GOP, as the party’s base grows increasingly leery of the liberal world order
- *American Affairs* represents the likely future of Republican foreign policy/national security thinking
- Its nationalistic orientation is more in tune with the party’s base
- In spite of its potential political appeal, *American Affairs* advocates an approach that would harm, rather than advance, U.S. interests

The launch of *American Affairs* comes at a propitious time. Millions of Americans experienced the Great Recession as a disaster. They – along with much of Middle America – believe that policymakers have done little to address the profound economic and political challenges facing people like them. They are disenchanted with politics as usual and view with hostility the economic and cultural changes that have accompanied globalization.

Furthermore, crucial planks of the Republican Party's platform are anathema to many conservative voters. The party's stance on immigration is too moderate for them. They see illegal immigration as a national emergency that depresses wages, takes jobs from deserving Americans, and threatens to destroy the nation's culture. Similarly, the party's long-running commitment to free trade is viewed by many conservative voters as being good for members of the elite, but a job killer for everyone else. Furthermore, the George W. Bush administration's prosecution of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is viewed by most conservatives as having been incompetent – and possibly ill-conceived.

As a result, the party's traditional commitment to leadership in world affairs is viewed suspiciously by more Republicans than at any point since the onset of the Cold War. Although distrust of the liberal world order has always existed among grassroots conservatives – in particular the role of international organizations – this revival of anti-internationalism is of a fundamentally different nature.

Some writers have compared it to the conservative nationalism of figures such as Robert Taft, the Republican Senator from Ohio who was a thoughtful skeptic of internationalism in the 1940s. But Taft would have been horrified by the xenophobia and penchant for conspiracy theories that characterizes much of the right's new anti-internationalism. Joseph McCarthy, the infamous Senator from Wisconsin, represents a better historical comparison. McCarthy's opportunistic anti-communism functioned mainly as a strategy for scoring political points against elites in both parties, rather than as a principled approach to foreign policy. However, it resonated with many culturally conservative voters in Middle America.² McCarthy, and other fringe populists on the right, served as a template for Pat Buchanan, the former speechwriter for Richard Nixon. His advocacy of traditional cultural values, protectionist trade policies, and an anti-internationalist foreign policy – along with a taste for conspiracy theories – formed the basis for surprisingly robust presidential campaigns during the 1990s.

This is the backdrop for the creation of *American Affairs*. Tens of millions of culturally conservative voters are am-

bivalent about, or even hostile to, the agenda that GOP leaders have long prioritized. By 2016, these people were open to candidates that embodied a style, and advocated a set of policies, that members of the conservative elite have mostly ignored. Donald Trump's disdain for the Republican establishment, his ambivalence about the liberal world order, and his politically incorrect rhetoric appealed to a constituency that has mostly voted for the GOP, but often without enthusiasm.

The Agenda of *American Affairs*

Several themes are prominent in the initial issues of *American Affairs*. Perhaps the most important is hostility towards the elite. The journal blames the problems facing the U.S. on what it views as a misguided worldview that predominates among leaders in both political parties – neoliberalism and its close cousins, globalism and cosmopolitanism. Michael Lind, for instance, argues that the embrace of neoliberalism has allowed elites in the private and public sectors – what he calls “managerial minorities” – to “enact policies that advantage their members to the detriment of their fellow citizens”.

The antidote, according to the journal, is to focus on preserving and promoting the vital interests of the U.S. The second unifying theme of *American Affairs*, then, is nationalism. What is often dismissed in the media as “populism”, the journal contends, is actually a healthy desire among millions of voters to reclaim control of the country from the globalist elite. They want policymakers to focus on what is good for the average American, not for other countries or for some imaginary international community.

Despair about the Trump administration's hostility to the liberal world order, the journal argues, is therefore

FURTHER READING

America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century

Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, Oxford University Press, 2016

This book provides a sophisticated and convincing defense of the need for the U.S. to remain fully engaged in the maintenance of the liberal world order.

Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II

Colin Dueck, Princeton University Press, 2010

Dueck offers the best critique of U.S. foreign policy from the conservative nationalist perspective.

White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics

Marisa Abrajano & Zoltan L. Hajnal, Princeton University Press, 2016

The authors document in detail how and why fears about immigration have prompted millions of white Americans to leave the Democratic Party and become Republicans.

misguided. That is because – to underscore the third theme of *American Affairs* – the liberal world order is not necessarily good for the U.S. Contributors to the journal hold differing views on this subject. Some, such as Michael Anton, see it as bloated and in need of reform, but not necessarily irreparable. Others, such as Ted R. Bromund, Michael Auslin, and Colin Dueck, argue that there never was such a thing as a liberal world order. Instead, there was merely an expansion during the Cold War of U.S. and Western political and economic practices and less frequent resort to “machtpolitik”. This process is now under threat by the return of “geopolitics” to key parts of the world, such as the South China Sea. Regardless of such differences, however, a common thread running through these essays is the contention that preservation of the liberal world order, as an end in and of itself, is misguided.

