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BROKEN THREADS: THE UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN A WORLD OF PANDEMIC COMPLEXITY

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Abstract

This essay presents a case study (the 2020 Presidential Election in the United States) in order to analyzing ongoing changes at domestic politics and foreign relations of a world superpower. It portrays a qualitative analysis informed by a bibliographic revision of the aforementioned topics. 2020 began with President Donald Trump dully avoiding an impeachment trial and trumpeting his divisive economic achievements (at the expenses of World Trade Organization and US partners). His mastery of a self-professed “art of the deal” at least seemed plausible as a set of political stunts. On the other hand, the Democratic Party remained splintered. The impeachment attempt put the party on the back foot, propelling POTUS’ premature campaigning. With populism on the rise on the world stage, for a while – it seemed – Trump could stand a chance at reelection. At the shadow of a global epidemic, Trump’s walls and fiery unilateralism fell down pretty quickly.

Keywords: COVID-19; Donald Trump; Nationalism; Presidential Election; United States.

Resumo

O ensaio, através de um estudo de caso (a eleição presidencial nos Estados Unidos em 2020), aborda transformações na política doméstica e relações exteriores daquele país. Trata-se de uma análise qualitativa focada em revisão bibliográfica da produção referente aos temas supracitados. O ano de 2020 começou com o Presidente Donald Trump evitando um processo de impeachment e promovendo polêmicos resultados econômicos de seu governo (às custas da Organização Mundial do Comércio e parceiros dos Estados Unidos). Seu domínio da auto-professada “arte da negociação” parecia plausível, ao menos como um conjunto de performances políticas. Por outro lado, o Partido Democrata permanecia dividido. A tentativa de impeachment colocou o partido na defensiva, ao passo que o Presidente iniciava prematuramente sua campanha. Com o Populismo em alta em escala mundial, por um momento – aparentemente – Trump tinha boas chances de reeleição. À sombra de uma epidemia global, os muros erguidos por Trump e seu unilateralismo caíram rápido.

Palavras chave: COVID-19; Donald Trump; Eleição Presidencial; Estados Unidos; Nacionalismo.

Three decades ago, the Berlin Wall fell down and Cold War followed suit in a rather peaceful way. This sequence of events was largely unprecedented and unforeseen in political and academic circles. Those events should have provided a cautious warning for the next century. Expect the unexpected. World orders can change profoundly in a quick pace, following a spree of improbable developments.

2020 began with President Donald Trump dully avoiding an impeachment trial and trumpeting his divisive economic achievements (at the expenses of World Trade Organization and US partners). His mastery of a self-professed “art of the deal” at least seemed plausible as a set of political stunts. On the other hand, the Democratic Party remained splintered between former Hillerites, delusionist Sanders and a host of alternative candidates associated with minority groups. The impeachment attempt put the party

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on the back foot, propelling POTUS' premature campaigning. With populism on the rise on the world stage, for a while – it seemed – Trump could stand a chance at reelection.

Then the “Chinese disease” (as said by Trump) quickly spread to the Americas, in spite of all containment measures adopted by the beleaguered administration. The new coronavirus infected 10 million American citizens before Election Day. November 7 (the day Joe Biden, the Democratic nominee, reached 270 Electoral College votes) registered record figures of COVID-19 contamination. By then, with almost 100.000 daily cases, Trump could no longer blame China for his misdoings. He spent the final section of campaigning infected by coronavirus together with key campaign staffers.

At the shadow of a global epidemic, Trump's walls and fiery unilateralism fell down pretty quickly – leaving many broken threads behind, as a host of institutions home and abroad razed to the ground.

Nevertheless, a number of unsung events paved the way for the Democrats' return to White House.

In February 22, Biden – then not a clear-cut party leader – won the South Carolina caucus, prompting Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar to withdraw from the race on this side. This proved pivotal for Bernie Sanders' amicable way out in April, sponsored by former President Barack Obama. Elizabeth Warren followed suit the same month. The aggregation of would-be candidates around Biden was already set on paper when George Floyd was victim of police brutality in Minneapolis in May 26, galvanizing Black Lives Matter, propelling civil unrest, pinning structural racism on campaign maps. The kind of movement that Clinton lacked in 2016, what gave Trump a lasting chance in swing states.

Such events took place against the COVID-19 background, with US (and Brazil) surpassing European figures. Trump's hasty reaction to both Floyd's killing and coronavirus gave Biden (now with Senator Kamala Harris, another former pre-candidate, nominated for Vice President) huge momentum and an agenda early on. Unforeseen developments were also enhanced by polarization at a boiling point. After many affiliates, Trump revealed his positive coronavirus testing in October 6. By then he trailed Biden in all major polls, what his sketchy appearances at presidential debates did little to ameliorate.

After four years, Trump policies turned America “great again” into the leading country in COVID-19 cases worldwide. His careless management of the coronavirus crisis took its toll in Election Day. The POTUS become not only a polarizing figure with little international headway, but also a stubborn poster boy for a government stricken with epidemics. Long-term allies such as Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel) and Boris Johnson (UK) rushed to congratulate the just-elected (Biden with a record-breaking 76 millions-plus votes, Harris the first woman of African and Asian origin elected Vice President).



In this context, Trump's recalcitrance to concede defeat sounds a last attempt at a marketing stunt running thinner (in the meantime, sabotaging transition efforts). While hardly unprecedented at the international stage, the POTUS' isolationist stance at home sent shockwaves across domestic institutions. Biden received the support of an unprecedented number of Republican Party affiliates.

COVID-19 was no game-changer in international relations. Nevertheless, its huge impacts upon domestic constituencies in 2020 can hardly be underestimated. Alongside with rippling effects of structural racism, tipping scales in national elections arrived sooner than later – to Trump's chagrin. Is this defeat a sign of the tail-end of the Populist wave that ruled the second decade of the century?

Trump won the Battle of Seattle but, in spite of any economic recovery, he lost the reelection war.

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