RSAJournal
2025, vol. 36
ISSN: 1592-4467

DOI: 10.13135/1592-4467/12290
rsa.aisna.net

The End of World War II

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Keywords

World War II, MAGA, Historical Memory, Rules-based Order, America First

For roughly eighty years, historical memories of World War II provided memes that circulated widely in American culture and helped to popularize a wide consensus about broad goals of US international policy. This essay briefly assesses several key components of this World War II-era historical memory and then addresses their surprising eclipse, and even reversal, amidst the rise of MAGA politics. Does the presidency of Donald Trump represent, in terms of Americans' widely-shared historical memories, the end of World War II?

A particular set of keywords suggests the complex of World War II historical memories that shaped American postwar culture and policy. "Infamy" was, of course, the word that President Franklin Roosevelt invoked in his first speech announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor. Prolifically embedded in wartime posters and wartime speeches, "infamy" connoted surprise attack by a perfidious enemy. For decades, the word came to underpin a cautionary tale about the need for "preparedness," including

robust military spending and strong multilateral alliances – in the postwar period.

"Appeasement" joined "infamy" in warning Americans about the ultimate cost of a world in which dictatorships challenged disunited democracies. "Appeasement," "Neville Chamberlain," and "Munich" became familiar codewords that, without needing further explanation, signaled a larger story about the need to oppose aggressive authoritarian governments and to draw lines against their territorial aggrandizement. "Fascism" represented unalloyed evil just as "democracy" represented unalloyed good.

"Beggar-thy-neighbor," though somewhat less common in popular culture, also circulated in historical narratives about the background to World War II. This phrase, used to describe the competitive economic policies of devaluation and trade wars that propelled the downward cycle into global depression during the 1930s, counselled against a go-it-alone global economic order. Beggar-thy-neighbor policies, as a matter of course, ended up beggaring everyone, producing a global cycle of impoverishment that provided fertile soil for the grievances upon which the dictatorships of the Axis countries thrived.

While these negative keywords suggested the dangers that led to the global catastrophe of World War II, another set of positive keywords came to circulate in American culture as emblems of how to construct and maintain a lasting postwar peace. The generation that had fought and died around the world in defense of people wanting to live free from cruel and genocidal dictators embraced the word "internationalism." "Human rights" and a concern about "humanitarianism" assumed a new status as policy goals, especially as the brutalities of the regimes that launched World War II were fully uncovered. And in pursuit of internationalism and human rights, "alliances" of all kinds and in every region of the world flourished within the new US-led postwar system. Under pressures of the emerging Cold War, military alliances such as NATO emerged. And economic agreements to stabilize a new "liberal internationalist" order, such as Bretton Woods and post-Bretton Woods accords, GATT and eventually the WTO all contributed to America's most important global objective – a "rules-based economic order" that would presumably provide

stability for growth and deter both national-state aggressors and corrupt actors within and outside of state jurisdictions.

For decades, these language legacies of World War II shaped historical narratives that circulated as almost self-evidently true. Who could disagree that the United States should stand against infamy, aggression, appeasement, and beggar-thy-neighbor policies? Who could oppose promotion of liberal-internationalism, democracy, human rights, humanitarianism, strong alliances, and a rules-based economic order? Political partisans disagreed over how goals should be manifested, particularly policies and exactly how optimally to serve the larger goals, but most Americans shared a broad consensus concerning the lessons shaped within these historical memories and keywords of World War II.

In some ways, the longevity of World War II's historical memory complex is a little surprising, given that eighty years have already passed. And during those years, Americans have had troops at war overseas for most of the time, most notably in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan. Because none of these wars, except for the Persian Gulf War, ended with American victories, one might have expected new war lessons to have emerged more prominently. As Andrew Bacevich has affirmed, however, the World War II narrative that war works continued to prevail throughout the decades of countervailing evidence that US wars have not worked very well. Indeed, the repeated futility of America's post-World War II wars seemed to accentuate, rather than dim, the prominence of World War II narratives in popular memory. The emphasis in both political parties on celebrating and honoring veterans also helped to silence potential critiques of American wars. Why scrutinize uncomfortable outcomes when you can continue to celebrate the "greatest generation" and the "good war"?

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the World War II narratives found fresh and fertile ground in official US policy rhetoric. Again, a dictator's infamous attack on a neighboring country and the mass murders committed in Bucha shocked most Americans, many of whom donned the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag and rallied behind President Joe Biden's call to defend freedom against a dictator's aggression. Invoking strains from FDR, Biden promised that the United States would lead a strong European alliance to assist Ukraine for as long as it might

take. Meanwhile, relying on the dollar dominated global economic system that had prevailed since the end of World War II, Biden instituted an escalating array of trade sanctions and monetary measures to marginalize Russians in the global economy. Appeasement of Putin, Biden warned in speech after speech, would embolden this dictator and lead Europe into another World War. All of the familiar negative and positive keywords of the World War II historical narratives circulated widely.

