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US POLITICS, PART 2.

A nation without a purpose.

This is the second of two essays on the state of American politics as November's elections draw near. Part 1 of this series can be read [here](#).

Back in 1977, America's disastrous defeat in Southeast Asia but two years in the past, the late Stanley Hoffmann published a book called *Primacy or World Order*. I have long held Hoffmann, a scholar of Austrian–French background who professed foreign relations at Harvard, in the highest regard for his ability to limn our global circumstances with exceptional clarity. The book just noted is a case in point.

America's humiliating loss in Vietnam had made the irreducible choice America faced clearer than it had been the whole of the post–1945 era: It could continue to insist on its recently achieved hegemony or it could contribute to the construction of a world order worthy of the term, but it would have to be one or the other.

As Americans go to the polls this autumn there is another way to think about the choice attaching to America's foreign policies. “Democracy or global supremacy?” Peter Dimock asked in [a recent piece we published in *The Floutist*](#). Dimock, an accomplished novelist with an intellectual background in American history, addressed this question in the properly stark terms our moment requires:

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As the presidential elections approach, Americans face an existential choice between upholding historically principled democratic commitments or ... a

neoliberal transnational culture of permanent war within which prospects of an authentic international, universal, and democratic peace have been all but destroyed. Permanent war as a default policy to ensure “global order” through American state power does not constitute an international politics capable of fostering democratic well-being around the world. Economically and militarily imposed American supremacy destroys the possibility of any genuine democratic international politics.

Hoffmann was right and Dimock is right—two refined minds boiling matters down like a French chef making a reduction. This was the choice in the former’s day and it is the choice of Americans now. But there is a bitter reality that must be addressed as those Americans who insist on voting prepare to elect either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris as their forty-seventh president: The choice these two thinkers so excellently identified is not on offer. America’s policy cliques and its various elites—political, administrative, corporate—long ago made this choice, chose wrongly, and have since kept as far as possible from public purview. Between democracy (at home and abroad) and empire, the latter remains as humanity’s blight.

What will Donald Trump’s foreign policy look like if he is elected for a second, non-consecutive term as president? What does Kamala Harris think about the war in Ukraine, about China, about Europe, about Israel and the genocide in Gaza? These are logical questions at this vital moment, and there are many others. How I wish these questions were more interesting than they are, the answers not so obvious.

Yes, there are differences between the Republican and Democratic candidates. These are worth considering. But any thought that a Trump or Harris presidency

will make any substantive difference in the American imperium's conduct is simply foolish or unschooled. And there is plenty of this around, I ought to add.

Americans rarely think much about foreign policy, at election time or otherwise. They tend to leave it by a long tradition to sequestered elites, interims such as the broad antiwar sentiment of the 1960s being exceptions proving the rule. It is the same as this political season unfolds. We witness American narcissism at its extreme, the self-absorption of a country that is too large and too isolated by oceans either side of it. At the same time, the policy questions American now faces—Gaza and Ukraine chief among them—are too large to go altogether unmentioned. Each candidate seeks assiduously to distinguish himself or herself from the other. Their shared problem is that this is a difficult business given neither has any intention of altering America's direction to any fundamental degree.

You get on the one hand delusion, and on the other distortion.

The extent to which the Democratic Party and the liberal media serving it have recast Harris as a sharp-minded, original thinker ready to unveil a resolute agenda has swiftly reached the point one must mark it down as amusing. An unnamed national-security operative in the Democratic camp, to take a ready-to-hand example, told *Politico* the other day, "With a President Harris, a two-state solution may finally be possible."

One assumption here is that Kamala Harris has her own ideas about the Middle East's crisis and is determined to shift American policy accordingly. Another is that Harris has a grasp of statecraft such that she is capable of developing a solution to a question that has proven intractable for decades. And another is that a two-state solution to the Israel–Palestine crisis remains at all possible.

