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Joe Biden's America, a new beginning



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Joe Biden's America, a new beginning

“DONALD TRUMP’S COSTLY LEGACY”
(Project Syndicate - January 11, 2021)



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Donald Trump's presidency has been a consequential one, but more for its destructive effects than for its achievements. The damage caused by repeated attacks on American democracy, an inept pandemic response, and disruptive foreign-policy decisions will be difficult – if not impossible – to repair anytime soon.

NEW YORK – We can finally state with confidence that US President Donald Trump will leave the White House, however reluctantly, on January 20. As his four years in office come to an end, it is not too soon to raise the question of how he will be viewed.

History will judge Trump to have been a consequential US president, in that he left America and the world much changed. He will also be seen as one of the worst, if not the worst ever.

True, Trump did accomplish some useful things. Domestically, he pushed policies – a cut to the too-high corporate tax rate; the easing of some overly burdensome regulations – that appear to have contributed to robust economic growth. In foreign policy, he deserves credit for moving the US policy vis-à-vis an increasingly repressive, powerful, and assertive China in a more sober, critical direction. He was also right to provide defensive arms to Ukraine, given that part of that country is under Russian occupation.

Negotiating a new trade pact with Mexico and Canada, and then persuading Congress to approve it, was a significant achievement, even if the improvement over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was modest and important parts of the new accord were taken from the text of the far bigger Trans-Pacific Partnership that Trump unwisely rejected. The United States also played a valuable role in facilitating the normalization of ties between Israel and several of its Arab neighbors, notwithstanding its failure to make any headway on the Palestinian issue.

But these and any other accomplishments are dwarfed by what Trump got wrong. Three failures in particular stand out. The first is the damage he has done to American democracy. The events of January 6, 2021, when a mob of Trump supporters besieged and occupied the US Capitol, were the culmination of the president's efforts to demonize the media, violate established norms, promote lies, question the authority of the courts, and reject the results of a presidential election that passed every serious test of its legitimacy.

Trump's incitement and instigation of unlawful activity and violence was the final straw. To be sure, not all the blame here lies with Trump, because no one forced so many Republican office holders to follow his lead in seeking to undermine the legitimacy of President-elect Joe Biden's victory. Those who enabled Trump through their political and financial support share responsibility for his sustained assault on the restraints that are critical to the functioning of any democratic system. Nonetheless, what distinguishes this incident of American populism from previous episodes is that it was engineered from the Oval Office rather than from the outside.

The second defining issue is COVID-19. The coronavirus's outbreak and subsequent spread were China's failure, but Trump's inept and inadequate response is what explains why 400,000 Americans will have died from the disease by the time he leaves office. The flawed US response also caused millions of jobs and businesses to disappear (some permanently), millions of students to fall behind, and governments and people around the world to lose respect for America.

There was much that the Trump administration could and should have done to deal with the coronavirus. Although it deserves credit for its role in accelerating the development of COVID-19 vaccines, this accomplishment was partly

undermined by the failure to arrange for their efficient delivery. The administration also failed to offer consistent messaging on the need for face masks, nor did it ensure that medical personnel had adequate protective gear or provide essential federal support for the development of effective, efficient tests.

The contrast with the relatively successful responses of Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Vietnam, and China underscores that a viral outbreak need not have led to a pandemic, and certainly not to one on the scale experienced in the US. Ironically, Trump apparently feared that prioritizing the fight against COVID-19 would weaken the economy and doom his re-election chances, when in fact it was his failure to rise to the challenge that probably did him in.

Trump's third legacy-defining failure was a foreign policy that undermined America's position in the world. In part, this outcome owes something to the reasons described above: his assault on democracy and failure to deal effectively with COVID-19.

But Trump's foreign policy also failed on its own grounds. North Korea added to its nuclear stockpile and built more and better missiles despite Trump's personal diplomacy with Kim Jong-un. Iran reduced the time it would need to develop nuclear weapons following the Trump administration's unilateral exit from the 2015 nuclear pact (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Venezuela's dictatorship is more entrenched, and Russia, Syria, and Iran increased their influence across the Middle East after America withdrew troops and support for local partners.

