

From Trump to Federation

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What are current political conditions to advance the European Union and to renew projects of world union? Current consensus seems to be that conditions are plainly opposed. Most opposed is the drift to autocracy in the United States under President Trump, but the threat to democracy is seen around the world as the numbers of democracies declines. The *Economist Democracy Index* reports that the number of full democracies is now 25, flawed democracies 46, hybrid regimes 36, and authoritarian states 60. (The U.S.A. is ranked as a flawed democracy.) Trump's record is not wholly dictatorial, but he persecutes political opponents, stifles dissent and speech, bypasses the Congress, manipulates the law to stay in power, defies the courts, vilifies marginalized minorities, controls information and the news media, tries to take over universities, prepares the military for domestic control, declares national emergencies on false premises, uses power for personal profit, and creates a cult of personality.¹

Trump does not explain his decisions and policies in traditional ways, but sometimes he links to campaign promises and even to some good. On removing undocumented immigrants, for instance, his policy, though often cruel, is aimed at restoring U.S. immigration law, which had become too porous for years as former presidents winked at the law in accordance with the image of America as a refuge for the tired and poor, "yearning to breathe free." He also gets rid of a few of his "criminals and rapists" who came in with the poor. On the eve of mass migrations caused by climate change and state corruption, America must have working immigration laws to secure its borders. It must solve the "Immigration Problem." Other policies, like higher tariffs, insults to allies, or undoing the post-1945 international order, are harder to justify.

Trump seems to me, as an old marine, to be preparing a coup d'état in 2026, if inflation should threaten him with losses in the Congressional elections, or in 2028, when the Constitution provides for further elections of the president and vice-president. He has refused to say unequivocally that he will abide by the law, which provides that he cannot be elected a third time. He has pardoned all his followers in the January 6, 2021, insurrection (if it was not a coup). He has vilified the leaders of the following impeachment trials, including Representatives Adam Schiff and Nancy Pelosi. He has renamed the Defense Department the War Department, forgetting why the old War Department was renamed in 1948 to reflect the renunciation of the right of war in the new U.N. Charter (Art. 2[4]).

His defense secretary recently assembled hundreds of his top generals and admirals to inform them of policies ending diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which had become a front for gay rights in the military. Trump appeared at that meeting, warning that U.S. cities should become a “training ground” for the military. That threatens domestic use of the armed forces to pursue his policies. He has purged nine senior officers, one of whom, Admiral Alvin Holsey, commander of SOUTHCOM, resigned lest he have to obey unlawful orders to use force against Venezuela or Colombia. Holsey eloquently gave no reasons, in accordance with long-standing military traditions of noninvolvement in politics. Trump threatened Mexico during the campaign. Trump has dispatched the National Guard to Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, Washington, DC, and other cities on missions to enforce the laws domestically, rather than rely on the courts, as provided in the Constitution.

Recently Dick Cheney, vice-president in the George W. Bush administration, died. He was the leading advocate of the war in Iraq after the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks. In the lengthy obituaries, he is presented as chief architect of ever more centralized, “imperial” American foreign policy. Cheney claimed that the powers of the presidency had been unduly eroded by Congress in the years after the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, which drove Richard M. Nixon out of the White House. The age of terrorism in his mind warranted broader executive powers. “I believe in a strong, robust executive authority, and I think that the world we live in demands it,” he told reporters on a trip to Iraq in 2005:

“I do believe that especially in the day and age we live in, the nature of the threats we face, the president of the United States needs to have his Constitutional powers unimpaired, if you will, in terms of the conduct of national security.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hence, to prevent future terrorist attacks, Cheney advocated aggressive policies including warrantless surveillance, indefinite detention, and brutal interrogation in intelligence gathering. He charged Saddam Hussein with developing nuclear weapons (unconfirmed by the United Nations) and pushed for the unilateral invasion of Iraq to topple Hussein in 2003. Out of that mistake came the rise of ISIS and wars in the Middle East almost to the present day. But the point is that centralized presidential power has developed for defense of the country in the face of novel weapons in a globalizing world, like hijacked commercial airplanes, small munitions carried by individuals, “smart” weapons of all kinds, electronic subversion, and even nuclear weapons in the hands of non-state actors.

Such executive power is not the result of neo-fascist personal qualities in the president—in international relations, explanation by the psychology of leaders is always a mistake. It is rooted, rather, in responsibility to defend the country. Every president since 1970 has resisted Congressional limits on his war powers. Even Jimmy Carter, the president who presided over the end of the Vietnam War, regarded the War Powers Act of 1970 as unconstitutional, though it was designed to prevent the president from starting a war alone. So it is to the Trump presidency. Trump’s assumption of war powers is typical of the drift to authoritarianism world-wide.

