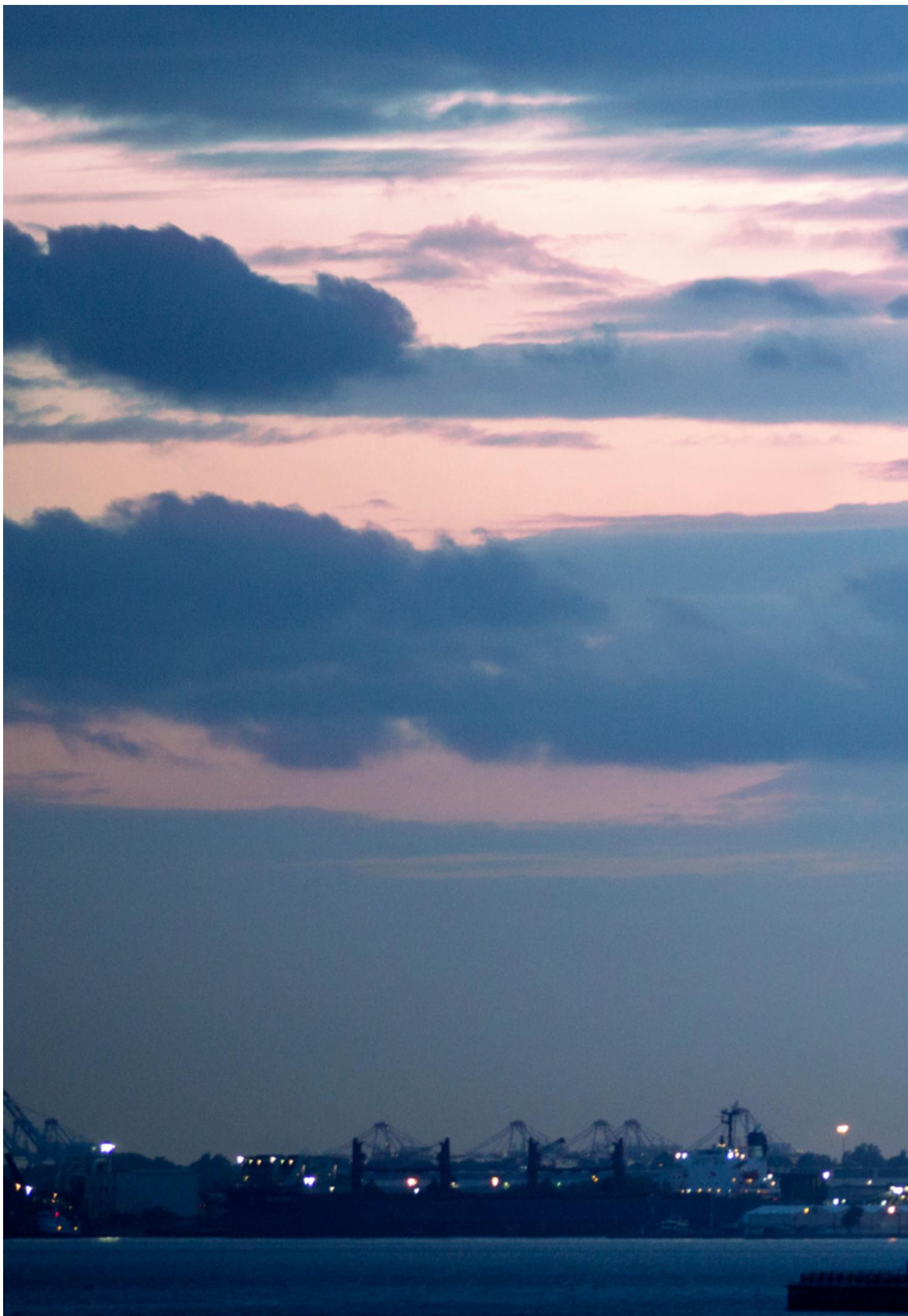


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# A Post-Trump Domestic Policy Roadmap to Restore U.S. Soft Power [1]

Many if not most (perhaps all) readers of and contributors to the CPD Blog are likely currently exhausted and dispirited—this writer certainly is—by the Trump administration’s ongoing gleeful torching of America’s global image. Still, at the risk of seeming excessively Polyannish, in all likelihood, “this too shall pass” at some point in the not-too-distant future. Hence, it is not too early to begin thinking about a post-Trump bipartisan consensus politics for restoring America’s reputation and soft power: planning for the work of generations that must begin now with an eye toward 2028 and far beyond. Indeed, bipartisanship will be crucial to this program’s efficacy, as it will be unconvincing to the world beyond America’s borders if it is seen as an exclusively Democratic political exercise that could readily be reversed by a subsequent hostile Republican administration and its legislative GOP allies.