More broadly, the US withdrawal from international agreements and institutions became the hallmark of Trump's foreign policy, as did his criticism of America's European and Asian allies, coziness with authoritarian leaders, and disregard of human-rights violations. The net result has been a reduction of US influence on the world stage.

Trump inherited a set of relationships, alliances, and institutions that, however imperfect, had for 75 years created a context in which great-power conflict had been avoided, democracy expanded, and wealth and living standards increased. Embracing a blend of "America first" nationalism, unilateralism, and isolationism, Trump did what he could to disrupt many of these relationships and arrangements without putting anything better in their place.

It will be difficult – if not impossible – to repair this damage anytime soon. Trump will no longer be president, but he will remain influential in the Republican party and the country. While the world was already in growing disarray, and while US influence was already declining, Trump dramatically accelerated both trends. The bottom line is that he is handing off a country and a world in far worse condition than he inherited. That is his distressing legacy.

“AMERICA IS THE NEW CENTER OF GLOBAL INSTABILITY”

(Project Syndicate – January 12, 2021)



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Following the storming of the US Capitol, President Donald Trump is desperate for an exit ramp that will preserve both his fragile ego and his future political influence. Unfortunately, that conundrum leaves him with few options other than to foment even more chaos both at home and abroad.

NEW YORK – Whether the storming of the US Capitol was an attempted coup, an insurrection, or an assault on democracy is merely a question of semantics. What matters is that the violence was aimed at derailing a legitimate transition of power for the benefit and at the behest of a dangerous madman. President Donald Trump, who has never hidden his dictatorial aspirations, should now be removed from power, barred from public office, and prosecuted for high crimes.

After all, the events of January 6 may have been shocking, but they were not surprising. I and many other commentators had long warned that the 2020 election would bring civil unrest, violence, and attempts by Trump to remain in power illegally. Beyond his election-related crimes, Trump is also guilty of a reckless disregard for public health. He and his administration bear much of the blame for the massive COVID-19 death toll in the United States, which accounts for only 4% of the global population but 20% of all coronavirus deaths.

Once a beacon of democracy, rule of law, and good governance, the US now looks like a banana republic that is incapable of controlling either a contagious disease – despite spending more on health care per capita than any other country – or mobs incited by a wannabe dictator. Authoritarian leaders around the world are now laughing at the US and scoffing at American critiques of others’ political misrule. As if the damage done to US soft power over the past four years was not immense enough, Trump’s failed insurrection has undermined America’s standing even more.

Worse, although President-elect Joe Biden will be inaugurated in about a week, that is plenty of time for Trump to create more mayhem. Right-wing militias and white supremacists are already planning more acts of protest, violence, and racial warfare in cities across the US. And strategic rivals such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea will be looking to exploit the chaos by sowing disinformation or launching cyber-attacks, including potentially against critical US infrastructure.

At the same time, a desperate Trump may try to “wag the dog” by ordering a strike – perhaps with a tactical nuclear warhead – on Iran’s main nuclear facility in Natanz, on the grounds that it is being used to enrich uranium. Far from this being out of the question, the Trump administration has already held drills with stealth bombers and fighter jets – loaded, for the first time, with tactical nuclear weapons – to signal to Iran that its air defenses are no defense at all.

No wonder Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi felt the need to reach out to the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss steps to prevent a nuclear strike by the Dr. Strangelove in the White House. Whereas an unwarranted order to launch a nuclear attack on a target with a large civilian population would be rejected by the military as obviously “illegal,” an attack on a military target in a non-populated area might not be, even if it would have dire geopolitical consequences. Moreover, Trump knows that both Saudi Arabia and Israel would tacitly support an attack on Iran (indeed, the US may avail itself of Saudi logistical and ground support to carry one out, given the shorter range of nuclear-armed fighter jets).

The prospect of an attack on Iran may give Vice President Mike Pence the pretext he needs to invoke the 25th Amendment and remove Trump from power. But even if this were to happen, it would not necessarily be a win for democracy and the rule of law. Trump could – and likely would – be pardoned by Pence (as Richard Nixon was by Gerald Ford), allowing him to run for president again in 2024 or be a kingmaker in that election, given that he now controls the Republican party and its base. Removing Trump with the promise of a pardon may be a Faustian deal that Pence strikes with Trump.

