



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Surveying H.R. McMaster’s “Battlegrounds”

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1. Introduction: Defending the Free World in the Post-Trump Era

By Jim Golby

H.R. McMaster is one of the most distinguished and rightly heralded soldier-scholars of his generation. With his appointment to the role of assistant to the president for national security affairs, he was also thrust into the role of statesman in the midst of one of the most controversial administrations in recent history. McMaster's appointment also raised some civil-military concerns. The three-star general was only the third active-duty military officer to fill this highly political role and one of a handful of appointees dubbed the "adults in the room," who many Americans hoped would serve as a check on President Donald Trump's worst tendencies.

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that McMaster didn't want to write a tell-all memoir about his White House tenure that focused primarily on his experiences and interactions with Trump. Already the author of an acclaimed civil-military history of the Vietnam War, McMaster instead staked out a more ambitious task:

I wanted to write a book that might help transcend the vitriol of partisan political discourse and help readers understand better the most significant challenges to security, freedom, and prosperity. I hoped that improved understanding might inspire the meaningful discussion and resolute action necessary to overcome those challenges.¹

As this roundtable demonstrates, the retired general already has inspired meaningful dialogue about some of the central national security challenges America will face in a post-Trump world. But these discussions are not without controversy. These impressive contributors engage McMaster's core arguments and explore their implications for U.S. national security policy, the future of conservative national security policy, and American civil-military relations. They often disagree on key aspects or implications of McMaster's

¹ H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), preface.

claims, including what brought about the current challenges on each of the “battlegrounds” he describes and whether “resolute action” is necessary to overcome those challenges in some, or perhaps even all, cases.² There should be little doubt that the debates McMaster sparked with this volume will be of far greater value to U.S. national security than the gossip he would have created by writing one more Trump-centric tabloid.

The Battlegrounds

In *Battlegrounds*, McMaster identifies six significant arenas in which he thinks the United States must compete: Russia, China, South Asia, the Middle East, Iran, and North Korea. He systematically works through the perils posed by each, detailing how these threats are more menacing and difficult to address than most Americans had previously supposed. McMaster structures the book around these battlegrounds, devoting two chapters to each — the first a historical diagnosis of the threat and the second a proposed framework for competition. According to the retired general, the United States has steadily lost ground across the globe since the end of the Cold War, largely because members of the U.S. foreign policy elite have forgotten the Clausewitzian dictate that war is a battle of wills.³

McMaster identifies the central culprit driving America’s current strategic deficit as what he calls “strategic narcissism,” a term inspired by the late realist scholar Hans Morgenthau. Rather than pointing specifically to the flaws of particular leaders or their strategic approaches, McMaster senses a broader trend and argues that this affliction — “the tendency to view the world only in relation to the United States and to assume that the future course of events depends primarily on U.S. decisions or plans”⁴ — has spread to virtually all members of America’s foreign policy elite across both parties. McMaster argues that strategic narcissism has dictated U.S. policy for nearly three decades. Because leaders don’t fully consider the agency and influence of other states or international actors, the

² McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 54.

³ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On war*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

⁴ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 15.

retired general claims that American soldiers and diplomats frequently suffer the consequences of these leaders' wishful thinking and self-delusion.

McMaster's leitmotif in *Battlegrounds* is "strategic empathy," by which he means actually taking America's opponents at their word — as serious opponents that are earnest in pursuing their own interests at America's expense. Only by first understanding the threats America's adversaries pose — and the values and interests at stake — can the country tackle its national security challenges with the clear-eyed tenacity required for the type of competition the retired general envisions. McMaster argues that the failure of political leaders to account for their adversaries' motives has made it difficult for the United States to take resolute action to secure its interests and has hindered the nation's ability to work with partners to chart a new course toward a better future.

In each of his diagnosis chapters, the doctor of history models his approach for strategic empathy. McMaster lands many blows with his frank, penetrating critiques of the naïveté of past administrations, Republican and Democrat. He keenly deconstructs the false hopes of liberalizing Russia and China, of quick and easy victories in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of a grand rapprochement with Iran. He rightly points out the foolhardiness of thinking that differences with these states (or with other groups like the Taliban) could be wholly resolved by open diplomacy and restraint on the exercise of American power. These chapters are a particular strength of the book, though — at times — his criticisms of previous administrations feel less even-handed than his nonpartisan rhetoric might otherwise suggest.

There also are occasions when McMaster gives a somewhat one-sided portrayal of past U.S. disputes with its adversaries. Just to take one example, he relates that: "[Vladimir] Putin, [Nikolai] Patrushev, and the Siloviki did not view U.S. assistance in the post-Soviet period as it was intended. The United States wanted to assist Russia with the traumatic transition and reduce dangers and complications."⁵ One need not be a cynic nor even think that the United States did anything especially unwise or unjustified at that time to recognize that there may be something to Russian complaints that they were taken advantage of in their

⁵ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 37–38.

post-Soviet weakness. Even if America's intentions were focused on reducing dangers, one ought to at least recognize that security dilemma dynamics can cause even defensive actions to appear threatening to a vulnerable state. Such criticisms do not necessarily undermine McMaster's central thesis, but they do suggest future debates about America's adversaries should continue to wrestle with the particular circumstances and details of each case to better apply true strategic empathy. Yet even with these weaknesses, McMaster still illuminates central aspects of the ideologies, aspirations, and emotions that drive and constrain the actors the United States faces across each of the battlegrounds he describes.

The Pendulum of Conservative National Security Policy

Despite largely avoiding discussion of Trump, McMaster's book is exceptionally interesting in that it reveals fundamental tensions that were at the heart of the Trump administration's approach to foreign policy. McMaster's position within these debates will continue to be relevant to American national security debates writ large, but especially to the future trajectory of the Republican Party's approach to national security.

In his essay, Michael Singh makes the case that the Trump administration showed that "old assumptions about American policy had to be set aside," placing any and all contingencies — and the future of conservative foreign policy — back upon the table for serious consideration. But much of the substance of Trump's foreign policy was often left to the president's deputies, including McMaster, though their interpretations of what Trump's "America First" approach meant in practice often varied. According to Singh, *Battlegrounds* highlights the "conservative foreign policy pendulum in motion, its final destination to be determined."

Almost all key national security figures in the Trump administration saw the world as inherently competitive, and they agreed that the United States must be clear-eyed and tough-minded in facing potential threats. None of them thought U.S. policy should focus on transforming the Middle East into a set of pacific democracies, à la the idealists in the George W. Bush administration. Nor did any think the United States could rely on the power of its example and its markets to transform Chinese society or Beijing's policies.

Perhaps the biggest unresolved tension about the Trump administration's overall national security approach, then, was among those within this competitive, realist perspective. As Singh notes, however, *Battlegrounds* provides little in the way of a "grand schema" to tie various issues together into a coherent framework outside of its broad notions of competition and strategic empathy.

In Singh's view, McMaster's book is less a defense of Trumpian foreign policy than a collection of "issue-by-issue criticisms" of past U.S. foreign policies and prescriptions for future policies. Although conservative foreign policy in the post-Trump era still could head in a number of directions, Singh argues that the retired general has made a clear case for one of those paths: "a more successful conservative internationalism" based on a realistic appraisal of threats and challenges. Praising the importance of McMaster's emphasis on strategic empathy, he extends the former national security adviser's call for conservative internationalism beyond McMaster's six battlegrounds and toward a more cohesive strategy. Singh puts forward five principles he believes should form the foundation for this conservative internationalist strategy, "tailored for today's constrained and competitive geopolitical environment." He ultimately concludes that McMaster "has offered a useful *tour d'horizon* of the threats facing the United States as well as an entry into a pressing debate over the proper role of the United States in the world."

The End of Restraint?

Emma Ashford sees in *Battlegrounds* not an entry into this pressing debate but rather signs that this debate may already be settled, at least among Republicans. Ashford argues that by removing Trump as a central character in his narrative, McMaster is able to emphasize underlying policy arguments of the Trump era to a greater degree than has often been evident. In this telling, Trump's personal style has masked some of the "continuities between the various and disparate foreign policy personnel of the Trump years." Stripped of the president's tweets and populist bluster, Ashford sees a future Republican foreign policy that "may be far more coherent — and far less constrained — than the last four years would suggest."

Ashford's review notes another interesting aspect of *Battlegrounds*: Although McMaster often derides those realists in the "restrainer" camp, his critique of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War shares some similarities with theirs. According to Ashford, "On the face of it, the book's core arguments are eminently reasonable: that American foreign policy has been characterized in recent years by hubris; that the country forgot that other states have agency; and that America suffers from a severe case of strategic narcissism." As a result, "a thorough re-examination of America's core assumptions about the world is therefore needed."

Yet, McMaster's reexamination of America's core assumptions looks very different from that of restrainers on both the left and the right. Whereas restrainers tend to argue that the international environment is actually less threatening than the Washington establishment or the "Blob" has supposed, McMaster argues that America consistently undervalues these threats and that the country's fundamental problem is that it is insufficiently committed to competition with adversaries who wish to do America harm.

Ashford usefully highlights these divergent assumptions, many of which the retired general anticipated and attempted to preempt. The most important difference revolves around views related to the utility of using coercion in foreign policy. According to Ashford, "McMaster systematically overvalues coercion in international affairs, and systematically undervalues diplomacy and other noncoercive tools of foreign policy."

Ashford's observation suggests a potentially significant flaw in McMaster's proposed approach. Whereas McMaster argues that American leaders have often discounted the agency of their adversaries, his generalized solution of greater competition across all battlegrounds assumes the United States would be able to overwhelm the agency of those same adversaries. Moreover, *Battlegrounds* offers little discussion of the potential risks or costs of escalation and scant consideration of the limits of American power or the need to balance resources across competing priorities.

