

# U.S. Foreign Policy in 2021

Madeleine K. Albright

Twenty years ago, as the second millennium drew to a close, the outlook for America could not have been brighter. The world was at peace, the global economy healthy, and the position of the United States unparalleled. The platform on which George W. Bush ran for president in 2000 referred to the era as “a remarkable time in the life of our country.”<sup>1</sup> Colin Powell, the incoming secretary of state, told Congress, “we will need to work well together because we have a great challenge before us. But it is not a challenge of survival. ... It is our own incredible success that we face.”<sup>2</sup>

Like any inheritance, incredible success can be invested productively or not. Tragically, America’s political capital has largely been squandered in this no-longer-new century. The historic blunder of the Iraq War, the 2008 financial crisis, and the badly mismanaged response to the coronavirus pandemic stand out, but there have been other missteps— an underappreciation for diplomacy, an overreliance on the military, neglect of our allies, and a failure to address domestic problems such as political polarization, systemic racism, and rising economic inequality. As a result, the United States is entering the third decade of the twenty-first century with respect for American leadership lower than it has been in the memory of any living person.

As a child in Europe, I hid in bomb shelters while Nazi planes flew overhead. Listening to the radio, I exulted at the voice of Winston Churchill and the wondrous news that American troops were crossing the Atlantic. I welcomed those soldiers on the streets of London, and I was seven years old when they hit the beaches at Normandy and later repelled Hitler’s army at the Battle of the Bulge. By the time the war was won, I was eight, anxious to discover what peace might be like and already in love with Americans in uniform.

To Abraham Lincoln, the United States was “the last best hope of Earth.”<sup>3</sup> To me, it will always be the land of opportunity. I could not imagine wanting to live anywhere else, nor conceive what the twentieth century would have been like without my adopted country. I have had no greater honor in my life than to sit behind a sign that read “United States of America.” That is why it is so disturbing to me that so many people around the world have come to believe that America’s influence is negative, and that we provoke more conflicts than we prevent.

Contrary to perceptions overseas, most Americans would prefer to concentrate on problems at home rather than throw their weight around internationally. There are plenty of issues deserving attention. Each new day brings a reminder that our fight against poverty, racism, and injustice in our own society remains unfinished. We worry about the horrific loss of lives and livelihoods caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Families on the West Coast have been choking on the toxic air of wildfires, while those on the Gulf Coast suffer through more frequent and destructive hurricanes worsened by climate change. Our entire society is being reshaped, for better and worse, by globalization and technology, which have opened up new opportunities but also created large pockets of resentment among those who worry that their jobs will be lost to foreign competition or automation.

Meanwhile, there is much going on in the world that we don’t understand, and we feel increasingly disinclined to try. In the Middle East, there is a viper’s nest of conflicts (as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen) made worse by the meddling of regional powers. In Asia, China is emerging as a military peer of the United States—altering the balance of power and unsettling America’s traditional allies. Europe’s unity and strength are being tested by the rise of extreme nationalist movements and the pernicious influence of Russia under Vladimir Putin, whose goal is to divide and weaken the transatlantic alliance.

To use a diplomatic term of art, the world is a mess. But many of the most pressing threats to the United States do not emanate from any one foreign country or region. They are borderless challenges that include not only pandemic disease, but also violent extremism, nuclear proliferation, cyber security threats, mass migration, ethnic conflict, and climate change. These threats cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone, and any single country would be foolish to try. Partnership is the key to peace, security, and prosperity in this new era.

I have in the past issued warnings against turning inward, as the United States has often done after periods of intense engagement abroad. It has never been in America's interest to withdraw from the world, and it would be especially counterproductive to do so in this era defined by borderless threats. But those threats also have the effect of blurring the distinction between domestic and foreign affairs, which have always operated along a spectrum. As a result, a successful approach to reviving America's influence abroad, and recapturing what has been lost, will by necessity need to begin at home.

For almost as long as I have been alive, the world has been able to count on the United States to serve as the rock against which the forces of despotism run aground and break apart. But in my travels abroad over the past four years, I have heard the same questions all the time: If America has a leader who says the press always lies, how can Vladimir Putin be faulted for making the same claim? If America has a leader who insists that judges are biased and who calls the American criminal system a "laughingstock," what is to stop a repressive leader in Hungary or Southeast Asia from discrediting his own judiciary? And if our political system is so polarized that even basic responsibilities of government break down, how do we make the case for democracy over authoritarianism? Not long ago, I met with a group of Egyptian parliamentarians and spoke to them about the need to compromise in order to govern effectively. One of them looked at me and said, "yeah, like you guys?"