It should be stressed that a post-Trump Republican party does not have to be a carbon copy of the pre-Trump GOP, which is not terribly likely in any event. Still, former GOP senator Jeff Flake recently declared, “I believe that a migration has begun within the Republican Party” away from Donald Trump. Flake asserted that “as the president’s hold weakens, space will open for traditional conservatives—those who still believe in limited government, open markets and an America that leads through example rather than intimidation.” A significant, arguably decisive Republican faction does have to be committed to the rule of law, the separation of powers, and, most relevant for this essay’s themes, the rebuilding of the United States’ image and overseas relationships, recognizing that what happens in America doesn’t stay in America; that, as John Winthrop declared  and Ronald Reagan repeated, the U.S. is “a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us.”

And indeed, as indicated by the title, the focus of this essay is the domestic realm, where the right policies can offer reassurance over time to external observers that the U.S. is re-embracing at home the principles and practices that made it the world’s soft power colossus for eight decades and more. As a new editorial in the *New York Times* declares, “The United States cannot lead the free world, inspire those who want to be a part of it, or oppose those who seek to undermine and destroy it if we cease to be a model democracy ourselves.”

Much of soft power formation occurs outside the realm of official policy, especially in the cultural creation realm—e.g. art and design, Hollywood, the music industry, and consumer products and marketing—but there are, of course, areas in which governmental policy choices can make a crucial difference, arguably now more than ever. What follows is hardly an exhaustive list. It is merely an essential start in this writer’s view, and the proposed policies could take years if not decades to fully bear fruit. (To quote Warren Buffett in this regard: “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently.”) And if many, even most, of the suggestions offered here seem thuddingly self-evident, it only underscores the importance of integrating them into a coherent, cohesive programmatic whole.

First, it all begins with voters, as I noted in my previous essay for the CPD Blog. Voters must unambiguously reject a would-be Trumpian successor and vote in either a Democrat or a non-MAGA Republican, and consistently keep doing so in future elections. But it is of course critical that presidential (and other) candidates must forcefully, repeatedly—and most important—effectively make the case to the electorate for restoring America's reputation and brand as the leader of the free world, that the U.S. is most secure when it is respected and trusted by, and attractive to (in multiple meanings) its allies both current and potential, and by the great majority of other states.

Second, subsequent Democratic and Republican administrations alike must push back vigorously against blood-and-soil nationalist conceptions of Americanness, and stress that what makes America unique is that its foundation is a constellation of compelling ideas and ideals. All one needs to be American is to embrace them, rather than needing to have ancestors mouldering in a centuries-old Kentucky cemetery.

Third, it may sound esoteric, but Democrats and non-MAGA Republicans need to work hand-in-glove to rip out the Unitary Executive Theory root-and-branch and restore the balance of law-making power among the presidency, Congress (especially), and the judiciary. It must be crystal clear to those outside the U.S. that America is not an autocratic-curious or -leaning country. Even if the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the presidential hire-and-fire-limiting 1935 decision Humphrey's Executor v. United States, there must be strongly constructed bipartisan legislation that the president, whoever he or she is, signs into law which inhibits a mischievous future administration from achieving an undue and potentially dangerous amount of power at the expense of the legislative and judiciary branches, which shouldn't actually be an especially heavy lift for Republicans who would be anxious, perhaps not entirely without foundation, that a future Democratic president could be just as over-reaching for rank partisan gain as Donald Trump has been.

Fourth, America must re-empower the fourth branch to do its job and fulfill its constitutional role without fear of authoritarian-style retribution. To that end, officials and policy influencers must repudiate in a bipartisan manner the Trump administration's anti-free press actions and rhetoric, and make restitution by reimbursing all extortionate fines and settlements levied by Trump and Co. against the information-entertainment industry for alleged transgressions (e.g. the CBS 60 Minutes and ABC This Week with George Stephanopoulos Trump lawsuit payouts). There must be no more using the Federal Communications Commission as a cudgel against networks and their entertainment and information personalities. There must be a restoration of federal funding to National Public Radio and public television news-gathering (and more generally to PBS), while sedulously maintaining their editorial independence with the revivification of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as an entity not menaced or simply strangled by government interference. (And, if the names of these institutions have simply become too toxic on the right as the result of incessant negative ideological messaging, then rename/rebrand them). Finally, the federal government should contribute funding to the non-partisan National Journalism Project, which subsidizes reputable news organizations in underserved parts, including outright information deserts of the U.S., an increasing phenomenon with the widespread closing of local and statewide news outlets. As the NJP puts it, its mission is "Strengthening communities," "Rebuilding local news," and most on-point in the current context, "Preserving democracy."