In the shadows of these standard World War II-era tropes, however, a reversal was taking shape. During his first term as president, Donald Trump had advanced new terms and alternative stories: he and his so-called MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement had called for a policy of America First, a term that both recalled and updated the name that signified the 1930s opposition to American participation in World War II.

It would be misleading to draw a straight line from the antiwar America Firsters of the 1930s to MAGA because opponents of joining the war before Pearl Harbor constituted a highly diverse coalition. Only some of the complicated politics of the 1930s, which is often loosely identified as an antiwar America First movement, maps well into Trump's agenda some 80 years later. Still, it is useful to see MAGA's American Firsters, if not as direct descendants of their namesakes in the 1930s, then certainly as contemporary opponents of the standard celebratory tropes of World War II memory. In the America First world of Trump's advisers, US policymakers needed to start going it alone, rethinking alliances, military strategies, economic policies, and all the other components of the post-World War II liberal internationalist order. World War II verities, MAGA claimed, no longer served ordinary Americans and had been foisted on them by postwar elites.

Although analysts agree that the election of 2024 between the Republican candidate, former president Donald Trump, and the Democratic candidate, first President Joe Biden and then Vice President Kamala Harris, largely turned on economic issues such as inflation and on border/immigration policies, the memes of World War II era versus the MAGA America First challengers were certainly present in the campaign. Support for Ukraine provided the most obvious divide. Biden and Harris channeled FDR in calling Americans to support freedom against aggression by bol-

stering alliances and economic tools. By contrast, Trump's vice-presidential pick, J.D. Vance, ridiculed the idea that the United States should lead an alliance in open-ended support for Ukraine. Examination of the available finance, weaponry, and manpower, he wrote, showed that the math did not add up to the possibility of a Ukrainian victory, and internationalist elites were again spending US treasure in a lost cause.

After the election, the MAGA repudiation of the World War II verities became ever more striking. Some of Trump's supporters spoke admiringly of autocratic governments, prominent appointees tossed off Nazi-style salutes, and eugenic utterances again circulated in the halls of Republican power brokers. Any of these fascist-adjacent representations would have disqualified politicians in the post-World War II memory world. But MAGA had successfully flipped the script with many voters.

Policy actions, with new sets of keywords, spoke loudly about the U-turn. President Trump and Vice-President Vance lost no time in scorning America's post-World War II alliance system. Europeans, they said, had not paid their "fair share" of NATO costs; they had been "very unfair" to America on trade; they were part of a "woke agenda" that the US would now oppose. Humanitarianism, according to Vance, was the way that previous policymakers had sold bad policies to easily mislead, emotion-driven constituents. Aid and human rights institutions, once a bulwark of America's postwar security order, came under attack as Trump ordered the Agency for International Development closed and withdrew from the World Health Organization. Post-World War II national security agencies – the CIA, NSA, and intelligence offices embedded in other parts of the bureaucracy – were purged and brought under MAGA control.

Trump also moved to free himself from any rules-based economic order. His administration's international economic policies careened this way and that, side-stepping trade agreements with Canada and Mexico; undermining economic policies; threatening Greenland, Panama, Ukraine and other countries over which MAGA supporters had economic designs. Any systemic predictability fell in the face of off-and-on-again tariff threats; demands for mineral riches, port facilities, and development opportunities; coercive measures related to refugees and immigration; and personal grievances too numerous to be easily tracked. Stephen Miran, Trump's chair of

the Council of Economic Advisers even hinted at a plan to devalue the dollar as part of Trump's protectionist trade war stance. Further threatening the "rules-based order" of the postwar era, Trump promised to make crypto a national priority, appointing a "crypto and A.I. czar" and placing Howard Lutnick, a supporter of the crypto, as Secretary of Commerce. Crypto, of course, makes it easy for rogue states and criminal networks to move money across borders without hindrance.

The breadth and depth of the MAGA revolution in US foreign policy (as in domestic policy) remains to be seen. At this writing, we are only two months into Trump's second term, and the terrain of culture and memory will remain in contestation. But at this moment at least, it does seem astonishing how quickly the presumed lessons of World War II, once so widely shared within American culture that they seemed to exist as incontestable truths, have been cast aside by current US policymakers. On its 80th anniversary, World War II may indeed finally have come to a close.

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Emily S. Rosenberg is Professor Emerita and former chair of the history department at the University of California, Irvine. Her books include *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900-1930* (Duke University Press, 2004); *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Duke University Press, 2003); and *A World Connecting, 1870-1945* (The Belknap Press, 2012). She is past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.