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TMS Scholarship Essay 2021 Prompt 3

### The U.S. Must Look in the Mirror First

In the twenty-first century the dividing line between internal versus overseas affairs for the U.S., the self-proclaimed dominant world power, is blurry at best. The vastness and complexity of problems plaguing the planet are invalidating the dichotomy between what issues are 'in' or 'out'. The prevailing pattern and speed of development that characterizes the world today has fostered profound, challenging dangers that require the brightest, most innovative minds to protect humanity in a multitude of dimensions. This requires global cooperation and coordination from which the U.S., a leader both in terms of strength and contribution to said problems, cannot separate itself. However, at this critical juncture when the helpful potential of the U.S. is most needed, its validity in guiding the progress of other nations remains questionable while it struggles with a plethora of burdens from within. It would be terribly hypocritical for the U.S. to continue exercising superiority in world affairs without addressing threats it faces at home to the very institutions it claims to promote abroad. Because of this, it must heighten its attentiveness to domestic troubles, but without withdrawing participation in international affairs working to address imminent problems. And in continuing the American mission to shape development and 'help the world', the U.S. must recognize its historical flaws in this department and reconsider approaches for a better global future.

Although no secret before, the past year has put a blinding spotlight on weaknesses in American social wellbeing that demand immediate attention. U.S. politicians and citizens have always been eager to belittle countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia for the proliferation of poverty, inequality and lack of welfare throughout their borders, ignoring both the fact that the U.S. played a heavy hand in those misfortunes and that a vast proportion of its own population

faces those same challenges. As of 2021, China, Ukraine, Morocco, Algeria, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Iran, and Namibia, among many other 'Third World' countries, have lower poverty rates than the U.S., which stands at 17.8% ("Poverty Rate by Country 2021"). Though many of these countries are smaller, most have much more challenging population densities, levels of democratic governance, and lack of industrialization than circumstances which face the U.S., yet somehow they are still regarded as inferior, failing to adequately provide for their populations. The irony.

But perhaps comparing the U.S. to poor countries is not worthwhile, because in other dimensions America is arguably still much stronger. Even so, the contrast between the U.S. and other countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), or put simply all the other rich developed nations, is even more incriminating. In 2019, the U.S. had the worst overall poverty rate of all 26 OECD members, still at 17.8%, and 7% higher than the average of the other 25 countries. Its child poverty rate was 20.9%, worse than Mexico, while the poverty gap was 40% ("America's Poor Are Worse Off Than Elsewhere"). Now the U.S. is the fourth lowest-ranking OECD member but its poverty rate has not improved, and given that it is the largest economy in the world, America's wealth inequality is a bit embarrassing on the world stage.

Homelessness, hunger and insecurity in health and safety plague the streets of America even as U.S. politicians denounce authoritarian leaders of countries with the same blemishes. Implicitly, these leaders are comparing themselves to autocrats who, scientifically and logically, would not be expected to provide for their populations in the same way that democratic governance promises to, while ignoring the same deprivation in their own backyard. Peripheral city regions in places like São Paulo and Jakarta with poor infrastructure, sanitation, and access

to basic resources are called 'slums' by the West, but the equivalent districts in the U.S. are glorified as low-income 'communities', 'neighborhoods', and the like. It is as if Americans are using twisted connotations to hide what they know is too shameful to admit, that the U.S. is not actually a perfect example of wealth and equality ("What are slums and why do they exist?").

A key dynamic of this problem is quite simple. Jeff Bezos should not be worth \$177 billion while 42 million people and 13 million children are experiencing food insecurity, and over 500,000 live on the streets ("For people facing hunger, poverty is just one issue", "The State of Homelessness in the US-2021"). Nor should NFL and NBA players be rewarded for dropping out of school to play sports with multi-million dollar contracts when those who stay in school cannot even dream of making a minute fraction of that. It cannot be rationally argued that anyone needs billions of dollars to live a dignified American life, regardless of whether that money is inherited, 'earned', or otherwise acquired. The top 1% own more than the bottom 92% of Americans, and it does not take a rocket scientist to realize that does not seem quite right ("The rich-poor gap in America is obscene"). To be clear, an endorsement of redistribution through taxes, empowering unions, or any other proposed solutions is not present here; highlighting this problem serves merely to suggest that surely, something ought to change, if not in the name of 'equality' the country prides itself on, then for the sake of economic health.

At the same time, in recent years Americans have become increasingly opinionated about politics, governance institutions, domestic and global affairs, and exactly what they (firmly) believe is right. A primary concern of a large body of voters has been about the protection of their freedom, because America is a free country, so says the Constitution. Or not. The Constitution's use of the word 'freedom' has been applied in profoundly liberal and unintelligently inventive ways, particularly during the last election cycle; but this is not

surprising, since 57% of Americans have not even read the four-page document (Jipping). And when asked about the independence of the Supreme Court, 48% believe it should be made to cater to what the people want, yet the entire purpose of the judicial institution was to do exactly the opposite (Jipping). Even a quick skim of the Constitution would tell them that.