Because the self-pardon that Trump has been considering might not pass constitutional muster, it is reasonable to assume that he will be groping around for other creative outs. He cannot simply resign and allow Pence to issue a pardon, because that would make him look like a “loser” who accepted defeat (the worst insult in Trump’s egomaniacal lexicon). But if the president were to order an attack on Iran and then become a (pardoned) martyr, he could both preserve his base and avoid accountability. By the same token, Trump cannot risk being impeached (again), because that would open up the possibility of his being disqualified from holding office in the future. By this reasoning, he has every incentive to go out with a bang and on his own terms.

If this all sounds like the final days of Nero “fiddling while Rome burned,” that’s because it is. The decay of the American empire appears to be hastening rapidly. Given how politically, socially, and economically divided the US is, four years of sound leadership under Biden will not be enough to reverse the damage that has been done. Most likely, the Republicans will do everything they can to sabotage the new administration, as they did with former President Barack Obama.

Even before the election, US national-security agencies were warning that domestic right-wing terrorism and violence would remain the primary home-grown threat to the US. With Biden in office, this risk will be higher still. For the last four years, heavily armed white-supremacist militias have been kept relatively at bay by dint of the fact that they had an ally in the White House. But once Trump is gone, the groups whom he has instructed to “stand back and stand by” will not simply accept Democratic control of the presidency and Congress. Trump, operating from Mar-a-Lago, will continue to incite the mob with more lies, conspiracy theories, and falsehoods about a stolen election.

The US will thus most likely be the world’s new epicenter of political and geopolitical instability in the months and years ahead. America’s allies will need to hedge their bets against a future return of Trumpism, and strategic rivals will continue to try to destabilize the US through asymmetric warfare. The world is in for a long, ugly, bumpy ride.

“THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUMP’S MOB” (Project Syndicate – January 8, 2021)



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The storming of the US Capitol by predominantly white supporters of President Donald Trump was in keeping with a long tradition of mob violence directed by white elites in the service of their own interests. The difference this time is that the rioters turned on their own.

NEW YORK – The storming of the US Capitol on January 6 is easily misunderstood. Shaken by the ordeal, members of Congress have issued statements explaining that America is a nation of laws, not mobs. The implication is that the disruption incited by President Donald Trump is something new. It is not. The United States has a long history of mob violence stoked by white politicians in the service of rich white Americans. What was unusual this time is that the white mob turned on the white politicians, rather than the people of color who are usually the victims.

Of course, the circumstance of this rioting is crucial. The aim was to intimidate Congress into stopping the peaceful transition of power. This is sedition, and in stoking it, Trump has committed a capital offense.

In the past, such mob violence has been aimed at more traditional targets of white hate: African-Americans trying to vote or desegregate buses, housing, lunch counters, and schools; Native Americans trying to protect their hunting lands and natural resources; Mexican farmworkers demanding occupational safety; the Chinese immigrant laborers who previously built the railways and worked the mines. These groups were the targets of mob violence stoked by Americans from President Andrew Jackson and the frontiersman Kit Carson in the nineteenth century to Alabama Governor George Wallace in the twentieth.

Viewed in this historical light, the mob of righteously indignant “good old boys” who stormed the Capitol had a familiar appearance. As Trump put it in his speech fomenting the riot, they were out to “save” America. “Let the weak [politicians] get out. This is a time for strength,” he declared, deploying familiar riffs. “They also want to indoctrinate your children in school by teaching them things that aren’t so. They want to indoctrinate your children. It’s all part of the comprehensive assault on our democracy.”

Throughout American history, most mob violence has come not as a spasmodic explosion of protest from below, but rather as structural violence from above, instigated by white politicians preying on the fears, hatreds, and ignorance of the white underclass. As the historian Heather Cox Richardson documents in her brilliant new book, *How the South Won the Civil War*, this variety of mob violence has been a critical part of upper-class white America’s defense of a hierarchical society for more than 150 years.

America’s culture of white mob violence goes hand in hand with its gun culture. The hundreds of millions of privately owned firearms in the US disproportionately belong to whites; and as the historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz points out powerfully in *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment*, “gun rights” have long been invoked by vigilante white mobs to suppress blacks and Native Americans.

