CHAPTER 3

Grim Pull of US Democratic Vulnerability

THE United States can be diagnosed as a vulnerable democracy, characterized by polarization and political drama, and threatened by the approaching Thucydidean brink. The version of classical realism presented in this book refers to the way in which concrete realities and everyday facts can become enhanced by the cognitive and emotive characteristics of political drama. People and political movements can be caught in a moment. Irrationalities are always present in the rational cool-headed factuality of politics, especially of the international kind. To a degree, the boundary between internal and external politics can become increasingly ambiguous and intermingled, particularly if both the domestic environment and the foreign actors are agitated in a regressive manner. The digital platforms and media formats cross border and form vectors for cognitive flows that influence politics and shape policies.

The grim flow of events can agitate in ways that decrease the likelihood of more or less rational strategic planning and cause downward-sloping vorticity. The key question is how the focus on the dynamics of “drama” links with both domestic policy and foreign policy practices. This is especially the case in the present moment, when President Donald Trump taps

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1 On democracies in crisis, see Runciman (2013).
2 See e.g. Henick (2013), Kraidy (2010), Murphy et al (2012), Ratner (2014), and Schmidtke (2011).
3 E.g. Bayles (2014).
out his frequent and hyperbolic assertions and all-caps tweets amidst the rise of competitive world politics in a world filled with doom and gloom and dramatic, rapidly emerging and dissipating events like the spread of a pandemic. Global public cognitions are triggered by regressions, ranging from the rise of autocratic strongmen to unresolved global challenges such as climate change. A further element of the overall scenario is the relative decline of the US not in terms of its military might, but of its emerging internal hesitation and even the convulsions of its body politic. Clearly, our time is not without dramatic elements as crises are felt to the extent that they undermine and shake the fundamental paradigmatic belief in: (1) the progress of democracy; (2) market liberalization; (3) “normal” statehood (i.e., surrendering their specific geopolitical claims over neighbors); and (4) peace through integration and global connectedness. No one paying attention to the unfolding events can say whether we are watching a regressive tragedy or some form of restorative drama which will culminate in the relative reaffirmation of the progressive narrative.

Long-term demographic trends in the US point to an increasingly heterogeneous electorate with minorities gaining a larger say in political arenas. However, the near-term trends can be contrary to the longer-term expectation. The electorate remains overwhelmingly “white” and Christian. In this sense, rather than demography being a destiny, the sense of transformation in the future can be a regressive driver in today’s politics, whereby grand coalitions are overpowered by narrower campaigns focusing on the deeply felt anxieties of the majority: “To a large extent, the crux of Trump’s winning strategy was his recognition of the ‘missing white voter’, who could be stirred by a clear but simplified anti-globalist, anti-establishment and culturally divisive message” (Aaltola and Sinkkonen 2017: 10). The political rhetoric has become more and more inflammatory, characterized by accusations, investigations, and increasingly partisan voting behavior in the Congress. The political center has, at least for the moment, weakened.

Concerns about the future of the vulnerable democracy are many. A strong sense of a brink prevails. One way of understanding “the brink” is to see it as a crisis, a culmination point in a sequence of events. Times are troubled and events take place in a seemingly indeterminate context. Resulting dramas highlight the temporal element of being at a critical crossroads or junction: From this moment onward, there is a strong sense that events can continue either negatively/ regressively or
positively/progressively. This critical point mobilizes and induces struggles for power. It has an extreme, dramatic element that is hard to miss, it is impossible to not feel and sense it. The term “critical,” is itself originally a medical term. The root concept, *criticus*, refers to the decisive point in the course of a disease. Interpreted in this way, crisis refers to the moment at which irreversible processes of progression or regression are initiated as manifestations of the moral worth and political virtue of the participating actors. The hotspots of foreign and domestic political entanglements get additional political gravity, influencing the ways in which the underlying dynamic is interpreted and dealt with by the respective actors in the twilight of the approaching brink.

Second, the cognitive frame has an element of a drama for containment. The very essence and limits of the actors are becoming contested topics. What is the US? What are its borders? Who belongs to the homeland and who are excluded from it? These questions are asked in many democratic countries as the regressive trajectories gather momentum. In the UK, after Brexit, this suspense is related to containment and the sense of being bordered is palpable. Across the English Channel, the containment drama involves sweating over deepening political tensions in various EU member-states as well as anxieties over the EU itself. Various forms of nativism and neo-nationalism have become empowered also in autocratic Russia and China, as Covid-19 is inflaming competition, decoupling, and causing political distancing. The same contentions apply to them as well, but in a different, even reverse, way. Western vulnerabilities would give them increasing domestic legitimacy. However, as contained autocracies, they are even more regressed than the Western democracies. Their sense of approaching brinks involves not so much polarization but fears over regime downfalls, over the very ending of the regimes themselves. The need to contain, to delimit the domestic from the foreign, and to define the constitutive element of mutual affinity within the domestic sphere, seem to be the global urgencies of the current age.

The urges to contain can manifest themselves in a more proactive way, in the spectacular acts of being on guard, sounding alarm, and in diligence of surveillance. The sense of legitimacy derives from the ability to maintain a certain sense of safety and the absence of uncontained and uncontrolled situations and confluences of events. It can be argued that an important way of doing accepted political labor in contemporary times is by worrying about the political health of communities and states. These situations contain a stern moral lesson about the disastrous consequences
of laxness and lack of vigilance, such as in the 2016 US elections or even 9/11. In this respect, political dramas and plays are focused on the pedagogies of correct behavior and the virtues and values of a well-functioning and healthy domestic and international order and its governance. Thus, against the background of crisis dramaturgy and the suspense of containment, the approaching brink is a dynamic scenario with characteristics that focus on containing the coherence of the actors so that they can seem morally viable and legitimate. The resulting hurly-burly of multidimensional polarizations bear a close resemblance to the grim nature of regressive politics and internal/external nexuses that Thucydides describes with detail and insight.

