

# Present at the Re-creation?

## U.S. Foreign Policy Must Be Remade, Not Restored

*Jessica T. Mathews*

For years, Joe Biden has portrayed the presidency of Donald Trump as an aberration from which the United States can quickly recover. Throughout the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, Biden asserted that under his leadership, the United States would be “back at the head of the table.” But a return to the pre-Trump status quo is not possible. The world—and the United States—have changed far too much. And although hailing the return of American hegemony might seem comforting to Americans, it reveals a degree of tone-deafness to how it sounds to the rest of the world. When people elsewhere look at Washington’s track record over the past two decades, they don’t see confident leadership. What they see, instead, are a series of disasters authored by Washington, chief among them the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent destabilization of much of the Middle East and the 2008 global financial crisis. During those decades, Washington also pursued an ineffectual war in Afghanistan, an incoherent policy in Syria, and ill-judged humanitarian interventions, most notably in Libya.

**JESSICA T. MATHEWS** is a Distinguished Fellow and former President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The failures have also been domestic. To date, the United States has handled the COVID-19 pandemic worse than any other major country. Americans make up only four percent of the world’s population but account for a staggering 25 percent of global COVID-19 cases and 19 percent of deaths from the disease. The failure has come at all levels: a stunning lack of national leadership, an alienated population unwilling to make modest sacrifices in the common interest, and a health-care system that is deeply inequitable and administratively fractured.

These maladies predated Trump, of course. President Barack Obama’s administration had to design international agreements such as the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal in a way that would avoid the need for formal ratification, because the world knows that the U.S. Senate has been unable to approve a multilateral treaty for nearly 15 years, even one modeled directly on U.S. domestic law. But Trump’s “America first” populist nationalism has cut deeply into the foundation of American foreign policy, as his administration called into question long-standing alliances, embraced authoritarian rulers, denigrated allies, and withdrew the United States from a wide range of international agreements and organizations that it founded. Beyond the moves that garnered headlines were a great many more that made it impossible for valuable institutions to operate. Under Trump, for example, the United States vetoed every nominee to the World Trade Organization’s Appellate Body, purposely keeping the number of judges below the required quorum and thereby depriving all 164 WTO member countries of the means to resolve disputes.