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American Century, American Carnage

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Set of documents

Doc. A. Henry Luce, "The American Century", *Life Magazine* (February 17, 1941) [excerpt]

AMERICA'S VISION OF OUR WORLD

... How it shall be created

What can we say and foresee about an American Century? It is meaningless merely to say that we reject isolationism and accept the logic of internationalism.

5 What internationalism? Rome had a great internationalism. So had the Vatican and Genghis Khan and the Ottoman Turks and the Chinese Emperors and 19th-Century England. After the first World War, Lenin had one in mind. Today Hitler seems to have one in mind - one which appeals strongly to some American isolationists whose opinion of Europe is so low that they would gladly hand it
10 over to anyone who would guarantee to destroy it forever. But what internationalism have we Americans to offer?

Ours cannot come out of the vision of any one man. It must be the product of the imaginations of many men. It must be a sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent
15 industrial products, our technical skills. It must be an internationalism of the people, by the people and for the people. [...]

Once we cease to distract ourselves with lifeless arguments about isolationism, we shall be amazed to discover that there is already an immense American internationalism. American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang,
20 American machines and patented products, are in fact the only things that every community in the world, from Zanzibar to Hamburg, recognizes in common. [...]. Most important of all, we have that indefinable, unmistakable sign of leadership: prestige. And unlike the prestige of Rome or Genghis Khan or 19th-Century England, American prestige throughout the world is faith in the good
25 intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people. We have lost some of that prestige in the last few years. But most of it is still there.

No narrow definition can be given to the American internationalism of the 20th Century. It will take shape, as all civilizations take shape, by the living of it,
30 by work and effort, by trial and error, by enterprise and adventure and experience.

And by imagination!

As America enters dynamically upon the world scene, we need most of all to seek and to bring forth a vision of America as a world power which is authentically American and which can inspire us to live and work and fight with vigor and enthusiasm. And as we come now to the great test, it may yet turn out that in all our trials and tribulations of spirit during the first part of this century we as a people have been painfully apprehending the meaning of our time and now in this moment of testing there may come clear at last the vision which will guide us to the authentic creation of the 20th Century - our Century. [...]

America as the dynamic center of ever-widening spheres of enterprise, America as the training center of the skillful servants of mankind, America as the Good Samaritan, really believing again that it is more blessed to give than to receive, and America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice - out of these elements surely can be fashioned a vision of the 20th Century to which we can and will devote ourselves in joy and gladness and vigor and enthusiasm.

Other nations can survive simply because they have endured so long - sometimes with more and sometimes with less significance. But this nation, conceived in adventure and dedicated to the progress of man - this nation cannot truly endure unless there courses strongly through its veins from Maine to California the blood of purposes and enterprise and high resolve. Throughout the 17th Century and the 18th Century and the 19th Century, this continent teemed with manifold projects and magnificent purposes. Above them all and weaving them all together into the most exciting flag of all the world and of all history was the triumphal purpose of freedom. It is in this spirit that all of us are called, each to his own measure of capacity, and each in the widest horizon of his vision, to create the first great American Century.

Doc. B. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", The National Interest (Summer 1989) [excerpt]

IN WATCHING the flow of events over the past decade or so, it is hard to avoid the feeling that something very fundamental has happened in world history. The past year has seen a flood of articles commemorating the end of the Cold War, and the fact that "peace" seems to be breaking out in many regions of the world. Most of these analyses lack any larger conceptual framework for distinguishing between what is essential and what is contingent or accidental in world history, and are predictably superficial. If Mr. Gorbachev were ousted from the Kremlin or a new Ayatollah proclaimed the millennium from a desolate

10 Middle Eastern capital, these same commentators would scramble to announce
the rebirth of a new era of conflict.

15 And yet, all of these people sense dimly that there is some larger process
at work, a process that gives coherence and order to the daily headlines. The
twentieth century saw the developed world descend into a paroxysm of
ideological violence, as liberalism contended first with the remnants of
20 absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism, and finally an updated Marxism that
threatened to lead to the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war. But the century that
began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal
democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to
an “end of ideology” or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as
earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political
liberalism.