**Pull of US State Drama**

The irrational, emotive, and kinetic modalities of regression have also been present in the less naturalistic and more rationalistic variant(s) of contemporary political realism. It is fascinating, for example, how Hans Morgenthau’s conceptualization of power has multiple modalities and enhanced meanings. For Morgenthau, combinatorial bonding—“chemistry”—was the key for the understanding of politics at all levels: “The relations between nations are not essentially different from the relations between individuals; they are only relations between individuals on a wider scale” (Morgenthau 1955: 43). Morgenthau’s state-person becomes a manipulator and enchanter who operates upon the charged field of rationality, foolishness, emotionality, empathy, and sympathy that exists between power-compelled political actors. The patterns of interaction between the actors contain a heightened sense of stimulation and agitation. Something seems to be spellbound in and behind the acts and words. There is charisma, legitimacy, character, integrity, and other dimensions of power at play, whether foreign or domestic, and especially in the nexus between the two. Arguably, international politics, as an agitated field of material, psychological and social factors, is especially pertinent to Morgenthau’s “international anarchy.” Power, as the brute quality of this reality, can become a highly refined, crafty, and shapeable, almost spellbinding, phenomenon.

In this charged field of strategic moves and felt attractions, high status and visibility are more connected to the tip of the global hierarchy than to its lower levels. This hierarchy effect draws attention to the correlation between highly visible places, and events attract more attention
and imitation. Even regression can spread better downstream from the (perceived) major states in the global arena. The US has been and still is in a special position of high visibility. Its events and political drama are followed among the other Western democracies and beyond them. This mode of attraction can be regressive but it, perhaps paradoxically, still constitutes a form of power, drama power.

Perhaps, counterintuitively, the recent spectacles, crises, and emergencies in US politics have captivated global audiences and led to an increase in this particular modality of power (Aaltola 2013). The dysfunctionality of US politics with its increasing political polarization draws attention. It could be that the models of soft power are too highbrow, and have failed to take into account the appeal of contemporary formats of popular culture in the US and around the world as well as the dynamic powered by the cognitive flows of social media platforms. Contemporary popular culture dramatizes political figures in the same way that it celebrates their fame. Drama, crisis, scandal, and the rise and downfall of political parties and figures are all part of politics. The US as a state enjoys “celebrity status” and the power associated with that status. This was the case with President Barack Obama, and now, much more so and in a different form, with President Trump. In this sense, US power is still immense and has not decreased. If anything, it has increased even though its soft power—the ideational, cultural, and normative forms of power—has declined considerably, especially among its European allies.

It should be noted that this contrarian characteristic of power is also symptomatic of the overall political regression. The Trumpian slogan “America First” is a sign of the times and of the downward slide that had started much before Trump. The complex entanglements and interdependencies produced by globalization, which can be difficult to comprehend at first glance, leave room for fame to become a key characteristic of power: “As [the] world grows more complex, fame promises a liberation from powerless anonymity.... In contemporary America, a country born seemingly without a past, the desire to be unprecedented—the old dream of fame in European history—has become a national obsession, the only way out of increasingly complex political and economic dependence

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4 On soft power, see Nye (2002, 2011) and Hayden (2012).
5 For a previous discussion see e.g. Defleur and Defleur (2003).
on others….” (Braudy 1997: 7–8). What was and is happening to US soft power and appeal in this context? The answers are increasingly connected to the global age of media formats, celebrity, and viral-ness in the social media domain. Many have claimed that the softer side of the US’ status has been downgraded by the cycles of disorderly political spectacle in Washington, DC. It may be suggested that there is nothing hyperbolic about the constant drama cycles. After all, drama has always been present in politics and politics is a long-standing topic of high drama. In the US, the drama of politics has been constantly choreographed, as the actors juggle for positions, checks, and balances. Theatrics are to be expected, yet the institutions and roles within them have set a relatively stable dramaturgy. However, it may be suggested that although drama has been a constant feature of US politics, its nature has undergone a transformation since the financial crisis of 2007, Barack Obama coming to power, the spectacle of the 2016 elections, and the subsequent investigation into whether President Trump should be impeached. This qualitative change in US state drama should be kept in mind when speculating on the decline of US soft power. It can be argued that some key modalities of US soft power have been largely misunderstood. Moreover, when you consider the new formats of globally engaging drama, which often mirror and influence political drama overall, US power is on the increase. Yet, at the same time, the US drama is also increasing the overall regression at the global level. What should be noticed is that there is some power-related functionality in the overall political dysfunction. It attracts and stimulates. It draws others into participate, especially among the political factions in other, not so healthy democracies, and especially among regressive states like Russia and China.

A glimpse into the underlying paradox of the attraction of dysfunction can be seen in the indexes of global markets. These measures are based on the credibility and expectations of future behavior. The gridlock and crises in Washington, DC, have had relatively little impact on the value of the US’ credit or on its stock market indexes, which are at an all-time high before the crash after Coronavirus spread to the US. The markets were steadily climbing. Unemployment was at record low levels. Economic expansion had continued at close to record levels. The general estimate was that the administration’s infighting, government shutdowns, election meddling and its investigations, and the impeachment proceedings had not had much influence on the economy. On the whole, it seems that no
significant loss of faith in the US had happened. Although some competitors, such as Russia and China, have called for the de-Americanization of the world, they are still investing in the US and other Western markets.