Stoking mob violence against people of color is typically how rich whites channel poor whites’ grievances away from themselves. Far from being a specifically Trumpian tactic, it is the oldest trick in the American political playbook. Want to pass a regressive tax cut for the rich? Just tell economically struggling whites that blacks, Muslims, and immigrants are coming to impose socialism.

Trump has done precisely this throughout his presidency, warning that without him in office, Americans will “have to learn to speak Chinese.” At his rallies, he routinely champions the Second Amendment and rails against nonwhites, telling congresswomen of color to “go back” to the “totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” He has urged his followers to manhandle opposition demonstrators, and to throw them out – not just from his rallies, but from the country itself. He has praised white supremacists as “very fine people.” After his Confederate-flag-waving mob stormed the Capitol,

he said, “We love you, you’re very special.”

The Republican Party fully backed Trump and his politics of incitement right up until the afternoon of January 6, when the mob swarmed the Capitol. But Republican leaders’ fealty to Trump has not been driven merely by his hold on the party’s base. Trump represents the essence of the American right. His assigned role has always been clear: to stack the judiciary, cut taxes for corporations and the rich, and push back against demands for social spending and environmental regulation, all while inciting the baying mob to fight “socialism.”

January 6 went awry because the white mob turned on the white politicians themselves. This was unacceptable, but not unpredictable. Trump has repeatedly told his followers that they are losing America; and the Republicans’ loss of Georgia’s two Senate seats to an African-American and a Jew doubtless added to the rage.

Trump may have been unusually crude in his race-baiting, but his approach has been perfectly in keeping with that of the Republican Party at least since the party’s “Southern strategy” in the 1968 election, in the wake of that decade’s civil-rights legislation. Until last year, Trump was getting the job done for his party’s plutocrat donors, bosses, and business allies. The 2020 election was his to lose – and lose it he did. But the reason was not that he was too racist toward people of color; it was that he was overwhelmingly malevolent and incompetent in the face of a killer pandemic.

In the grand sweep of history, America is indeed turning the corner on its past of racism and white mob violence. Barack Obama was elected to the presidency twice, and when Trump won in 2016, he received fewer votes than his opponent. Between Kamala Harris’s election as vice president and Georgia’s Senate elections this week, there is strong evidence to show that America is gradually shifting away from white oligarchic rule. By 2045, non-Hispanic whites will constitute only around half of the population, down from around 83% in 1970. After that, America will become a “majority-minority” country, with non-Hispanic whites accounting for around 44% of the population by 2060.

For good reason, younger Americans are more cognizant of racism than previous generations were. The Trumpian virulence on display at the Capitol may have been dismaying. But it should be seen as a desperate, pathetic last gasp. Fortunately, the America of racist white rule is receding, if still far too slowly, into history.

“WHY BIDEN SHOULD ABANDON TRUMP’S FAILED TRADE WAR WITH CHINA”

(Project Syndicate – January 14, 2021)



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US President-elect Joe Biden says he will not make any significant changes to America’s China policy until he conducts a full review of the existing “phase one” trade agreement and consults with allies in Asia and Europe. But it should not take a comprehensive review to see that this approach is unworkable.

SHANGHAI – When President-elect Joe Biden is inaugurated next week, he will quickly move to transform most dimensions of US policy. A glaring exception is China. But if Biden maintains outgoing President Donald Trump’s confrontational approach to the world’s second-largest economy, he will come to regret it.

While Biden may be less overtly antagonistic toward China than Trump was, he has echoed many of his predecessor’s complaints about China’s trade practices, accusing the country of “stealing” intellectual property, dumping products in foreign markets, and forcing technology transfers from American companies. And he has indicated that he will not immediately abandon the “phase one” bilateral trade agreement reached last year, or remove the 25% tariffs that now affect about half of China’s exports to the United States.

In Biden's view, it is best not to make any significant changes to the ongoing approach to China until he conducts a full review of the existing agreement and consults with America's traditional allies in Asia and Europe, in order to "develop a coherent strategy." His chosen US Trade Representative, Katherine Tai – an Asian-American trade lawyer (and fluent Mandarin speaker), with extensive experience in China – might play an important role in the review process.