The issue of prioritizing resources already was acute during the Trump administration. It will only become more salient for American policymaking going forward. Although America remains the world's leading state, it is not dominant in the way it was 30 years ago, let alone

in 1945. It has the world's most advanced large economy, and it will likely remain the world's largest economy in market exchange terms for many years, if not indefinitely. But China already is, or shortly will be, the world's largest economy in purchasing power parity terms, and there are a number of other very large economies in the international system, not just in Europe and Northeast Asia but also in South and Southeast Asia. American power is not so overwhelming in the face of all the potential challenges to U.S. interests that might plausibly be identified.

The Power of Values

Daniel Twining's thoughtful essay offers a different interpretation of McMaster's argument, one based on soft power and values rather than hard power and coercion. He interprets *Battlegrounds* as a "hard-nosed, realist case for why an effective U.S. strategy of great-power competition demands policies that recognize the political domain as a central arena of contestation." Given the reemergence of authoritarian regimes across the globe, the fight to defend the free world is more necessity than choice. According to Twining: "the greatest dangers to American security emanate from either autocratic control or the absence of accountable and effective state institutions. Supporting democratic governance abroad is, therefore, a form of self-defense."

Twining's review suggests that McMaster's prioritization of threats may be implicit, but it is nevertheless clear. In *Battlegrounds*, Twining sees a sharp argument that China is by far the overwhelming threat, and he argues that everything else needs to follow from that. This view is also largely consistent with the Trump administration's approach to foreign policy, both during and after McMaster's tenure. It was reflected in both the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.⁶ A growing focus on China also became increasingly ascendant in the administration as time went on, especially after the arrival of COVID-19.

⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; and *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Twining emphasizes that McMaster envisions competitive engagement with China “not primarily [as] a military campaign but a contest of systems.” Although Chinese leaders — as well as many of the actors in the other battlegrounds — see America’s free society and values as vulnerabilities, McMaster sees them as an enduring U.S. advantage. As Twining argues, “That Chinese leaders view such openness as a grave danger should remind Americans of freedom’s strategic value.” According to this view, then, the best way to compete with China is to embrace and support American values, both overseas and at home. Indeed, few Americans would disagree with McMaster and Twining that “priming America for an era of strategic competition with an autocratic superpower requires healthy and vital democratic institutions at home.”

Strategic Empathy Begins at Home?

It may be somewhat ironic, then, for me to suggest *Battlegrounds* could do more to incorporate the same sort of strategic empathy for American citizens that it encourages the nation’s political leaders to apply to the country’s adversaries. This tension is most pronounced in McMaster’s treatment of domestic political constraints as something through which political leaders must break, rather than as something within which they often must operate. While elected political leaders can and should play a role in educating and persuading the public about the importance of national security, the political science literature suggests their ability to do so — while real — is more limited than McMaster seems to assume.⁷

It is understandable — and perhaps even wise given that *Battlegrounds* was released at the height of the 2020 presidential campaign — that McMaster steered clear of discussions about how domestic politics can and do shape the making of foreign policy. Even so, a more conspicuous discussion of how — and why — McMaster thinks the United States should

⁷ James M. McCormick, ed., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); and Helen V. Milner, and Dustin Tingley, *Sailing the Water’s Edge: The Domestic Politics of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

prioritize particular threats over others would have helped *Battlegrounds* transcend the current moment to make a more enduring statement about America's role in the world. As it stands, however, McMaster has made a significant contribution to ongoing debates about how the United States should confront the adversaries it faces across each of the six battlegrounds he surveys.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the retired general is at his best when he is laying out the case for *how* America should confront its adversaries across each of the challenges he describes. But *Battlegrounds* would have been even more compelling if it had offered additional guidance about *where* and *when* America should fight — and on what basis American leaders should make those decisions. Indeed, it is telling that McMaster's critique of recent U.S. national security policy includes an admonition that Americans underestimated the difficulty of the war in Iraq — but it never questions or explores whether the United States should have embarked on the war in the first place. The United States is the strongest state in the international system, but Americans' willingness to use that power is not infinite, nor should it be. No presidential candidate in 2020 ran on an aggressively interventionist approach to international affairs. And both parties seem to be, if anything, moving further away from the liberal hawk/neoconservative positions that were ascendant in the 1990s and early 2000s.

In this context, it may not always be possible for elected political leaders to simply dial up their resolve to exceed that of their opponents. Domestic political constraints are sometimes just that: constraints. At times, however, McMaster's book seems to imply that domestic political variables and resource constraints should be changed or ignored across all potential battlefields, at all times. But effective strategies must sometimes be adjusted to fit within finite resources and the limits of American political will, and difficult choices must be made between security priorities.

In *Battlegrounds*, the politics of national security are entirely international, with domestic disagreements about threats, priorities, and resources serving only as a distraction. Indeed, McMaster's own decision to write a White House memoir that is largely silent about the president he served is illuminating about his views of the policy process and the role of domestic politics within the making of foreign policy. His desire not to engage in tabloid

bickering is admirable, but can one really provide an accurate and complete picture of policymaking and strategy development at the national level that does not consider the president as a central actor — perhaps even *the* central actor?

Conclusion

Although civil-military issues are rarely explicit within the pages of *Battlegrounds*, McMaster's decision to appear on the book's cover in his Army service uniform places them front and center. Of course, the question of whether active-duty military officers — or even recently retired officers — possess the political skills necessary to succeed in a policymaking position pre-dated McMaster's selection for the role of national security adviser. In light of Trump's high-profile and often tempestuous reliance on senior military officers in policy positions — as well as the recent appointment of retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin as secretary of defense under the Biden administration — the debate about whether generals should serve in overtly political positions is unlikely to disappear anytime soon.

The same can also be said of the other debates that McMaster — the consummate soldier-scholar turned statesman — has inspired and advanced with this impressive work. Each of McMaster's battlegrounds will remain central to American national security for the foreseeable future. Even as Americans contemplate Trump's foreign policy legacy, McMaster's articulation of the challenges posed on each battleground offers a vital contribution to emerging debates about the future of American national security policy. As the reviews in this roundtable demonstrate, McMaster's arguments are both compelling and controversial. But no one should be surprised that the old cavalryman seized the initiative and fired the first shot in the debate about how best to win the fight to defend the free world in the post-Trump era.

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2. Competitive, Competent, Conservative: Internationalism After Trump

By Michael Singh

As the Trump era comes to a close, the debate is just beginning over the administration's approach to the world and what it means for the future of conservative foreign policy in the United States. President Donald Trump himself was better known for his provocative and unpredictable pronouncements than statements of doctrine. Yet, once Trump assumed office it did not take U.S. partners and allies long to realize that they faced something altogether new in Washington: that old assumptions about American policy had to be set aside, and any and all contingencies — the renegotiation or dissolution of agreements or American withdrawal from treaties or geographies — seriously considered.

It was left to Trump officials and allies to impute to him a foreign policy philosophy, which they did variously. Nadia Schadlow, who served as deputy national security adviser for strategy, argued that Trump, unencumbered by the assumptions and nostalgias of the foreign policy community, saw the new reality of a world defined by competition and enacted policies to meet that challenge. She contended that he focused on states rather than international organizations as key actors, demanding reciprocity from allies and adversaries alike and rebuilding U.S. military strength.⁸ Rep. Matt Gaetz of the Florida panhandle, on the other hand, propounded a “Trump Doctrine” that emphasized intervening in international affairs only under the gravest circumstances and otherwise leaving other states to their own business — the polar opposite of competition.⁹

In *Battlegrounds*, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) H.R. McMaster consciously adopts a different approach to taking stock of the Trump administration, one that reflects his long service as an apolitical officer in the U.S. Army. As the highly regarded retired general himself warns in the book's

⁸ Nadia Schadlow, “The End of American Illusion: Trump and the World as It Is,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (September/October 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2020-08-11/end-american-illusion>

⁹ <https://gaetz.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-matt-gaetz-delivers-major-foreign-policy-speech>

introduction, those looking for a critique, defense, or even explanation of Trumpism will be disappointed. McMaster is determined to look forward, drawing upon his experience not just at the White House but in the military. He offers issue-by-issue criticisms of past U.S. foreign policies and prescriptions for future policies, rather than any grand schema to tie the past and present together.

While no consensus doctrine emerges from these accounts, what comes across clearly is a sense of the conservative foreign policy pendulum in motion, its final destination to be determined. Whether it lands upon a wan realism of the Ford-Nixon era — when, in the estimation of scholar Paul Miller, “neither America’s material power nor its ideals were appreciably strengthened or expanded”¹⁰ — a strident and amoral nationalism, or, as McMaster implicitly but nonetheless clearly hopes, a more successful conservative internationalism depends on arriving at the correct evaluation of the foreign policy challenges facing the United States and the most effective ways to confront them.

Competition Rekindled

It has become widely accepted among conservative commentators that the world the United States faces is more competitive than in the past, affording U.S. foreign policy less room for error and excess. Competition requires two things: that other states be capable of mounting a challenge, and that they be willing to do so. An appraisal of the geopolitical landscape is bracing on both counts.

