The Expeditionary Implications of a Populist Grand Strategy

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Abstract: The rise of a new form of populism challenges the assumptions underlying the grand strategy of the United States and thus the types of activities that the operating forces of the United States Marine Corps may be called on to perform.

Keywords: populism, grand strategy, clash of civilizations, migration

For the world as a whole, the years between 1947 and 2017 were times of enormous change. In those seven decades, the population of the planet trebled, and, at the same time, grew much richer, much better connected, and, in terms of heritage, allegiance, and culture, far less European. The same is not true of the 70 years that preceded 1947. Outside of a handful of highly developed countries, all but one of which were chiefly inhabited by people of European descent, the experience of people living in 1947 differed little from that of people who were alive in 1877. For the operating forces of the Marine Corps, the experience of the last 14 decades has been the exact opposite of that of the vast majority of human beings. That is to say, all of the great metamorphoses experienced by Marines on active service during the course of the past 140 years had either been completed or, at the very least, were well underway before the passage of the National Security Act that gave the Marine Corps its current form.[1]

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One cause of the curious pattern of change of the past 140 years has been the timing of technological transformation. Between 1877 and 1947, inventions of immediate interest to Marines, those associated with delivery of cargo, people, projectiles, and messages, appeared with reliable rapidity. Between 1947 and the present, nearly all of the items of equipment introduced into the inventory of Marine operating forces have been improved versions of the devices that they replaced. Thus, while a Marine of 1877 would have stared in amazement at the weapons and equipment fielded in 1947, a Marine of the latter year would easily recognize much of the ordnance presently in use and most means of locomotion. Moreover, if they were in the habit of reading magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*, they would have quickly made sense of such exceptions to this rule, such as the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey and antitank guided missiles, the direct antecedents of technologies that already existed, albeit as prototypes.[2]

Another contributor to the slow evolution of Marine Corps' operating forces between the end of the Second World War and the present day has been the absence of any significant alteration to the grand strategy of the United States. That is to say, whatever their position on the political spectrum, the vast majority of Americans, and nearly all those in positions of national influence, have acted in ways consistent with the presumption that the paramount purpose of the foreign and defense policies of the United States ought to be the protection, proliferation, and perfection of liberal democracy throughout the world.[3] Indeed, so powerful was this "liberal universalism" that, on occasions when American politicians found it necessary to make alliances with illiberal regimes or support the overthrow of democratically elected governments, such measures were invariably defended on the grounds that they would, in the long term, serve the eventual triumph of political, economic, and social systems similar to our own.[4]

All of the essential elements of liberal universalism can be found in the penultimate paragraph of the best-known work one of its most famous avatars, Francis Fukuyama. Writing at the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama made use of an unmistakably American metaphor, that of a nineteenth-century wagon train:

> Rather than a thousand shoots blossoming into as many different flowering plants, mankind will come to seem like a long wagon train strung out along a road. Some wagons will be pulling into town sharply and crisply, while others will be bivouacked back in the desert, or else stuck in ruts in the final pass over the mountains. . . . The wagons are all similar to one another: while they are painted different colors and are constructed of varied materials, each has four wheels and is drawn by horses, while inside sits a family hoping and praying that the journey will be a safe one. The apparent differences in the situations of the wag-

> ons will not be seen as reflecting permanent and necessary differences between people riding in the wagons, but simply a product of their different positions along the road.[5]

One contributor to the crumbling of the long-standing American consensus in favor of liberal universalism has been the painfully obvious failure of the Herculean project to plant liberal democracies in various parts of the Muslim world. Another is the growing influence, in academic and intellectual circles, of systems of thought, whether postmodern or antimodern, that reject the philosophical underpinnings of liberal universalism.[6] A third reason for the decline of American faith in the ubiquitous utility, all-inclusive applicability, and eventual triumph of liberal democracy is the growing popularity among politically active people in the United States of a new kind of populism.