All three of these assumptions are beyond ridiculous. If the official quoted is not deluded, he or she is doing his bit to distinguish Harris from Biden so as to delude the electorate. Kamala Harris is a complete blank on the foreign policy side. So far as I know she has never articulated a single idea or position that is not subject to opportunistic change. She has, in consequence, no intention of doing other than what she is told, which means what Americans and the world have had from Joe Biden they will have more of should Harris win in November.

As to purposeful distortion, this seems the favored sport between Republicans and Democrats. Harris hates Israel and loves Palestinians, the Trump camp will tell anyone who listens. Trump is “pro-Russian,” the Democrats insist. He is a close friend of President Putin’s and wants the Russian military to defeat Kiev on Ukrainian battlefields.

Well, when there are few substantive differences between the policies of the two candidates, I suppose it follows that differences must be manufactured so that voters may go to the polls under the illusion they are making a choice.

When Barack Obama ran and was elected in 2008, he represented a radical contrast to the administration of George W. Bush. He would replace the aggressive war-seeking of Bush II with reasoned policies sympathetic to other nations and peoples. The olive branch in the talons of the American bald eagle would take precedence over the arrows held in its other claw.

The fatal flaw in Obama’s foreign policy thinking is evident in the record he left behind. He concerned himself with method not objective, means not ends, or in the ancient Greek conception, *techne* rather than *telos*. The power of the imperium

would be extended and enforced, but with more drones and covert operations, fewer invasions and combat soldiers.

Obama's presidency was not the first during which it was evident that any occupant of the White House was in large measure a figurehead, a salesman selling to the public policies devised and executed by what I am perfectly at ease calling the Deep State. This was the case at least as far back as the Reagan years. But since Obama, competence in matters of state has mattered progressively less—this to the extent one sometimes wonders whether those actually devising and executing policy prefer a not-quite-competent president who stays out of their way.

In the kindest possible interpretation, this Obama *contra* Bush binary is the most one may read into the Trump–Harris contest. Both, straight of the top, are condemnably beholden to the Israel lobby, corporate money, and the national-security state to a degree that may be unprecedented. Trump, although more mercurial and unpredictable, is a “peace through strength” man in the Reagan mold. He wants terrorist Israel to “finish the job in Gaza quickly” because the Zionist state is taking a serious hit to his reputation.

Harris will play the Obama card, pretending to elevate the place of diplomacy in American statecraft. She will carry on about the need for a ceasefire just as Biden has—ineffectually, performatively, in net terms giving the Netanyahu regime dispensation—and the weaponry, let us not forget—to finish the job at the pace it chooses. The bedrock policy the Deep State favors, inalterable and unconditional support for apartheid Israel, will remain undisturbed.

Techné, the technology of a project, the “how” of it, is what is at issue between Trump and Harris in all questions to do with America's relations with the world

beyond its shores. The *telos*, the goal, the intent, is as fixed and beyond question now as it has been the whole of the postwar era. This is why neither Trump nor Harris holds out any promise of foreign-policy success or a change of direction. Failure remains America's only prospect in its foreign endeavors.

A hundred and fifteen years ago a writer named Herbert Croly published the book for which he is remembered. In *The Promise of American Life*, the celebrated social critic looked forward in search of the imperatives the United States had to face if it was to change its mind and choose democracy over empire. America had fundamentally to alter its idea of itself, Croly argued with exceptional insight: A nation with a destiny must make itself a nation with a purpose. The former left its people with semi-sacred "missions" and obligations to change the world in their image. To have a purpose is to have earthly things to do, the work of making a better world, the work the human cause requires and deserves.

I have cited Croly and his book on various occasions over the years, simply because leaving destiny behind and finding a purpose is a project America has never yet taken up, to say nothing of completed. Folly it would be to expect either Donald Trump or Kamala Harris to go anywhere near addressing this failing once one or the other is elected. America and its people will eventually have to transform themselves just as Herb Croly proposed, but one gives up on the thought of any kind of national initiative: Events and history will have to force this process into motion.

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