The gap in economic and material power between the United States and its rivals has inexorably shrunk since the end of the Cold War. It is not that U.S. power has declined. Indeed, America’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown at a steady clip for decades, and the U.S. GDP remains the world’s highest in the nominal terms that matter geopolitically, even if China’s economy is larger when measured in terms of purchasing

¹⁰ Paul D. Miller, “Conservative Internationalism Out of Power,” *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2018), 105–18, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.005>.

power parity.¹¹ The U.S. military remains the world’s most formidable and battle tested, and U.S. military spending is roughly three times that of China’s and indeed greater than the next 10 highest-spending countries combined.¹²

Yet, what was once a towering advantage in both economic and military terms is no longer, due both to the growth and diffusion of economic and military might around the world — enabled, ironically, by the very international order the United States has long upheld — as well as stagnation on certain key fronts in the United States. For example, U.S. productivity growth has slowed significantly since the mid-2000s, weighed down by flat or declining infrastructure and research and development spending, among other factors.¹³ Likewise, the U.S. military has fought to exhaustion in places like Iraq and Afghanistan while China has focused heavily on catching up to, and developing the capabilities needed to confront, the United States — a strategy McMaster describes in detail over the course of two chapters on China. The result, according to the Department of Defense’s latest “China Power Report,” is that China has neared parity with, or even exceeded, the United States in certain areas such as shipbuilding and the deployment of intermediate-range missiles.¹⁴

While the notion of symmetric threats to U.S. power is alarming enough, McMaster astutely observes that challenges to American power continue to come in asymmetric forms as well.

¹¹ For a discussion of this distinction, see Jeffrey Frenkel, “Is China Overtaking the US as a Financial and Economic Power,” *The Guardian*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/29/is-china-overtaking-the-us-as-a-financial-and-economic-power>.

¹² “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2019>.

¹³ For further discussion, see, for example, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, “The Slowdown in Productivity Growth and the Policies that Can Restore It,” The Brookings Institution, June 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Productivity_Framing_LO_6.16_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

He describes in length “Putin’s playbook” of disinformation, used to divisive effect in advance of and following the 2016 elections, as well as, in a telegraphic final chapter on cross-cutting threats, the risks the United States faces in cyberspace, in outer space, and from new weapons and technologies. And unlike so many analysts who wish to brush aside the threat of terrorism after two decades of unsatisfying and arduous focus on it, McMaster reminds readers that it remains a serious short-term threat, even if near-peer rivals loom larger in the long term.

Of course, if the United States were concerned by other states’ economic power and military potential alone, it might regard the European Union and India as its foremost rivals rather than the partners they are. What makes states like Russia and China threatening is not simply their power — which, in Russia’s case, is in fact meager — but their mounting willingness to challenge the United States and the international order itself. These challenges have played out on a grand scale in places like Ukraine, Syria, and the South China Sea and on a smaller, but more frequent and no less dangerous, scale in the air and on the seas, where U.S., Russian, and Chinese vessels come into regular contact.¹⁵ They have also played out in diplomatic conference rooms, where U.S. rivals seek to gain the upper hand in setting international norms and standards and foster alternative multilateral institutions that exclude or marginalize the United States.¹⁶

Order Unravelling

Many commentators attribute this new competitive reality to a failure of the “liberal convergence” that many policymakers expected to materialize after the end of the Cold War. In their seminal article recounting what went wrong in U.S. policy toward China in recent decades, Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell, for example, assert that “the liberal

¹⁵ “Chinese and American Warships Nearly Collide,” *The Economist*, Oct. 4, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/10/04/chinese-and-american-warships-nearly-collide>.

¹⁶ Jonathan E. Hillman, “A ‘China Model?’ Beijing’s Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards,” Congressional Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-model-beijings-promotion-alternative-global-norms-and-standards>.

international order has failed to lure or bind China as powerfully as expected.”¹⁷ McMaster approaches the matter from a complementary angle, harshly criticizing what he describes as American “strategic narcissism,” a term inspired by Hans Morgenthau’s late-career work on the intersection of emotion and power.¹⁸ McMaster might have instead termed the problem “strategic solipsism” for, while Morgenthau was focused on what he considered the ills of self-actualization (criticizing, among other things, plastic surgery and jogging), McMaster is warning against the all-too-common predilection among U.S. analysts and officials to view world events as functions of American policy, insufficiently cognizant that “rivals and enemies will influence the future course of events” based in part on “their own interpretation of history.”¹⁹ At the same time, he tacitly acknowledges that American assumptions sometimes require revision not because they were naively conceived but because circumstances have changed (for example, Xi Jinping’s ascendancy in China).²⁰

Making matters worse, the guardians of the international order have arguably been complicit in its demise to the benefit of adversaries who are glad enough to see that order crumble. Democracy has faced challenges both at the free world’s periphery — where states such as Turkey and Hungary have seen the democratic gains of recent decades sharply reversed — and at its heart. In the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, only 39 and 31 percent of respondents, respectively, indicated to Pew Research in February 2020 that they were satisfied with the state of their country’s democracy — in contrast to 70

¹⁷ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>.

¹⁸ Hans Morgenthau and Ethel Person, “The Roots of Narcissism,” *Partisan Review* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 337-47, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, <http://archives.bu.edu/collections/partisan-review/search/detail?id=331504>. See also Hans Morgenthau, “Love and Power,” *Commentary*, March 1962, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/hans-morgenthau/love-and-power/>.

¹⁹ H.R. McMaster, *Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 19.

²⁰ McMaster, *Battlefields*, 100.

percent of Indians and 55 percent of Israelis, despite the unending cascade of indeterminate elections that the latter have endured.²¹

If conservative internationalists criticize their liberal counterparts for placing too much faith, and investing too much hope, in international institutions and not enough in American leadership, then they must acknowledge that Trump's erratic fusillades against allies, his tendency to withdraw from international commitments and organizations without an alternative plan, and his unprecedented effort to reverse the results of the 2020 presidential election have diminished America's standing and boosted that of its rivals, while hastening the decay of the U.S.-led international order. McMaster, to his credit, explicitly recognizes problems such as these. He notes both how Trump's groundless accusations of election fraud played into Russian disinformation efforts in 2016 and 2017, and the damaging effects of America's declining reliability as an ally.²²

Thriving in a Tougher World: Five Principles

The United States cannot turn back the clock. Just as the effects of past errors and excesses cannot be reversed, nor will the relative advantage in economic and military power America enjoyed at the end of the Cold War be regained. Striving for an idealized future heedless of the aims and plans of one's rivals is a fool's errand, but pining for the return of a mythologized past is just as fruitless. Yet, there is every reason to believe that the United States can continue to enjoy security, prosperity, and international preeminence with the adoption of a strategy that is informed by the lessons of the past several decades and tailored for today's constrained and competitive geopolitical environment. Such a strategy should be based on five principles.²³

²¹ Richard Wike and Shannon Schumacher, "Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong," *Pew Research Center*, Feb. 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>.

²² McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 50, 270.

²³ These principles are drawn from those offered by Henry R. Nau in *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

Support Diplomacy with Force, Force with Diplomacy

First, diplomacy is most effective when backed by force, and vice versa. The former is an article of faith among conservatives — economic and military force should not be considered a last-resort alternative to diplomacy but should be wielded in concert with diplomacy to achieve the best outcomes for American interests. To ensure that U.S. threats of force are deemed credible, the country must build and preserve its military strength, allowing it neither to become outmoded by rivals’ technological advances nor exhausted by peripheral conflicts.

However, the converse is also true — coercion must be undertaken with realistic objectives in mind and with an understanding of the perspective of the target. This is where McMaster’s frequent exhortations to “strategic empathy” are valuable. Conflicts the United States, as a superpower, regards as limited tend to be considered high-existential by smaller adversaries. This makes those adversaries unexpectedly defiant, even under severe coercive pressure, often leading either to stalemate or outright military conflict.²⁴ Avoiding such outcomes requires, first and foremost, setting realistic objectives when first crafting a policy, which is less politically costly than scaling back one’s objectives once failure appears inevitable. McMaster applies this logic to Iran, decrying the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement as an exercise in diplomacy not backed by the credible threat of force, and the 2018 decision to withdraw from the deal as the resort to pressure without a clear diplomatic strategy.²⁵

Respect the Role of States

Second, the United States should give proper due to strong states as key actors in international affairs. As much as analysts and policymakers tend to invoke the

Press) and summarized by Charlie Laderman, “Conservative Internationalism: An Overview,” *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.009>.

²⁴ For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Michael Singh, “Conflict with Small Powers Derails US Foreign Policy: The Case for Strategic Discipline,” *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 12, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2020-08-12/conflict-small-powers-derails-us-foreign-policy>.

²⁵ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 297.

“international community” or call for the United Nations or another international body to act, the true burden of action lies with individual states and coalitions of states. International institutions should not be dismissed lightly — they are important tools in international affairs, lending legitimacy, setting norms and imposing constraints, helping to allocate the costs of global public goods, and providing forums for the debate and resolution of problems. They are also arenas for competition, and American withdrawal from, or neglect of, those institutions benefits rivals, as McMaster notes.

However, success or failure in foreign policy nevertheless depends foremost on the will and capacity of states. Sanctions on Iran are a case in point. While the legitimacy of those sanctions in the eyes of much of the world flowed from the U.N. resolutions that endorsed them, their power derived from America’s preponderance in, and thus influence over, the international financial system. As the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign has demonstrated, the absence of significant international support has not reduced the power of U.S. sanctions. It has merely offset it modestly by offering Iran the meager consolation prize of international support for its position. When a U.N. imprimatur is present but no state is willing or able to act in support of that mandate — for example, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701’s call for the disarmament of Hezbollah²⁶ — the result is underwhelming.