# **"It is not too early to begin thinking about a post-Trump bipartisan consensus politics for restoring America's reputation and soft power: planning for the work of generations that must begin now with an eye toward 2028 and far beyond."**

Fifth, more broadly, there must be a bipartisan re-commitment to the sanctity of the First Amendment, equally applied to all of those who are resident permanently or temporarily in the U.S., with no fear of (patently unconstitutional) retribution for speech or organizing activities. No elaboration is necessary on this point. Either Americans believe in the First Amendment's tenets or they don't. One assumes and hopes it's the former.

Sixth, and related to the previous point, officialdom must repudiate the Trump administration's brutal, self-destructive campaign against American higher education and recommit to fostering its robustness and intellectual independence. There must be a re-funding of research at pre-Trump administration levels as well as the refund of every penny Trump extracted from universities. And of particular importance, there must be an end to all policies and practices that are impeding and discouraging international students who are contemplating studying at U.S. colleges and universities—indeed, the federal government needs to put in place policies that will positively encourage international students to study in America, which has long been a major source of enduring pro-American sentiment among these alumni.

Seventh, make America welcoming to tourists again. Even vile autocracies like Nazi Germany and Franco dictatorship-era Spain recognized the value of showcasing their regimes via tourism, as in the words of one Franco Spain tourist plan: “[I]t is essential that the tourist who visits us not only returns here, but that he is converted into the most active propagandist of our nation, increasing in this manner our prestige in the world.” The U.S. has traditionally been a tourism powerhouse, attracting millions of visitors from around the world who are drawn by iconic American cities and natural wonders. But 2025 visitor numbers are sharply down, with understandably hurt and irate Canadians staying away and contributing mightily to the decline. The U.S. needs to roll out the welcome carpet and let potential tourists know that they are desired and will be treated as honored guests, not as suspicious figures whose social media posts are subject to scrutiny before they are admitted to America. It's not rocket science to heal this self-inflicted—and expensive—wound.

Eighth, make immigration policy humane and fair. Re-establish America as a refuge for those who face persecution in their home countries, and end, forcefully, the current grotesque anti-immigrant rhetoric that both besmirches America's image and encourages persecution and violence. It's incumbent on bipartisan figures to explain clearly and compellingly (something Joe Biden, who saw immigration as a distraction from more important issues, never did) to Americans that too much of the country's past and current immigration policy has been rooted in racism and xenophobia, and that, in its resultant unfairness, it is fundamentally un-American. This doesn't mean advocating for a complete open-border situation with no constraints and controls. There are certainly legitimate grounds for deciding admittance versus exclusion, but they need to be based on data and reasoned debate, not ill-conceived

gut feelings and prejudice. An optic that particularly needs to be quashed is that of body-armored, masked, heavily armed immigration officers indiscriminately swooping down en masse on peaceful individuals whose only legal transgression is their undocumented presence. These strong-arm tactics are the stuff of Vladimir Putin's Russia or the fever dreams of militant European far-rightists and have no place in American politics and society.

Finally, and once again related to the previous point, we must get U.S. federal troops out of American cities. The appearance of a domestic military occupation against a chimerical "enemy within" is a very bad look overseas for a country operating ostensibly on the basis of universally accepted laws, not raw armed might and arbitrary political division, as the foundation of national governance and indeed fundamental legitimacy.

Again, this listing of steps to take marks only the beginning of a larger, and very long, process of America's rehabilitation of its self-immolated international reputation and the titanic soft power that it accrues when it is intact. Moreover, the bipartisanship that such a domestic policy program requires may render it a dead letter, given the hard rightward turn of what is currently rather dubiously labeled as American conservatism, although there is mounting intra-GOP antipathy toward Donald Trump, so it is not a given that a future Republican turn toward the political center is an impossibility.

The alternative of a world without the United States as an (admittedly flawed) exemplar and ultimate guarantor of a stable, rules-based global commons is dreadful on the face of it. See for example the Trump administration's just-released, thoroughly awful, overseas hard-right nationalism-promoting National Security Strategy document, which is now officially Kremlin-approved. In destroying its soft power—which is, after all, power—America will leave itself isolated (which actually seems to be Trump's plan), to further quote John Winthrop, "a byword among the nations," regardless of whether Trump believes Vladimir Putin is the friend of the US, and will concomitantly threaten the future of U.S. safety and security in an increasingly unstable and in some ways menacing world. This cannot be allowed to come to pass, and Democrats and non-Trumpian Republicans will have to work together going forward to make sure that it doesn't.

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