Also known as "populist nationalism," "national populism," and "the new nationalism," the *populism* of the twenty-first century rests on the premise that the paramount purpose of a state is the preservation of a particular people.[7] In some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, the identity of the people in question stems from a common ethnic heritage. In others, such as France and the United States, the definitive population of a country owes its existence to what might be called *civic ethnogenesis*. That is, membership in such a people has more to do with commitment to a particular set of institutions and ideals than biological descent from the creators of those things.[8]

Proponents of populism imagine a "people," however formed, as a profoundly persistent phenomenon, "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."[9] Because of this, they assign a great deal of value to the transmission of traditions from one generation to another, the preservation of patrimony, and the avoidance of any measure, however tempting in the short term, that places the long-term well-being of the people at risk. This perspective also preserves populists from the temptation to engage in enterprises aimed at altering the fundamental features of societies other than their own.[10]

Present-day populists are often described, by friend and foe, as "nationalists." While there is a great deal of truth in this designation, the conservative character of populism causes its champions to differ from the nationalists of earlier eras in one important respect. In the two centuries between the French Revolution and the end of the Cold War, nationalists often sought to increase the possessions, populations, and prestige of the states built around their nations, even if it meant the incorporation of substantial numbers of foreigners into their respective realms. In sharp contrast to these nationalists, the populists of the past four decades have often proved willing, and sometimes even eager,

to sacrifice size, whether of territory or population, on the altar of common descent.

To a large degree, the great change in the preferences of nationalists stems from a number of broad developments in the world at large. On a planet in which war between states is both less frequent and much more capital-intensive than it used to be, the independence of a people is much less dependent on the ability to put large numbers of soldiers into the field. At a time in which talent, capital, and goods move among states with an unprecedented degree of freedom, a smaller state can be as economically viable as a larger one. In particular places, the power of these global developments has been increased by local events. For example, the forced transfers of a population that took place at the end of the Second World War did much to increase the degree of ethnic homogeneity in the populations of Poland and Hungary, while the breakup of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia replaced multinational, polyglot polities with states that were, at once, substantially smaller and far more homogeneous.[11]

The high value that populists place on homogeneity correlates strongly with deeply held beliefs in the uniqueness of national cultures, the specificity of national situations, and the degree to which practices, policies, and predilections reflect the peculiar experience of particular peoples. This, in turn, leads easily to profound pessimism about the prospects of projects aimed at transplanting political institutions from one country to another. Thus, for example, populists can be expected to reject, as inevitably futile, efforts to build liberal democracies on the wreckage of endogenous dictatorships. Such efforts, they tell us, may result in regimes that are better or worse than the ones that they replaced, but cannot lead to situations in which the people who make up these governments replace the values, habits, and assumptions of their respective countries with those of an alien nation.

The embrace of the uniqueness of national cultures does not, however, prevent populists from acknowledging, appreciating, and, indeed, celebrating the existence of communities larger than nation-states. On the contrary, the rejection of the one-size-fits-all universalism inherent in so many competing philosophies often leads populists to a belief that the world is divided into distinct global civilizations, each of which is separated from the others by considerable chasms of purpose, presumption, and practice. We thus find populists in Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes making frequent mention of the membership of their respective nations in a common civilization, that of the West. Similarly, populists in Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia, such as Turkish president Recip T. Erdogan, see no inherent contradiction between their service as champions of the definitive nationalities of their respective states and their enthusiasm for the well-being, expansion, and ultimate triumph of Islam.[12]

To date, no Anglophone populist has proposed a taxonomy of global civilizations as complete as the one made famous by Samuel P. Huntington.[13] Nonetheless, populists writing in English agree on three important points. First, they believe that the differences that distinguish Islam from the West are much greater than those that distinguish the component peoples, states, and movements of those two polycentric civilizations from one another. Second, they view China as an entity that is, at once, both a civilization and a state. Third, they see Russia as a special case, a place in which the hybrid character of the dominant culture makes possible both closer ties to the Western world and the embrace of alternate identities.[14]

There will, in all likelihood, be times when enthusiasm for the well-being of a multinational civilization will run afoul of the powerfully parochial propensities of populism. Nonetheless, the correlation between populism and a strong sense of civilizational solidarity is so strong that, even in nations as large as the United States, there is little danger of isolationism. Rather, if the opinions of prominent populists are any guide, it is far more likely that a populist United States will find itself serving as the hegemon of an informal alliance of Western states. Thus, while the Marines of a populist America will spend far less time in places inhabited by non-Western peoples, they may spend more time along the frontiers that separate the territory and waters of the West from parts of our planet that belong to other civilizations.