With this in mind, the United States should devote considerable effort to increasing the capabilities and resilience of its partners, especially those that demonstrate the political will to act in furtherance of mutual interests. It should also organize those partners into cooperative coalitions and networks so that they complement and amplify one another’s capabilities. As Kori Schake, former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter have noted, allies help to constrain rivals and magnify, or substitute for, the exercise of American power. The neglect of alliances encourages rival networks to flourish.²⁷ Investing in alliances and enduring partnerships, as opposed to treating cooperation as

²⁶ “Security Council Calls for End to Hostilities Between Hizbollah, Israel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1701 (2006),” United Nations, Aug. 11, 2006, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>.

²⁷ Kori Schake, Jim Mattis, Jim Ellis, and Joe Felter, “Defense in Depth,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-11-23/defense-depth>.

purely transactional, also generates positive externalities, as existing allies are more likely to give new requests from Washington a more sympathetic hearing in the future and may even search out new areas for cooperation themselves. But nurturing alliances need not mean fostering or encouraging dependency — indeed, as strength and dependency are at odds, Washington should not shy away from pushing its partners to shoulder ever greater shares of collective burdens as their capabilities grow.

In these respects, McMaster correctly notes that the Trump administration deserves credit for building and improving upon the work of previous administrations: It increased American defense investments in Europe, even as it has pushed NATO partners to spend more on their own defense, and strengthened partnerships, such as the “Quad” in the Indo-Pacific and Israel’s nascent partnership with the United Arab Emirates and other countries in the Middle East. Although he does also note that the administration deserves admonition for its “expressions of doubt about the value of allies when Russia and China are doing their best to break alliances apart.”²⁸

Capitalize on Shared Values

Third, the United States should concern itself not only with power but with values. As American Enterprise Institute scholar Zack Cooper has noted, “the competitions with China and Russia are only partially about power ... U.S. worries about China and Russia are founded as much in clashing values and visions as in clashing power.”²⁹ While America’s competition with its present-day rivals centers far less on ideology than during the Cold War, the threat the United States and its partners perceive from Moscow and Beijing are heightened by the way both operate — through repression and control at home and coercion and subversion abroad.

Furthermore, U.S. values confer an important advantage to Washington in its competition with its rivals that far outweighs whatever vulnerabilities these values give rise to. Free markets and a vibrant democratic civil society help to foster growth and innovation,

²⁸ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 442.

²⁹ Zack Cooper, “Bad Idea: Great Power Competition Terminology,” *Defense360*, Dec. 1, 2020, <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/>.

promote political resilience, and even speak to the aspirations of the citizens of U.S. rivals. While McMaster is rightly skeptical of the power of economic openness to liberalize authoritarian states like China — an assessment now widely accepted — he defends the promotion of democracy and economic liberalization as a means to counter and deter America’s rivals, even as he notes that the Trump administration unevenly applied this logic.³⁰

Shared values also underpin America’s strongest alliances, as does a shared concern over the threats posed by the values of U.S. rivals. Relationships such as that between the United States and Saudi Arabia are frequently offered as a counterpoint to this assertion. In fact, however, they demonstrate its validity. As Democrats’ calls for the incoming Biden administration to take a tougher line with Riyadh attest, relationships that are exclusively interest-based and not buttressed by shared values are those most vulnerable in political shifts — or shifts in how interests are perceived — on either side. This is why, when foreign leaders pen op-eds in American newspapers, they tend to appeal to shared values rather than simply to shared interests.³¹ Doing so suggests a bond that goes deeper than a mere transaction.

During the Cold War, there was not one international order, but three : There were those that governed relations between the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and their clients on the other. There was also the order that implicitly governed relations between the blocs. As many analysts have noted,³² the mistake Western policymakers made in their exuberance at the end of the Cold War was assuming that the liberal order led by the United States would subsume the other two. This proved only partially true. While many ex-Eastern Bloc states gladly joined the U.S.-led international order, Russia and China proved more interested in contesting American leadership.

³⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 140.

³¹ See, for example, Yousef al-Otaiba, “The Moderate Middle East Must Act,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 9, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yousef-al-otaiba-the-moderate-middle-east-must-act-1410304537>.

³² See for example Campbell and Ratner, “The China Reckoning.”

The answer to this problem, however, is not to scrap the U.S.-led order as a relic of the past, but to reform it by building, as Miller has suggested, a “smaller, deeper liberal order” based on shared values and interests that can magnify U.S. efforts to counter its rivals.³³ Miller proposes building a separate structure for engaging with those rivals through diplomacy, arms control agreements, and the like, and, yes, even cooperating with them where doing so is possible and advantageous. The point of building an order among U.S. allies would not be to cut them off from U.S. rivals — playing such a zero-sum game would be risky for the United States, as Schake, Mattis, Ellis, and Felter note.³⁴ Rather, it is to permit them to engage with those rivals collectively and with confidence. Both “orders” should leverage the advantages conferred on the United States by the democratic values it shares with its allies, as well as the weaknesses inherent in the authoritarian values held by America’s rivals.³⁵

Set Priorities, Match Ends and Means

Fourth, as important as they are, America’s democratic values should be advanced conservatively, keeping in mind the vital importance of maintaining domestic support for U.S. foreign policy. McMaster is right to assert that “strengthening democratic institutions and processes in target nations may be the strongest remedy” to the aggression of America’s adversaries, and he advocates for doing so across the board — whether by supporting activists in Russia, China, and Iran, or by helping to promote democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁶ Yet, he does not explicitly address the need to prioritize among these issues. Such prioritization has taken on greater urgency given that American resources and power are increasingly at a premium in a more competitive world.

³³ Paul Miller, “Make the Free World Free Again,” *The Dispatch*, June 9, 2020, <https://thedispatch.com/p/make-the-free-world-free-again>.

³⁴ Schake, Mattis, Ellis, and Felter, “Defense in Depth.”

³⁵ For further discussion, see *Linking Values and Strategy: How Democracies Can Offset Autocratic Advances, A Task Force Report*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, October 2020, <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Linking-Values-and-Strategy.pdf>.

³⁶ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 140.

The Trump administration's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* sets out its priorities with laudable clarity:

Long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department, and require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.³⁷

Far less clear, however, are the policy implications for this prioritization elsewhere, such as in the Middle East. As the defense strategy makes clear, it almost certainly means operating more through partners. But it should also mean recognizing that a dollar spent maintaining or expanding the strength, stability, and prosperity of a willing partner — those on the boundaries of the free world — will almost certainly yield more than that same dollar spent seeking to foster accountable governance or promote economic liberalization where they do not already exist.

The need to set priorities and follow them when allocating resources is reinforced by the need to maintain domestic support for foreign policy. Strategists should consider not just what ought to be done but what can be done given material, as well as political and social, constraints. The election of successive presidents who have decried American interventions in the Middle East and pledged to reduce U.S. commitments overseas should be evidence enough of the American people's conflict fatigue. While McMaster often attributes this phenomenon to a failure by consecutive administrations to explain the importance of conflicts like those in Iraq and Afghanistan to the American populace, survey data does not bear this out. For example, Pew Research found in mid-2019 that veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — who are presumably well-informed about those conflicts — overwhelmingly believe that the costs of those conflicts exceeded their benefits. These polls also show that veterans' views closely track with those of the general public.³⁸

³⁷ *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States*, Department of Defense, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

³⁸ Ruth Ignielnik and Kim Parker, "Majorities of U.S. Veterans, Public Say the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Were Not Worth Fighting," Pew Research Center, July 10, 2019,

Such evidence suggests that the problem is not one of communication but of failing to match realistic ends with available means — means which are increasingly needed elsewhere. If internationalists fail to learn from such feedback and from the results of past policies, public skepticism of their proposals is likely to deepen and calls for more wholesale retrenchment and restraint will mount.

Husband America's Strength

Finally, the United States needs to rejuvenate the wellsprings of its power and influence: its military and economic strength and its democratic health. While these topics are largely beyond *Battlegrounds'* remit, McMaster touches upon each briefly. He notes, for example, that “partisan vitriol” in the United States gives its rivals the impression that it is incapable of competing effectively,³⁹ or that “decisions involving technological and infrastructure development must consider how the proposed technology and infrastructure would interact with geopolitical competitions,”⁴⁰ or that competing in cyberspace requires cooperation between the public and private sector.⁴¹

The upshot is that no clever strategy for deploying American power will succeed in countering the threats it faces if that power itself is permitted to atrophy. To succeed in a more competitive world, the United States will need to move more quickly to modernize and make more resilient a military that is increasingly vulnerable to the capabilities of its adversaries, enact economic policies to boost productivity and protect against national security threats, and restore the health of its democratic institutions and ability to craft foreign policy on a bipartisan basis (seemingly the hardest of all given the country’s experience in 2020). McMaster’s successors in the West Wing will need to grapple with these problems that lie at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy, perhaps taking comfort that the United States has managed to do so in the past. In 1978, for example, Michael Mandelbaum and William Schneider lamented that the “Cold War consensus is

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting/>.

³⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds* 443.

⁴⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds* 411.

⁴¹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds* 406.

gone,” and asserted that the incoming Carter administration’s most pressing need was for “a domestic consensus for foreign policy.”⁴²

Conclusion

In *Battlegrounds*, McMaster has offered a useful *tour d’horizon* of the threats facing the United States, as well as an entry into a pressing debate over the proper role of the United States in the world. For internationalists of all stripes, the stakes of that debate are high. Radicalism is resurgent in international relations. The notion that the international system the United States has defended and in which it has prospered for decades must not be preserved, but rather transformed, has gained traction not only in Moscow and Beijing but on the hustings throughout the Western world. The time to make the case for what focused, pragmatic, and competent American leadership and engagement looks like, and what it has to offer the United States and the world, is now or never.

