

Will the West survive Trump?

Review of "The Retreat of Western Liberalism" by Edward Luce and "The Fate of the West" by Bill Emmott

By **Carlos Lozada** June 15

THE RETREAT OF WESTERN LIBERALISM

By Edward Luce. Atlantic Monthly Press. 234 pp. \$24.

THE FATE OF THE WEST: The Battle to Save the World's Most Successful Political Idea

By Bill Emmott. The Economist Books. 257 pp. \$28.

Superpowers come and go, but it's rare that one puts in for early retirement.

The Trump presidency, with its dismissal of friends, deference to enemies and disdain for leadership, is leaving a void at the center of that place we have long called the Western world.

Yes, I know, even talking about "the West" seems so retro-imperialist, a kind of top-hat history. But in the face of a powerful authoritarian China, a paranoid Russia and an undeterrable Islamic State, defending the values of freedom and equality may be the cause of our time. These are universal

aspirations that have found high expression in the Western political tradition — if not always in its practice — and now they're in trouble.

It is the turmoil of the West, not of the West Wing, that should preoccupy us most. President Trump will leave office, one way or another. Any succession plans for the West will be far more chaotic and far less welcome.

This upheaval is captured in two books by British journalists hailing from publications known for promoting free peoples and free markets. In "The Fate of the West," by former Economist editor Bill Emmott, and "The Retreat of Western Liberalism," by Financial Times columnist Edward Luce, the challenges to the West are outlined in detail — and they mainly come from within. Slowing economic growth, rising inequality, division among longtime allies and growing mistrust of elites are eroding the legitimacy and power of the West, giving way to crude, inward-looking nationalisms. And it's happening just as transnational cooperation is most needed.

The West is a concept, not a location: the United States, Germany and Japan, for instance, can all be Western in crucial ways — cultures, currencies and cardinal points be damned. The West, as Emmott writes, is "the world's most successful political idea," one combining openness to new opportunities and a constant striving for equal voice, rights and treatment. The two may conflict at times, but both are essential. "Without openness, the West cannot thrive; but without equality, the West cannot last," Emmott writes.

After World War II, the West succeeded in tempering Europe's self-destructive impulses, and after the Cold War, it seemed that the Western ideal of liberal democracy and open markets had defeated all comers. It was Fukuyama's end of history and Krauthammer's unipolar moment and all that good stuff. Yet it was "remarkably arrogant to believe the rest of the world would passively adopt our script," Luce reflects. "Belief in an authoritarian version of national destiny is staging a powerful comeback."

[Condoleezza Rice's new book is a repudiation of Trump's 'America first' worldview]

For Emmott, the financial crisis beginning in 2008 finally revealed the internal rot, not just because of the economic pain that followed but because of the “sense of betrayal and systemic failure that it has engendered.” The problem of the West, he contends, is not that some are rich and some are poor, but that those left behind don’t trust in the fundamental justice of their society. The West “does not depend upon incomes or wealth being equal or even close to it,” Emmott writes. “It does depend on people mostly considering their societies to be fair.”

Such societies have grown increasingly unfair, he maintains, thanks to democracy’s tendency toward “self-entrapment” — the abuse of the political process to capture benefits and preferences for powerful industries, especially in the financial sector. Emmott credits the Occupy movement with identifying this culprit, even if it couldn’t do much to stop it.

For Luce, the combination of rising income inequality, vanishing economic mobility and distant technocracy has led to our moment’s populist resurgence. “The election of Trump, and Britain’s exit from Europe, is a reassertion of the popular will,” he writes. And both authors regard the ascent of Trump, in particular, in near-apocalyptic terms. “Western liberal democracy . . . is facing its gravest challenge since the Second World War,” Luce argues. “America’s best liberal traditions are under assault from its own president.” Emmott concurs that Trump’s proposals — pushing protectionism, weakening alliances, tightening immigration — threaten Western values.

A longer view, one less clouded by a gauzy Atlanticism, would emphasize how the deepest of America’s inequities, often along racial and cultural lines, long predate the challenges of the post-Cold War world. Yet today’s disruptions matter because, even if America is not synonymous with the West, “the West would be severely diminished, even finished, without the US,” Emmott writes. The Trump administration’s “America first” agenda,

as interpreted by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and White House advisers H.R. McMaster and Gary Cohn, means that linkages between America's policies and its values will be incidental, and that rather than seeking cooperation with allied nations, Washington now sees the world as a horde of zero-sum competitors out for themselves. It is the sort of narrow realism that will undercut efforts on counterterrorism, trade and, as we've already seen, climate change.

