

Joe Biden Has Problems. The World Has Solutions.

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From the founding fathers to Silicon Valley, the U.S. has a long tradition of borrowing the best ideas from around the globe.

The worst thing that President-elect Joe Biden can do right now is to spend any more time with election lawyers. The irritations of President Donald Trump's unseemly rearguard action are already fading away. The challenge of governing the country will only grow. The ugly truth is that the new president's inheritance is a much tougher one than most of Biden's supporters realize — on two counts.

First, as Covid-19 has revealed in painful detail, the U.S. is falling behind much of the world, not just in health care but also in most of the functions of government. Second, little of this falling behind is really Trump's fault. The disruptive child being dragged out of the White House is more a symptom of what ails the U.S. than a cause. Merely removing him will not solve much.

From this perspective, Biden should do what other great U.S. presidents have done when their country has started to fall behind: Look abroad and copy what works.

For all the talk about American exceptionalism, the best American leaders have never been ashamed of learning from abroad, especially in times of trouble. The founding fathers carefully studied the world's most successful political systems, particularly those of Britain, France and ancient Rome. James Madison pored over comparative constitutions while at Princeton, while John Adams and Thomas Jefferson drew on their experience as envoys to France.

A century ago, the Progressives stole ideas from Europe: President Woodrow Wilson even began writing a universal history of the state in order to redesign U.S. institutions for a post-laissez-faire age. During the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt based Social Security on foreign pension systems and turned to John Maynard Keynes for economic ideas. President Lyndon B. Johnson borrowed the phrase "Great Society" from another British academic, Graham Wallas, while the Ronald Reagan administration borrowed "privatization" from Margaret Thatcher. America's most influential statesman of the late 20th century, Henry Kissinger, based much of his diplomacy on the European concept of balance of power.

Nowadays, Kissinger still draws on Metternich and Talleyrand when he thinks about the U.S.-China relationship, but in terms of public policy he is a cosmopolitan exception. Washington, sadly, has stopped learning from abroad in terms of ideas and has become the rich world's most parochial capital city.

The lobbyists and lawyers who infest the town are preoccupied with exploiting their knowledge of the intricacies of the U.S. system to win advantage for their clients. Of course, a president whose foreign policy was summed up by “America First” has not helped, but Trump’s blinkeredness is hardly unusual. With John McCain gone, can you name a senator who understands what is happening in the rest of the world?

No, neither could we.

The contrast with the private sector is especially stark. U.S. businesses still steal ideas from around the globe: Silicon Valley and Wall Street suck in foreign-born talent. But politicians in Washington are obsessed with their bases, which, given the U.S. primary system, means a highly ideological sliver of the population. Not that the media are much help: One U.S. newsroom assumed the fireworks that exploded over London on Nov. 5 were to celebrate Trump’s removal, apparently unaware that Guy Fawkes Day has been celebrated by Britons for centuries.

The history of great empires that have turned inward is not a happy one. The next president always needed to confront this — but Covid-19 has shown that this insular U.S. has fallen much further behind than even pessimists appreciated.

The global pandemic has been, among many things, a global test of government capacity. Last week Bloomberg News published its study of “virus resilience.” The U.S. came in 18th of 53 nations. It would have been far lower, if not for its private sector’s success in producing vaccines. On the basic Hobbesian test of keeping its people alive, the American Leviathan has failed.

The U.S. is closing in on 800 deaths for every million people. That is a slightly better record than Britain and Belgium, but it is far worse than most of its allies. Germany, with 170 deaths per million, has done six times better. But the really shocking comparative numbers come from East Asia, where plenty of governments that a generation ago looked across the Pacific to the U.S. as the great role model have now outperformed their erstwhile exemplar.

Japan has lost fewer than 2,000 people, or a hundredth of the U.S. death toll, despite having an elderly population and a supersized capital city. Taiwan has gone more than 200 days without a domestic case of Covid-19. Singapore is beating itself up because its mortality rate is edging close to five deaths per million.

Perhaps most pointedly of all, China is now almost back to work as normal. Even allowing for Beijing’s sluggish start in dealing with the virus, and throwing in some skepticism about its official death toll of just three deaths per million, it has plainly been far better at protecting its people from dying than the U.S. And the rest of the world has seen it.

There are two lame excuses for this — both of which Biden should dismiss. The first is that high U.S. mortality rates are part of the price you pay for freedom and democracy. Though China’s success certainly has something to do with autocracy, all the other

countries at the top of the Covid-19 league tables are also freedom-loving democracies; they're just better-organized freedom-loving democracies than the U.S. For instance, New York City and Seoul are both lively cities with crowded subways and a wild nightlife. But New York has lost more than 22,000 people, while Seoul has lost a few dozen.