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⁴² Michael Mandelbaum and William Scheider, “The New Internationalisms,” *International Security* 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978): 81–93, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446200>.

3. Battlegrounds: The Fight for American Foreign Policy

By Emma Ashford

During Donald Trump's presidency, many senior national security roles came to resemble the post of Hogwarts' Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher: The jobs were fraught with peril, most occupants came to regret their choice, and few lasted more than a year. The upside is that, though the Trump era has only just ended, a first batch of memoirs have come out from those who served in the Trump White House. H.R. McMaster's *Battlegrounds*, however, is likely to prove frustrating to anyone hoping for substantive insights into the Trump administration. As McMaster himself notes, despite his role as national security adviser during the critical first two years of the Trump presidency, this book isn't a tell-all. Instead, he presents a curiously sanitized policy process, one in which the National Security Council staff plan and execute an idealized strategy largely without the involvement of the principal. The book thus ends up being more of a window into McMaster's worldview and his criticisms of America's post-Cold War foreign policy.

But this is not necessarily a bad thing. In stripping the Trump factor from foreign policy, *Battlegrounds* ultimately highlights the continuities between the various and disparate foreign policy personnel of the Trump years. The dark vision of the world that McMaster presents is increasingly shared by many Republican foreign policy hands.⁴³ Although

⁴³ For just a few examples of places where Republicans align with McMaster's worldview: Former Trump officials Elbridge Colby and Wess Mitchell argued in *Foreign Affairs* that the United States must "thwart China's bid for ascendancy in Asia and beyond." Matthew Pottinger, Trump's deputy national security adviser, has argued that economic decoupling from China is already underway. Similar sentiments are also apparent among Republican foreign policy hands outside the Trump administration. Eric Sayers of the American Enterprise Institute, for example, has argued that "China's geography, strategy, and military systems place U.S. military forces ... at significant risk," and has suggested that "there is reason to believe that Beijing could successfully launch a lightning attack." The Hudson Institute's Michael Doran and Peter Rough have argued that "China is advancing on the Middle East with ruthless determination, ... actively working to oust the United States." Meanwhile, never-Trump Republicans Peter Feaver and Will Inboden effectively echo McMaster's thesis: "Today, the geopolitical situation is more daunting in almost every respect

Trump’s own policy incoherence has tended to mask this fact, McMaster’s book suggests that another alternative to the liberal internationalist consensus in U.S. foreign policy is beginning to emerge. And while McMaster offers criticisms of liberal internationalism similar to those of many realists and restrainers, his proposed solutions represent a fundamentally and radically different approach to the world. *Battlegrounds* makes clear that the future of Republican foreign policy may be far more coherent — and far less restrained — than the last four years would suggest.

The Invisible President

In theatre, there is a conceit known as “the unseen character,” a person who is frequently referred to — and may even direct the course of events — yet who is never seen or heard directly by the audience. That Trump could play this character might seem surprising to anyone who’s lived through the last four years. After all, how could one write a book about the Trump administration without referencing the many tweets and high-profile media

[with] multiple potential flashpoints from Taiwan to Baltic states, from the Arctic circle to the South China Sea and Malacca Strait, and across multiple issues and domains including trade, technology, cybersecurity, ideology, as well as air, land, sea, space, and soft power...” See Elbridge A. Colby and A. Wess Mitchell, “The Age of Great-Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 30, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition>; David Nakamura, Carol D. Leonnig, and Ellen Nakashima, “Matthew Pottinger Faced Communist China’s Intimidation as a Reporter. He’s Now at the White House Shaping Trump’s Hard Line Policy toward Beijing,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/matthew-pottinger-faced-communist-chinas-intimidation-as-a-reporter-hes-now-at-the-white-house-shaping-trumps-hard-line-policy-toward-beijing/2020/04/28/5fb3f6d4-856e-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html; Eric Sayers and Mark Montgomery, “Seizing the Advantage in the Asia-Pacific,” in *Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2020), 66–69, <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/fdd-monograph-defending-forward.pdf>; Michael Doran and Peter Rough, “China’s Emerging Middle Eastern Kingdom,” *Tablet Magazine*, Aug. 3, 2020, tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/china-middle-eastern-kingdom; and Will Inboden and Peter Feaver, “Advice to National-Security Republicans as Biden Takes Office,” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 20, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/20/biden-inauguration-advice-national-security-republicans-shadow-government-trump/>.

spats? From James Comey's *A Higher Loyalty* to John Bolton's *The Room Where It Happened*, the memoirs of the Trump era are mostly splashy tabloid bait, full of juicy anecdotes and incriminating details. There is undoubtedly some merit to avoiding this approach. As Carlos Lozada, a critic for the *Washington Post*, describes the genre, "Too many books of the Trump era are more knee-jerk than incisive, ... more fixated on calling out the daily transgressions of the man in the Oval Office — this is not normal! — than on assessing their impact."⁴⁴ In contrast, *Battlegrounds* is vaguely reminiscent of the classic British political satire *Yes, Minister*, in which the prime minister is never seen or heard, though his directives are a frequent point of concern for the other characters. By keeping the president offstage and unseen for most of the book, McMaster actually manages to present a book that is far more about foreign policy substance than about Trumpian scandal.

Yet, it also makes for an exceedingly strange entry in the canon of national security memoir. The memoirs of the great national security advisers of the past are typically as much about the personal relationship with the president as they are about policy. Some of this is undoubtedly the result of McMaster's relatively distinctive role as an active-duty military officer in a civilian White House role.⁴⁵ But *Battlegrounds* doesn't just avoid salacious details. It effectively excises the president from foreign policy, replacing him with policy process — McMaster's attempt to encourage his staff to think "more strategically" — and with lengthy anecdotes. Though the president occasionally makes an unexpected decision, he is effectively uninvolved in the policy debates to which McMaster devotes his energy. Indeed, even when McMaster disagrees with Trump's choices, there is no real criticism, just euphemisms. The president is never mistaken, never unrealistic — he is merely

⁴⁴ James T. Kloppenberg, "To Understand the Trump Era, a Post Critic Read 150 Books," *Washington Post*, Oct. 8, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/to-understand-the-trump-era-a-post-critic-read-150-books/2020/10/08/coa00622-f9ea-11ea-a275-1a2c2d36e1fi_story.html.

⁴⁵ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "An Active-Duty National Security Advisor: Myths and Concerns," *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 28, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/an-active-duty-national-security-advisor-myths-and-concerns/>.

receiving bad advice or is overly optimistic about the success of an endeavor.⁴⁶ In other administrations, this would be dismissed as diplomatic phrasing. In the Trump administration, it leaves those who hoped that McMaster would, at a minimum, criticize the president on policy grounds disappointed.

One might plausibly read this stylistic choice as McMaster's own attempt to remain nonpartisan. He notes early on in the book that "in the tradition of Gen. George C. Marshall ... I had never even voted."⁴⁷ But there's also a darker side to the offstage president of *Battlegrounds*: his role as an obstacle to be circumvented in achieving foreign policy outcomes. McMaster, after all, is not quite the impartial servant he suggests. He may not be partisan, but his foreign policy instincts differ from those of the president on a number of key issues. And in a number of places throughout the book, McMaster presents anecdotes of conversations with his counterparts overseas in which he discusses the best way to undermine Trump's foreign policy views. In Afghanistan, for example, "[President Ashraf] Ghani knew that President Trump had been elected largely by people who did not understand what was at stake in that far-away place, and who were skeptical about what more Americans were calling 'forever' or endless wars. I asked Ghani to help the world understand."⁴⁸ In South Korea, McMaster warned Ambassador Chung Eui-yong "about the revival of American isolationism, as an activist element of President Trump's political base. ... [W]e would have to work hard to stay aligned due not only to the incompatibility of Trump's and Moon's domestic supporters."⁴⁹ McMaster presents himself as nobly ensuring American security by undermining what he considers to be dangerous impulses by the president. But we should be clear: His actions are undermining the will of a democratically elected president, his commander. There are many in Washington who would praise McMaster for being one of the "adults in the room" and reining in the president's worst

⁴⁶ For example, "Those who were deeply skeptical about America's long war in Afghanistan convinced President Trump to abandon it." H.R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 215. Similarly, "And President Trump, perhaps too confident in his own persuasive abilities... may have overestimated Kim's ability to abandon the regime's Juche ideology." McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 325.

⁴⁷ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 4.

⁴⁸ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 188.

⁴⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 355.

impulses. But that has always been a problematic and somewhat undemocratic argument.⁵⁰ In keeping the president offstage, McMaster may have succeeded in keeping the book from political controversy. But he implies that the president's decisions don't matter when national security experts know better, a shallow — yet worrying — echo of Trump's own “deep state” conspiracy theories.

On Assumptions

It's a cliché to say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But the cover of *Battlegrounds* leaves very little doubt about the themes one should expect to find within. A close up of McMaster in full dress uniform adorns the front, with worry lines and frown clearly visible on his face. In the absence of Trump, the book is mostly about McMaster's own vision of the world, and — as the cover implies — it's a dark vision of an unforgiving arena of competition between states.

On the face of it, the book's core arguments are eminently reasonable: that American foreign policy has been characterized in recent years by hubris; that the country forgot that other states have agency; and that America suffers from a severe case of strategic narcissism, a concept that McMaster pulls from classical realist Hans Morgenthau. Though Morgenthau only really addressed narcissism in one coauthored paper later in life — it was to him less a strategic concept than a philosophical one⁵¹ — McMaster takes the general idea of preoccupation with self and runs with it, defining strategic narcissism as a tendency “to view the world only in relation to the United States.”⁵² This then implies the notion of “strategic empathy,” of seeking to understand what drives other states, whether it be interests, emotions, aspirations, or ideologies. American foreign policy in recent years, McMaster writes, has tended to be far more narcissistic than empathetic. A thorough

⁵⁰ John Haltiwanger, “Obama Slams New York Times Op-Ed Author on Trump Resistance,” *Business Insider*, Sept. 7, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/obama-nyt-op-ed-author-trump-resistance-2018-9>.

