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Garfinkle, Adam

2020

Garfinkle, A. (2020). The ‘George Floyd’ unrest : its strategic implications. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 113). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/143741>

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The 'George Floyd' Unrest: Its Strategic Implications

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Racially charged civil unrest in the United States will affect the November election, undermine military morale if the president orders military force to smother protests, and further estrange Americans from supporting an active and constructive US role in global affairs. The "George Floyd" moment may therefore be justifiably counted as a significant historical inflection point.

COMMENTARY

THE EXISTENTIAL fact of George Floyd's killing at the hands of a policeman in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 25 May 2020 is less consequential than the ensemble of reactions to it now in motion. How is the ongoing social unrest likely to affect American power, policy and reputation in the world at large?

Three questions about its impact point to what is most important: First, how will the unrest affect the November presidential election? Second, how will the unrest, and specifically President Trump's reaction to it, affect military morale? Third, how will the unrest, coming on top of the evolving COVID-19 challenge, affect public views of the still operative, but eroded, US role as key provider of common global security goods?

The Politics of Social Unrest

The common wisdom on the political impact of American social unrest holds that peaceful protests help liberal Democrats and riots help "law-and-order" Republicans. This is basically correct: The legitimacy and even the nobility of peaceful protest and dissent is baked into the American concept of free political speech based on conscience; violent protest, on the other hand, whether deemed justified in the

circumstance or not, tends to mobilise nervous but otherwise passive voters in favour of politically reactionary and socially narrowing agendas.

That, it is now popularly averred, is what happened in the 1967-68 period, and may happen again. Trump apparently thinks so; his unsubtle Nixonian reaction so far gives every indication of being a deliberate effort to stoke conflict so that he can harvest the political fallout.

Trump may or may not be rewarded for his efforts. The 1968 analogy is by no means airtight for several reasons, so it remains to be seen how effective Trump's "law-and-order" campaign posture will be in November. It is a posture he will pursue in tandem with a "blame China" strategy to distract memory of his COVID-19 response mismanagement.

Unless the unrest persists for several more months, which is unlikely, by the election it will have become just another partisan lightning-rod issue. Disentangling the inevitable multiple factors determining election results will be, as always, difficult and inconclusive.

But one thing is certain: The election will have a major impact on future US foreign and national security policy. If Trump is re-elected, four more years of his isolationist-unilateralist instincts will have destroyed what remains of US postwar grand strategy, and with it all of the multilateral institutions raised over the decades to support it.

If the Democrats win, policy will not revert to the status quo ante before the Obama Administration's more hesitant and much differently toned movement away from that grand strategy. A Biden Administration, however, will restore many benign traditions and attitudes in dealing with other nations as it works its way toward a new, and hopefully apt, strategic concept.

Military Morale

President Trump's use of military force to disperse protesters in front of the White House so that he could stage a wordless campaign photo-op, upside-down Bible in hand in front of the historic St. John's Episcopal Church, was outrageous on so many levels that one hardly knows where to begin.

Republican Senator Tom Cotton's tweet, calling on the White House to invoke the 1807 Insurrection Act and give "no quarter" to protesters, was even worse: He basically advocated the commission of war crimes by US troops against US citizens on US soil. But Senator Cotton is merely aiming to replace Mark Esper as Secretary of Defence, so will say anything without the constraint of scruples to win the president's confidence.

Neither Trump nor Cotton has apparently given any thought to what such actions do to military morale, including among US troops deployed overseas in harm's way. The US military has been a major institutional tool for advancing racial harmony and justice in the United States since at least 1948. People of every race, religion, and ethnic origin are numbered among those in the uniformed services.

The spectre of American soldiers shooting and killing unarmed peaceful protesters without even a pretence of due process -- that is what “no quarter” means -- in a racially charged situation would severely undermine morale throughout the military. America’s adversaries could not possibly fail to notice.

That is why Secretary Esper has come out against implementing the Insurrection Act, a display of integrity that may soon get him fired. He has been joined by Generals James Mattis, Mike Mullen, and dozens of other retired and active-duty flag officers. Will that firm response from the military stop the president from again ordering US soldiers to do things they should never be ordered to do? We’re bound to find out.

Isolationism and Virtue

The current unrest in the US, which is being deliberately exacerbated by opportunists on both the radical “antifa” Left and the radical white-supremacist Right, is clearly deepening the turn of opinion away from active and constructive US engagement in global affairs.

As was not the case during the final decade of the 20th century, Americans today increasingly see expansive international engagement as too expensive, too dangerous, too complex to understand, and unhelpful either to the “main street” American economy or to rock-bottom American security.

But something much more profound than that is going on. The Protestant/Enlightenment DNA baked indelibly into the American personality requires a belief in the nation’s exceptionalist virtue to justify an activist role abroad. Unlike most historic great powers, security and commercial interests alone do not suffice to persuade the denizens of a uniquely secure “world island” to “go abroad in search of monsters to destroy” -- to recall John Quincy Adams’s famous words.

Only a belief that some morally transcendent purpose is involved can sustain an active US global role, and that role ultimately rests on confidence in the basic virtue of American society. This is the trait that outsiders have frequently understood as America’s missionary-like global vocation. They have not been mistaken.

America: No Longer a Worthy Model

The ultimate importance of the “George Floyd” unrest, then, is to pile another brick on the sepulchre of American exceptionalism. Maybe Americans are being too hard on themselves. Maybe the reaction to Floyd’s killing actually demonstrates the very considerable progress we have made in the past half century; after all, the vast majority of the protests have been both peaceful and racially integrated.

Mark Twain once quipped after a concert that Richard Wagner’s music “was not as bad as it sounded”; similarly, today’s unrest may not be as bad as clickbait-seeking media selectivity makes it look.

No matter: When, for justifiable reasons or not, the nation loses its moral self-respect, as it has occasionally during the past 244 years, it cannot lift its chin to look confidently upon the world, or bring itself to ask the world to look upon America as a worthy model,

let alone a leader. That is very much the mood in recent years, and particularly now. Alas, then, US allies and partners will need to adapt to what is an increasingly clear non-exceptionalist new American normal.

Adam Garfinkle is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg