

While Trump deals with China his enemies look within

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 7 October 2020

In 1940, US president Franklin D Roosevelt had support from the man he beat at the election for a ‘principled stand for freedom’.

The enemies of democracy are having a wonderful year, deftly turning the war on the coronavirus into a war against their own citizens.

Freedom House, an organisation that cut its teeth persuading Americans they should fight Hitler, has found evidence of authoritarian overreach in 80 countries.

The pandemic has provided the excuse to impose sweeping emergency powers, the suspension of parliaments, restrictions on movement and assembly, curfews, thuggish policing, harsh penalties and arbitrary arrests.

Illiberal governments from Russia to Cambodia and China have leapt on the chance to crush dissent and tighten their autocratic grip. Previous reports from Freedom House could be read with detachment, particularly from Australia, where the commitment to international freedom once appeared immovable. For a time after the fall of European Communism, we foolishly imagined we’d won an epic victory and that the universalisation of Western liberal democracy marked, in Francis Fukuyama’s phrase, the end of history. Instead autocracy has staged a comeback, notably in Russia and China. Leaders in both countries look on Western liberal democracy with scorn.

Handicapped by years of complacency, we now have a fight on our hands, and we are hardly in the best of shape. The seriousness of our predicament is spelled out by Donald Trump’s former national security adviser Lieutenant General HR McMaster in his new book, *Battlelines: The Fight to Defend the Free World*.

Trump’s critics had been hoping for a dump on the President from a former member of his inner circle. Instead, McMaster’s critical eye turns to previous administrations, from George HW Bush to Barack Obama, whose hopeful aspirations for reform in China overwhelmed any desire to confront unfair economic practices, technology theft, an abysmal human rights record and aggressive military posturing.

“Since the 1990s, US policy betrayed all the elements of strategic narcissism,” he writes. “Wishful thinking, mirror-imaging, confirmation bias, and the belief that others will conform to a US-developed script.”

While the West was pondering its navel, China and Russia have been working towards a common goal of usurping the rules-based order established by the US and its allies after World War II. The Chinese Communist Party “sees freedom of expression as a weakness to be suppressed at home and exploited abroad”, McMaster writes.

A new China policy, fit for the world we live in rather than the world as we would like it to be, may be Trump’s single greatest legacy. It represents the greatest shift in US foreign policy since the Cold War.

It declares zero tolerance for industrial espionage and the intimidation of Chinese students and expat-Chinese communities in the West. It insists that the US must use its influence, backed by military capability, to curb Chinese expansionism and insist the CCP sticks by the rules.

The US and its allies must relearn how to compete on the world stage, McMaster writes. They can win this “cold war” as they did the last one, by demonstrating the natural advantages that flow from freedom of expression, entrepreneurial freedom and the rule of law.

The overriding question is whether we have the stomach for it, given the direction the New Left is trying to take us and its hegemonic grip on our cultural and industrial institutions.

To them, the US is the main cause of the world’s problems. It would be a happier planet if Americans stayed at home on bended knee atoning for their own transgressions. In the New Left’s view of the world, US strategic assertiveness has antagonised China and Russia — and jihadist terrorism is an understandable reaction to the American presence in Muslim lands. They are closely aligned to influential foreign policy realists in opposition to an alleged “crusader mentality” and the costly and seemingly futile attempts to spread democracy.

Autocrats intent on creating a new world order could not wish for more influential or more forgiving friends. They are willing to overlook the persecution of ethnic minorities in China, Russia’s state-sanctioned anti-LGBT vigilantes and Iran’s sickening deaths in custody. In their eyes, the defining battle for justice is being fought not on the streets of Hong Kong but the streets of the US. Their enemy is not the CCP but the Minneapolis police.

As we look towards the presidential election, McMasters reassures us that Trump’s assertive China policy has bipartisan support, despite the vitriol between leaders on almost everything else.

That may be so. But the presidential challenger’s disposition does little to dispel the fear that the US may be one election away from retreat. The intellectual left, after all, are the Democrats’ people. How willingly would they embrace a pivot from, say, Black Lives Matter to the defence of freedom in Taiwan?

In the search for a historical parallel, we are drawn reluctantly to World War II and the formation of the America First Committee in September 1940, one of the country’s largest and most powerful anti-war movements. Its prominent supporters included American heroes such as aviator Charles Lindbergh, industrialist Henry Ford, actor Lillian Gish and architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Future presidents, John F. Kennedy and Gerald Ford also contributed to the organisation.

The committee stood resolutely opposed to US involvement in the war or assistance of any kind to Britain and the other nations in the frontline of the fight for freedom. American democracy was best defended at home not abroad, was its position.

Should Trump be defeated next month, let us hope the victor has the character of Wendell Willkie, the defeated Republican presidential candidate in the 1940 election. Back then, the tussle between interventionists and isolationists was largely taking place among Republicans.

Willkie defied members of his own party and the polls to condemn America First's populist anti-war rallying cry and took a principled stand for freedom with president Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wilkie and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt were founding supporters of Freedom House.

An alternative history, in which the anti-Semitic Lindbergh beats Willkie, becomes the Republican nominee and wins the presidency in a landslide, forms the narrative of Philip Roth's 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*.

In Roth's counterfactual dystopia, Lindbergh signs a non-aggression pact with Hitler and the US descends into paranoid, illiberal chaos while Germany and Japan run amok.

It is a vivid reminder that a world in which the US ceases to lead the fight for freedom is a frightening place.

Let's hope we don't go there, whoever wins on November 3.

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