There is no way to restrain the executive as long as weapons become more lethal and smaller. In Russia’s war in Ukraine, it appears to me, the drone, supported by signals intelligence, is replacing the rifle as the basic weapon of the infantry. As long as leadership in an arms race is seen as the basic method of defense, in place of serious new efforts of disarmament and rule of law, there will be no end of this degradation. National executives responsible for defense necessarily must acquire more power to act. Legislatures, like the U.S. Congress under the domination of President Trump, are prone to paralysis, which is a dangerous situation when terrorism threatens the state. This is the cause, it seems to me, why autocracy is spreading over the whole world.

As many have perceived, humanity under their autocrats now seems threatened by some kind of nuclear war. Arnold Toynbee called it the recourse, in declining civilizations, to a knock-out blow when creative solutions have been abandoned. All the treaties that ended the Cold War—INF, CFE, START—have been allowed to expire. The CTB (1996) is stuck with all nine nuclear powers holding out and 44 potential nuclear powers waiting. The NPT (1968) is not leading to nuclear disarmament.ⁱⁱⁱ Global military spending has reached the \$2.7 trillion mark. The United States is embarked on the “modernization” of its nuclear forces, costing up to \$1 trillion. Trump recently announced the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing. The new Space Force, established in 2019 during his first administration, threatens the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. The Chinese have a road-mobile, ballistic anti-ship missile, with maneuverable reentry vehicles (MaRVs), capable of striking moving carriers and supporting vessels, the Dongfeng [“East wind”]-21D. It threatens U.S. power in the Pacific.

Deterrence cannot hold forever. Human beings, even Air Force personnel, cannot live with the fate of the world at their fingertips forever. An accident or a policy error, even by “rational” commanders, will set off the weapons. You wouldn’t give loaded shotguns to a group of ten-year-old boys. Recently, the Netflix film, Kathryn Bigelow’s *House of Dynamite*, shows quite dramatically what could actually happen if, say, North Korea launched an ICBM to Chicago. None of the Big Three was responsible, but the long awaited WWIII came to pass.

It could start with a Sarajevo incident. Perhaps it won’t be the end of the world. If it were stopped after a brief exchange, it would still mark a dividing line in human history. Survivors might not bear to describe it but would refer, like W. Warren Wagar in *A Short History of the Future* (1999), to the “Catastrophe.” It would be an experience so grave that it could never be forgotten.

It is customary, for world federalists, European federalists, and scholars in general, to stop at this point as if their work of prevention is done and no future remains for survivors. But World Wars

I & II did not end the human race. We must think the unthinkable. Federalists must imagine how humanity could survive. I think the first step will be to save and reform our national republics by meeting the challenge of strong executives while restoring the legislatures and judiciaries as checks on arbitrary powers. Unions will come later. We cannot just await, with Einstein, WWII fought with sticks and stones. Shall we go back to kings and tyrants? The fact is, the Enlightenment is not dead. We must in every land return to the great unfinished project of building the republican (or democratic) form of government. Then the task will be to form regional unions and necessary world federation, for continued international anarchy is a formula for catastrophe. We must not give way to tribal hatreds and injustice. As the young Harris Wofford said at another dark time in 1948,

“What is proposed is that federalists wake up to the fact that they have stumbled into man’s greatest peaceful revolution, and that they are its vanguard. It is the revolution to establish politically the brotherhood of man.”^{iv}

No national federation or republic has been established without war—not the United States of America, not Italy—nor have the first experiments of world government been attempted without heeding the lessons of WWI and WWII. In the United States, there are already hesitant calls for a new U.S. Constitutional Convention to meet the challenge of Trump and the like “imperial” presidents. It is led by former Senator Russ Feingold, who has written a book aware of the dangers, *The Constitution in Jeopardy* (2022). Professor Jill Lapore of Harvard follows up with the Amend Project. They are aware of past world federalist proposed amendments, but most of their ire is reserved for corporate and Republican opponents, who would limit the convention to reforms not affecting the status quo or even go back to the confederation of the states.

Constitutional conventions provide an opportunity for federalists to exercise their influence. At a time of national and international crises, there will be a search for representatives at the convention who have experience of government and who can—like those at Philadelphia in 1787—consider the measures that would safeguard liberty while empowering the executive to meet modern threats to security. There will be a search for men and women of “virtue.” No doubt, they should convene in secret, as in 1787. The reasons would be the same: to confront the real problems of modern times and to make the necessary concessions of sovereignty, that is, powers emanating from the people and presently captured by the imperialists.

