

Correcting Mistakes

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A quarter-century ago, in January 2001, George W. Bush took the oath of office as President of the United States. “If our country does not lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led,” he proclaimed at his inauguration. “Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos.”

Bush took the reins at probably the height of America’s global power. In the decade after his father had declared victory in the Cold War, no one dared challenge U.S. dominance. Soon that would fundamentally change. 9/11 revealed forces that even

the mighty U.S. could not crush, and sparked a chain reaction that would sweep away the ‘unipolar moment’ in just over two decades. And the global financial crisis in the fall of 2008, triggered by the collapse of the American mortgage market at the end of Bush’s second term, rang the death knell for liberal globalization.

The U.S. National Security Strategy released in December 2025, by the administration of another Republican president, seems quite critical of the post-Cold-War period. American strategies “have not clearly defined what we want,” but instead “stated vague platitudes” and

“often misjudged what we should want.” The Trump administration’s new approach is not grounded in “traditional, political ideology,” but rather “is motivated above all by what works for America—or, in two words, ‘America First.’”

The irony of history. George W. Bush, who inaugurated the era of ‘endless wars’ that is now so condemned in Washington, was initially considered a moderate pragmatist, expected to follow in the footsteps of his realist father and to replace the leftist Clintonites with their democratizing fervor. But 9/11 turned everything upside down, fusing national security concerns and the neoconservative obsession with world revolution.

This is all quite natural. Faced with a threat from nowhere (or everywhere), a deeply ideological, monopolistic power activated every tool at its disposal. But, just as naturally, every tool was damaged in the process. The U.S.’s military was overstretched, its ideology was weaponized and thus discredited, its ends and means were confused.

Twenty-five years is long enough for serious changes even in calmer times—let alone now, when ten years are compressed into one. In a quarter-century, the ‘American

empire’ of Bush’s early tenure (before the Iraq debacle) has given way to the ‘American republic’ invoked by Trumpists. True, critics will say that Bush’s “determined choice” has also been reversed, replacing trust with cynicism and community with chaos. But slogans exist to be turned inside-out whenever necessary. And cynicism is more palatable when frank than when veiled. Compare Trump to the recently deceased Dick Cheney.

American politics, in 2026, are a matter of trying to correct the mistakes that were made during the ‘end of history.’ Such mistakes are many; the U.S. set the global agenda and is principally responsible for the current situation. But unless another black swan throws everything into disarray, the Americans will take lessons from all this that are applicable to them. As for the rest of us, we should take a cue from the self-reflecting superpower, rethinking our goals and strategies in a world without hegemony. A more open, competitive, and anarchic environment offers various opportunities, but is also extremely unforgiving of mistakes, perhaps even more than the centralized ‘liberal world order’ was. Greater reward, greater risk.