

OPINION

A Debate Heard 'Round the World



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

As Thursday's presidential debate reberated through American politics, most attention focused on President Biden's faltering performance. But there is another dimension to the story. The debate moved foreign policy to center stage in the presidential race even as it raised the temperature of world politics and increased the chances of more international crises as the U.S. election approaches. American presidential debates typically revolve around domestic issues like fiscal policy and culture wars, but last week's shocker was an exception. Donald Trump has decided that foreign policy is a crucial weakness of the Biden presidency, and he hammered relentlessly at a theme he believes will work for him. "Throughout the entire world, we're no longer respected as a country. They don't respect our leadership. They don't respect the United States anymore," Mr. Trump said. He returned to this idea repeatedly during Thursday's debate. He said Vladimir Putin wouldn't have invaded Ukraine "if we had a real president . . . a president that was respected by Putin."

For those who have been paying attention, this shouldn't come as a surprise. Mr. Trump has been empha-

sizing this idea on the campaign trail. On June 18 he told a rally in Racine, Wis., that "Joe Biden is humiliating our country on the world stage . . . I will prevent a thing called World War III." The crowd began cheering and continued as he said: "You are closer to it than you have any idea. Biden's weakness has put us in grave danger." Mr. Trump's rallies have long served as focus groups. The former president throws out ideas and concepts; when his audience responds enthusiastically, he doubles down. The idea that World War III is approaching and only new leadership can prevent it resonates with his supporters. At a June 22 rally in Philadelphia he said that under Mr. Biden, "the world is in flames. Our border is overrun. . . . Europe is in chaos. The Middle East is exploding. Iran is emboldened. China is on the march. And this horrible, horrible president is dragging us toward World War III."

Mr. Biden's debate performance also sent shock waves through the international system. Politico quoted a European diplomat's text: "Internationally this isn't a great look for America, at the risk of stating the obvious." For European leaders, almost all of whom vastly prefer Mr. Biden to his challenger, the president's halting delivery confirmed existing fears. Based on Mr. Biden's uneven performance in meetings with European and world leaders, doubts about his abil-

ity to win re-election or carry out the duties of office were already widespread. At this point almost the entire Continent is battenning down the hatches for what European leaders believe to be a near-inevitable Trump return to the White House. Mr. Biden's political and personal vulnerability comes amid a leadership crisis in Europe. French President Emmanuel Macron is licking his

Seeing foreign policy as a crucial weakness of Biden's presidency, Trump hammers away.

wounds after a stinging defeat in the first round of parliamentary elections. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz presides over a weak, divided and unpopular coalition. Viktor Orbán's Putin-sympathizing Hungary has just assumed a six-month presidency of the European Union. Rishi Sunak's Conservatives appear on the verge of a landslide defeat in Thursday's election. The contrast with a resurgent Russia, where Vladimir Putin seems to have stabilized his domestic political position while strengthening relations with supporters like Iran, China and North Korea, is disquieting. While the president's political allies and aides struggled to extinguish the domestic firestorm sparked by the de-

bate, Team Biden's foreign-policy strategists face an even more complex task. The weak debate showing undermines confidence in both the durability of the Biden administration and the competence of its leadership. Can either Israel or Hamas trust commitments made by this administration when it looks as if Donald Trump will return to power next January? Will China see opportunities as a weakened American administration under an elderly leader fights for its political life? In a worst-case scenario, the perception of presidential weakness would lead foreign leaders to challenge U.S. power at a time of seeming American vulnerability. Mr. Putin chose to attack Georgia in 2008 while an unpopular George W. Bush administration was dealing with the financial crisis. In 2024, Mr. Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un or Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could choose this moment of American political disarray to make a dramatic move. Two or more of them could coordinate actions, presenting a distracted and weakened Biden administration with the most dangerous and complex international challenge since the 1940s. As Team Biden works to keep the world calm, it can be sure of one thing. Any foreign-policy failures between now and November will become prominent features of Mr. Trump's no-holds-barred assault on President Biden's fitness for office.