⁵¹ Hans Morgenthau and Ethel Person, “The Roots of Narcissism,” *Partisan Review* 45 (Fall 1978): 337-47.

⁵² McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 15.

reexamination of America's core assumptions about the world is therefore needed. And certainly, these criticisms of America's choices during the unipolar moment are widely shared by many today. As McMaster puts it, American foreign policy in recent decades has been "frustrating because of the wide gap between the assumptions on which some policies and strategies were based and the reality of situations on the ground in places like Afghanistan and Iraq."⁵³ In contrast, *Battlegrounds* presents his attempt to push his team to "map the interests of rivals, adversaries, and enemies" and to "identify not only goals but also our assumptions."⁵⁴

But it's worth delving more deeply into what he thinks the core assumptions underlying U.S. foreign policy should be. McMaster assumes repeatedly, for example, that Americans are now living in what the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, once described as "the most dangerous time in my lifetime."⁵⁵ He highlights a range of threats, from great-power competition to transnational terrorist organizations, hostile states in Iran and North Korea, and "new challenges to security... in complex arenas of competition from space to cyberspace to cyber-enabled information warfare to emerging disruptive technologies."⁵⁶ Indeed, McMaster frequently assumes the *opposite* of what most critics of the post-Cold War foreign policy consensus argue: He believes the world is less safe than heretofore assumed, the threats are more dangerous, and that America is beset by a number of rival states that are all out to get it. For him, the mistaken assumption in Afghanistan is not that America is overcommitted to a conflict that matters little for core national security. Instead, he argues that the mistake is that America is insufficiently committed and that "the results of striking a deal with the Taliban for the purpose of withdrawing from America's longest war are likely to be far worse than a sustained commitment under a sound strategy."⁵⁷ On Iran, McMaster doesn't believe that maximum

⁵³ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 4.

⁵⁴ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 17.

⁵⁵ Christopher Preble, "The Most Dangerous World Ever?," Cato Institute, Sept. 17, 2014, <https://www.cato.org/policy-report/september/october-2014/most-dangerous-world-ever>.

⁵⁶ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 18.

⁵⁷ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 220.

pressure has failed, as many in Washington now do, or that it is time to try diplomacy.⁵⁸ Instead, he argues that any attempt to negotiate with Iran is “divorced from the very nature of an Iranian regime that was fundamentally untrustworthy and hostile to the United States.”⁵⁹

In short, McMaster systematically overvalues coercion in international affairs and systematically undervalues diplomacy and other noncoercive tools of foreign policy. This is not precisely the same thing as over-militarization in foreign policy, though it shares some common symptoms. McMaster’s unwritten assumption is that that punishment and shows of force — whether sanctions, military strikes, or troop buildups — are more effective than cooperative diplomacy or compromise. Indeed, many of the core assumptions McMaster is challenging are those that underlie diplomacy, arms control, and deterrence. Just consider his argument on North Korea: “The assumption that Kim wants nuclear weapons only for deterrence is based on mirror imaging of an adversary that is not ‘like us’ and on simplistic historical analogies to nuclear deterrence against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.”⁶⁰ McMaster may be correct that North Korea’s leaders are not rational, and that nuclear deterrence is impossible in this case, but he offers no evidence that this is the case.⁶¹ Prior variants of this argument — with regard to China, for example — have proven unfounded.⁶²

McMaster makes other assumptions, too: The book is full of lengthy discussions of the malicious acts of other nations, yet America rarely missteps. He is entirely correct that some critics of U.S. foreign policy — particularly on the left — are often too willing to

⁵⁸ For example: Fred Kaplan, “Trump’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ on Iran Has Failed,” *Slate*, Nov. 17, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/11/trump-iran-strategy-nuclear-pressure.html>; and Sina Toossi, “Iran Is Becoming Immune to U.S. Pressure,” *Foreign Policy*, July 2, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/02/iran-united-states-maximum-pressure/>.

⁵⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 294.

⁶⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 374.

⁶¹ Uri Friedman, “Can America Live With a Nuclear North Korea?” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/north-korea-nuclear-deterrence/539205/>.

⁶² See, for example, Joshua Rovner, “Nobody Loves Deterrence, But We’ll Keep Doing It Anyway,” *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 9, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/nobody-loves-deterrence-but-we-ll-keep-doing-it-anyway/>.

attribute everything bad in the world to America. McMaster, however, commits the opposite sin. His commitment to an America that does no wrong is so absolute that he argues at one point that the United States shouldn't bear any responsibility for the 1953 coup against Iranian leader Mohammed Mossadegh.⁶³ Thus, for all his praise of empathy and historical understanding, the countries he describes in *Battlegrounds* are strangely uniform in their implacable opposition to the United States. And for all his opposition to strategic narcissism, he seems curiously unwilling to question whether the United States might sometimes be the problem. In one passage, McMaster describes one of his Pakistani counterparts, despairing that “[General Naveed Mukhtar] and other Pakistan army officers often sounded like they were diagnosing the situation in South Asia as dispassionate outside observers even as they drove much of the instability and violence that was the subject of their analysis.”⁶⁴ That McMaster fails to consider that the same criticism might apply to the United States — that it is sometimes a purveyor of instability — is a key shortcoming of the book.

Through a Glass, Darkly

Perhaps the most interesting part of *Battlegrounds*, salacious White House gossip aside, is that it expresses a very similar worldview to that of McMaster's successor, Bolton, in *The Room Where It Happened* and to that found in *Field of Fight*, the coauthored tome by Michael Ledeen and Michael Flynn, McMaster's short-lived predecessor as national security adviser. And it bears a strong resemblance to the 2017 *National Security Strategy* produced under McMaster's leadership. Each of these documents — with varying levels of competence — takes aim at the post-Cold War foreign policy consensus. They dispute the idea that international law has any motivating force, that a rules-based order can tamp down the rise of other great powers, and that America can reshape the world in its own image. And they bemoan the shortsightedness of America's policy toward China. For McMaster, for example, it was strategic narcissism of the highest order to assume that China would democratize.

⁶³ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 316.

⁶⁴ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 202.

On the surface, many of these arguments sound similar to those made by realists or restrainers. But McMaster and the others also make arguments that are substantively distinct from the realists. They argue that deterrence and punishment are the only things that work against hostile states, to the extent of arguing that preemptive strikes — as in the assassination of Qassim Soleimani — may be necessary. And McMaster repeatedly emphasizes the importance of returning to “competition” with other states. In one anecdote recounting a conversation with Nikolai Patrushev, a senior Russian policymaker, he writes, “I thought it important to let Patrushev know that we were prepared to compete and would no longer be absent from the arena.”⁶⁵ Though there’s no apparent end goal to the competition that McMaster, Bolton, and others prescribe, they argue that American participation in this competition is absolutely vital for American safety and security. As McMaster describes it, “when engaging with our Chinese counterparts, I explained our need to compete thoroughly as the best means of avoiding confrontation.”⁶⁶ Throughout the book, he and others pin almost all their hopes to the success of militarized deterrence and coercion, ignoring the risks of the security dilemma.

McMaster also takes explicit aim at realists and restrainers in his book, arguing that realists are “paragons of strategic narcissism due to the tendency to disregard the agency that the ‘other’ has over the future course of events.”⁶⁷ That’s a curious criticism when so many realists and restrainers have repeatedly emphasized that other states have agency, explaining why purely coercive campaigns against regimes like Iran or Venezuela fail.⁶⁸ But

⁶⁵ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 33.

⁶⁶ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 137.

⁶⁷ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 436.

⁶⁸ One only has to look at classic realist authors like George Kennan, who emphasized the importance of understanding internal Soviet politics when formulating America’s Cold War strategy. George F. (“X”) Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>. For more recent examples on Iran or Russia, see Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iranian Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); and Emma Ashford, “Not-So-Smart Sanctions: The Failure of Western Restrictions Against Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 31, 2015. More generally, see Stephen Walt, “The World Wants You to Think

McMaster ignores these contributions and instead paints this group as blind to the world, obsessively focused only on predetermined policy goals. It's a straw man argument that permeates the book's discussion of realists, whom the author characterizes as being in an unholy alliance with the left, driven by "cash and appeals to emotion."⁶⁹ Consider McMaster's assertion that:

many who are deeply skeptical of US military engagement abroad self-identify as part of a realist school of international relations. But realist is the wrong word. They get the world wrong because they start from an ideologically driven approach to US engagement with the world. They are against any form of military intervention abroad and for the withdrawal of US forces not only from the wars in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, but also from the preponderance of other military commitments overseas.⁷⁰

Even if one resists the easy jab here — that McMaster worked for almost two years for a president who openly advocated for withdrawal from these conflicts — the portrayal of all realists and restrainers as idealists or peaceniks is problematic. To begin with, most restrainers wouldn't argue that military action is never necessary. Meanwhile, most realists are explicitly nonideological in their approach to the world, relying instead on rational models that focus on states as the most important actors in international affairs. McMaster's criticisms are particularly confusing given that he himself approvingly cites some great classical realist scholars and attempts to graft an ideological structure onto a dark and straightforwardly offensive realist view of the world.

