

Behind the Political Chaos: The Decline of American Values

政治乱象的背后：美式价值观的衰落

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On January 6, the U.S. Congress was occupied and violent clashes between police and demonstrators caused multiple deaths and injuries, highlighting the tragedy of democracy and human rights in the United States.

It is worth pointing out that the fall of Capitol Hill in the United States is not entirely unexpected. Rather, it is the inevitable result of the deteriorating development of the political ecology of the United States in the past few decades, especially in recent years. American values are already mired in trouble, and they are increasingly being questioned not only globally but even in other Western countries.

After World War II, the United States advocated and vigorously promoted a series of so-called universal values, including democracy, freedom, and human rights. These values were regarded as the cornerstones of the global order dominated by the United States and the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War marked a point at which the value system advertised by the United States reached its highest global momentum and even the so-called end of history emerged. However, history does not evolve in accordance with American visions and plans. Rather, it is only an illusion that all countries in the world embrace American values. The concepts of democracy, freedom, and human rights are not problematic. The issue, however, is who ought to interpret them and who ought to judge them. With its strong position, the United States has monopolized the interpretation of these concepts for a long time and it has been difficult for the developing countries to have a voice in the discussion.

However, in recent years, this situation has been changing. On the one hand, the values advocated by the United States have been unable to guarantee good economic and social effects, and its role model and influence in the world have fallen sharply. The polarization between the rich and the poor, and the consolidation of classes in the United States have become more pronounced. The people are not optimistic about their futures. Polls show that most Americans have lost trust in their own political elites and believe that they do not represent the interests of the people. In the United States, dissatisfaction with democracy has become a common phenomenon, and the rate of dissatisfaction with democracy exceeds the rate of satisfaction. This is also the main reason why American populism prevails. Since the beginning of last year, the COVID-19 pandemic has been raging unabated. The United States, which claims to attach the most importance to democracy and human rights, has faced the gravest outbreak. The cumulative number of confirmed cases in the United States exceeds 20 million, and the death toll is close to 400,000. These numbers are still increasing rapidly.

On the other hand, what the United States has done fully demonstrates the double standards and hypocrisy of its values, which further weakens the global appeal of its value system. Democracy and human rights belong

to the United States alone, and democracy and human rights are only afforded to some in the United States. The United States has wantonly interfered in the internal affairs and has subverted the regimes of other countries. Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and many others, have suffered painful and profound experiences. In the United States, African-Americans have suffered discrimination for a long time, giving way to the Black Lives Matter movement. The United States has turned a blind eye to its own problems and still acts as the global “mentor” of democracy and human rights. Calling Hong Kong rioters “heroes of democracy” does not prevent them from calling Trump supporters, who seized the Capitol, rioters. The populism of the U.S. economy is prevalent, and the government unscrupulously promotes unilateralist protection policies, erects barriers to free trade, and builds walls against foreign investment, clearly violating the values of free trade and a free market economy for which it advocates. The “double standards” of the United States are so obvious, so common, and so hypocritical that it is becoming increasingly unable to justify its actions, unable to win the trust of the world, and increasingly unable to win the trust of its people.

For a long time, the so-called universal value system advocated by the United States was, to a large extent, only a tool for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and for safeguarding its own monopolistic interests. It is precisely because of this that it has encountered increasing resistance on a global scale. For instance, the United Nations Human Rights Council used to be one of the main tools used by the United States to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. However, as the voices and diversified values of developing countries are now gaining greater recognition, the United States discovered that it was unable to dominate this organization, so it announced its withdrawal in June 2018.

On June 22 of this past year, the UNHRC once again passed the resolution entitled *Promoting Mutually Beneficial Cooperation in the Field of Human Rights* that China had submitted. The resolution advocates for adherence to multilateralism, calls for the establishment of a new form of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and mutually beneficial cooperation. It will build a community with a shared future for mankind, emphasizing that all countries should conduct sincere dialog and cooperation in the field of human rights, share good practices and experiences in the promotion and protection of human rights, and strengthen human rights technical assistance and capacity building so as to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation. On October 29 of last year, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly responsible for social, humanitarian, and cultural affairs reported to member states on its routine work and deliberated on human rights issues. At the meeting, 23 countries, led by the United States, “launched an attack” (“发难”) against China on the Xinjiang issue, though they were criticized by 54 countries. In fact, most Asian and African countries have long been extremely dissatisfied with the United States’ abuse of democracy and human rights and other value issues to interfere in their internal affairs. The values advocated for by the United States can no longer dominate the world.

In essence, the reason why American values have been able to dominate the world for a long time is not because of their so-called universality but rather because of the strength of the United States, especially its economic and technological prowess. However, in the past decade or so, with the large-scale financial crisis and sovereign debt crisis, the American economic myth has been broken, and its S&T strength has not allowed it to monopolize the world. In addition, the United States also believes that it has encountered real challenges, and the nationwide suppression of the Chinese private enterprise Huawei highlights this anxiety.

American values are declining. This reflects the decline in the overall strength of the United States. Hard indicators such as GDP, manufacturing capacity, and S&T strength can largely explain this problem. The decline of its soft power, however, especially the influence of its values, will be a fundamental change.

As everyone has recognized, the political chaos in the United States is merely a symptom of America’s chronic illness, not the cause. The social and political problems of the United States are deeply entrenched, and the country may no longer be able to lead the West in the future, let alone dominate the world. The “American Era” (“美好时代”) in which the United States dominated the world is becoming a thing of the past. This is why Western countries were both shocked and frightened by the fall of the Capitol.

The political chaos in the United States is largely self-sufficient and a result of the paranoid and instrumental development of its values. Now, it is time for the United States to reflect. American values are by no means a panacea, nor are they superior. With more introspection and less prejudice and with more tolerance and less rejection, the United States may heal, and the world will be better.

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