25 The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the
total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. In the
past decade, there have been unmistakable changes in the intellectual climate of
the world’s two largest communist countries, and the beginnings of significant
reform movements in both. But this phenomenon extends beyond high politics
and it can be seen also in the ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture
in such diverse contexts as the peasants’ markets and color television sets now
omnipresent throughout China, the cooperative restaurants and clothing stores
30 opened in the past year in Moscow, the Beethoven piped into Japanese
department stores, and the rock music enjoyed alike in Prague, Rangoon, and
Tehran.

35 What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the
passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such:
that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization
of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This is not
to say that there will no longer be events to fill the pages of Foreign Affairs’
yearly summaries of international relations, for the victory of liberalism has
occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete
40 in the real or material world. But there are powerful reasons for believing that it
is the ideal that will govern the material world in the long run.

*Doc. C President Donald j. Trump, inaugural address, January 20, 2017
[excerpt]*

We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people. Together, we will determine the course of America and the world for years to come.

We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done.

Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power, and we are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent.

Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People.

For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.

Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth.

Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed.

The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.

Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

That all changes – starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you.

It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America.

This is your day. This is your celebration.

And this, the United States of America, is your country.

What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people.

January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.

The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.

Everyone is listening to you now.

You came by the tens of millions to become part of a historic movement the likes of which the world has never seen before.

At the center of this movement is a crucial conviction: that a nation exists to serve its citizens.

Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves.

These are the just and reasonable demands of a righteous public.

But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.

We are one nation – and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams; and their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.

The oath of office I take today is an oath of allegiance to all Americans.

For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry;

Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military;

We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own;

And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon.

One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind.

The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world.

But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future.

We assembled here today are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power.

From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land.

From this moment on, it's going to be America First.

Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families.

We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.

I will fight for you with every breath in my body – and I will never, ever let you down.

Analysis

Remarks on methodology

This set of documents invites a reading in light of the notion “Le passé dans le présent”, applying it to a series of discourses on the international role of the United States, from the mid-20th century to the present day. The documents discourage any naïve reading of history and geopolitics as linear narratives of progress, and instead appear to offer a bell-curve trajectory, starting with the promise of a brighter future (doc. A), reaching an elusive and ambiguous moment of triumph (doc. B) and ending with a feeling of decline, coupled with a critical reading of previous achievements (doc. C). In this diachronic dossier, students are not merely expected to chart changes, but also to register the way in which history is constantly revised and reappraised to serve specific rhetorical purposes: in the course of the nearly eight decades separating doc. A from doc. C, Henry Luce’s vision of an “American Century” has turned into the dystopian diagnosis of Donald Trump’s “American carnage”.

Correctly identifying the nature and the communicative functions of the three documents is essential here. Doc. A and C are both meant as rousing statements about the place of the United States in the world (Luce repeatedly uses “America,” but the candidate should know better), but doc. C is meant to be delivered orally, and is written accordingly. In both these documents, form is key, since they seek to convince and generate enthusiasm. By contrast, form is anecdotal in doc. B, an essay published in a political journal, meant for specialists rather than a general audience.

For the sake of clarity, I have included headings and subheadings in the body of the commentary, but candidates should remember that they are not allowed to do so and should rely on explicit transitions instead.

Introduction

In 1941, Henry Luce prophesized that the remainder of the 20th century could become “the American Century”, if the country were to embrace internationalism. This dossier provides us with an opportunity to test that claim retrospectively, with three documents, including Luce’s text, published between 1941 and 2017. They thus encompass 76 years, during which the United States entered the Second World War, fought against the USSR during the Cold War and emerged victorious, to become the world’s lone superpower in the 1990s. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, the leadership of the United States has proved increasingly fragile. The hitherto marginal notion that the country is now

suffering from globalization was key to the election of Donald Trump, whose inaugural address concludes the dossier. The relationship between progress and internationalism thus runs through these documents.

The first document is an excerpt from Henry Luce's 1941 editorial in his own *Life Magazine*. Published a few months before the United States entered the Second World War, it sought to rouse the country to action by promising that such a course would eventually put the United States on par with previous dominant civilizations. Throughout the document, Luce effusively praises American values and calls for them to be made available to the world. In document, B, political scientist Francis Fukuyama reflects on the "end of history" following the triumph of liberalism. This famous article was written in 1989, as the Cold War was ending, and published in the *National Interest*, an international affairs magazine. It appears to belatedly vindicate Luce's prophecy, though in a distinctly darker and less emphatic tone. By contrast, document C, Donald Trump's inaugural address from January 20, 2017, calls for a retreat from the world, and claims that it is now necessary to put "America First". The contentious and belligerent speech was Trump's first public statement as President, shortly after having been sworn in. It addresses the American people, but also viewers around the world and sheds a critical light on Luce's promises and Fukuyama's triumph.