Trumpism Post-Trump

Putting aside these contradictions for a moment, *Battlegrounds* is less important for its own arguments than for what it says about the future of Republican foreign policy. By

Like a Realist," *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/30/the-world-wants-you-to-think-like-a-realist/>.

⁶⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 436.

⁷⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 435.

excising Trump — and his strange and incoherent foreign policy proclivities — from the picture, McMaster maps out a foreign policy approach that is far more competent and cohesive than anything seen from the Trump administration. In McMaster’s ideal world, America would be fighting “sustainable” long-term wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; continuing to wage a global counter-terror campaign; deterring Iran and North Korea; building up the U.S. nuclear arsenal; further developing high-tech weapons and a missile defense capability; and competing with Russia and China not only in their respective regions but also in the Arctic, in cyberspace, with regard to new technology, in education, and on trade, where he contends that the U.S. government should be helping to decouple its economy from China. This vision is more consistent with the views of those who have advised Trump on foreign policy than with the president’s own views.⁷¹ This suggests that, at least among Republican foreign policy elites, there is some consensus on the future direction of U.S. foreign policy.⁷² That consensus is perhaps even less favorable to restraint than the existing liberal internationalist consensus. *Battlegrounds* suggests that the post-Trump Republican party is likely to look far more coherent on foreign policy, as hawkish elites who distanced themselves from the president’s strange whims (i.e., meeting with Kim Jong Un), and his more restrained tendencies (i.e., getting out of Afghanistan), reclaim the mainstream of Republican foreign policy.

Perhaps more importantly, *Battlegrounds* suggests that the morass of criticism and think pieces that followed the 2016 election have now largely condensed into three possible

⁷¹ After leaving the White House, Bolton attacked Trump as being too soft on China. The former Trump secretary of defense, James Mattis, quit the administration over frustration that the president wanted to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and Syria. And then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Bolton both reportedly favored military strikes against Iran that the president ultimately rejected. See Dan Diamond, “Bolton Casts Light on Trump’s Deference to China on Coronavirus,” *Politico*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/24/bolton-trump-china-coronavirus-338647>; Nancy A. Youssef and Rebecca Ballhaus, “James Mattis to Depart as Defense Chief Over Troop Withdrawals from Syria, Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 21, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-mattis-retiring-at-end-of-february-11545344800>; and Michael Shear et al., “Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, Then Abruptly Pulled Back,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/world/middleeast/iran-us-drone.html>.

⁷² See, for example, many of the Republican foreign policy thinkers cited in footnote one.

visions of U.S. foreign policy, which we might describe as 1) liberal internationalism 2.0, 2) America First unilateralism, and 3) restraint (broadly construed). The first is in many ways a continuation of the post-Cold War liberal internationalist consensus, albeit with some modifications around the edges to rein in the worst of the excesses.⁷³ The latter two are both challenges to that consensus. Both these challenges draw from the same set of core criticisms about America’s post-Cold War choices in foreign policy: that there was too much optimism about America’s ability to reshape world politics, too much focus on ideology, too little focus on the agency of other countries, and a foolish assumption that the unipolar moment would last forever. But where they differ is in their policy responses. The “restraint” camp as broadly construed — a motley coalition of realists, restrainers, antiwar progressives, paleoconservatives, and libertarians — views America’s foreign policy failures as a reason to reevaluate America’s core interests, prioritize among them, and dial down the country’s military presence overseas in favor of diplomacy and engagement.⁷⁴ McMaster and those around him — the America Firsters — instead take these failures as an indication that America should lean in, committing ever more resources to “competing” in every arena of influence for an unknown and potentially unlimited period of time.⁷⁵

⁷³ Among others, see Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (Yale University Press, 2017); Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for Twenty-First-Century Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); and Michael O’Hanlon, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace: U.S. Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁷⁴ Among others, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of US Strategy Toward China,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 79–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849993>; Jasen Castillo, “Passing the Torch: Criteria for Implementing a Grand Strategy of Offshore Balancing,” in *New Voices in Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2018), 24–35, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/Grand-Strategy-Report-Final-online-1.pdf?mtime=20190408141828&focal=none>; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump* (Medford, MA: Polity, 2020); and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ In addition to McMaster and others, see Leon Panetta et al., *Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad* (Washington, DC: Foundation for the Defense of Democracies,

In recent years, Washington’s policy community has become, if not more friendly to, then at least more cognizant of the arguments for restraint in U.S. foreign policy. But it has not yet started to grapple effectively with the America First criticism of liberal internationalism, which has thus far been obscured by its association with a mercurial president. Indeed, many of the more extreme parts of this unilateralist approach to the world — such as trade wars with China or the use of secondary sanctions on allies — have been so far taken mostly as evidence of Trump’s personal eccentricity. But McMaster’s worldview is increasingly mainstream among Republican foreign policy elites; Washington needs to take his view more seriously. It’s a potentially dangerous path: McMaster’s dark vision of a world where “competition” and threat are endless could well open the door for an increasingly illiberal, unilateral, and militaristic U.S. foreign policy.

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2020), <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/fdd-monograph-defending-forward.pdf>;

Nadia Schadlow, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); and Colby and Mitchell, “The Age of Great-Power Competition.”

4. The Power of Values: The Free World's Strategic Advantage in Great-Power Competition

By Daniel Twining

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster's book *Battlegrounds* lays out a hard-nosed, realist case for why an effective U.S. strategy of great-power competition demands policies that recognize the political domain as a central arena of contestation. Grand strategists in the United States today too often argue that the way America should manage competition with China and Russia is to be more like them — practicing forms of *machtpolitik* that emphasize competition in the military and technological domains.⁷⁶ For these self-styled “realists,” there is no place in the most competitive geopolitical landscape in 40 years for values-based policies that emphasize freedom, pluralism, and human rights. In short, scholars who have never served in uniform argue that soft power is for sissies.

McMaster, whose excellent book opens with a riveting tank battle in the Iraqi desert and is informed by his 34 years in uniform, including commands in combat, begs to differ. China and Russia are pursuing strategies to weaken and ultimately dismantle the free and open world that American leadership built and has sustained since 1945. To do so, they are pursuing state-directed policies designed to subvert democratic practice. In different ways, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin understand some things that too many U.S. foreign policy practitioners do not: that democracies are America's greatest allies; that much of America's standing in the world stems from its support for human rights and political freedom beyond its shores; that strong democratic institutions make nations more resilient to Chinese and Russian efforts to entrap them in illiberal spheres of influence; and that leaders in Beijing and Moscow are pursuing state strategies to discredit democratic values globally so as to make the world safe for autocracy. McMaster argues

⁷⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Realism and Restraint,” *Horizons*, no. 14 (Summer 2019), https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Horizons-2019-John-J.-Mearsheimer_K1.pdf; and Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth, “The Future of the Liberal Order is Conservative,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (March/April 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-02-12/future-liberal-order-conservative>.

that a free and open world of democratic societies is worth defending because it offers the United States geopolitical advantages the country's adversaries cannot match.

Why Defending Democracy Is Strategic

From an American perspective, a more democratic world is not simply desirable in terms of morality — it is the surest source of American security. As McMaster writes, “The existence of free and open societies abroad benefits security because such societies are natural defenses against hostile, aggressive, authoritarian powers ... Support for democracy and the rule of law is the best means of promoting peace and competing with those who promote authoritarian, closed systems.”⁷⁷ Democracies do not fight each other.⁷⁸ They do not produce the uncontrolled mass migration that kleptocratic misrule in nations like Venezuela or state-generated conflict in places like Syria produce. They do not seed the violent extremism — with a global reach — that has emanated from what McMaster terms the “terrorist ecosystem” in ungoverned regions of the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands. Dangers to American security are far less likely to germinate in nations that are ruled justly and inclusively. Instead, the greatest dangers to American security emanate from either autocratic control or the absence of accountable and effective state institutions. Supporting democratic governance abroad is, therefore, a form of self-defense.

For America's great-power competitors, abuse of the rights of citizens at home is a corollary of aggressive revisionism abroad. Nations like China and Russia, where power is unbound by law and institutions at home, are more likely to exercise unbridled power abroad in ways that are deeply destabilizing to the international system and dangerously detrimental to American national security interests. These include political strategies coming out of Beijing and Moscow that aim to corrupt, coerce, or co-opt America-friendly countries. A goal of U.S. statecraft must be to compete directly in the political domain against America's great-power competitors and their efforts to neuter democratic institutions in nations of strategic importance, including America's neighbors in Latin American as well as Asian

⁷⁷ H.R. McMaster, *Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 438.

⁷⁸ Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

nations situated along vital sea lanes. As McMaster puts it, “[S]upport for democratic institutions and processes is not just an exercise in altruism. Democracy is a practical means of competing effectively with China and other adversaries who attempt to promote their interests at the expense of other nations through corrupt practices.”⁷⁹ From the perspective of American national security interests, defending democracy is strategic.

The Shift to Strategic Competition

“Realists” sometimes excuse Chinese and Russian predation abroad by justifying it as defensive in nature. If only the United States had not pushed for NATO expansion, Russian leaders would not feel so insecure. If only America had not encircled China with maritime Asian alliances and forward-deployed forces, it would enjoy the strategic space to rise peacefully as a status quo power. McMaster has no time for such self-flagellation by experts whose strategic insights sound alarmingly similar to Kremlin and Chinese Communist Party propaganda. Accommodating these nations through retrenchment would create grave dangers because, in the case of China in particular, their strategy is offensive rather than defensive.

