

Conclusive remarks

by Giuseppe Franco Ferrari

Each and every President in American history is identified with some peculiar event that has taken place during his mandate, and/or with some defining temperamental features.

In contemporary times, for instance, Franklin Delano Roosevelt fathered the New Deal, had to confront the Pearl Harbor attack and prepared the final victory during WWII, after being the only President in U.S. history to be elected four times. Truman had to make the decision of resorting to the atomic bomb to end the war against Japan, signed the peace treaties and witnessed the beginning of the Cold War. Eisenhower can be linked to *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, although he was known to be lukewarm towards desegregation, let alone integration. Jack Kennedy coined the New Frontier, successfully managed the Cuban blockade, was tragically assassinated at Dallas. Lyndon B. Johnson was able to push the Civil Rights Act through Congress, was overwhelmed by riots and the Vietnam war and declined to run for a second term. Richard Nixon put an end to the war but fell due to the Watergate scandal. Gerry Ford, within a dull backdrop, is remembered above all for the pardon to his predecessor. Jimmy Carter put an enormous emphasis on civil rights but failed to manage the Iran crisis. Ronald Reagan branded deregulation and supply economics and greatly contributed to the crisis of the Soviet Union. George H. W. Bush, Sr. is recalled for the fall of the Berlin Wall and was not reelected due to failing to keep the promise “read my lips: no new taxes”. The first baby boomer President, Bill Clinton, tried the third way but had the infamous affair with Monica Lewinsky. George W. Bush, Jr. can be identified with the anti- terrorism doctrine after 9/11, the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the so-called compassionate conservatism; furthermore, his name will forever be linked to the *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court case. Obama, besides being the first non-white President, is renowned for supporting social services and education, promoting the legalization of same-sex marriages and taking on the financial crisis of 2008-2010. Trump has left indelible signs of his Presidency, besides his unique style: the travel ban on citizens from Muslim countries, the appointment of three Supreme Court justices, the slow and controversial reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, the first ever double impeachment and acquittal of a U.S. President, the refusal to concede to Biden and finally the Capitol Hill riot on January 6, 2021.

What are the main defining features of the Biden Presidency, at least to the eyes of contemporary observers, leaving to historians the more complete and sophisticated judgements?

A summary glance at the last four years shows, firstly, the sudden and unfortunate retreat from Afghanistan, the fight against the pandemic, the criminal trials of the former President, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the restarting of military conflicts in the Middle East and the resignation of the presidential candidacy due to the deterioration of his physical conditions.

We have started our cycle of biennial seminars about the American Presidency in 2008. On every occasion, we have discussed the details of U.S. domestic and foreign policy during the previous two years, the state of the separation of powers, the relations between Federation and the States. Each time, in the moment of our discussions, we believed that something unique was going to happen and that it would have been decisive for the present and the future of the whole world.

For the first time, after an in-depth discussion of almost all of Biden's policies and of the condition of the U.S. institutions in the last years, many of us perceive an unprecedented and unpleasant sense of powerlessness. Whatever judgement we may give of the Biden Presidency and, even worse, whatever we may expect from the presidential elections, the world's overlapping crises seem to be quite difficult to solve, to say the least.

A wave of pessimism is shaking global public opinion, above all in the West. Emmanuel Todd (*La Défaite de l'Occident*, Paris, 2024) speaks of nihilism. John J. Mearsheimer refers to the end of expectations and illusions (*The Great Delusion, Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, Chicago, 2018). The West is apparently suffering from a deep crisis of values and ideals, arguably a much more serious crisis than the previous three that have marked the last 25 years - terrorism, financial collapse and pandemic - causing many scholars to identify the concept of 'constitutionalism 3.0'. The United States has reached an unprecedented level of polarization in domestic politics. In the global context, the role of the U.S. after the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization, has been depicted as the management of theatrical warfare. Many qualified observers believe that in the last two years the situation has gotten out of control. Ukraine and the Middle East might be two traps into which the West as a whole has fallen. It is now questionable whether, whoever the newly elected President is going to be, he or she will have the capacity of putting an end to both wars and to restore a strategic balance with the United States and its allies in a pivotal position.

Europe is weakened by the diminished leadership ability of Germany and France, where populist shifts have partially delegitimized their respective heads of government and of State: according to many political scientists, the current axis of Western power runs from Washington to London to Warsaw, bypassing the capitals of the two traditional European allies. The EU trade balance has dramatically turned from a moderate surplus to a deep deficit from 2021 to 2024. Its energy policy has apparently gone too far to be sustained by the economic system. In more general terms, the loosening of national consciousness, although slowed down by populism, has not been compensated by a strong continental compactness.

Russia is far from being defeated, unless an escalation to atomic weapons is foreshadowed. Russia was in full demographic crisis, was moving

form the status of illiberal democracy to an authoritarian regime, but it has been put in condition of preserving its banking system from the negative effects of being excluded from SWIFT, of changing the direction of exports, of welding together China and India, once historic enemies. The BRICS area has achieved a considerable enlargement, although at the price of increasing its heterogeneity; it has build up a still rudimentary bank system alternative to the WB and the IMF and it is talking about the creation of an unlikely common currency. Taiwan, the Asian bulwark of authentically democratic values, is likely the next target of the Chinese communist regime and is becoming more and more defensible.

Such geo-political conditions do not mean that the presidential elections of November 2024 are less important than past ones. They are still the most important political event worldwide. However, the horizon is dark and their possible impact on world politics is, for the first time, less determinant than ever before.

European citizens can only witness the choice between Trump and Harris, hoping that the genius of the system will prevail once again and that the leaders of the West will be able to resume the geo-political supremacy which they have historically conquered and which they deserve.

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