The diverging views expressed in these documents about the promises of internationalism will lead us to use the notion "Le passé dans le présent". We will study the ways in which foreign affairs have been used to articulate a narrative of progress in the United States, and how these claims have held up historically.

We will first focus on the connection between progress and internationalism in this dossier, before examining the way progress through internationalism or a retreat thereof is connected to American values by the three writers. Finally, we will reflect on the paradoxical demonstration of the impossibility of progress, which the documents hint at.

Globalization as progress

The three documents all postulate that progress is somehow linked to internationalism or globalization. Fukuyama, who at times appears skeptical about the results of globalization, favorably compares it with the threat of "the ultimate apocalypse of nuclear war" (B 16), which loomed during the Cold War. If we accept the common definition of progress as a forward motion, a positive development, then it appears clearly that

document A equates the notion with internationalism. Luce calls for the country's involvement in foreign affairs and describes this process in a flattering light: "dynamically" (32), "vigor and enthusiasm" (35, repeated in 45-46), "authentic" (39), "magnificent" (53). These terms encompass movement, physical strength and aesthetics and culminate in a celebration of the "triumphal purpose of freedom" (A 55). 76 years later, Donald Trump's inaugural address similarly ties future American prosperity to foreign affairs, though it reverses the meaning of this association. What was once the promise of a brighter future has become a burden that needs to be shed in order to achieve that future. This is expressed in a tirade from line 54 to line 66, which concludes with the clearest expression that a retreat from internationalism will mechanically produce progress: "The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world. But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future." Fukuyama, in 1989, tied progress to foreign affairs even more tightly when stating that the new international order had brought about the "end of history". While this could be read as the end of the very possibility of progress, Fukuyama suggests that an endpoint has been reached in politics, but not necessarily in the quality of life enjoyed by people around the world. Fukuyama's "larger process" (B 11), the subject of the article, can plausibly be read as a more cautious expression of the notion of progress, a semantic choice in line with the prudent tone of the entire article (also indicated by the numerous modals).

The change from doc. A to doc. C, from Luce to Trump, cannot be understood solely as a difference in political philosophy. Luce, Fukuyama and Trump wrote their texts in widely different historical contexts. Luce's text is remembered in part because what it prophesized came to pass: the United States did enter the Second World War and "[got] the job done" (C 6-7), and it did go on to become a dominant world power, bent on spreading its values and furthering its economic interests. In 1989, Fukuyama could observe the result of this historical evolution, when he described the rise of economic and political liberalism through arms and trade agreements spanning the world, all produced within American-created or American-led institutions, such as NATO (created in 1949) or the WTO (created in 1995). In turn, Trump's speech is the product of a period during which the power of these institutions has been eroding – the last round of global trade agreement, the GATT, was abandoned after 2004 – and after two decades during which the status of the United States as the world's sole superpower has been challenged by the emergence of a number of rivals, including China. The notion that American wealth has

been transferred to other nations in a zero-sum game model is inaccurate. However the fact that China may soon overtake the United States as the largest economy in the world (in absolute GDP, it is already the case in GDP at parity in purchasing power, though the country still lags far behind in GDP per capita) does suggest a transfer of relative economic power from the United States to countries, which have successfully leveraged the institutions the United States created. The three documents are not direct products of their time, but the consensual rejection of trade agreements by the major candidates in the 2016 presidential election, including the two top Democratic contenders, make it impossible to read Trump's speech as a mere idiosyncrasy.

In addition to its rejection of internationalism, this speech is noteworthy in its explicit reduction of foreign affairs to just one factor: economy. As Donald Trump puts it: "We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country has disappeared" (C 61-62). In this reading, military might and prestige, key aspects of Luce's program, are reduced to byproducts of an economic situation; ironically, this corresponds closely to the Marxist vulgate which posits that culture and institutions are a mere superstructure, affixed on an economic base. Trump's bluntness in turn calls attention to the fact that the other two texts also afford a crucial role to commerce and the economy, in spite of their loftier inspirations. Henry Luce's text repeatedly emphasizes "vision" (A 12, 33, 38, 44, 56) and "imagination" (A 31), but also acknowledges the role of "patented products" and "American machines" (A 20), before describing the country as "the training center of the skillful servants of mankind" (A 41). Like the Roman Empire and 19th-Century England, which Luce describes as two forerunners of his "American Century", the United States will not separate military might and prestige from trade. Fukuyama similarly observes the entanglement of political ideals and trade, when he describes the selling of color televisions in China (B 29) or when he announces that the "material world" will hopefully catch up with the progress accomplished in the "realm of ideas" (B 39). Thus, far from being an abstraction, internationalism is conceptualized through the concrete measure of trade and material goods, from the promises of 1941 to the impending retreat from the world in 2017.