The analogies to the contemporary dynamics of the US state drama can be found in the popular realm, where social media can hyperbolize phenomena into viral frenzies and polarizing spectacles. The flows of public cognitions are sudden, yet powerful and manipulatable. The unconventional and decidedly unpresidential side of Trump has been widely condemned. However, Trump’s provocations have captured the attention of the nation, and the world. He is seen as different, as a disruptor. In addition, in a context of overall loss of direction and confusion, disruption can become a virtue in the eyes of many citizens. *This is what Thucydides saw as a key sign of the regressive slide. Previous vices start to turn into virtues as the need for haste prevails over calmer forms of politics.*

Times and manners have changed in today’s world. Attention is being sought in whatever form will work and the so-called social media “influencers” rule. A point of contrast was offered by the former Disney star Miley Cyrus’s twerking act at the MTV VMA show in August 2013. Her sexually provocative behavior—twerking in a skimpy outfit—was widely condemned. Yet, the cyber download rates of her dance hit the roof. This viral spectacle laid bare and exemplified the dynamics of contemporary American popular culture. New popular culture formats and tricks have emerged. The radical retweet by President Trump in December 2019 exposing the identity of the whistle-blower that started the impeachment proceedings in Congress was condemned, yet it also brought scrutiny to those who condemn it. It again echoed that Trump is different, a disruptor.

It is a sign of regressive times, of a Western democratic winter, that various kinds of scandals have become important characteristics of fame and celebrity. Using disruptions to seek attention has evolved around the growth of social media, especially on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where user-generated content prevails over all other forms of content. Influencers have to tap into cognitive flows and moods in order to appeal to users and shape their content production. For a political influencer to sustain visibility, a good way is to use disruptive messages. These challenge the existing cognitive expectations of users or create a new set of users. President Trump’s all-caps tweets used both these techniques. They bypassed the screening conducted by the professional media and the
mood set by conventional political expectations. It also drew to Twitter new user groups that were buying the key political message that Trump was putting out. He had a political product—a pitch that economic uncertainties due to the loss of “good” manufacturing jobs to East Asia were somehow connected with the increasing demographic heterogeneity in the US—that attracted and disrupted the political markets in the social media. The “product” and “marketing techniques” were North American and had been used before by companies in their marketing. However, this type of disruptive influencing was somewhat unusual and considered politically incorrect in politics. The external component in the form of Russia’s disinformation and misinformation campaigns provided useful support for the shaping of the cognitive flows in the social media and, through it, the mainstream media. One in the absence of the other might not have worked. One has to remember that the 2016 elections were extremely close, with Hillary Clinton receiving three million more votes nationwide, and Trump prevailing only because of the 70,000 or so votes in three states that were important in capturing the majority in the Electoral College.

If the underlying premise of soft power is that cultural influence in general, and popular culture in particular, enhances the underlying power in and of the US, then attention should be focused on the changing nature of media formats and the formats of fame and influence in them. Again, the internal and external are entangled. The changing formats have wide global reach and they highlight drama in ways that might inform about, mirror, and even construct state drama in contemporary Washington, DC. How do the changing trends in the US, and more widely in global popular culture, resonate with and correspond to the formats of US political drama? How does this nexus change the evaluation of the impact of US domestic crises on its global modalities of power? Power moves irrespective of its modalities. It agitates and stimulates. It forces and compels. The motions inherent in the regressive untying of domestic bonds of cohesion, by definition, translates into emotionality. Ever increasing passions contribute to the intensity of polarizing rip currents. Agents of regression can become movers and shakers if they have a sense of these cross-currents and can shape vorticity. This thinking is based on a classical theme in grim realism: political motions cause individual emotions and vice versa. Crawford (2000: 124) traces the origin of the English term “emotion” to “political or social agitation
and popular disturbance.” Against this background, it is not a coincidence that theories of political movements and political mobilization have been most receptive to including emotions in their models. There are feelings in and around political movements (Jasper 1998: 397), such as moral shocks, frame alignments, and frame breaks, as well as the possibility of the emergence of collective identities. Power—both its integrating and especially disintegrating variants—moves itself to bring about private emotions and corresponding political motion that can take the shape of a tweet, like, or retweet. These can create a sense of momentum that gathers power and is unstable. Power that is in transformation stirs the existing patterns of understanding of what are positive and negative emotions, what should be expressed and hidden, and what are adequate and inadequate responses. In related literature, emotions are sometimes given a positive, empowering role that translates influence and status into power—into the capacity to produce intended and foreseen effects. However, in the context of disintegrating political cohesion, the empowerment turns into a constitutive element of wider political regressions and the emergence of confused factions and discord.

Aided by digital platforms, there are moves that can be particularly stirring and stimulating. In this sense, power is a game of contrasts and fast dramatic moves. In the 2016 presidential race, as the two main candidates made their campaign moves to counteract each other and to react with the confluences of circumstances, power was on the move. These moves were felt by the electorate in different ways. The power of the candidates to convince and persuade was at stake as they used their expressive language in varying tempos synchronized with nonverbal expressions at various media stages and on various social media platforms. Both main candidates were trying to be the movers of the overall campaign dynamic. The winner was thought to be the one who was better able to move and disturb the other and capture the audiences.

In the televised debates, Donald Trump’s seemingly erratic sentences and Hillary Clinton’s steadiness in response was widely perceived to have translated into debate wins for Clinton. However, in the domains of social media, the effect was the opposite. Trump’s unconventional and disruptive messages were heard and they stimulated his audience. Although Clinton won the debates according to the old-fashioned opinion polls,

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6 See, e.g., Willer et al. (1997: 573).
Trump won them in the social media by tactics that are known to work there: attention and disruptive marketing. Trump was more successful in stirring up emotions. Clinton lost her power to entertain, influence, and stand out. In the age of digital media, she became boring, and voters were, to a degree, turned off. Trump’s power—“stamina”—decreased in the eyes of liberal educated voters, but, and much more importantly, it was impressive in the eyes of his core supporters outside of liberal America. Much of contemporary political persuasion is expressed in a rather primitive language of staged political spectacle in the digitalized platforms.

