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Are we witnessing end of the American era?

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The coronavirus emergency has exposed how far the United States is retreating from its leadership of the free world

It is an era that has lasted for the adult life of every person in this country. An era that began with the end of the Second World War, a war that had seen the world's great nations bankrupted. In some cases morally, in some politically, in most economically. In some cases, all three.

It is an era that was defined by the decision of President Truman, urged on by his appointees George Marshall and Dean Acheson, to come to the aid of Europe financially and to make its security a priority. An era that was marked by the cultural dominance of Hollywood and rock 'n' roll, by the great prosperity of western capitalism, and by the nuclear stand-off with the Soviet Union that preceded communism's intellectual and political collapse.

And now it's time to wonder, is this era over? Does the coronavirus catastrophe mark the end of Pax Americana?

Since Truman first earned the title, the American president has been "the leader of the free world". The term is used so frequently, and so casually, as almost to suggest it is an official title. Just as Victoria was not only Queen but Empress of India.

Yet being the leader of the free world is not an office. It's a role. Truman created it by his actions. And his successors accepted the responsibilities. Sometimes they lost their way, sometimes they were too strong, sometimes too weak, but always they accepted the American postwar duty, a self-imposed duty, to show a way forward, to rally liberal democracies, to support the opinion and actions of the free nations.

The case does not need to be overstated. No president has ever simply ignored American domestic opinion or placed being leader of the free world above being leader of his own nation. And free nations have only occasionally made the error of assuming American interests and opinions were the same as their own.

Yet in most of the struggles and crises since 1945, the world has felt able to rely on the United States to give a lead, to show a way forward. Until now.

Coronavirus respects nobody and stops at no borders. It doesn't speak a language or inhabit a country. Covid-19 is the ultimate international crisis. Yet an extraordinary feature of this crisis has been how national the response has been.

We are facing something that is a threat to the health of everyone, in rich countries and poor, and that threatens to crash the global economy, perhaps destroying years, even decades of economic progress. But where is the international leadership to combat it?

This is a moment for a leader of the free world, yet there is no leader of the free world. Donald Trump is incapable even of adequately leading the US response, let alone guiding or inspiring international institutions. In any case, he has no interest in doing so. And were he to have such an

interest, who would follow him as he flails around, lashing out in his incoherent press conferences?

Mr Trump is merely the embodiment of an American attitude that has been growing for some time. And is, in many ways, understandable. As the Second World War and even the Cold War retreats into history, many Americans have grown weary of their international responsibilities. They think international leadership costs money, time, energy and American lives, yet they feel (perhaps wrongly) that it doesn't put food on American tables or keep Americans safe. To the contrary perhaps.

Trump may go next year or in 2025, but will this feeling ever go?

Of course Pax Americana is the result of more than the international leadership of presidents. It is also about the example of America. Even when that country was struggling with racial segregation and discrimination it has seemed to many an example to the world of what was possible.

A land of opportunity, mobility and prosperity. A constitutional democracy that protected free speech and liberty of the citizen. A nation always one step ahead, putting the first man on the moon, developing new technology and tomorrow's corporate giants. A laboratory of democracy where states competed to test new ideas and policies. A place where class and inheritance counted for less than talent and endeavour.

Yet today this model seems frayed and coronavirus has shone a light on another America. One where the federal government seems too weak to act and where science has to compete with superstition in the public sphere. A place where there might be free speech but it is hard to know if one can trust what one hears. A place where the will to support the economy is not as great as the economic problems demand.

America dominated the postwar era because it came out of the Second World War stronger than any nation. It was richer, more powerful, more sure of itself. Without that self-assurance and wealth there would have been no Pax Americana.

But there is a chance that at the end of the coronavirus crisis, America will be among the nations worst hit, and will struggle to overcome the damage to its health and to its economy.

Will it still be in a position to lead the free world? And if it isn't, who is? Western Europe is still financially and militarily dependent on the United States for its defence and security. Many of the world's great industrial and scientific enterprises are American ones. If they have lost the will and capacity to lead, nobody else seems ready to do so.

Which brings us to China. It may be brazen enough and big enough to take up the role. If its economic and military clout continue to grow, and America leaves a vacuum, it would be a disaster for us. China could be a leader, but it would not be a leader of a free world.

This may be too pessimistic. Perhaps the crisis will renew America's sense of its unique role and it will once again provide leadership that can be respected and accepted. But we can't take that for granted.

So our task when this is over will be to join with other nations to create world structures that are not so dependent on the United States, to show a willingness to finance them and to help lead them. To accept a shared responsibility that we have left to the United States alone for too long.

If we do not, the danger is that we may not just see the end of Pax Americana, but of Pax itself.