Of the three aforementioned propositions, the one that promises to effect the greatest alteration in the grand strategy of the United States, and thus the employment of America's Marines, is the idea of the persistent differences that distinguish the common culture of the West from that of Islam. To those who accept this precept, no amount of nation building will change the fundamental character of the peoples, polities, and practices of the Muslim world. Rather, the best that America can do when engaging entities that belong to this civilization is to provide them with incentives to refrain from doing us harm. This means that, on the rare occasions when Marines go ashore in such places, their visits will be brief and their purposes punitive. When, in the course of doing this, Marines happen to topple a government, they will do so with the expectation that any regime might follow will have much more in common with its predecessor than it does with any of its counterparts in the West.

The punitive expeditions sent into Muslim lands by a populist American government would bear a strong resemblance to the first campaign that U.S. Marines conducted in the Islamic world. In 1805, when First Lieutenant Presley Neville O'Bannon and his seven Marines crossed the Sahara, captured the fortress of Derna, and imposed peace in Tripoli, they did so to inflict pain on the prince who ruled there, to convince him to release American hostages, and to ensure that neither he nor any of his successors engaged in any future acts of

piracy against vessels flying the Stars and Stripes. While this operation involved alliances with local leaders, one of whom sought to deprive the aforementioned monarch of his throne, any change of rulers that might have resulted from the operation would have been entirely incidental.[15]

In and of themselves, retributive raids will require few changes in the organization, armament, or training of the operating forces of the U.S. Marine Corps. Rather, the range of Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTFs) that the Corps has been employing since the 1960s possess both the capabilities and the mentality associated with the successful conduct of punitive expeditions. The same, however, cannot be said for the other sorts of missions that are likely to arise in a world in which a populist American government engages Islam as a global civilization—those that will ask Marines to deal with the phenomenon of Muslim migration.

Viewed through a populist lens, the movement of large numbers of people from one country to another poses a threat as great as many kinds of military operations. Similarly, those who stress the differences among global civilizations often point to the phenomenon of "migration jihad" as a means by which Islam can expand its influence, its population, and, ultimately, the territory under its control.[16] Because of this, a populist government of the United States will, in all likelihood, undertake operations designed to prevent seaborne migrants from moving inland and facilitate their rapid repatriation. One can, for example, imagine a situation in which vessels containing Muslim migrants attempt to discharge their passengers on an American beach. In such a scenario, the Department of Homeland Security might ask the Department of Defense for help in establishing a cordon around the landing beach, setting up camps to house the migrants, and keeping the peace in those temporary settlements. While the military organizations best suited for this work would be military police units of the United States Army and Army National Guard, there might well be situations in which, for reasons of time, distance, and availability, the Pentagon will call on the Marine Corps to provide this sort of aid to the civil power.

One can also imagine situations in which Marines assist with the repatriation of people who, merely by remaining in the places where they were born, find themselves on the wrong side of a civilizational divide. Such situations, which might result from changes in borders, the movements of other peoples, or the demographic decline of the groups in question, might cause a populist government of the United States to attempt to help the people in question find a safe haven in the Western world. While such service would be more congenial to the Marines involved than the duties associated with the expulsion of unwelcome guests, it would require similar capabilities. To put things another way, in a world in which the United States embraces a populist grand strategy and, as a result, follows the logic of the "clash of civilizations," Marines may well find

themselves establishing temporary cordons around large groups of civilians, protecting them from a variety of hostile parties, and ensuring they are able to reach their intended destinations.