BOOKSHELF | By John J. Miller

Stranger Than Fiction

Think to New Worlds

By Joshua Blu Buhs
Chicago, 384 pages, \$35

The American craze for UFOs arguably began on June 24, 1947, when Kenneth Arnold flew a plane over Washington state and claimed to observe nine mysterious moving lights. As the story exploded in the media and wild speculation ensued, an unnamed reporter for the Associated Press noted that "flying discs had similar counterparts in the past" and cited "a rare book in Chicago's Newberry Library." The book in fact was not rare, having been put out by a major publisher a generation earlier, but it possessed a forbidding title: "The Book of the Damned." The author was Charles Fort. "By the damned, I mean the excluded," wrote Fort—and by the excluded, he meant bizarre phenomena that science supposedly could not explain. In a meandering text, he described frogs and fish that fell from the skies in England and France, gigantic footprints pressed into the sandstone of Nevada, and other oddities. Compiled during long hours in libraries, Fort's anecdotes carried an aura of authenticity because they included references to newspapers and journals. Among Fort's fairies and poltergeists were forerunners of flying saucers: baffling illuminations that had allegedly zipped through the air in Sweden, Ireland and Germany in the 1800s. Fort thus seemed to give UFOs a provenance, helping fuel the sensationalism that surrounded Kenneth Arnold's sightings in 1947 and prompt dreams of alien arrivals. As Joshua Blu Buhs puts it in "Think to New Worlds," his account of Fort's influence on popular culture, "Forteanism expanded the imaginative possibilities." It went on to feed the legends of the Abominable Snowman, the Bermuda Triangle, the Loch Ness monster and more. "Who in the name of frenzy is Charles Fort?" asked Booth Tarkington in 1920. The novelist supplied an affectionate answer: Fort, he wrote, was "a magnificent nut." Admirers viewed Fort as a diligent investigator whose strange stories about fantastic events, compiled in "The Book of the Damned" and later volumes, fostered a useful skepticism in the face of scientific orthodoxy. Critics saw him as a kook. H.G. Wells condemned Fort as "one of the most damnable bores who ever cut scraps from out-of-the-way newspapers." Mr. Buhs takes Fort seriously but also recognizes that his detractors had a case: "Fort teetered on the edge of pure crankery."

Born in Albany, N.Y., in 1874, Fort sold short stories to magazines in the early 1900s. One of his editors was Theodore Dreiser, who became a patron and advocate; "The Book of the Damned" saw print in 1919 partly because Dreiser, one of the most acclaimed novelists of his day, demanded that his publisher release it and threatened to take his business elsewhere if it didn't. By this time, Fort had found his forte, shifting away from pure fiction and devoting himself to scouring periodicals for accounts of half-forgotten enigmas. He mixed curiosity and credulousness, writing of telekinesis, spontaneous combustion and rocks he dubbed "thunderstones" that dropped during storms. What separated Fort from crackpots was his sense of whimsy: "I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written." His approach was close in spirit to his contemporary Robert Ripley, the cartoonist behind "Ripley's Believe It or Not!" Yet Fort was more than a mere entertainer. He intended to cast doubt on conventions and dogmas, and he appealed to an audience of readers who understood the allure of Hamlet's line: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The 'magnificent nut' who tracked poltergeists and flying saucers had an influential afterlife, inspiring authors of science fiction and horror.