So now the U.S. has a voting bloc of citizens, over half of which do not have a minimally decent understanding of American government, let alone the founding document of the country, being relied upon to elect sensible leaders. To an extent, however, this is the fault of the education system. Students in AP Government classes in their senior year of high school are still reading textbooks which waste time explaining that Congress is a bicameral legislature, the president has to be thirty-five, and the founding fathers sought a separation of powers. This is basic information, repeated over and over in every U.S. history class every American student takes at least four times throughout their time in primary education. One should not have to take college level political science classes to have a thorough understanding of how politics, elections, public opinion and governance actually works. At least not if all those high school graduates get to make momentous votes based on conceptions of their rights and ‘freedoms’ imagined in their heads and through the media.

American students are not particularly brag-worthy in other subjects either. Though the U.S. spends more on public education than most developed countries, its high school students only score fourteenth in reading, twenty-fifth in math, and seventeenth in science among OECD states (“U.S. Education Reform and National Security”). Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned that inadequate education threatens the country’s economy and national security, as it will no longer be able to legitimately lead the world if its human capital, and competitiveness remains comparatively insufficient (“U.S. Education Reform and National

Security”). Collectively, this lack of understanding and intellectual capacity across the U.S. population is fostering a breeding ground for false information to proliferate in the media, and hostile social relations to result.

Fake news and disinformation campaigns in the new media create echo chambers that exploit vulnerabilities in Americans’ knowledge. Historically, people got their news from mass media in the form of national broadcast channels and newspapers that were subject to strict regulations, mandating their reports be reliable and investigative. Because this framework of communication was unidirectional, Americans were passive receivers of this information and could rely on its sincerity to make ‘educated’ judgments (Yarchi et. al.). However, new media, primarily social media platforms, are now the dominant mechanism by which many Americans seek information about society and politics. New media is characterized by multidirectional, interactive platforms not subject to the standards under which mass media operated, allowing for a fast paced internet environment that moves through topics too quickly to fact-check. In this day and age, anyone with a camera, computer or phone can create ‘news’, post it online, and someone is going to believe it. And because these platforms are always available, few people wait for the five o’clock news or other consistent form of information sharing to find stories they want to read and form opinions, no matter how incorrect (Yarchi et. al.). Worst of all, new media thrives because of echo chambers, in which people who are already without basic knowledge of a topic can find like-minded people and feed off of each other’s theories, irrationality, and lack of desire to seek factual truth. The positive reinforcement that people receive when they can hear what they want to hear and easily block out what they wish to be wrong has negative repercussions, including the burgeoning distrust of science.

In a world with many experts, there are plenty of them to disagree with each other. And this disagreement, combined with the public's limited educational understanding and the ability of politicians and conspiracy theorists to throw absurd and widely-received misconceptions around the media, leaves people confused. Albeit in most cases the overwhelming majority of scientists agree on a subject, such as climate change, wearing masks, or the necessity of coronavirus vaccines, it only takes one dissenter with credentials to stir the pot (Jensen and Blok). That pot, of course, being the worldwide web with countless social media platforms from which one person's opinion that might appeal to the ears of certain denialists or skeptics can magically become the next most valid scientific analysis of all time. So to speak. Not only has this proven detrimental to public safety in the context of a global health crisis, but it has also contributed to the downfall of democracy in the U.S., culminating most impressively in the January 6, 2021 insurrection of the U.S. Capitol. Because no one can exploit the opportunities of new media better than politicians.

Though the use of social media for political clout was gaining prominence in the U.S. around the 2010s, its value to the previous presidential administration is hard to over exaggerate. Admittedly, both political parties have relentlessly abused their power to shape public opinion and 'knowledge' through platforms like Instagram and Twitter with astonishing success. However, much of the power of the Trump era came from Republican activity on the internet, more than any other time in history. And it was the ideas and misinformation spread during this time that elected a populist authoritarian to the office of the President of the United States and assisted in dividing the American people more severely than ever. To clarify, this analysis in no way seeks to argue with partisan undertones; words such as 'populism' and 'authoritarianism' are not taken lightly and are being used strictly in their definitional context.

