

On the State and Future of US Politics

GB sits down with one of America's leading presidential thinkers to discuss where the Trump presidency, its likely evolution and its consequences Conversation with JEREMI SURI

Jeremi Suri holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. His latest book is *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office*.



GB: How would you describe the current state of American politics?

JS: I would say that American politics today are characterized by disruption, division and profound uncertainty about the future.

GB: Why?

JS: It is a combination of longstanding ideological differences in American society, as well as the breakdown or decay in long-established institutions. Most importantly, however, we are seeing a new generation entering American politics and an older generation, represented by the Trumps and the Clintons, holding on to power as long as they can. This demographic transition in America is a key source of much of our difficulty right now.

GB: Which American institutions have broken down?

JS: To some extent, our electoral system has broken down. Our public markers of political acceptability

and objectivity have broken down. There is no longer an agreed factual framework for the ways in which we discuss policy, and the ways in which we discuss many important national issues.

GB: Have American media institutions broken down?

JS: The media have been heroic in recent months. One of the best protections of American democracy is a long-established, vibrant and independent media, and much of what we know and what is, to some extent, holding President Trump accountable is due to the courageous investigative reporting of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. We can point to media entities on the right and the left that are actually doing more than other national institutions to preserve democracy in the country.

GB: Will the US survive this century as a country?

JS: If the US and our democracy can weather the present difficulties and stress test, in a few years we

could be stronger and more democratic than we have ever been. What this moment is doing is mobilizing and engaging young people and others, in a largely unprecedented way, with the political system and forcing them to appreciate the importance of preserving the democratic system. So there is, today, a new generation of idealists in America – a new generation of committed democrats (lower case ‘d’) – throughout our society. We are seeing them in demonstrations. We are seeing them out voting in places like Alabama and Pennsylvania. And they are bringing a new democratic energy to our politics. We just have to get them into power and get this older generation out.

GB: But will the US, as a state – democratic or not – weather this century?

JS: Yes, but it will do so with scars. There will be many who will suffer in the process, as they did in the 19th century development of American democracy. We will also see the US losing some of its lustre around the world as a consequence.

GB: How do you see the next year of the Trump presidency unfolding?

JS: On the home front, the investigations and scandals surrounding the presidency will only deepen (as they do nearly every day). The Republican Party will continue to split apart. We will see a major victory for Democratic candidates in November. The Trump administration will likely become more alienated, more isolated, and more stymied on domestic policy. On foreign policy, we will likely see continued lurching from crisis to crisis. More often than not, we will see bombastic rhetoric without much follow through, as we have seen in Syria and, arguably, in respect of North Korea.

GB: What crises, in international or foreign policy, do you see over the next year for America?

JS: The North Korean question will not go away, despite the superficial amity between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. The Singapore summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un has not magically eradicated what remains a security crisis surrounding the intercontinental nuclear capabilities that North Korea has developed (see the *Feature* article by Barthélémy Courmont at p. 40).

Iran, for its part, will continue to adhere to the nuclear agreement with the European powers, but at the same time also continue to support Assad and his other supporters and proxies in the region. So those are two theatres where we will see continued tension and conflict, which will bring Vladimir Putin

and the Russian leadership into closer conflict with the US, as Russia continues to pursue a separate set of interests in both theatres.

GB: How would you characterize the mentality of the American political class today across the spectrum? What is their belief system?

JS: The mainstream policy experts and professionals advising Congressional and federal leaders, as well as state leaders, are committed to free trade. They are committed to an international stance that is less militarized than it has been for the last 20 years or so. They are committed to a set of alliances – particularly the NATO alliance. So there is, in my view, a traditional liberal internationalism that is still quite strong in America.

What we are witnessing and experiencing is a revolt against this liberal internationalism from a minority – an organized minority – across the country that puts Trump and other politicians like him into positions of power. In the short run, those anti-internationalist or hyper-nationalistic voices still have a great deal of day-to-day influence over American policy. They are holding certain politicians – especially Republican politicians, who otherwise know better – hostage because our primary system gives these minority voices a great deal of influence in the electoral process.