According to a study released in 2019, 42 percent of Americans now believe that people belonging to the opposing political party are "evil."<sup>4</sup> Nearly 20 percent think that their adversaries "lack the traits to be considered fully human" and that the world would be better off if many of those foes didn't just steer clear of politics but were dead. Other surveys show that people often attribute to ideological opponents beliefs (e.g., about race, religion, law enforcement, and illegal migration) that the rivals do not in fact hold. Social media platforms are used systematically, intentionally, and effectively to propagate falsehoods about people and events in public life.

These trends are extremely worrisome. They are also out of place in a society that still claims to lead the free world. For the past several years, my exhortation to audiences has been "see something, say something, do something." Exactly what we are able to say and do will depend on our circumstances. A new American president can mark a clear break from the current "lie, deny, and defy" approach to executive leadership. Members of Congress can renew our commitment to the Constitution, support the principle that no one is above the law, and defend a free press. Every citizen must think about the example we set and the values we nurture in our young. We must look honestly at our society and commit to eradicating systemic racism and achieving equality of opportunity for all. Ultimately, each of us has a responsibility to promote our ideals as best we can despite the uproar those sowers of discord generate.

The repair and renewal of American democracy is not a purely domestic project. We need to enact new laws and develop new tools to protect our political and financial system from foreign authoritarian influence and interference. We need to support emerging democracies and those fighting for freedom and human rights in closed political systems. We need to draw closer to our democratic friends and allies to share best practices and counter the malign influence of Russia and China. We need to reinvigorate international institutions and foster mutually beneficial cooperation in critical areas, perhaps none more important than technology.

The coronavirus pandemic has both underscored America's dependence on technology and deepened it further. Much of our economic activity now takes place online, and we now rely on the internet to communicate, learn, and even govern the country. Our ability to do all this is a testament to more than half a century of U.S. leadership in scientific research and the development of transformational technologies. But our advantage has begun to erode.

China in particular has been investing heavily in emerging fields of innovation such as quantum computing, biotech, space, and artificial intelligence while aggressively deploying its own 5G telecommunications systems. 5G networks will provide connectivity for an unprecedented number of devices, so a great deal of attention has rightly been focused on the security implications of depending on Chinese equipment. But China is also undertaking a concerted international effort to influence global standards for mobile communications and to enshrine its preferred norms for artificial intelligence and advanced surveillance technologies. If they succeed, American companies would be disadvantaged, democratic values would suffer, and our security and prosperity would be threatened over time.

Democratic and Republican national security leaders increasingly agree on the need for a comprehensive U.S. technology and innovation strategy to respond to this challenge. In a September 2020 speech hosted by the National Democratic Institute, Senator Mark Warner said that “for the first time, there is a growing bipartisan consensus in Congress that the U.S. might need to pursue its own industrial policy to foster competition and give non-Chinese companies a more level playing field against [Chinese] state-backed champions.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a strategy should begin with investments to develop competitively priced and secure 5G equipment, funding for research and development to help ensure that semiconductors are manufactured in the United States, and increased support for American education and research institutions. It should include prudent limits on the sharing of sensitive technologies with China, especially those that could be used for domestic repression, along with measures to bring back to the United States the manufacturing of critical medical supplies. It also must include an approach to immigration that ensures the United States continues to attract the most talented people to study, stay, and invest.

As successful as the United States has been as a technology leader, we will need to partner with allies—especially democratic ones—to ensure that our vision of a more open, secure, and free internet prevails. We must develop and pursue a shared technology development agenda while advancing international digital norms that reflect democratic values. There have long been tensions between the United States and Europe over the right approach to digital privacy and competition, but our shared interests and values far outweigh these points of friction. Only by combining strengths can we guarantee our continued prosperity and security.

As dangerous as a U.S.-China technological rivalry could become, nothing is more threatening to American lives and livelihoods than the climate crisis. What had previously been downplayed as a long-term problem has moved into the forefront of American minds after years of worsening storms, destructive wildfires, and increasingly costly droughts and floods. Mother Nature, and more and more Americans, are now demanding a bolder approach to the production of energy based on a lessened dependence on carbon-based fuels.