The expressive language of the 2016 campaign found its parallel in the choreographies of today’s hip-hop dance, where artists tend to be focused on what they call power moves. Power moves are dance’s most impressive, stirring, and provoking elements, which are further accentuated by putting them into various contrasting combinations. Such a kinesthetic assemblage of moving bodies is related to the characteristics of any candidate’s ability to “dance” around with their words so that the other candidate’s power moves are clearly less effective. For a candidate to succeed, they must produce a powerful sense of moving forward. Trump forced the audience to take notice, although many of them were aware that what they were witnessing was unconventional and so they were reluctant to directly express their support for Trump, as, for example, when approached by election pollsters. Fact-checking of what Trump said was of secondary concern at the deeper level of stimulations and agitations. In the voting booth, rational calculations did not prevail. The voters identified with the disruptive influencer. They wanted to belong and stir things up. The voting became more expressive than rational (Wodak 2019).

Trump was clearly no wizard of the established political stagecraft. However, he was an innovator. Trump’s controversial statements are often read as his own tactical choices. Some say that he seems to channel the underlying voice of those who feel they have lost the global race to success. These include, especially, the white, non-college-educated citizens who used to do just fine with their high-school diplomas, but feel they are losing out now. Trump somehow found a way to make these people feel empowered. His performance during the election campaign and his term as president can be explained through identifiability. The voter identifies with Trump because he is using words and responses that they would use. They can understand him and, although they might not
always agree with him, they can recognize him. He is thus acknowledged and known in a way that Hillary Clinton could not be because she had to appeal to many segments, which made her message seem contrived. The relationship between Trump and his voters is one of correspondence. Trump can be seen as a tactical discoverer who can use words to find voters who were not at ease with Clinton’s more complex messaging. However, the characterization of Trump as a discoverer who found the “forgotten” white voters is perhaps misleading and simplistic, though at the same time very effective. Trump is an inventor rather than a discoverer. He innovated in the sense that he triggered voters to conjure up and express their unhappiness and deeply rooted and identity-based enmities in the voting booth.

Trump triggered voters to vote on the basis of their expressive rather than instrumental side. For a long time, the standard models of voting behavior have been based on the idea that a voter is instrumentally rational, that voting is based on weighting different candidates or parties according to the public good that they could achieve if elected. The voting intentions, according to this traditional approach, are affected by public goods such as economy or health care. Yet, this normative and well-meaning understanding is misleading. People vote also to express, irrespective of any policy consequence that the act of voting might have (Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 25). A sense of belonging to a group through the act of voting is one of the key dimensions of the approach that views voting as expressive behavior. Voting becomes an act of being and belonging.

The expression of one’s autonomy in selecting an identity group or formation by voting for the unlikely candidacy of Trump contained more expressive potential in comparison to voting for Clinton. This sense of autonomy was heightened by the suppression of Democratic voters. Making voting for Clinton seem more of an act of compulsion and requirement accentuated the expressive value of the vote for Trump. It can be suggested that the Trump campaign was geared toward highlighting the need to express oneself in the voting booth.

The key to understanding Trump is his desire to project his strong personality and personal characteristics. The unpredictability in what he says is aimed at creating suspense, a sense of drama. This drama is meant to catalyze a sense of a notable and extraordinary political figure. He is striking in his strange way of standing out. He becomes easily remembered, not in terms of explicit content, but as a strange political figure.
And expressing oneself through him becomes tempting because of how easy it is. Some of his supporters articulate this by appealing to his authenticity. He is seen as keeping it real, saying things as they are. If his expressions and tweets seem a bit random and incoherent, his expressive value is all the more higher as a function of them. In this sense, Trump did not discover anything new or forgotten. He reinvented and reinvigorated the old trick of political alchemy by turning himself into an expression of belonging to a new golden age for America.

Much of the trick is based on a continued series of startling statements and personal insults. Trump’s statements work similar to “magical” words in fictional contexts. They embellish, enhance, and enchant reality and hold people spellbound. However, the situation in the 2016 elections was more complicated than this. To a strong degree, Hillary Clinton had many of the same qualities. Clinton had weathered decades of scandals. The congressional investigations over Benghazi and the controversies over her stolen campaign emails demonstrated her proclivity for scandals as well as her ability to withstand such storms. Clinton’s ability to withstand decades of crusades against her is a notable demonstration of sustained political appeal. The art of continued buoyancy despite adverse conditions is fundamental to politics and power. She once tweeted: “I am here, despite all the previous investigations…to honor those we lost and to do what I can to aid those who serve us still.” It is as if she is saying that because of the drama, she was (and is) stronger, the last of the true Romans fighting the barbarian Trump. However, Clinton’s “magic” did not work because it was based on the need to have a broader appeal in order to forge a grand coalition. This might have worked in a politically more together-minded US. But for an American polity that has regressed to a lower state of political health, Clinton was too complicated and too rational to be understood clearly at the level of identities, belonging, and confrontationality. This diluted the expressiveness of her message. She was not able to disillusion Trump’s core audiences no matter how hard she tried.

It might be that the seeming fragility and precariousness of the scandalous campaigns offer keys to understanding how Trump sustained his candidacy against all odds. Voters can feel a nuanced sense of identification with the candidates. On the one hand, constant visibility translates into a particular form of presence and indicates follower attention. The expectations that either Trump or Clinton might fall were essential parts of the drama needed to sustain their campaigns. Sustained drama
has become, arguably, a crucial form of political power in managing a successful presidential campaign. On the other hand, Ronald Reagan’s or Bill Clinton’s so-called Teflon effect used to refer to a presidential characteristic which stemmed from the ability to avoid the negative consequences of multiple scandals, i.e., losing support and visibility. Trump, in prevailing in the 2016 contest, showed that a candidate can create a unique kind of Teflon effect and poison the opposing candidate’s personality to a degree that the Teflon effect no longer works as it used to.