GB: You have written about the ‘Impossible Presidency.’ What do you find ‘impossible’ about the modern American presidency, and how do you see that institution evolving over the next couple of decades?

JS: I argue that the presidency has become impossible because American presidents are simultaneously asked to do more internationally and at home, and given fewer sources of effective leverage than executives in others contemporary settings. The expectations of the presidency are astronomical, while the resources for getting things done are actually minimal. This contradiction is a major problem. The solution to the contradiction is to rethink what we are looking for in the president. The solution should not be to give him or her enormous powers, or to reduce the office. The solution is going to be to focus the office on what it should be focussed on – that is, the issues that matter the most to the country. These issues – internationally or domestically – are the ones where national leadership is most consequential and needed. These are issues relating to core national security interests, and issues of core economic growth and domestic welfare interests. We need a more strategic presidency – not a ‘stronger’ presidency.

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GB: What are the top five issues on which the presidency should focus?

JS: A future president will do a much better job than recent and current presidents by defining his or her office less through involvement in every part of the world than through a keen focus on American relations with China, Europe and Russia. Those will be the core international issues. Those issues will involve security as well as environmental and trade matters. At home, the president will not focus on cultural issues like abortion or guns or religion. He or she will instead focus on infrastructure development. This will require an emphasis on providing a climate that encourages mobility for citizens and also economic opportunity for citizens. By the way, these were core Republican values in the 19th century, before the office grew into much more of an imperial institution than an actual leadership office.

GB: How do you see the evolution of the continental relationship with Canada and Mexico?

JS: The continental relationship will continue to be dominated, as always, by state relationships and other subnational relations. What makes the enduring peace and prosperity across these two borders so significant is that there is so much investment in the continental relationship across American party lines from figures like governors, mayors and business leaders. (This is reciprocated by Canadian provincial premiers and city mayors, and by Mexico's governors and mayors.) The best thing that the US federal government can do today is what it has always done – namely, to provide a peaceful and stable climate, including through a modernized trilateral trade and investment regime, for subnational actors to do the good work that they do in the service of economic growth, development and peaceable relations across these borders.

GB: Should Americans be impressed by the return of China to the centre of international affairs?

JS: Americans have to come to grips with the fact that we are no longer in the world of the late 1990s and 2000s, where there were really no peer competitors with the US. China is, today, a regional and sometimes global strategic and economic competitor with the US. This is not necessarily a threatening thing. On the contrary, it could actually be a source of stability. The Chinese are as invested in global capitalism as the US. We evidently have differences – significant differences – in how we manage things like intellectual property rights. There are differences over currency at times. Nonetheless, unlike during the Cold War, the US and China have the same interest in the growth of the global economy. In the long run,

fundamentally, that will provide many opportunities for cooperation and controlled, peaceful competition. Peaceful competition is good. The US got into a lot of trouble when it did not have a peer competitor. Having a peer competitor might well be better for us this century, in economic and in military terms.

GB: What are the sources of the present American conflict – even obsession – with Russia?

JS: The Russia controversy in American politics is large, and will get larger still over the next year. It has three elements. The first has to do with the clear evidence that the Russian leadership has defined its interest as limiting the spread of American influence in theatres like Ukraine (and the broader post-Soviet space) and the Middle East. Without having to declare who is right and who is wrong, it is obvious that there is a conflict in the approaches privileged by the two countries as to how these theatres should develop over the next decade. Indeed, the visions of the US and Russia about the future development of these regions are arguably more in conflict with each other than are the visions of the US and China with respect to the future of East Asia.

The second major element is the degree to which the Russian government uses cyberspace as an arena to exert influence. Russians would say that this is something the US has done in the past, including through Voice of America during the Cold War. But Americans do not see Russian cyber operations – especially as they concern internal American matters – as legitimate. We view them as illegitimate, almost terroristic actions.

The third element – not unrelated – has to do with the recent presidential election and the very serious evidence that the Russian government tried to interfere in the election. The combination of geopolitical differences, differences in the use and perception of cyberspace, along with the 2016 election amounts to a cocktail for political, if not strategic, obsession with Russia in the US today and for the foreseeable future.