As with the other challenges described in this chapter, progress on the climate agenda must combine domestic and international action—drawing strength from a comprehensive government response. For the past four years, the federal government has been moving in the wrong direction—withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, undoing environmental regulations, and promoting fossil fuels. But state and local governments have taken proactive measures, including California’s announcement in September 2020 that it will require all cars sold after 2035 to be zero-emissions vehicles.<sup>6</sup> While the prospects for climate action in the near term will hinge on the outcome of the November 3 election, there will be pressure on any administration to act because of the depth of the crisis and the way the debate is being reframed.

Instead of focusing on the negative consequences of climate change, environmental advocates are increasingly making the case for the positive consequences of climate action. Senator Brian Schatz, who chaired a special committee on the climate crisis, describes “a future with an improved quality of life, more fairness, and better products. ... [C]hoosing action means choosing American wealth and American leadership.”<sup>7</sup>

Putting climate action at the center of U.S. foreign policy will reap international dividends. It offers a potential platform for cooperation with China, even as the ideological and technological rivalry deepens. It would send another strong positive signal to America’s friends and allies, not only in Europe but also around the world. And it would provide an avenue for us to reengage in the multilateral institutions that are essential to cooperative action on this and other borderless challenges, such as pandemic disease.

Whenever the United States awakens from its slumber and reengages on these and other critical issues, it will be essential that we act with humility. Our approach must reflect the understanding that we are operating in a new era where our leadership is no longer automatically accepted. If we fail to comprehend this, we will not know how to formulate a successful strategy. We will be like a lawyer who assumes that, because of past victories, she has the jury in her pocket when she hasn't, precisely because the jury resents being taken for granted.

Fifty years ago, the memory of World War II was part of every adult's consciousness; so, too, was America's role in rebuilding Western Europe and helping Japan to become a democracy. The rehabilitation of former Axis powers was seen as a luminous accomplishment. America's leadership was still disputed, but its credentials were acknowledged. The country that had stood up to Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo had earned, at a minimum, a respectful hearing from people everywhere.

We can no longer assume that our understanding of our own history is widely shared. Relatively few hear the word "America" and think first of the Battle of Lexington or the landings at Omaha Beach. To those under the age of thirty—the majority in most countries—the Cold War confrontation between freedom and communism means little. To many, the Statue of Liberty has been replaced in the mind's eye by an immigrant child in a cage. We aren't thought of as the country that led in founding the United Nations, but rather as the petulant nation that exited the Paris Agreement, the Iran nuclear accord, and the World Health Organization.

A new decade can offer an opportunity to turn the page, refresh the American brand, and prove the resilience of our system. But for that to happen, we will have to return from our absence and, in so doing, help revive the basic international understanding that by working creatively with others, every country can reap benefits. By standing together with our partners, and by acting with purpose both domestically and internationally, we can resume progress toward a more peaceful, prosperous, and safe world.

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<sup>1</sup> "2000 Republican Party Platform," The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara, July 31, 2000, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2000-republican-party-platform>.

<sup>2</sup> *Nomination of Colin L. Powell To Be Secretary of State: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate*, 107th Cong. 1 (2001), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107shrg71536/pdf/CHRG-107shrg71536.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> "Annual Message to Congress—Concluding Remarks," Abraham Lincoln Online, September 30, 2020, <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan Kalmoe and Liliana Mason. *Lethal Mass Partisanship: Prevalence, Correlates, and Electoral Contingencies* (NCAPSA American Politics Meeting, 2019), [https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe\\_\\_mason\\_ncapsa\\_2019\\_-\\_lethal\\_partisanship\\_-\\_final\\_lmedit.pdf](https://www.dannyhayes.org/uploads/6/9/8/5/69858539/kalmoe__mason_ncapsa_2019_-_lethal_partisanship_-_final_lmedit.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Warner et al. "Democracy, Technology & China: U.S. Strategy for Innovation in the 21st Century," National Democratic Institute, September 16, 2020, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBY7yqUwJKU>.

<sup>6</sup> Jill Cowan and Brad Plumer, "California Plans to Ban Sales of New Gas-Powered Cars in 15 Years," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/climate/california-ban-gas-cars.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Senate Democrats Special Committee on the Climate Crisis, *The Case for Climate Action: Building a Clean Economy for the American People* (Washington, DC: Senate Democrats Special Committee on the Climate Crisis, 2020), [https://www.schatz.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SCCC\\_Climate\\_Crisis\\_Report.pdf](https://www.schatz.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SCCC_Climate_Crisis_Report.pdf).