Trump’s main invention was his recognition that the format called “election campaign” is hopelessly old fashioned. While President Obama had already made notable inroads into the utilization of novel communication technology in election campaigns and political communication, Trump truly changed the format into something new, more fitting to the age of a digitalized electorate, where a participatory approach and engagement through social media are irresistible and the essential features of any candidacy. He came, saw, and changed. In the craft of “drama power” that taps into the positive effects of controversy, polarization, and paralysis, the apparently scandalousness and dysfunction of Trump can actually be essentially functional. The growing appeal of new media formats—especially reality TV and celebrity culture—and the emergence of fast tempos of social media have changed attitudes concerning what is expected of political campaigns and candidates, and how negatively or positively the drama, scandals, and controversy related to them are (to be) evaluated. Presidential status is increasingly about visibility, fame, and celebrity. Dramatic candidates are seen as sources of concern and worry, yet also entertaining and expressive. There is a strange fascination for and attraction in scandalous yet visibly fragile and contested candidates. The attraction toward exceptional candidates like Trump can turn into a complex sentiment that needs sustainment through continually emerging crises and scandals. Although this has seemed to work for Trump so far, it is likely to be dysfunctional for the American political system.

The ongoing reality shift in politics remains regressive as the US heads for the 2020 elections. Trump entered the election year under the cloud of impeachment proceedings initiated against him by the House of Representatives. This was followed by the pandemic turbulence. Trump-like candidates can be regarded as dizzying from the perspective of steady national interest. Yet, they bring about a compelling sense of drama, of a need to follow them, and to be for or against them.

7 E.g. Conlin (2003).
The voyeuristic fascination with them is often seen as cheap and politically incorrect. On the other hand, even negative appeal is a form of identification. Being “anti” some candidate still promotes their visibility. Some follow the campaigns because Trump makes them feel superior, and others want to see his inevitable “humiliation.” There are those who want to see previously unworthy personalities be made visible and even glorified. Obscure figures can be transformed into heroes and some want to see them last longer than expected just to demonstrate their own anti-establishment identifications.

What can be called an “anti”-politics can start to prevail. People vote because they are “anti” some political influencer and the identity group for which that person stands. The substantive issues no longer matter as much as the emerging sense of hostility, of being “against” at the level of identity. The US has not yet regressed into a dangerous split-mindedness. Yet, polarization is at a record level (e.g., Pew Research Center 2020). The US is a dis-eased and regressed democracy. Yet, the institutions, the polity, and the society are still functioning and heading for fresh elections. Regressions and diversions are taking place, but the political process is still being played out and holds legitimate. As explained in the previous chapter, healthy politics has two stages. The US has sunk into the lower Stage; it has become increasingly disoriented, but can still be healed. While the US has moved closer to what was previously called the brink, in a way important for the argument of this book, it is still on the edge of the Thucydidean brink, where internal political competitors are still in a somewhat separate category from external hostile actors.

Citizens are, however, agitated, stimulated, and triggered as they identify with the animosity (or support) felt toward a particular politician. Their expressed political emotions run high, in a way that is likely to trigger a negative emotional reaction (and its expression) from those who hold an opposing view and identify differently. In this heightened affective state, domestic political competitors can come to be viewed as rivals or even enemies as the regressive process takes further hold. If you include foreign actors in this domestic mix, the regression can turn into a phenomenon of the Thucydidean brink that is the conceptual basis of this work. We have to watch, with growing alarm, what will happen in 2020 as the Corona crisis will add to the already high tensions.

One aspect of Trump’s success was his ability to appeal to a wider range of emotions than the usual presidential candidate. As a result, it might be that future presidential candidates are increasingly expected to satisfy a
fuller spectrum of people’s emotional appetites than merely the rational
and instrumental ones. The “reality” of the campaigns will have to be
designed so as to reveal supposedly “authentic” moments that the voters
can identify with through a range of positive and negative sentiments.
People are coming to expect seemingly revelatory “he looks alien but he
is just like me,” “he is real,” “oops,” and “caught you” moments. The
drama of scandals and the way in which politicians react to them adds to
this tendency. In Trump, a segment of American voters had a candidate
who they felt was being “real” for them. This fascination constructed
an identity for the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) people who
created themselves by being fascinated by and drawn into the captivating
“strangeness” of Trump. A candidate with less sense of drama looks to
avoid these and, as a result, misses what people want to see and identify
with. “Serious” candidate can fall with a scandal or a blunder, whereas
a “real” one only becomes more human and authentic. People see and
recognize Trump as a human with all (or at least many of) the human
frailties. This can be considered as an increasingly important modality of
appeal.

The ways in which the overall reality is felt and sensed, and in which
authenticity is acknowledged, can be connected to the transformation of
the popular culture toward bleak, cynical, and realistic content. Gone are
the days of bleary-eyed idealistic struggles between good and evil, and of
heroic idealistic leaders. In the place of West Wing-type narrations, new
content, such as Game of Thrones, House of Cards, The Good Wife, Boss,
and Scandal, portrays a much harsher Machiavellian image of politics,
where morality exists only in a feigned form. This grimly realistic narra-
tion feeds into how people comprehend politics. Their expectations have
been reset accordingly. The appeal of the new bleaker modes of portraying
politics derives from the viewers’ recognition that this interpretative frame
is more transparent and honest when it comes to contemporary polit-
ical life. This shift is not only affecting the US, but can be seen to be
deeply affecting most Western democracies. The situation is far from
ideal. However, the underlying drama power and its counterintuitive and
paradoxical expectations are worth considering in evaluations of popular
politicians and their parties.
Magnetism of Drama Internally and Externally

American popular culture is highly visible globally. The US and its political modes are seen and recognized everywhere. The visibility of its formats is one of the foundational stones of US soft power that one hears about often, especially in political jargon and policy analysis. During the Trump presidency, the use of the concept of "soft power" has declined because there is a perception that the "noise" from Washington, DC, is overwhelming any strategic signaling function which traditional systematic messaging could have achieved and which is usually seen as characteristic of any great state actor and its use of power, whether soft, sharp, or hard. The times have changed, regressed. However, people watch and rewatch the news and social media products of American politics and culture. The immersion takes place through television and digital social platforms. The popularity and wide dissemination supposedly support the familiarity, fame, and status of the US worldwide. The American way of life is still recognized and acknowledged, perhaps more so than any other state’s culture. In many of the Western democracies, the effect of this is diverse. They have become entangled with their own political fevers, frenzies, and modes of polarization. The US and its president matter in a diversity of ways unforeseen by the relatively progressive soft power models of the 1990s and 2000s.