A very American internationalism

However, these three texts are not abstract dissertations on internationalism as a potential for progress through trade and commerce. They only deal with the concept insofar as it can be articulated with the

history and the values of the United States, as defined in the moment when they were written. Though they employ different tones and pursue different objectives, the three authors appear to agree and the primacy of the American perspective in the world.

For Luce, internationalism appears primarily as an opportunity to export the values of the United States. We have already mentioned the repetition of “vigor and enthusiasm” in the text, two words pointing to a pioneer mentality, which is on full display in the final paragraph. In 1.47 to 57, Luce suggests that the people of the United States are uniquely dynamic, as they represent a nation of “enterprise” (A 40, 51), “conceived in adventure” (49). By mentioning the physical boundaries of the countries, “from Maine to California” (50-51), he presents internationalism as the continuation of the myth of the Frontier, which fueled the westward expansion throughout the 19th century, and of the United States’ Manifest Destiny. In addition to these national narratives, Luce explicitly mentions the founding documents of the American nation – “our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution” (9-10) – perhaps using these references to freedom and to the rule of law in order to dispel the idea that he might be calling for a form of disguised imperialism. Trump’s speech also relies abundantly on an evocation of American values, which is to be expected in the context of a democratic ceremony. Newly elected presidents take care to weave in allusions to any or all of the founding documents enumerated by Luce, and Trump’s is no exception: its opening line, “we, the citizens of America” (2) and its emphasis on “the people” (17, 18, 31, 32) all parallel the wording of the preamble to the United States Constitution: “We, the people”. Even in this contentious speech, Donald Trump pays further homage to the American democracy when he praises his predecessor and erstwhile opponent, Barack Obama (9). In other words, internationalism is once again defined in relations to American values, though in this case, “we, the people” is described as the opposite of “other nations” and “other countries” (C 58, 61) and not as a blueprint for the rest of the world. By contrast with these two texts, Fukuyama appears to downplay the importance of American traditions and institutions. The name of the country is not even mentioned throughout the excerpt, as Fukuyama prefers to call attention to “the West”. But of course, the text itself was published in an American magazine, by an American scholar, and the echo it received when it was published testifies to the central role of the United States in foreign affairs. In line with his general thesis, and indirectly vindicating Luce’s forecast, Fukuyama makes no distinction between the American values and those

of the rest of the western block, between rock music and Beethoven (30-31). Just as Luce, he strongly suggests that the triumph of the United States is also a triumph of soft power: in 1941, Luce indicated that the culture of the country was already international (A 18-19), and in 1989, Fukuyama again suggested that cultural homogeneity was among the earliest signs of the “end of history” (34). Again, though, Fukuyama characterizes American cultural products as “consumerist Western culture”: the triumph of American values is such that they have become partly universalized and no longer associated with a single country.

The language used in all three documents supports the claims made for the superiority of American values through a religious and even messianic rhetoric, which pervades even Fukuyama’s ostensibly sober text. Again, Luce and Trump appear to draw from the same sources. Beyond the founding texts, mentioned above, which form the basis of what some historians call the United States’ secular religion, both overtly appeal to established religion. For instance, Luce equates the country with the Biblical Good Samaritan, “really believing again that it is more blessed to give than to receive” (A 42-43) and also mentions the Vatican as a possible forerunner for American internationalism (A 5). Beyond these specific references, the language used by Luce frequently carries religious overtones, in the article’s subheading, for instance, which suggests a form of political Genesis: “*America’s vision of our world. . . How it shall be created.*” Trump similarly alludes to religion at the intertextual level with words such as “righteous” (C 42) or statements along the lines of: “We assembled here today are issuing a new decree...” (C 68-69). Additionally, the alliterative sentences and the anaphora contribute to the resemblance between this speech and a sermon. Fukuyama’s article is more understated – befitting its nature but also the moment of quiet “triumph” it describes – but its eschatological worldview nevertheless carries religious overtones. All three documents thus associate progress firmly with American values and present the role of the country as something of a sacred mission, a continuation of the country’s Manifest Destiny.