In addition to providing security, Marines conducting these large-scale "noncombatant evacuation operations" would also be called on to fill gaps in the services provided by more specialized organizations. While any attempt to provide a definitive list of such work is necessarily doomed to failure, Marines can reasonably expect to be called on to assist with the movement of people and supplies, participate in information operations, and cooperate with people from a wide variety of occupational, organizational, and civilizational backgrounds. In other words, in addition to a set of skills peculiar to the management of migration, repatriation operations will require the same sort of polyvalence that has long been associated with success in complex emergencies.

Reduced to its essence, the way that a populist America engages Islam will be shaped by the absence of a central authority strong enough to compel sustained cooperation within that civilization. Thus, while various actors from the Muslim world will seek to conquer new territories, respond to threats posed by outsiders of various kinds, and avenge wrongs—both real and imagined—inflicted upon their coreligionists, they will not be able to do so in a coordinated fashion. When dealing with Islam, the United States, and, by extension, its Marines, will be faced with a chaotic series of autonomous outbursts of energy, enthusiasm, and enterprise.

The same is not true for the way that a populist United States will have to deal with China. Where the solidarity of Islam is largely a matter of the heart, that of Chinese civilization is founded, framed, and buttressed by an extraordinary degree of political cohesion.[17] Whenever Marines interact with people acting on behalf of China, they will be engaging China as a whole. This, in turn, means that whenever Marines confront their Chinese counterparts, they will be obliged to weigh the risk of escalation against the price of backing down.

The ideal way to prepare for the challenge of high-stakes, small-scale standoffs with China is the provision of a great deal of vicarious experience in the resolution of crises of this sort. The cost of mistakes, however, will be such that many senior leaders will attempt to exercise close supervision over any American forces that come close to clashing with their Chinese counterparts. Indeed, the prospect of such confrontations will lead some to propose the replacement of the traditional Marine Corps approach to command with a form of restrictive control. Fortunately, the experience of encounters with the chaotic champions of Islam will provide lots of ammunition for Marines who will argue that this sort of micromanagement is the "exception that proves the rule" of such practices as the promotion of initiative and leading from the front.[18]

In dealing with both China and Islam, a populist United States will rely on Russia to guard much of the border that separates the West from the territory of those two civilizations. At the same time, America will have to take measures to ensure that the military capabilities needed to fulfill this task will not be used in ways that threaten the well-being of the unambiguously Western states of Eastern Europe. For American politicians, this policy will require the clear, consistent, and persistent explanation of the definitive dualism of the place of Russia within Western civilization. For Marines, support for such a policy will take the form of frequent "show the flag" visits to European nations located along the western border of Russia.

There is, of course, far more to the world than Russia, Islam, and China. A populist America will have to devise policies for dealing with India, Africa, and Latin America, as well as places such as the Antipodes and the "Southern Cone" of South America that might be described as "exclaves of Western civilization." An attempt to predict such policies, however, is beyond the purposes of this article. Indeed, even if all of the predictions made in the course of the preceding pages prove false, and the grand strategy of the United States takes a form different from the one described, people interested in the operations of landing forces will, from time to time, want to ponder the relationship between the way that Americans make sense of the world and the things that they ask their Marines to do.

Notes

1. The National Security Act of 1947, Pub. L. No. 253 (1947) laid out an organizational framework for those agencies of the United States government that are chiefly concerned with defense, intelligence, or foreign policy.
2. For brief descriptions of experiments with tilt-rotor aircraft in the years before 1947, see Martin D. Maisel et al., *The History of the XV-15 Tilt Rotor Research Aircraft: From Concept to Flight* (Washington, DC: NASA History Division, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2000), 6–8. For an accessible description of early antitank guided missiles, see John Weeks, *Men Against Tanks: A History of Anti-Tank Warfare* (New York: Mason Charter, 1975), 152–69.
3. For a brief and highly sympathetic description of liberal universalism, see Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.
4. For the classic expression of the argument that the promotion of liberal democracy in the long term sometimes required short-term cooperation with forces that were neither liberal nor democratic, see Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary* 68, no. 5 (November 1979): 34–45.
5. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 338–39.
6. For an examination of the fragmentation of liberal universalism, see Paul Edward Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004).
7. For competing definitions of populism, see Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Penguin, 2018), 44–57, 78; Stephen R. Turley, *The New Nationalism: How the Populist Right is Defeat-*