The presence of American popular culture was also thought to disseminate American values, norms, and practices. Yet, in this respect too, the world is changing. Many of the news stories and narratives today are about stagnating decision-making, partisanship, polarization, investigations, meddling, possible collusion and misuse of power, government shutdowns, and other often scandalous content. However, the high levels of noise, even if lacking strategically, may provide their own form of appeal. As said, this appeal is based on the paradoxical effects of visibility, scandalousness, and dramatic crises. They draw in audiences regionally and globally even when the effect on sentiments is seemingly negative. If Trump’s domestic appeal was based on the ability to trigger a wide range of emotions, could this also work at the international level? At least, it is worth considering whether the high level of noise produces a form of power, which merits a closer look in order to cast light on the often counterintuitive dynamics of soft, or rather drama, power. The premise here is that drama power amounts to sending and attracting regressive impulses, which are felt differently in different political systems at different stages of their regressive slides or relative immunity from them. The US drama
power is regressing states at Stage 2 and reinforcing the dis-easing sentiments inside the states at Stage 3. The key is to understand that it also affects states beyond the Thucydidean brink. The states beyond it, at Stage 3, are drawn in for their own domestic reasons. Their citizens are also galvanized by the ongoing spectacle in the world’s oldest democracy. While the autocratic states at Stages 3 are drawn to meddle in the US, if they have the capabilities, the states at Stage 4 and 5 provide appealing objects for US diversions. States like Iran, and North Korea provide examples of this. Attraction toward them is felt in the US.

The above model is based on regressive patterns of push and pull effects, often irrational stimulations, and agitations. How do these come together, how do patterns of influence happen? As already suggested, appeal and visibility are parts of the answer. It can be suggested that the political economies of status and reputation are important modalities of contemporary politics, both internally and externally. In this sense, the political economy of politics resembles that of a theater or a television set in that it circulates affects and other cognitions as well as money. In this economy of digitalized data content, the US-based entities are clear front-runners. The list of the four biggest companies in the world in the first quarter of 2019 by stock market capitalization provides clear evidence: Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Alphabet/Google. Digital markets, both in the sense of hardware and content, show the relative dominance by US-based entities of data flows and content based on them. Domestic and international politics are increasingly made visible by leveraging similar captivating algorithmic formats and frames of digitalized public culture.

Dramatic content as a format is an underlying cultural resource that contains a charged affective climate of admiration and hate, awe and repulsion, fear and attraction. Furthermore, it is in this affective climate that the central political actors enact their status, honor, and fame (Aaltola 2008). Although the episodes of state drama might give an impression of being contingent and emergent, its spontaneity is highly structured through tradition, constitution and law, and established relationships between the central institutions of the state. Irrespective of the well-trodden paths of political spectacle in the US, it is useful to examine the

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8 See, e.g., Street (2004).
9 Research has been done on the relationship between politics and new popular culture formats such as celebrityhood (Corner and Pels 2003) and fame (Braudy 1997).
impact of newer features, such as celebrity status, on the global viewing public. In particular, the main aim could be to examine the aspects of political drama that have not yet received adequate attention: How can the new popular media features be seen as a part of the US’ power to have a regressive influence on others as well as a part of expressions of the continuing vitality of the US. How can these lead to increases in US soft power even when the Washington drama is one of disarray? And how can this seeming success be symptomatic of political regression?

The continuous drama in the US has numerous examples. These range from the federal government shutdowns and budget battles in the Obama era to the resolution to withdraw from Syria, “strategic ambiguity” with regard to North Korea and Iran, and the Trump era investigations and the Coronavirus crisis. All these can easily be, and have been, read as signs of America in decline. This might be so, with the qualification that, overall, world politics seems to be entering a regressive stage. From this perspective, it is possible to argue that the sense of drama draws people into American politics much like flies to fly-paper. It engages them to pay attention to the dysfunctionalities and, in doing so, carries a sense of appeal and specific type of power, drama power. The guru for millions of American salespersons, Dale Carnegie, concluded in his 1936 book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, that mere facts do not win customers: “This is the day of dramatization…. The truth has to be made vivid, interesting and dramatic. Movies based upon true stories do it, and radio does. And you will have to do it if you want attention.” It is possible to propose that the political theater in the US does this for the hundreds of millions of people watching attentively at home and abroad. In a way, the appeal of US political life is based on drama as a general politico-cultural resource, disseminated in its particular American version. It can open up scenarios of high drama and suspenseful contest. Drama can be an effective tool in selling politics and one’s status in it. Moreover, these cultural resources are becoming increasingly global through virally spreading media formats. This grim regressive power may be framed as a marketing activity in which drama is part of the packaging.