But it should not take a comprehensive examination to see that high tariffs and the phase one agreement are fundamentally incompatible. In the last two years, the proportion of Chinese exports to the US subjected to additional tariffs has soared from a nearly insignificant share to over 70%. And the share of US exports to China subject to tariffs has skyrocketed, from 2% in February 2018 to more than 50% two years later.

Over the same period, the US has implemented 11 rounds of sanctions against Chinese entities. Last month's addition of 59 Chinese enterprises and individuals to the US Department of Commerce's list of export-controlled entities brought the total to 350 – the most for any country.

With such high costs and strict limitations on exports, China cannot possibly fulfill its commitment, included in the phase one agreement, to purchase some \$200 billion in additional US goods and services in 2020-21. Since January 2020, US exports to China have fallen far short of the deal's targets. As a result, in November 2020, China had fulfilled just 57% of its annual purchase commitment.

China's options for accelerating progress are severely limited. The private sector – which accounts for nearly 80% of Chinese demand for US imports – cannot simply be instructed to purchase American goods at such high tariffs. And forcing state-owned enterprises to pick up the slack would create its own problems.

The conclusion is clear: as long as Biden upholds Trump's confrontational approach, the phase one accord will be fundamentally unworkable, and further progress toward a mutually beneficial trade relationship will be all but impossible. Bilateral trade could even collapse.

But this does not mean that the Biden administration need only remove tariffs. The phase one agreement is also deeply flawed, not least because complying with it would force China to reduce imports from other countries. By giving the US a significant advantage over China's other trading partners, the agreement may even violate the World Trade Organization's principle of non-discrimination.

Other countries, therefore, are trying to level the playing field. At the end of 2020, the European Union and China concluded the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, and all ten of the ASEAN countries signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), together with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

None of this is in America's interest. For starters, ASEAN countries – which, collectively, form America's fourth-largest export market – are likely to shift more trade to their RCEP partners. The fact that the RCEP lacks the labor and environmental standards seen in agreements with Canada, Mexico, and the US will reinforce this shift.

The RCEP is also likely to increase Chinese demand for agricultural and energy exports from Australia and New Zealand. And by indirectly establishing a free-trade zone among China, Japan, and South Korea – the so-called iron triangle – it will consolidate supply chains in Northeast Asia and the West Pacific. This puts the US at a growing strategic disadvantage.

Instead of upholding Trump's confrontational China policy, Biden should accept China's central role in the global economy, and pursue a mutually beneficial, non-discriminatory trade agreement. China's efforts to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership – which evolved from the Trans-Pacific Partnership after Trump abandoned it upon taking office four years ago – could provide an important opening here.

The Biden administration promises a fresh start for the US and its relations with the world. To fulfill that promise, he must end his predecessor's disastrous trade war against China.

“WHITHER AMERICA?”

(Project Syndicate – January 12, 2021)



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Fortunately, Joe Biden will assume the US presidency on January 20. But, as the shocking events of January 6 showed, it will take more than one person – and more than one presidential term – to overcome America’s longstanding challenges.

NEW YORK - The assault on the US Capitol by President Donald Trump’s supporters, incited by Trump himself, was the predictable outcome of his four-year-long assault on democratic institutions, aided and abetted by so many in the Republican Party. And no one can say that Trump had not warned us: he was not committed to a peaceful transition of power. Many who benefited as he slashed taxes for corporations and the rich, rolled back environmental regulations, and appointed business-friendly judges knew they were making a pact with the devil. Either they believed they could control the extremist forces he unleashed, or they didn’t care.

Where does America go from here? Is Trump an aberration, or a symptom of a deeper national malady? Can the United States be trusted? In four years, will the forces that gave rise to Trump, and the party that overwhelmingly supported him, triumph again? What can be done to prevent that outcome?

Trump is the product of multiple forces. For at least a quarter-century, the Republican Party has understood that it could represent the interests of business elites only by embracing anti-democratic measures (including voter suppression and gerrymandering) and allies, including the religious fundamentalists, white supremacists, and nationalist populists.