Upon his death in 1932, at age 57, Fort embarked on what Mr. Buhs calls "an influential afterlife, his name transformed into an adjective." Fortean ideas inspired authors of science fiction and horror. John W. Campbell, a prominent editor of pulp magazines starting in the 1930s, remarked that Fort's corpus "probably averages one science-fiction or fantasy plot idea to the page." The narrator of a story by H.P. Lovecraft mentions "the extravagant books of Charles Fort with their claims that voyagers from other worlds and outer space have often visited earth." Arthur C. Clarke and Robert A. Heinlein also drew from Fort. Even William Gaddis, the postmodern novelist, refers to Fort in his 1955 book, "The Recognitions." Visual artists, too, have looked to Fort. The Buffalo AKG Art Museum owns an abstract painting from 1948 by Martha Visser't Hooft: "Fall of Related Objects (Tribute to Charles Fort)." Mr. Buhs, whose previous book was on the lore of Bigfoot, points to many of these connections as he chronicles the efforts of people who tried to extend Fort's legacy into the 1950s and beyond. Some were harmless eccentrics who enjoyed "creating trippy rearrangements of reality." Others morphed into menaces. Mr. Buhs claims that Eric Frank Russell, a science-fiction writer and Fort disciple, became a Holocaust denier. Fort was a meticulous researcher, and so is Mr. Buhs: "Think to New Worlds" is packed with information. Unfortunately, it's also a mess, disjointed in its organization and colorless in its storytelling. It ends on a note of tendentious politics, blaming Fort for today's right-wing conspiracy theories. This is nonsense, and it overlooks a more positive spin: Amid the public-health establishment's brazen refusal to consider a lab leak as a source of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world might have benefited from more Fortean distrust. Those who seek a better introduction to Fort's life should pick up the 1970 biography by Damon Knight or the 2008 biography by Jim Steinmeyer. To get a sense of what Fort wrought, they might track down a copy of "Chariots of the Gods?" by Erich von Däniken or watch "Ancient Aliens," now in its 20th season on the History Channel. Or perhaps most fitting of all, they might turn on the news and take in the latest report on those things we're now supposed to call "unidentified aerial phenomena."

Mr. Miller is director of the Dow Journalism Program at Hillsdale College and the author of "Reading Around: Journalism on Authors, Artists, and Ideas."

Is Josh Shapiro Capable of Leadership?



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

Josh Shapiro's star is on the rise. Since his election as governor of Pennsylvania in 2022, the 51-year-old Democrat has frequently been touted as presidential timber. After Joe Biden's public implosion on Thursday night, some in the media are floating Mr. Shapiro as a possible replacement at the top of the Democratic ticket. Those making that case highlight what is meant to be his most politically attractive quality: He's a moderate.

He says he supports a school-choice plan, but so far he's done nothing to advance it.

Not so fast, says Charles Mitchell, president of the free-market Commonwealth Foundation. "Americans should know: Josh Shapiro's moderate image is a myth—so far," Mr. Mitchell says. Mr. Mitchell cites a litany of issues such as energy and corporate tax cuts, on which Mr. Shapiro's actions have fallen short of his rhetoric. But the most glaring is his inaction on school choice. On Sunday night, the deadline for a state budget passed without a deal. Just like last year, this means that a proposed

voucher program is caught in the crossfire between a friendly Republican Senate and a hostile Democratic House. Mr. Shapiro says he favors school choice, but he is unwilling to lead. The governor's predecessor, Tom Wolf, was an avowed enemy of school choice, so the Keystone State's lack of progress is no surprise. But Mr. Shapiro was supposed to be a different kind of Democrat. Two months before he was elected, he posted the following on his website about Lifeline Scholarships, a proposed voucher program for kids stuck in the worst 15% of Pennsylvania's public schools: "Josh favors adding choices for parents and educational opportunity for students and funding Lifeline Scholarships like those approved in other states and introduced in Pennsylvania." It was a brave move, because it meant taking on arguably the Democratic Party's most powerful constituency: the teachers unions. It would mean that Mr. Shapiro was aligning himself with a new and diverse choice coalition that has expanded far beyond the usual suspects such as the Commonwealth Foundation. In Pennsylvania this coalition includes everyone from billionaire financier Jeff Yass to rapper Jay-Z and Black Pastors United for Education. Sightings of moderate Democrats are frequently reported in the press but actual evidence for their existence is scant. Mr. Shapiro likes to invoke his motto "Get Stuff



Done" (the G-rated version), which emphasizes practical results over ideology. But we're now in the thick of his second budget battle and he still isn't getting it done. "Josh Shapiro promised school choice as a candidate," says Mr. Mitchell. "But in 2023, his first year in office, he vetoed his own school-choice proposal in a failed effort to break a budget impasse of his own making. Now he calls Lifeline Scholarships 'unfinished business.' But he's not showing any leadership, exerting any pressure, or spending any political capital to pass them." Pennsylvanians broadly support school choice. Mr. Mitchell cites a just-released Commonwealth Foundation poll showing 75% total support for "establishing scholarships for low-income students in Pennsylvania's worst performing (bottom 15%) schools that would help pay for tuition to another K-12 school."