State dramas often involve the search for and passing of a communal verdict—a judgment is passed about the politico-moral status of those involved. Who are fair and legitimate actors, and who are not? This judgmental quality puts the limelight on the presidency and the Congress, on Democratic and Republican values, and the parties’ ability to make correct (at least some) choices. The media and the public check how
3 GRIM PULL OF US DEMOCRATIC VULNERABILITY

well people choose in the course of the heightened spectacle. Drama highlights the temporal element of the US being at a critical juncture, at a crisis point: from a particular critical moment onward, there is a strong sense that events can continue either negatively/regressively or positively/progressively. The media formats emphasize breaking news. Hyperbole is utilized in the staging of events. Social media further fuels this temporization of attention and delivers the needed tension between different camps and factions of people watching attentively as the public drama unfolds. The message is not rational, it is at the level of identities and (affective) identifications that play different factions increasingly against each other in an intensifying hurly-burly of increasingly expressive anti-politics.

Tensions are built up and the critical moment is faced head on. A case in point was provided by the Mueller Report on the Russian election meddling and on the possible collusion by the Trump campaign in the spring of 2019. With regard to the Mueller Report, months and months of revelations and speculations in the media led into a critical moment when Attorney General William Barr announced his summary of the report. In this way, the critical moment can act as a benchmark for knowing who was the protagonist and antagonist in the drama. Barr took over the framing of the moment and its confluence of circumstances, and left the actual report and its summary in shadow. Just a few months later, Congressional Democrats retook the initiative by launching the impeachment inquiry against the background of the approaching elections. The role of the antagonists and the protagonists were reclarified and, to a degree, reset. However, all this has not significantly registered in the opinion polls. President Trump’s support remained low but firm as he kept on heading toward the 2020 elections.

In a healthier political situation (Stage 1), the drama could also manifest in a more positive, proactive way. In this version, the actors would be vigilant, on guard, and avoid collisions much before the risks increased to the level of critical confrontation. In these frames, the sense of legitimacy derives from the ability to maintain a certain sense of pragmatism and safety, as well as from the absence of high-stake critical moments and deadlines. This more proactive form of political drama utilizes a pragmatic form of political triangulation to reach a shared common ground. It aims to avoid the negative consequences of the more polarized drama. In contemporary US politics, it can be argued that the more positive form of drama has been largely replaced by high drama composed of clashes,
crises, hyperbole, and scandals. This is a sign that the US has regressed closer to the Thucydidean brink, closer to experiencing the truly negative effects of the approaching stage of slip-mindedness. It can be argued that signs of this can be seen in the numerous mass killings in the US, initiated by various groups often acting alone. They are the first to feel the gravitational pull of the approaching slip-mindedness. It stimulates various people in various ways. Mindless acts of incontinent violence are extremely alarming as they are contagious and further agitate.

One of the most notable characteristics of studies on mass killings has been the absence of substantive results. One central problem has been that the studies are often politically inert. They have not recognized the possibility of any overall regressive ideological constituents. The drama brought about by violent persons inevitably carries an important political element. Shooters and killers often exist at the outer boundary of their local and national communities. However, they are linked to each other through the new internet-based social media and computer game worlds. They are loners only in a more traditional sense of the word. They have their own sense of communality, affinity, and identity. In the drama of virulent politics and fame-seeking, killers and shooters can be regarded as extreme subjectivities that manifest in the emerging discontinuity and disruptions of the society, the loosening and dis-easing of the state and society by emerging extra-state dynamics.

**MODES OF REGRESSION AND AMERICAN POLITICAL RELIGION**

One way of understanding the difference between the two forms of drama, one arguably more healthy and the other more regressive, is to think about the cultural resources underlying American political leadership and the presidency. Cultural objects and symbols as well as economic resources are utilized to exert political influence. Deeper cultural resources that can draw from religion act as anchors and frames in public debates whose meaning are acknowledged and recognized, because of which they create a sense of legitimacy that is harder to achieve by other means (Squiers 2018: 32). This resource has been conceptualized in

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10 See, e.g., Lankford (2016).
11 See, e.g., Billings and Scott (1994).
various ways, but the research tradition concerning civil religion is perhaps the most relevant: “In a sense, American civil religion is the Durkheimian fabric of common values that binds the American people geographically and historically” (Williams and Demerath 1991).

The various ways of defining common religious-like elements in public life have many roots. It has been referred to by authors such as Thucydides and Machiavelli. The key idea is to leverage and co-opt religion, religiosity, and religion-like elements for political purposes. The more scholarly use of the concept was provided by Robert Bellah in his (1967) article, “Civil Religion in America.” For Bellah, civil religion was the “religious dimension” of public life. It exists and evolves close to religions, and borrows from them in different ways; however, it is also separate from explicit religions and their dogmas. It is clear that civil religion is a contested concept in the conceptual as well as political sense. Bellah was criticized by many for the underdefined nature of the concept. However, there are places where US politics acquires religious content and draws from signifiers—such as, “In God We Trust”—that combine politics and religion. For example, President Trump has been skillfully appealing to the evangelical voters using references to the explicit religion, Christianity. The culture wars that have deepened and spread in recent decades have a long history that in many ways ties in with the religious cultural resources in American public life. Lienesch (2019) concludes that the US civil religion is increasingly pluralistic in its religious courses and polarized in its political aspect. There are those who would like to have a clearer definition of the shared political creed, while others oppose such efforts to define the meaning and would like to leave the civil religious dimension as pluralistic and as far removed from any particular set of dogmas as possible.