There is consensus in the social science community that autocratizers follow a similar pattern in their efforts to build power and expand populist ideals. Leading figures first attack the media and sectors of civil society that do not directly support them, then polarize the domestic population by disrespecting opponents and the democratic process while spreading false information, then use their power to undermine political institutions (“Autocratization Turns Viral”). In the U.S., this manifested in direct attacks on the validity of the media, using executive authority to circumvent congressional oversight on countless occasions, inviting foreign intervention into federal elections, and using “the machinery of government for personal, partisan, and undemocratic ends” (Levitsky and Ziblatt). Democratic processes and institutions were undermined repeatedly, most recently in efforts to restrict the efficacy of the U.S. Postal Service and mail-in ballots for voters, in abandoning norms of judicial appointments, and in transitioning out of office. Actions between the President, and Democratic and Republican Congress members focused on abandoning the constitutional spirit of forbearance to defeat the other side in every way, at any cost. There is no compromise, no middle ground, no tolerance. Partisan Americans see each other as enemies, and consequently, the productivity of the U.S. government has been devastated (Levitsky and Ziblatt). As a result, the Liberal Democracy Index of the U.S. declined from 0.86 in 2010 to 0.73 in 2020, with most change in the past two years. This places the level of democracy in the U.S. lower than Costa Rica, Estonia, Uruguay, South Korea, Lithuania, Greece, Chile, and almost every OECD country (“Autocratization Turns Viral”). Yet the U.S. has spent most of its history, old and recent, acting as a beacon of democratic perfection in the West to which all developing countries must forcibly aspire to. Again, the irony.

The point here is not to criticize particular presidents or elections, but to make a few suggestions. Perhaps the U.S. population is not very well positioned academically if comments and posts made on Twitter are deciding factors in elections for a majority of voters. And perhaps recent developments advise that the U.S. should stop touting itself as the prodigy of democracy when it is doing worse than countries who were controlled by the USSR not too long ago.

Clearly America has problems, many of which have not been addressed here. Misunderstandings about immigration, gun violence, racism, and countless other issues are staring the U.S. in the face. A point has been reached when investigations by America's own bureaus, courts and law enforcement are no longer enough to debunk 'fake news' that politicians spread online, and the words of the most qualified people in science do not size up to the beliefs of someone who might not have even graduated high school. And affective polarization plagues society such that Americans of opposite parties do not even want to talk or share space with one another (Levitsky and Ziblatt). Undeniably, the U.S. has a lot of room for self-improvement, and more attention must be granted to these hurdles immediately. However, the U.S. remains an incredibly powerful influence, and its participation in international affairs remains vital to the future of humanity.

Global society today is a 'risk society', meaning that the development and technological progress experienced in the past century has brought unprecedented, novel forms of risk upon the population and planet that are new, systematic, invisible to the senses, and universal. Society is not necessarily more risky than before, but the threats facing humans today are man-made, a repercussion of mankind's own modernization, and require unimaginable feats to overcome (Jensen and Blok). These manifest in dangers like respiratory disease from pesticide exposure in industrial agriculture, and cyberterrorism with the potential for attack on literally anything in this digital age, at the hands of anyone with an internet connection.



Global climate change is a classic example as, contrary to misinformation proliferated through illegitimate media forms, it not only exists but is caused by human activity, and poses the greatest threat to humanity. The warming witnessed today is unlike anything Earth has experienced for the last 800,000 years, and is unquestionably unnatural. The maximum concentration of greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere during its natural orbital cycles is 320 parts per million (ppm), but that number is 417 ppm today, an increase of 100 since only 1950, higher than any time in planetary history (MacDonald, "Module 6: Unit 3"). This influx is caused by carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane emissions from fossil fuel combustion, production, and agricultural land use. Historically, the U.S. is responsible for 25% of these emissions, the largest overall contributor; today it contributes 15%, but most of China's emissions stem from the production of goods either used in the U.S. supply chain or exported directly for American consumption ("Emissions Gap Report 2019"). The U.S. plays a particularly heavy hand in this crisis, which necessitates its active participation in international efforts to mitigate the consequences. And climate change is only one of many global challenges towards which the U.S. has had disproportionate influence, so its cooperation in international organizations is imperative if other, less guilty nations are expected to act as well. The risk society is complex and dangerous, and will require the brightest minds around the world to be overcome - humanity cannot afford to prolong the current wrestling match for nations' self-esteem and power.

The U.S. is afflicted with innumerable calamities that demand immediate recognition and remedies, most notably the backsliding of its own democracy. More energy must be spent in the direction of domestic improvements and establishing a solid foundation for the U.S.'s power to stand on. However, participation in global problem-solving cannot be abandoned, for the success

of international cooperation in the risk society is just as vital to the population as internal efforts. The U.S. cannot choose one dimension over the other, but must balance them more appropriately by abandoning its imperialistic drive for replicating Westernized development worldwide, where it is often unwanted and ill-received, and instead contribute to global wellbeing by fighting humanity's pressing threats alongside, not against, other powers. Yet to restore the legitimacy of its helping hand, the U.S. should look in the mirror first.

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