Of course, populism implied policies that were antithetical to business elites. But many business leaders spent decades mastering the ability to deceive the public. Big Tobacco spent lavishly on lawyers and bogus science to deny their products’ adverse health effects. Big Oil did likewise to deny fossil fuels’ contribution to climate change. They recognized that Trump was one of their own.

Then, advances in technology provided a tool for rapid dissemination of dis/misinformation, and America’s political system, where money reigns supreme, allowed the emerging tech giants freedom from accountability. This political system did one other thing: it generated a set of policies (sometimes referred to as neoliberalism) that delivered massive income and wealth gains to those at the top, but near-stagnation everywhere elsewhere. Soon, a country on the cutting edge of scientific progress was marked by declining life expectancy and increasing health disparities.

The neoliberal promise that wealth and income gains would trickle down to those at the bottom was fundamentally spurious. As massive structural changes deindustrialized large parts of the country, those left behind were left to fend largely for themselves. As I warned in my books *The Price of Inequality* and *People, Power, and Profits*, this toxic mix provided an inviting opportunity for a would-be demagogue.

As we have repeatedly seen, Americans’ entrepreneurial spirit, combined with an absence of moral constraints, provides an ample supply of charlatans, exploiters, and would-be demagogues. Trump, a mendacious, narcissistic sociopath, with no understanding of economics or appreciation of democracy, was the man of the moment.

The immediate task is to remove the threat Trump still poses. The House of Representatives should impeach him now, and the Senate should try him some time later, to bar him from holding federal office again. It should be in the interest of the Republicans, no less than the Democrats, to show that no one, not even the president, is above the law. Everyone must understand the imperative of honoring elections and ensuring the peaceful transition of power.

But we should not sleep comfortably until the underlying problems are addressed. Many involve great challenges. We must reconcile freedom of expression with accountability for the enormous harm that social media can and has caused, from inciting violence and promoting racial and religious hatred to political manipulation.

The US and other countries have long imposed restrictions on other forms of expression to reflect broader societal concerns: one may not shout fire in a crowded theater, engage in child pornography, or commit slander and libel. True, some

authoritarian regimes abuse these constraints and compromise basic freedoms, but authoritarian regimes will always find justifications for doing what they will, regardless of what democratic governments do.

We Americans must reform our political system, both to ensure the basic right to vote and democratic representation. We need a new voting rights act. The old one, adopted in 1965, was aimed at the South, where disenfranchisement of African-Americans had enabled white elites to remain in power since the end of Reconstruction following the Civil War. But now anti-democratic practices are found throughout the country.

We also need to decrease the influence of money in our politics: no system of checks and balances can be effective in a society with as much inequality as the US. And any system based on “one dollar, one vote” rather than “one person, one vote” will be vulnerable to populist demagoguery. After all, how can such a system serve the interests of the country as a whole?

Finally, we must address the multiple dimensions of inequality. The striking difference between the treatment of the white insurrectionists who invaded the Capitol, and the peaceful Black Lives Matter protesters this summer once again showed to those around the world the magnitude of America’s racial injustice.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the magnitude of the country’s economic and health disparities. As I have repeatedly argued, small tweaks to the system won’t be enough to make large inroads in the country’s ingrained inequalities.

How America responds to the attack on the Capitol will say a lot about where the country is headed. If we not only hold Trump accountable, but also embark on the hard road of economic and political reform to address the underlying problems that gave rise to his toxic presidency, then there is hope of a brighter day. Fortunately, Joe Biden will assume the presidency on January 20. But it will take more than one person – and more than one presidential term – to overcome America’s longstanding challenges.

ABOUT THE COUNCIL FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ITALY

The Council for the United States and Italy is a private non-profit organization, founded in Venice in 1983 by Gianni Agnelli and David Rockefeller, who served as honorary presidents until 2003. Marco Tronchetti Provera followed them as Chairman, then Sergio Marchionne until 2018. Domenico Siniscalco is the current Chairman, Gianni Riotta Executive Vice Chairman. The Council for the United States and Italy promotes and creates economic relations between Italy and the United States, linking them to Europe, Asia and Africa through knowledge and free trade. Its members are leaders in the economy, industry, finance, technology, services, consulting, law and culture - a team in which economic growth is viewed as promoting humanity and wealth as a cultural value to be shared.

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