Diverging Conceptions of Progress

The three texts thus appear to share linguistic strategies and certain key values. However, as we have seen, they are shaped by different historical circumstances, and ultimately diverge in the way they conceptualize progress. In particular, they diverge on the proper point of application of progress, to the point where they may lead us to question the very notion.

As mentioned above, the word "people" recurs in both Luce's and Trump's texts. Its meaning differs, however. In Luce's "American Century", the people are synonymous with the nation. At no point does Luce mention the government as a distinct entity, whose will could be distinct from that of the citizens. The same conception is present in Fukuyama's text which defines "blocks", entities even broader than nations, and attributes them a collective worldview or a collective culture. Donald Trump, by contrast, redefines "the people" as a separate category within the United States, which he distinguishes notably from the government and "the establishment" (C 20-23). This broad distinction is further honed by the mention of individual situations and individual stories, later in the speech (C 43-48). For Luce, progress for the nation necessarily resulted in progress for the citizens, since the citizens and the nation were consubstantial; for Trump, this no longer holds true. In this, Trump reflects a conservative view, in which the government serves its own purposes and not necessarily those of the citizens. He also echoes a growing concern in the American left since at least the late 1990s that globalization and global trade agreements have been built to benefit private corporations rather than the public good.

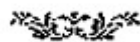
Donald Trump's speech thus reframes and questions the progress accomplished between 1941 and 2017. In doing so, the speech underlines the fact that progress is an element of discourse and perception and not an objective fact. In Luce's text, the narrative of progress is built through comparisons with several examples of imperfect world-spanning civilizations (A 5-7) from the past, used to provide a flattering contrast to the "American Century", while the present is equally disheartening, a mere promise of destruction (A 10). The future, however, burns brightly. 48 years later, Fukuyama appears much more optimistic about the present, and uses the history of the 20th century as ground for his optimism regarding the future: liberalism had by that time vanquished "absolutism, then bolshevism and fascism" in addition to communism (B 15). However, by the time of Donald Trump, Luce's bright future and Fukuyama's cautiously optimistic present – the whole second half of the century – have become the dreadful past against which the future will be constructed. These diverging discourses on the same period reveal that while the past continues to inform the present, it does so as an *ad hoc* rhetorical construction. By extension, this suggests that the past Luce and Fukuyama allude to in their respective texts are also constructions, meant to serve the authors' purposes: the present informs these mediated pasts as much as the past informs the present. Taken together, the documents point not only to

the divergences between the writers but to the obsolescence of promises of progress, an ever-delayed, never fulfilled promise. Of course, Fukuyama's text cautions us not to give too much weight to transient phenomena, to immediate reactions (B 7-10) and it may be too early to assess the importance of Donald Trump's vision of progress; though the past thirty years have proven Fukuyama's own prophecies inaccurate, the dossier does not invalidate his intuition that the evolution of political and material conditions may be cyclical (B 18). If that is the case, Trump's isolationism may in turn breed a new Luce.

Conclusion

To conclude, the long historical perspective provided by these three documents suggests that the United States have consistently used foreign policy through the second half of the 20th century to articulate what progress means. The document also underlines the fact that these narratives fall short of their grand promises.

These documents thus vindicate science fiction writer William Gibson's claim that: "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed"¹. The discredit which has afflicted grand narratives since the 1970s also affects the notion of progress beyond the scale of the individual, and the dreams of the past are repurposed as cautionary tales in the present. Donald Trump's use of individual stories is not metonymical, but meant to highlight the impossibility of subsuming these trajectories into a collective narrative. In such an individualist worldview, progress becomes a private metrics rather than something to be distributed, a far cry from Luce's emphatic, politically-motivated, jingoistic but also broad-sweeping hope to turn the United States into what Ronald Reagan later called "a shining city on a hill".



¹ William Gibson is, along with Bruce Sterling, one of the founders of the Cyberpunk literary movement an influential vision of a near-future dominated by information technology and rampant capitalism (notably with his novel *Neuromancer*, 1984, and his short-story collection *Burning Chrome*, 1986). He has become an influential public intellectual on technology and culture, and continues to write science-fiction.