East Asia's supremacy at Covid-19 was not a fluke. Look at the global rankings for high schools and health care: East Asian countries are clustering at the top alongside the Scandinavians. Or look at infrastructure. The gap between Asian airports and New York's La Guardia or JFK are obvious to any traveler, but just as striking is the gap in the underlying wiring: Some three-quarters of the world's "smart cities," which have updated their infrastructure for the internet age, are in Asia.

For nearly 50 years, Asian countries, led by Singapore, have been quietly building smarter and better governments in the same way that Toyota and Honda once built smarter and better cars. The difference is that, while Detroit and the rest of U.S. industry eventually copied Japan's "lean manufacturing" so they could fight back, Washington's politicians have not copied Singaporean lean government; indeed, they barely know what it is.

The second excuse that Biden should dismiss is that America's failures are all Trump's fault. The outgoing president may have actively obstructed U.S. attempts to deal with Covid-19, but he did not create a health system that was designed to help the old and the rich, not the poor. A pandemic was always bound to expose that. All those people who died in New York City did so under a Democratic mayor and a Democratic governor.

The same goes for many other things where the U.S. is falling behind the rest of the world. Trump said some unhelpful things after George Floyd's death, but he did not invent racist policing — one of us covered the Rodney King riots nearly three decades ago. Polarized politics? Poor schools? A convoluted tax system? Trump hardly made any of these problems better, but the U.S. public sector started falling behind its peers long before he even became a reality TV star.

With a little reading, the president-elect could discover that other countries are doing plenty of clever things that the U.S. could copy. Formerly socialist Scandinavia is a world leader in contracting out parts of the public sector to the private sector, including in sensitive areas such as health care and education. Germany has an exemplary decentralized health system that covers everyone at a fraction of the cost of the U.S. system.

India has given every citizen — more than a billion people — a digital identity that can be used to deliver benefits to a population that has high levels of illiteracy. Tiny Estonia has made it possible to do a host of things online, including voting, filing tax returns, participating in the census and setting up businesses — enough to save about 2% of gross domestic product through efficiency.

So many other governments are clearly doing better than Washington. But East Asia presents the most pressing challenge, not least because China has the potential to rival the U.S. as the center of the global economy. Its schools are following Singapore's tactics of promoting good teachers, firing bad ones and using tests to monitor the system. Its 15-year-olds sit at the top of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development rankings for reading, science and math; their U.S. equivalents languish in 14th, 19th and 38th places, respectively. Yes, China cheats by including only four cities, but no one thinks American students come close — and the U.S. results look especially lousy given that it outspends most of its rivals.

If a dysfunctional public sector is a geopolitical liability for the U.S., it is also a political liability for Biden's Democratic Party. The Democrats can claim that, unlike the destructive Republicans, they believe in government and the good that it can do. But in practice, they are the political arm of public-sector unions that will move heaven and earth to save their members from being fired.

Democratic Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama managed to introduce a few reforms, but they got far less than they wanted. Despite increased charter schools and merit pay, it's still very difficult to reward good teachers and fire bad ones: Every year, incompetent and even criminal teachers are shuffled from school to school ("the dance of the lemons") or allowed to spend their days doodling in city offices ("rubber rooms").

Biden is in an unusually good position to break this dismal pattern. With 30 years on the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, he knows as much about "abroad" as anybody. As a moderate Democrat, he can position himself at the vital center, between the old left, which is tied to the unions, and the do-nothing Republicans.

At 78, he's unlikely to run for a second term (which would mean asking Americans to keep him in the world's most difficult job until he's 86), so he probably has unusual freedom to reform the public sector. This is surely where most Americans also belong: More than 60% of voters, including a majority of Democrats, tell pollsters that they support serious structural reform of government.

So look around the world, Joe: Set up an office to study what works in other countries; copy the best and avoid the worst; build back better not just on the basis of U.S. examples, but foreign ones too. China is a particularly important example to study. Not only can it teach the U.S. a thing or two about how to build airports and harness the power of the internet of things, but it can also teach what happens when countries become complacent and parochial.

When Columbus reached the Americas on the Santa Maria in 1492, China accounted for a fifth of the world's economy, it and boasted the world's most sophisticated government and its most powerful navy (some Chinese ships were more than 400 feet long, to the Santa Maria's 70 feet). But eventually, complacency set in: While European states fiercely competed against each other, copying technology and ideas to improve

their administrative and military machines, China atrophied, with mandarins learning the same Confucian texts decade after decade and century after century, and emperors turning their backs on the world.

In 1525, China destroyed its world-beating fleet, setting fire to some ships and leaving others to rot, in order to prevent the country's purity from being contaminated by contact with other countries. In 1792, the Qianlong emperor famously dismissed a British envoy, George Macartney, who had come bearing a treasure trove of gifts in an attempt to persuade China to open up to trade: "We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures."

Within a generation, China was a plaything of foreign powers. The modern Chinese have learned from that lesson. Has Joe Biden?

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