Chinese leaders seek to build a new world order that would diminish American security. Moreover, because of the Chinese government’s policy of “civil-military fusion,” one cannot separate doing business with Chinese companies from empowering the Chinese Communist Party, as McMaster correctly observes. “If the Chinese Communist Party succeeds in creating a twenty-first century version of the tributary system, the world will be less free, less prosperous, and less safe,” writes McMaster. The party, in his view, “uses investment and indebtedness as the basis for servile relationships between the Middle Kingdom and modern-day vassal states,” with the Belt and Road Initiative, “in large measure, a colonial-style campaign of coercion and cooptation.”⁸⁰

As national security adviser, McMaster led what he convincingly argues to be America’s most important strategic shift in decades: the decisive pivot away from accommodating

⁷⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 141.

⁸⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 110–11.

China, which he says “only emboldened” the Chinese Communist Party and “actually enabled the growth in power of a nation whose leaders were determined not only to displace the United States in Asia, but also to promote a rival economic and governance model globally.”⁸¹ Shifting from engagement with China to a policy of competition was essential given the Chinese Communist Party’s first-order threat to the world America built. A first step was to “acknowledge that we were in a competition with China — a competition that the United States was losing because of a failure to understand the emotions, ideology, and aspirations that motivated Chinese Communist Party policy.”⁸²

The Danger of China’s Global Ambitions

What exactly are China’s aspirations? Its leadership seeks to reorient the existing international order around the communist party’s interests and values. It is both “obsessed” with political control at home and “determined to advance its system of authoritarian capitalism abroad to expand Chinese power and influence at the expense of countries that adhere to democratic principles and free-market economic practices.”⁸³ Chinese Communist Party leaders believe they have a window of strategic opportunity both to strengthen control at home and to revise the international order in their favor.⁸⁴ Such aggressive revisionism comes at the expense of U.S. interests and directly targets the liberal international order that, for 75 years, has broadly made Americans prosperous and secure. In short, “[w]hat China’s campaign of cooption, coercion, and concealment has in common with Putin’s playbook is the objective of collapsing the free, open, and rules-based order that the United States and its allies established after World War II.”⁸⁵ By the time McMaster joined the Trump administration in 2017, he believed that it was past time for the United States to confront the challenge.

The imperative to confront Chinese leaders’ global ambitions matters, and not just to national security hawks like McMaster. China’s campaign to revise the international order

⁸¹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 131.

⁸² McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 90–91.

⁸³ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 103.

⁸⁴ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 103.

⁸⁵ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 124.

is insidious because it is less a military challenge than a systemic effort — across the military, economic, political, and information domains — to remake the world in ways friendly to the interests of an authoritarian superpower and hostile to those of democracies. Such a world would impinge on the American way of life and leave the United States, used to operating with a margin of strategic advantage, at the mercy of a ruthless set of foreign leaders who show no compunction about grossly abusing the rights of their own citizens.

The menace of China’s designs is amplified by the fact that it can be difficult to see them clearly — precisely because the Chinese Communist Party’s strategy, as McMaster writes, “relies on cooption and coercion” to influence others “to act in the party’s interests. The party also attempts to conceal its intentions and its actions to preclude competition.” Chinese influence operations are designed to peel away U.S. allies, including by meddling directly in their domestic politics, as has been all too apparent in the case of core U.S. partners like Australia. For McMaster, “[t]his strategy of cooption, coercion, and concealment [is] potent and dangerous.”⁸⁶

Fear and Aggression

The Chinese Communist Party’s aggressive ambitions abroad stem partly from its acute insecurities at home. McMaster echoes George Kennan’s insight from the dawn of the Cold War that threatening Soviet conduct abroad flowed from the nature of the Soviet system itself. McMaster convincingly links the history of Chinese imperial rule to the Chinese communist project today, which is more imperial than collectivist. “Like Chairman Xi, the emperors who occupied the Forbidden City practiced a remote and autocratic style of rule vulnerable to corruption and internal threats ... The emperors who sat on the elaborate throne in the Hall of Central Harmony made decisions based largely on fear and anxiety.”⁸⁷ But, like Chinese Communist Party rule today, “their effort to preserve hierarchical order and control was anything but harmonious for those subjected to their brutality.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 104.

⁸⁷ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 95.

⁸⁸ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 96.

Chinese Communist Party propaganda makes Chairman Xi Jinping out to be all-powerful and the party all-knowing. Xi “wanted to be seen as the unchallenged ruler of an increasingly powerful and apparently harmonious country. Yet for Xi and his predecessors, the pomp of the office masked deep insecurity, and harmony concealed brutal repression.”⁸⁹ Perversely, China’s growing wealth and power have not mitigated these anxieties but amplified them. “As China’s power increased, so did leaders’ insecurity and fear ... The party was obsessed with control because control was necessary to allay its fears and fulfill its ambitions.”⁹⁰

This is one of the most profound strategic insights in *Battlegrounds*. The solution, for McMaster, is not to allay Chinese leaders’ fears through policies of accommodation and reassurance. Past policies of accommodation meant that the United States “actually enabled the growth in power of a nation whose leaders were determined not only to displace the United States in Asia, but also to promote a rival economic and governance model globally.”⁹¹ In short, avoiding strategic competition in the past did not reassure China — it only emboldened the Chinese Communist Party and further opened the door to its global designs. Putting U.S.-Chinese relations on a healthier footing means not yielding to the party’s efforts “to advance its system of authoritarian capitalism abroad to expand Chinese power and influence at the expense of countries that adhere to democratic principles and free-market economic practices.”⁹²

The Competitive Advantages of Open Societies

As national security adviser, McMaster led an overdue effort to reorient America’s approach to China around competitive engagement. This was not primarily a military campaign but a contest of systems. Where Chinese leaders at the helm of their techno-authoritarian state see weakness and vulnerability in open societies’ democratic institutions, McMaster sees an enduring U.S. advantage. “I believed that if the United

⁸⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 97.

⁹⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 97, 99.

⁹¹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 130.

⁹² McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 103.

States and our allies and partners began to compete effectively, it would be possible to turn what the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] saw as weakness into strength,” he writes.

We saw competitive advantage in freedom of expression, of assembly, and of the press; freedom of religion and freedom from persecution based on religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation; the freedom to prosper in our free-market economic system; rule of law and the protections it affords to life and liberty; and democratic governance that recognizes that government serves the people rather than the other way around.⁹³

Chinese leaders are in the process of constructing a total-control state, in which the party can snuff out all forms of political dissent before they even manifest based on a comprehensive system of social credit, the largest army of internet censors on the planet, a “Great Firewall” that blocks Chinese users from accessing objective news and information beyond China’s borders, and universal surveillance of citizens.⁹⁴ The way to compete with this Chinese system is to do the opposite, helping allied and friendly societies around the world build democratic resilience against the Chinese Communist Party’s malign influence beyond its borders. This includes strengthening the institutions of free societies, encouraging civic education and active civic participation in public life, and holding leaders accountable through independent courts, regular elections, and free media. In fact, for McMaster, “[t]he free exchange of information and ideas ... may be the greatest competitive advantage of our societies.”⁹⁵ That Chinese leaders view such openness as a grave danger should remind Americans of freedom’s strategic value.

Open systems help to inoculate countries that are targets of Chinese ambition from Beijing’s efforts to corrupt, coerce, or co-opt them. The institutions of free societies “bestow competitive advantages useful not only in countering Chinese industrial espionage and other forms of economic aggression, but also in defeating CCP influence campaigns

⁹³ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 132–33.

⁹⁴ Ross Anderson, “The Panopticon Is Already Here,” *The Atlantic* (September 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>.

⁹⁵ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 133.

designed to mute criticism and generate support for CCP policies.”⁹⁶ Broadly, “[a] good offense based on the competitive advantages of our free and open societies requires a strong defense against the CCP’s sophisticated strategies”⁹⁷ that aim to weaken democracies, erode American alliances, and build a new world order centered around the values and interests of the Chinese Communist Party.

Strategic Competition Starts at Home

McMaster concludes by emphasizing, and rightly so, that priming America for an era of strategic competition with an autocratic superpower requires healthy and vital democratic institutions at home. If the values of free and open societies are the best defense against the Chinese Communist Party’s campaign to recast the global balance of power in its favor, the United States must ensure that its civic institutions reflect those democratic values as fully as possible. This requires rejecting “the toxicity and disinformation in the social media ecosystem and reintroduc[ing] civility into the discussions important to a thriving democracy.”⁹⁸ Americans should celebrate what they have in common even as they respectfully argue about issues that divide them. McMaster’s words ring even more true in the midst of a U.S. political transition that demonstrates how democracies can self-correct: “Citizens of free and open societies might cherish the freedoms and opportunities their forbears bequeathed them while acknowledging that no democracy or free-market economy is perfect and that all are works in progress.”⁹⁹

McMaster argues that education has a vital role to play, including in producing civically minded citizens. Universities should foster not only self-criticism “but also an acknowledgement of the nobility and accomplishments of our great unfinished experiment in democracy and liberty.”¹⁰⁰ At the level of primary and secondary education, there is essential work to do “to rekindle in our youth an understanding of our history, including

⁹⁶ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 139.

⁹⁷ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 141.

⁹⁸ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 403.

⁹⁹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 403–04.

¹⁰⁰ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 443.

not only the contradictions and imperfections in our experiment, but also the virtues and great promise of America.”¹⁰¹

Ultimately, America cannot lead the free world if partisan polarization, social atomization, and the inability to come together around core values that unite the country prevent domestic consensus on the urgency of what the United States needs to do in the world to sustain a balance of power that favors freedom. The Chinese Communist Party and other foreign adversaries would be only too happy to see America diverted from strategic competition abroad by enduring and unnecessary divisions at home.

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¹⁰¹ McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 443.