What sort of policy recommendations do these themes suggest? In the realm of grand strategy, contributors contend that alliances, such as NATO, will be strengthened by demanding more from other nations and by narrowing the focus of activities to problems such as mass illegal immigration and terrorism. They argue that it is unrealistic and counterproductive to view the liberal world order as encompassing the entire international system. Democratic governance, Ofir Haivry and Yoram Hazony submit, is by no means possible in every country. Encouraging its spread is at best pointless, they believe, and at worst destabilizing. Authors such as Reuven Brenner question the sustainability of pivotal supranational institutions such as the European Union and the Eurozone.

American Affairs also offers advice about economic and immigration policy. Some contributors see the current trade and monetary system as harmful. Clyde Prestowitz argues that, in order to prevent the overvaluation of the dollar, and thus address the trade deficit, the exchange rate system should be reformed. He also advocates lowering the corporate tax rate and acting more aggressively to counteract dumping and overcapacity, in order to rebuild domestic industries and combat the offshoring of jobs. As for immigration, the editors favor a “Canadian” approach, which would prioritize the admission of highly skilled workers and seek to eliminate illegal immigration.

The Political Appeal of *American Affairs*

American Affairs offers seemingly plausible solutions to the issues that are most important to Trump’s core supporters.³ A more nationalistic economic policy – which treats international trade as a zero sum competition – would be welcome to voters who view trade agreements specifically, and globalization more broadly, with skepticism.



U.S. President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a ‘USA Thank You Tour’ event at Giant Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania, 15 December 2016. *Lucas Jackson / Reuters.*

The journal would also dramatically reduce the immigration of low-skilled workers. This is appealing to Trump voters, who view immigration as a problem, on two fronts. It would, argue the editors, lessen downward pressure on wages by reducing competition from immigrants who accept lower remuneration. Though *American Affairs* leaves it unsaid, this approach would also slow the process by which the U.S. is becoming more diverse, which many cultural conservatives view with alarm.⁴

The agenda of *American Affairs* should also appeal to many potential Republican voters when it comes to grand strategy. The commitment of conservative internationalists, such as John McCain, to preserving the liberal world order has always puzzled many grassroots conservatives.⁵ To be sure, they overwhelmingly favor maintaining a powerful military, and support using force when necessary, especially against suspected terrorists. They also applaud hawkish rhetoric and invocations of American exceptionalism. However, they question the feasibility of fostering democracy in far-flung countries, such as Afghanistan, not least because their communities supply a disproportionate percentage of the troops who operate on the front lines of such efforts. The journal’s call for an embrace of realpolitik – for viewing the world through the lens of interests, not values, and for eschewing democracy promotion, will be music to the ears of many conservatives.⁶ The journal’s more restrained approach to alliances will also strike a chord with many Trump voters, a significant minority of whom believe that NATO is bad for the U.S.⁷

American Affairs and Conservative Foreign Policy

American Affairs molds Trump’s inchoate pronouncements into a coherent worldview. In doing so, it highlights the significant political and intellectual shortcomings of conventional Republican foreign policy. Because *American Affairs* more closely embodies the priorities of the majority of

conservative voters, it likely represents the future of the Republican Party's foreign policy.

Nevertheless, there are notable shortcomings in the journal's approach. For one thing, the journal's antidote to the GOP's conservative internationalist tendencies would have worrisome consequences. By treating international democratic norms, institutions, and alliances as at best outdated, and at worst threats to national sovereignty, *American Affairs* would dramatically reduce the ability of the U.S. to shape the international system to its own advantage. Despite its many flaws, the emergence of the liberal world order has been the most important factor in promoting peace and stability since the end of World War Two – and it can play the same role in the years to come, if the U.S. remains committed to it. In contrast, even partial withdrawal would significantly increase instability in the international system, while doing little to make the U.S. safer or more prosperous. The notion of Fortress America was dangerous in the 1930s; it would be utter folly to use it as the basis for a grand strategy today.

Furthermore, regardless of its intentions, millions of Americans will be offended by the journal's anti-immigrant, culturally conservative message and its disdain for "identity politics". Racial and religious minorities, in particular, will interpret the economic and political nationalism advocated by *American Affairs* as an implicit warning that they are not real Americans – and never will be. Throughout the modern era, politicians touting America First-type messages have done so in order to stoke the anger and fear of culturally conservative voters. As Trump's candidacy in 2016 demonstrates, this is a recipe for encouraging white nationalism and extremism.⁸

In other words, *American Affairs* may want to channel a Taftian conservative nationalism, but it will instead

encourage the more insidious conservative populism that has been the hallmark of demagogues such as Joseph McCarthy. This would not improve Republican foreign policy – it would simply trade one set of significant problems for another.

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