

Patrick Lawrence

The president changes, the imperium remains

“My administration is leaving the next administration with a very strong hand to play,” Joe Biden declared last week at the State Department, where he presented a sort of farewell review of his regime’s foreign policy record. “And we’re leaving them an America with more friends and stronger alliances, whose adversaries are weak and under pressure—an America who once again is leading.”

Mangled grammar aside, there was a surfeit of this kind of thing during Biden’s final days in the White House. Biden and Secretary of State Blinken spoke incessantly of their successes as statesmen as Donald Trump’s inauguration drew near. This is Biden, you see. He spent the whole of his 53 years in public life on the assumption that if you say something often enough, regardless of its distance from reality, it will eventually be accepted as true.

This works in American politics to a very regrettable extent. William James, the early and noted psychologist, explained the phenomenon well in an 1894 essay called “[The Will to Believe](#).” Americans, a fundamentally religious people, are given to accepting things as true even when there is no evidence of their truth. This was James’s very useful insight. A lot of senators and congressmen have traveled far over the years on this unfortunate national trait. Biden’s great miscalculation was to assume the chicanery and log-rolling of his decades in the Senate would get

him through when he tried to sell snake oil, as we Americans put it, not only in his district but to the rest of the world.

It is difficult to overstate the mess Joseph R. Biden, Jr., leaves behind. He has made America not merely a sponsor in a genocide: It has fully participated in terrorist Israel's racist brutalities. He has dragged America into a proxy war with Russia he has lost in the trenches and skies of Ukraine; the sanctions regime Biden imposed against the Russian Federation has destabilized America's European clients. Across the other ocean, relations with China have collapsed into open hostility thanks to Antony Blinken's gross ineptitude.

The Biden administration has, altogether, hollowed out America's standing in the world, laid utter waste to the nation's traditional claim to stand for human rights and human dignity; the democracy-vs.-autocracy theme is exposed as a farce that is not funny.

It is interesting to note that in Joe Biden's very last days in the White House this record became fair game for the liberal media—the supercilious MSNBC high among them—that had so recently lauded Biden's every move. We are far from a common acceptance that Joe Biden's four years in power marked an acceleration in the decline of the American imperium, but permissible mainstream opinion has tilted in this direction, if subtly, as Biden steps back after 53 years in public life.

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Donald Trump was formally inaugurated as I typed these sentences, at midday on 20 January East Coast American time. It remains the political fashion among the liberals who dominate American discourse—their late-hour bouts of honesty notwithstanding—to forecast that the Biden regime’s artfully concocted soufflé will collapse quickly as Trump begins his second four years in the White House. It would be a mistake to accept this version of the nation’s political chronology. If Joe Biden hastened the pace of America’s decline, the four years to come under Trump are almost certain further to accelerate it.

I see more continuity than departure in the transition that occurred in Washington this week. The U.S., to put this point another way, entered a new era during Biden’s years, and Trump offers little to no promise there is any turning back from it. America remains a powerful nation, but its strength—to draw a distinction I consider significant—has waned dramatically these past four years.

Trump acknowledged in [his inaugural address](#)—readily, with alacrity—the mess with which the Biden regime has left him. “The pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair,” he said. “We now have a government that cannot manage even a simple crisis at home, while at the same time stumbling into a continuing catalog of catastrophic events abroad.”

All true. But in the course of these remarks, this:

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The golden age of America begins right now. From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be

the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer.... America will soon be greater, stronger and far more exceptional than ever before.

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The only way to read this speech is upside-down. It is greatly encouraging to hear a new president speak honestly of the failings of a nation wherein failure is rarely if ever spoken of. “We must be honest about the challenges we face,” Trump said at one point. Excellently stated. There is no progressing—in politics, diplomacy, love, war, or any other sphere—without first identifying with total clarity where one stands.

But it is disheartening, to put it mildly, to see Trump then indulge in the same delusions that has got America into precisely the sort of trouble into which Biden regime has led the nation.

A golden age? Greater, stronger, more exceptional? This is a nation that cannot be honest even with itself, to say nothing of with others. This is a nation that cannot face what has become of it. It is a nation, then that has little hope of progressing these next four years.

America is an imperium, to turn this matter another way. It is a state that operates on the basis of its ideology. Nations of this kind tend to be incapable of change.

From Biden to Trump we are likely to see to see a change in style more than in substance.

Taking Greenland and the Panama Canal by force, annexing Canada as a fifty-first state, renaming the Gulf of Mexico the Gulf of America: Such ideas, all articulated by Trump since his election victory last November, are a measure mostly of his incompetence to hold America's highest office. But there is something else in this silliness we must not miss: Donald Trump's priority may be making America great again, but he is not stepping back from the projection of imperial power or the ideology of American exceptionalism. No, he is making an old, rather basic mistake: He presumes it is possible to run an empire abroad and a democracy at home.

It is not: As history has shown, it is one or the other but not both. All the early anti-imperialists—Twain, W.E.B. Du Bois, *et al.*—understood this. No American president has since America began its imperial project at the end of the nineteenth century, the exceptions being F.D.R. and Jack Kennedy.

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We do not know with any certainty how Trump and those he will gather around him will address the various crises with which the Biden regime has left him. Trump, the man, is too erratic in his disposition, too undisciplined intellectually, and too easily influenced on any given occasion by, as they say, the last person with whom he speaks. As much to the point, we do not know the extent to which

the Deep State, which subverted various of his first presidential term, will do the same again.

It is obvious Trump is well aware of the Deep State's malevolence this time around, and most of his cabinet choices, by no means all, reflect this. But Tulsi Gabbard, his nominee to serve as director of national intelligence, [has already capitulated](#) the question of the government's legal right to surveil Americans without court-issued surveillance. Marco Rubio, Trump's choice as secretary of state, is a straight-ahead neoconservative.

Trump has said many times ending the war in Ukraine is a near-term priority, and one reads he intends to initiate a telephone call to President Putin in the first days of his, Trump's, administration. But immediately there are questions, serious ones. The Deep State scuttled his earlier attempts to develop a new détente with Moscow. Equally, the Kremlin has made it clear it will insist in any negotiations on a comprehensive new security architecture that addresses Russia's abiding concerns. Will the Deep State permit any such talks? Are Trump and his people capable of diplomacy of this magnitude?

We do not know what went into the ceasefire that took effect in Gaza this past weekend. Did Trump force Netanyahu to accept it, as widely reported? Some analysts suspect he made a deal with the Israeli prime minister: Agree to a ceasefire and I will accept... we can fill in the blank here—annexation of the West Bank, extended Israeli sovereignty in the Golan Heights. Of only one thing can we

be somewhat certain: Trump does not want a war with Iran, in my read. And, if this proves correct, it means he will not permit Israel to start one.

I see faintly encouraging signs that Trump could improve relations with China, so lowering the dangerous level of tensions to which Biden, Blinken, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan stupidly raised them. Trump has all along shown comparatively little interest in trans-Pacific security questions—the South China sea, Taiwan, Beijing’s military buildup. His focus is trade. Trump is likely to prove tough with the Chinese on trade, tariffs, and technology questions. But if he eases off on the security side Beijing may prove more comfortable as an economic competitor if the military rivalry is reduced.

These are three of many questions we must watch in coming months. North Korea is another. Europe and NATO are others. There will be plenty to say. But it is too early to say more than... more than the imperium goes on with a new look.

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