GB: How do you see the relationship between Washington and Moscow evolving over the next few years?

JS: We will see continuing tension, and probably increased US sanctions on Moscow. There will be further retaliation by Russia, and we will see more hostility and more mutual isolation. We will see more militarized actions by Russia in places where it can get away with it. We will also see efforts by the US to support those in Ukraine and elsewhere who are fighting proxy wars against Russia. In short, there will be more conflict, short of direct conflict between the US and Russia.

GB: Do you see any prospect of direct conflict?

JS: There is, of course, a possibility. Neither side wants this, but we could well bumble into conflict. Again, this would be unintentional. Both sides may want to come to the edge, but as good historians we know that it is very hard to manage that edge – short of direct hostilities – without actually falling into war. So I can certainly imagine us bumbling into direct warfare with Russia in Syria, the broader Middle East or somewhere else. To be clear, however, once again, I do not believe that there is any interest or intent on either side for such direct conflict.

GB: How do you see the evolution of American policy in the Middle East for the remainder of this presidency?

JS: We will see continued American disengagement from the Middle East and continued reliance by this president on proxies in general, and Saudi Arabia and Israel in particular. We are going to invest more heavily in those two states, and perhaps Egypt as well, to do much of the work for us in the region. But those states evidently have their own agendas, which often do not align with America's agenda and interests in the region.

GB: What about America's relationship with Iran, and specifically around the Iran nuclear agreement?

JS: Working very closely with the Israelis and the Saudis is, by implication, working against Iran. That is why the US pulled out of the nuclear deal, against the wishes of all of our European allies. We will see a return to nuclear proliferation by Iran, and we might very well see Iran coming closer to having a viable nuclear weapon within the next few years.

GB: How do you see the evolution of social media in the US, including possible additional regulation of that sector?

JS: We are in a moment with those platforms that is similar to where we were with the railroad in the mid-19th century. The railroad companies were, as with today's internet giants, largely unregulated entities that had enormous, earthquake-like influence and destabilizing impacts on politics. But then they were quickly regulated by legal structures, leading to the Progressive Movement in the early 20th century. We are entering another moment like that, when the US, Canada and their European partners will be working to build state structures to regulate and manage these social media institutions and social media outlets of one kind or another. What that regulation will look like we do not yet know, but it seems clear that, in future, companies like Facebook will not be able to

take advertising money and share data willy-nilly in the way they have for the past few years.

GB: Do you think the Trump presidency will survive the entire first term?

JS: No.

GB: How will it end?

JS: There are several pathways by which it could end. It could end in a legal proceeding surrounding impeachment. It could end in a resignation. And it could end in a health incident. These are all distinct possibilities. None of these three pathways has a likelihood of greater than 50 percent, but put together I would assert that a premature end to the presidency is more likely than not.

The real, underlying reason for which I do not believe that the administration will make its way through is that, at some level, as I argue in *The Impossible Presidency*, the president needs people to do things for him. He cannot do everything himself. This is the most incredibly powerful-looking office with very weak enforcement and execution capabilities in practice. As the president becomes more and more isolated, it will be harder for him to get things done. He can keep tweeting, but can he actually change law? Can he actually deliver legislation? Can he actually change events on the ground or overseas? So far, he has proven unable to do that. It is going to get far more difficult for him, and that will make it more difficult for him to survive. Revelations from Bob Woodward and the anonymous *New York Times* op-ed show that the team the president has chosen to advise him is actually revolting against him.

GB: If President Trump were to leave prematurely, would there be a destabilization of the American political system, or would there be a return to the status quo ante?

JS: The American political system is extraordinarily resilient. It is filled with warts and inequities and undemocratic elements, but in the end, the long departure of someone like Donald Trump, as with the long departure of Richard Nixon, will lead to a pullback toward the political centre. (continued)

For the rest of the interview with Jeremi Suri please visit the GB website at: www.globalbrief.ca

