

Trump is making Americans see the U.S. the way the rest of the world already did

By [Suzy Hansen](#) September 8 at 2:17 PM

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Last spring, President Trump [announced](#) that he was withdrawing the United States from the Paris climate agreement, making the U.S. one of only three nations that isn't a signatory. This summer, he was throwing around careless provocations at a nuclear-armed North Korea. In May, he [physically pushed his way past](#) the prime minister of Montenegro for a group photo of NATO leaders. Many Americans [reacted](#) to these embarrassments with fear, [horror](#) and not a little bit of surprise — I guess because an American blundering through the world is something they had never seen before.

The Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie once observed that there are “two Americas” — one at home and one abroad. The first is the America of Hollywood, work-in-progress democracy, civil rights movements and Ellis Island. The second is the America of coups and occupations, military dictators and CIA plots, economic meddling and contempt for foreign cultures. The rest of the world knows both Americas. But as Shamsie has written, Americans don't seem aware of the second one at all.

The debate about how the United States elected an irresponsible nationalist like Trump has focused on why the first America, the supposedly beautiful one, failed, rather than why the second America,

the ugly one, triumphed. But from abroad, Trump makes a lot more sense — and has much more in common with his predecessors and his countrymen — than many Americans realize.

I left the United States more than a decade ago to live in Istanbul. I spent most of my first year educating myself about Turkish history and politics, and trying to learn how to write about them. What continued to surprise me was what I kept learning from foreigners about my country: about America in Turkey, and then about America everywhere else.

The rest of the world doesn't figure much in U.S. lesson plans. [A majority of states](#) have phased out international geography from their middle school and high school curriculums; according to the most recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, [from 2014](#), three-quarters of eighth-graders place “below proficient” in the subject. And although many Americans know the major flash points in the nation's international history — the Vietnam War and the Iran hostage crisis, interventions in Central America, the invasion of Iraq — few learn about the complexities of our relationships with so many other nations, especially the diplomatic, military and economic entanglements of the Cold War.

This may be particularly true of those Americans who came of age in the 1990s as the United States triumphed over the Soviets, its status as a benevolent superpower somehow confirmed. The ugliness of the Cold War was largely forgotten. I remember the Marshall Plan and [the Truman Doctrine](#) portrayed in my '90s-era education as great international acts of charity, of which Turkey had been among the lucky recipients. But when I moved to Istanbul, Turks taught me about the more complicated aspects of the United States' long relationship with their country: that thousands of U.S. soldiers had occupied Turkish soil in the 1950s, and how, throughout the darkest days of the Cold War, most Turks believed that the United States was manipulating their military and their citizens. I had come expecting Turks to be foreign to me. It turned out we were profoundly, tormentedly, related. \

[/Secular citizens of Turkey have never felt so alone/](#)

It wasn't just Turkey. After the financial crisis in Greece, I interviewed many intellectuals and other citizens there who offered historical explanations during which they referred — casually, assuming I knew about it — to an American intervention. I'd never heard of it. But it was a pivotal moment in contemporary Greek history: Thousands of Americans arrived in Athens as part of the Truman Doctrine, propping up an authoritarian regime against Greek communists and leftists and demanding that Greeks imitate the American way of life. From the late 1940s to the 1970s, American military personnel, diplomats and spies provided ample support to the Greek government as it tortured and persecuted its citizens. This history, our history, was part of them. I haven't met any Americans for whom it was part of their identity — most never knew about it. It wasn't at all part of mine.

In those fleeting moments, I would feel a terrifying gulf open between us: The United States had wielded the power in this relationship, and Americans took no responsibility for it. As a journalist, I had been sent to write about the Greek financial crisis for a major American magazine with no knowledge of how our mutual history might have produced unconscious prejudices in both countries.

[/Why the defeated coup in Turkey could make democracy weaker there/](#)

At the very least, Greeks and Turks could explain how this history influenced their present. Americans, meanwhile, did not realize that who we were — as a nation and a people — had also been shaped by these abuses of power over the course of a century. Holding onto an image of ourselves as freedom-loving individualists who determined our own fates and championed the same for others, Americans didn't have any idea how far we'd strayed from this ideal in the eyes of the rest of the world. This appeared to be true everywhere I went: in [Egypt](#), in [Afghanistan](#) and, perhaps most important, in Iran, where [tens of thousands of Americans](#) once worked in service of a brutal ruler.

During the Cold War, the threat of communism inspired U.S. leaders to inaugurate a new kind of empire under the guise of “modernization.” Americans feel strange about the word “empire”; we tend to think our

foreign relations couldn't possibly resemble Britain's in the 19th century.

That is largely because the United States' Cold War architects deliberately constructed an empire that concealed its existence through language. As critics such as Nils Gilman have chronicled, academics working for the U.S. government in the mid-century knew not to use the word "Westernization" to describe their economic or political interventions abroad, for fear they might be compared to their European imperialist predecessors. Americans were taught to view the United States as simply the ideal modern nation — the shining city on a hill, as Ronald Reagan put it (echoing the early Puritans who settled in Massachusetts), that all foreign countries should aspire to emulate. Even if the United States "made mistakes" abroad, Americans were people with uniquely good intentions who wanted to help foreigners along to a better, freer life.

Many Americans have long accepted this idea of our superiority and goodness as if it were a self-evident truth, not postwar propaganda created to justify imperial intervention. Without these beliefs, who would Americans be? That ours is the most successful and evolved country in the world is the basis of most Americans' sense of reality.

The 21st century has brought devastating challenges to this worldview: the Sept. 11 attacks and the catastrophic occupations in the Middle East; the financial crisis and the end of the belief that endless progress was possible for many. It has been a painful period for Americans. But the rest of the world has long suffered the destructive consequences of the United States' fantasies. Whatever national introspection follows Trump will not be complete without a full reckoning with the nation's postwar lunge for global dominance, not unlike Germany's reckoning after World War II.

Are ordinary people responsible for their governments' foreign policy? It's hard to blame the millions of Americans living in poverty, who have been just as victimized by the injustices of the 20th century as those abroad. But many other average Americans with dangerously naive

ideas about themselves and their country grow up to become teachers, foreign correspondents, presidents. What they did not learn as children will not be cured by what they learn at elite universities, in self-regarding metropolitan centers or in graduate schools that for the most part tell them that the United States is the center of the planet and that they are the smartest on it. This kind of American exceptionalism is a product of 200 years of disconnection from our country's acts around the world — a geographic, intellectual and emotional isolation.

Trump has looked out of place as a world leader because he is a television personality, not a politician. He is also the crudest manifestation of some very American traits: recklessness, nationalism, contempt for history, an inability (if not utter disinclination) to inhabit a foreigner's experience. Never before has it been so clear that Americans' identities — their confidence and happiness — are tied to the supposedly exalted status of their nation, and of the man or woman who leads it. Trump may contradict everything many of us believe about ourselves, but the first question we might ask is whether what we believe is true.

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