What Constitutional devices could both empower yet limit the president? I imagine that general and complete disarmament under effective international control would again become high policy, as in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. That would lower the threshold for abuse of power. But what do we do with a president who fails to see that the laws be faithfully executed, or forces the courts to abandon cases against him, or abuses massively the pardon power? Can the legislature, as representative of the people, still be empowered to enact the rule of law to check the defenders of national security? Why do we even trust the rule of law? We may have to go back to Blackstone on English law, John Adams of the American Revolution on establishing a government of laws, not men, and Hans Kelsen on international law.

If the president is inclined not to obey the laws, or if the legislature or the judiciary becomes, in his or her judgment, corrupt, the enforcer of the laws, disarmament regimes, international laws,

and norms would become the memory of the Catastrophe. Any deviance would be met by the word, “Remember!”

What will be the role of European and world federalists in times of U.S. and other constitutional conventions? I am distressed by the weakness of the current federalist movement. Hardly a single person of great experience or world reputation now expresses faith in unions to establish peace. We are still labeled “utopians,” “obstructionists in the guise of perfectionists.” We do not seem to have the facts or the arguments that could persuade busy officials vested with the responsibility to defend the state. What precedents can we cite for our project to place common trust in say, a novel U.N. Parliamentary Assembly, parallel to the U.N. General Assembly, to advise on or decide such issues as the war in Ukraine or in Gaza? Not, it seems, the Congress of the American Union, the European Parliament, the dispute settlement panels of the International Trade Organization, or the arbitral processes of the Law of the Sea.

Judging by how the Charter of the future United Nations was conceived in the U.S. State Department in 1942-43, written studies and proposals made available to statesmen should again be helpful, since time for original reflection will be unavailable. At the start of WWII, Clarence Streit’s *Union Now* (1939) was the most substantial example, along with a single law article by Grenville Clark and some excerpts drawn from the English federalists.^v Now we have Clark and Sohn’s *World Peace through World Law* (1958), Joseph Schwartzberg’s *Transforming the United Nations System* (2013), Andreas Bummel and Jo Leinen’s *A World Parliament* (2018, 2024), Mahmoud Sharei’s *The Future in the Past* (2025), and Augusto Lopez-Claros’s *A Second United Nations Charter* (2025). Hundreds more exist. These lie on shelves, ready for reading. They assume that the people of the world will be ready after another great failing of the sovereign state system.

We federalists ourselves believe in the necessity of a government to keep the peace, as clearly expressed in *The Federalist* (1787-88), Nos. 1–6, 15–17, 20, 23, and 51. Europeans have gone farthest in showing the way to a more perfect union among the older historic states. Jean Monnet, father of the European Union, envisioned popular readiness: *Nous ne coalisons pas des États, nous unissons des hommes.* “We are not forming coalitions between States, but union among people.” Federalists in the future will find themselves resisting old fashioned national patriots, who, after the supposed nuclear war, will return to “rallying around the flag.” To do so, federalists must uphold a new political wisdom, going back to John Locke, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Albert Einstein. In 1945, Einstein said,

“The first atomic bomb destroyed more than the city of Hiroshima. It also exploded our inherited, outdated political ideas.... No league system ever attempted in human history could prevent conflict between its members. We must aim at a Federal Constitution of the world, a working world-wide legal order, if we hope to prevent an atomic war.”

Federalists in the coming crisis must anticipate a global political struggle to re-establish or establish republican forms of government. We must bring the number of flawed democracies (46) to that of full democracies (25). And of authoritarian states (60) at least to hybrid regimes (36). After WWII many countries, like Germany and Japan, amended their constitutions:

“Germany, Art. 24. Entry into a collective security system.

(1) The Federation may by legislation transfer sovereign powers to international institutions....”

That constitutional process will necessarily continue (total to date: 49). As for international organizations, reform will not be so simple as proposing to abolish the veto in the U.N. Security Council while nations claim the sovereign right to wage war. The whole Charter must be rewritten to establish a republican government of the union. The sovereignty of the people would have to be strengthened as the sovereignty of the states declines. Survivors will want a good government, belonging to the people. Capital, secured by the laws, would have to consent to share its gains. Much stronger, tentative bills of human rights would have to be part of the solution. So would action, however futile, to slow climate change and protect the diversity of life. It's true that some natural disaster like the melting of the Greenland ice cap (also inevitable) might be the crisis that inspires collective action, in place of nuclear war. But when a president or national executive strays from the rule of law, the enforcer of the laws would be: Remember!

ⁱ New York Times, 11/2/2025.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 11/5/2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, 1987-2019.
Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, 1990-2023.
Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, 1991-2026.
Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban (185 parties), 1996- Not in force.
Non-Proliferation Treaty (191 parties), 1968- Extended indefinitely.

^{iv} Harris Wofford, "Dead End: Federalism Limited," Common Cause, 1 (May 1948): 388.

^v Joseph Preston Baratta, *The Politics of World Federation*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004: 98.