That's not all. Those polled also supported establishing an independent authorizer for charter schools rather than the current system, which leaves approval to union-dominated school districts. They favor expanding access to charters to get 40,000 kids off waiting lists. Eighty-four percent support government-funded education-opportunity accounts to give families real alternatives to the failing public-education monopoly. In other words, Mr. Shapiro would be embracing a cause popular with everyone but the teachers unions. What kind of moderate Democrat wouldn't see that as an opportunity to stand out from the pack? On paper there's a strong case for Mr. Shapiro to replace Mr. Biden. He is governor of a state that is America's fifth largest and a must-win swing state for Democrats in November. Mr. Shapiro's reputation as a can-do leader was greatly enhanced nationwide when he managed to get Interstate 95 open in only 12 days after a critical stretch of the highway collapsed in Philadelphia last June. "As of now, Josh Shapiro is a perfect sub for Joe Biden—a moderate-talking, left-governing politician from the nation's largest swing state who is failing to do the work of his office," Mr. Mitchell says. "If he changes course this budget season and delivers for kids, he could become the kind of statesman America needs." And a true moderate Democrat. Write to mcgurn@wsj.com.

The Constitution Protects 'Fake Electors'

By Lawrence Lessig

Arizona has joined Georgia, Michigan and Wisconsin in seeking to prosecute Donald Trump's 2020 electors. Mr. Trump and his party's lawyers encouraged them to meet and vote on the date set by Congress, Dec. 15. Because Joe Biden carried those states, Democrats and journalists call these Trump electors "fake." But the effort to prosecute them is unconstitutional, and the campaign to vilify them is stupid. A twist on a plotline from the HBO series "Succession" illustrates why. In season 4, episode 8, a fire at a Milwaukee "vote count center" destroys more than 100,000 ballots, throwing Wisconsin—and the election—to the Republican candidate. Imagine a more complicated story: After the fire, the governor invokes federal law to order voting in Milwaukee be reopened. A state court holds

that action unconstitutional. Democrats appeal. While the litigation unfolds, the clock ticks. Imagine that the question isn't resolved by electors day (designated by statute as the Tuesday after the second Wednesday in December). Which slate of electors should meet and vote?

Efforts to prosecute them constitute election interference.

Both, under a precedent set in Hawaii in 1960. Richard Nixon had been declared the winner of the Aloha State. A recount eventually went for John F. Kennedy—but not until after electors day. Both Nixon's and Kennedy's electors met to cast their ballots. On Jan. 6, 1961, Vice President Nixon, overseeing the count in Congress, counted Kennedy's votes, not his.

Hawaii's practice makes sense whenever there's a question about which slate of electors was actually chosen on Election Day. If both sets of electors vote, the National Archives will have some extra paper. But if one set doesn't vote, then litigation supporting their candidate is moot. Electoral votes must be cast on electors day; if they aren't, they're lost. Presidential electors perform a federal function. A state's interference with that function through prosecution is unconstitutional. More practically, such prosecutions create incentives for the apparent winning side to slow the resolution of any challenge. If the delay extends beyond electors day, and if fear of becoming a "fake-elector felon" drives the other side's electors not to vote, then the presumptive result will become the only result—even if it doesn't accord with the will of the vot-

ers, properly accounted. The danger on the other side is that the losing side will file baseless challenges, as Mr. Trump's lawyers did in 2020. But those lawyers have faced severe penalties. It's wildly unrealistic to require electors—most of whom aren't lawyers—to evaluate their candidate's legal claims before casting their ballots. That burden belongs on the lawyers. We know that elections are going to be close. There is no good reason to force a resolution of election contests weeks before Jan. 6. Hawaii gave us a way to allow the orderly resolution of election claims and ensure that the will of the people will ultimately count. We should follow that example from a less partisan time. Mr. Lessig is a professor at Harvard Law School. He submitted an expert declaration in the Arizona cases at the defendants' request.