ing Globalism and Awakening a New Political Order (Newark, DE: Turley Talks, 2018), 10–19; and Francis Fukuyama, "The Rise of Populist Nationalism," in *The Future of Politics* (Zürich: Credit Suisse, 2018), 7–13.

8. For an overview of the large role played by immigrants in the French population and the process of assimilation, see Cicely Watson, "Recent Developments in French Immigration Policy," *Population Studies: A Journal of Demography* 6, no. 1 (July 1952): 3–38, https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.1952.10415552. For the broader process of building civic nationalism, see Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*: *The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976).
9. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 143–44.
10. For a brief taxonomy of populism that distinguishes between populism and demagoguery, see Victor Davis Hanson, "The Good Populism," *New Criterione* 36, no. 10 (June 2018): 4.
11. For a brief account of the forced population transfers that took place in Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War, see Joseph B. Schechtman, "Postwar Population Transfers in Europe: A Survey," *Review of Politics* 15, no. 2 (1953): 151–78, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500008081. For descriptions of the movements that took place at the end of the Cold War, see, among others, Jean-Paul Sardon, "Demographic Change in the Balkans since the End of the 1980s," *Population: An English Selection* 13, no. 2 (2001): 49–70; and Milica Z. Bookman, "War and Peace: The Divergent Breakups of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia," *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no. 2 (1994): 175–87, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343394031002005.
12. For a biography of President Erdogan that places his career within the larger context of Turkish politics, see Soner Cagaptay, *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
13. For a précis of this taxonomy, see Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49. For a book-length treatment, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
14. For a recent discussion of global civilizations from a populist point of view, see Ernesto Henrique Fraga Araújo, "Trump e o Ocidente" [Trump and the West], *Cadernos de Política Exterior* [Foreign Policy Notebooks], Year III, Number 6 (Second Semester 2017): 323–58. For the three articles that introduced the "clash of cultures" thesis to populists in the English-speaking world, see William S. Lind, "Western Reunion: Our Coming Alliance with Russia?," *Policy Review*, no. 49 (Summer 1989): 18–21; William S. Lind, "North-South Relations: Returning to a World of Cultures in Conflict," *Current World Leaders* 35, no. 6 (December 1992): 1073–80; and William S. Lind, "Defending Western Culture," *Foreign Policy*, no. 84 (Autumn 1991): 40–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/1148780.
15. For an account that looks at this operation from the point of view of the ruler of Tripoli, see Seaton Dearden, *A Nest of Corsairs: The Fighting Karamanlis of Tripoli* (London: John Murray, 1976). For American perspectives, see, among others, Addison Beecher Colvin Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (New York: William Morrow, 1991); Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror, 1801–1805* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003); Joshua E. London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005); and Richard Zacks, *The Pirate Coast: Thomas Jefferson, the First Marines, and the Secret Mission of 1805* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).
16. For a celebration of "migration jihad," see Murtadda Mutahhari, *Immigration and Jihad* (London: Dar Al-Hadi Publications, 2003). For a much less favorable view, see Ann Corcoran, *Refugee Resettlement and the Hijra to America* (Washington, DC: Center for Security Policy, 2015).
17. For a discussion of whether China is a state that happens to own a civilization or "a civ-

ilization pretending to be a state," see Lucian W. Pye, "China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society," *Foreign Affairs* 69, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 58.

18. For a sophisticated discussion of the relationship between different approaches to command and the situations in which forces find themselves, see Martin Samuels, *Piercing the Fog of War: The Theory and Practice of Command in the British and German Armies, 1918–1940* (Warwick, UK: Helion, 2019), 1–47.