[Dan Drezner: The vulgar realism of Rex Tillerson's State Department]

Is there no other power to sustain the West but Washington? The authors look skeptically at Europe's regional and national leadership. Emmott notes that the internal processes of the European Union "feel alien and even incomprehensible" to many on the continent, while Luce isn't convinced that German Chancellor Angela Merkel is up to becoming honcho of the free world should she win reelection this year. "The spirit of Western internationalism is resting on her shoulders," he writes. "It is asking a lot of a fourth-term German leader to carry such a torch," he writes.

U.S. influence matters not because Washington has always upheld the values it professes, but because just professing them matters, too. "Even where it is proved hypocritical, such as in the 'war on terror' and during much of the Cold War, the idea of America proved greater than its faults," Luce writes. "The link between an America that upheld its system at home and promoted it abroad was never broken, though often tarnished. Trump is inverting that link. The more scorn he pours on democratic traditions at home, the more he endangers them abroad."

If the West is an idea, well, America is, too. And it's worth preserving.

These would not be big-think books without a litany of policy recommendations — even if the recommendations here tend toward the small-bore or predictable, and thus, the disappointing. Emmott, who sees

lobbying groups and special interests as agents of entrenched power and inequality, wants the United States to do away with excessive professional licensing requirements, strengthen antitrust enforcement, rein in large banks, boost infrastructure spending and deploy inheritance taxes to counteract intergenerational concentrations of wealth. Luce calls for a “new social compact” (alas, even elegant British writers succumb to policy clichés) featuring universal health care, simpler tax codes, carbon taxes, less money in politics and more job retraining for the middle class.

Such proposals, aimed at redressing the domestic challenges the authors outline, seem like necessary but ultimately technical fixes to what is a more systemic problem. After all, Luce and Emmott do not envision a benign post-American world where rising powers create economic opportunities for all; theirs is a more Spenglerian view of civilizational decline. The irony of Trump’s early mismanagement is that it confirms that, for all the complaints of the post-Cold War era — America the hyperpower, the drone warrior, the red-line-ignorer — the thirst for U.S. leadership remains strong. When Merkel declared that Europe must now take its fate into its own hands, there was apprehension, not triumphalism, in the statement. America long ago decided it would not be the world’s policeman, but becoming its disaffected loner is no solution, either.

[Yes, Trump is a populist. But what does that mean?]

“Trump has made it clear the post-war US-led global order is history. But what will replace it?” Luce asks. He has little faith in the Chinese leadership, and he argues that Vladimir Putin’s Russia simply wants to foster division among potential rivals. Absent the United States, we are left with an odd circumstance: The nations that share Western values are not strong enough to lead, while the ones that might be strong enough do not share Western values. “Some fear that China is the coming power,” Luce writes. “But chaos, not China, is likelier to take America’s place.”

Could new leadership in the United States begin to repair the increasing frailty of the West, especially if Trump’s politics of resentment fails to

deliver? “It is comforting to assume, as many do, that the US system will simply revert to pre-Trump mode,” Luce cautions. “The chances are at least as great that Trump will be able to pin the blame on elites, foreigners, Islam, minorities, unelected judges and other handy saboteurs. That is how populists operate.”

The damage Trump is inflicting on the norms of American democracy, on basic notions regarding truth, trust and discourse, is severe — and it’s not like things were heavenly before he took that down escalator into the netherworld of the 2016 campaign. So there’s more to worry about than China, Russia or North Korea, those “barbarians . . . at the West’s gates,” as Emmott calls them, with a doff of the pith helmet. The American president’s impact on the Western psyche will endure in some form no matter who comes next — and remember that what follows in Washington may not improve things. “Imagine how things would look with a competent and sophisticated white nationalist in the White House,” Luce writes in his final paragraph, just to make matters as depressing as possible.

Dean Acheson’s Pulitzer-winning memoir, “Present at the Creation,” chronicles the origins of those institutions and alliances that would guide the post-World War II order. These authors suggest that Acheson’s beginning is reaching an end. Luce believes that we are “present at the re-creation,” with Moscow and Beijing aiming to “rupture the West’s claim to universalism.” Emmott, more blunt, worries that we are “present at the destruction.”

Destruction feels too definitive, re-creation too vague. It’s more of a repudiation. After all, I’m not worried that Fukuyama was wrong that Western liberal democracy has become the ultimate ideal for human government. I’m worried that he was right but that nobody cares.

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