Mirroring the polarization is the tension between two modes of political leadership: custodians of principle and pragmatic arbiters. Custodians of principle draw their legitimacy from an explicitly clear vision of the underlying civil religion, while arbiters want to continually reestablish the limits of common sense. Custodians draw from various sacralized forms of what America is and stands for. Arbiters are less explicit in the substance while trying to reach common sense goals through pragmatic efforts at compromise. In doing so, they come close to sacralizing not the content

12 See, e.g., Haberski (2018).
or vision, but the method of arbitrating and the goal of “common sense.”
Their acts of compromise are done in the name of the common uniting
spirit.
Political custodians control, as much as possible, the flow of ideas and
cognition in the public debates represented by media and social platforms.
Their flow-control model contrasts with the more open-ended and teleo-
nomic goals of the political arbiters, who are often political centrists, and
who, instead of controlling the flows toward a convergence, shape the
flows so as to give them a sense of legitimizing common sense. The inter-
pretative openness, voluntariness, and ambiguities of the American culture
are taken as the pluralistic and irreducible starting point. Arbiters try to
use methods that make the flows of ideas and cognitions converge at some
point. Custodians take a different approach. They have or claim to have
a vision for a better America. They can come in the progressive shape
of claiming to unite diversity as inclusively as possible or they can lead
their people, defined in a more exclusive manner, toward the “promised
land” or back to the “golden era.” Both figures and their cognitive modes
of control can be used to maintain and challenge the established status
quo, but, fundamentally, the competition is over the definition of reality:
“…a struggle to achieve or maintain the power to define reality” (Hunter
1991: 52). They can push the boundary of the legitimate or converge
in the middle. Custodians tend to moralize an issue. For example, Presi-
dent Trump has often used almost sacred sounding terms in conjunction
with the presumably foreign elements. Natural security has become about
America first and Americans first, Americans in this case being the in-
group as defined by Trump. Arbiters, on the other hand, try to turn
potential moral issues into practical problems that can have a pragmatic,
managerial, and institutional solution.
There has been a marked increase in the identity-centric formation
of political belonging away from the more issue-centric one. The custo-
dians are winning over the arbiters. Convictions and commitments have
become stronger and more emotive, motivating, and mobilizing. In a
way, the deeper identity characteristic has made politics more about civil
religion, and increasingly about dueling American custodial visions. The
other side is seen as custodians of the wrong type, and they are treated
as irreligious and sacrilegious. This adds to the drama, and to political
regression. Tensions run higher as the politics is felt ever more deeply:
“An electorate that increasingly treats its political opponents as enemies,
with ever-growing levels of prejudice, offensive action, and anger, is
a clear sign of partisan polarization occurring within the citizenry. If issue positions do not follow precisely this pattern of behavioral polarization, it does not make those increasingly tribal partisan interactions irrelevant” (Mason 2018). The rational interests and practical issues are becoming less important. For example, a better-educated American is more likely to have liberal vision and identify with the “oppressed” more than with promoting or protecting the rights and interests of their own socioeconomic group.

Politics used to be a scenario driven by many characteristics. Now stronger or even mega identities—in the sense of comprising a large number of identities that used to be more distinct and separate—structure politics and its other characteristics. The identity formations cluster other characteristics such as class, race, gender, religion, and sexuality into “packages” that then define how a person is likely to act politically. The alignments are stronger, yet polarized, as there are two strong identities contesting over two mutually exclusive definitions for America. They act similar to the huge gravitational pulls of black holes in undermining the possibilities for middle positions and mobilizations for the political center.

Research findings tend to support the expressive model for political affiliations and voting behavior over the instrumental one. The key to the argument is a motivational one. Deeply entrenched identities motivate political mobilization and action more than instrumental beliefs: “Strongly identified partisans feel angrier when threatened with electoral loss and more positive about an anticipated electoral victory but strong ideologues do not” (Huddy et al. 2015). The perceived negative status changes—such as defeat in an election—produce a strong affective response. When a party’s or campaign’s success becomes the signifier of one’s identity group’s status, people react in a stronger way than with more issue-specific losses or victories. A voter becomes increasingly emotionally attached to a party that can represent the key identity markers they are holding, thereby decreasing the chances that they might change their voter identification. Social status is an important motivator when a voter identifies with a party and internalizes this sense of belonging as a self-identity. The party-political identification aligns outlooks on different political issues into one relatively cohesive whole.

These identities can become further politicized and motivating for political activity and engagement. As the politicization becomes more manifest, the in-group solidarity grows. The members identify with each
other and with the shared signifiers of their in-group solidarity. The signifiers can be about being “anti” something external to the group and/or about being for something and the practices of demonstrating this “being for”—such as slogans, signs, demonstrating, ways of using language. With the increasing politicization, one’s sense of status can become associated with a sentiment of solidarity within the in-group and with a sense that that status is interdependent with the in-group’s status and that of its other members. Phrases such as “I am a normal American” and “I think that I am a true Democrat” can indicate one’s status-level identification with a particular active political group. The other group members are positively regarded, leading easily to in-group bias where out-group members are felt to be of lesser importance, significance, and status. This bias can contribute to the direction of the political actions as the in-group fights to maintain or enhance its identity group status. Groups that are fighting for their status can be creative in their attempts to bring about political change and they can also utilize more manipulative and well-crafted efforts to further their status goals.

There are several ways of seeing the role of status and power in the increasingly identity-based politics. Social identity theorists argue that in-group members try to maintain or increase the in-group’s status and distinctiveness, whereas researchers taking a more evolutionary perspective argue that the group members cooperate and trust each other for the purpose of survival and competition (Huddy 2013). At the level of national identity, the difference between these two approaches is clear. The positive regard for one’s in-group can lead to a sense of being together, having the same status, being equal, and affective sentiments of belonging. The more evolutionary approach regards national identity as a matter of survival of the nation as an in-group among many contesting national in-groups. The national in-group identity turns more in the direction of having to be “fitter” in the international competition, which is seen as an evolutionary environment. These two approaches can be seen as mutually exclusive. In the European scene, where positive regard for one’s nation is often seen as patriotism, feelings of national superiority, and the associated evils of nationalism can be only one step away. The political center—center-right and center-left—is increasingly under pressure in Europe as well.

However, the key is that many theories of the current polarization and deepening contestation in the US and Europe pinpoint status and power as the key motivating factors for in-group cohesion, identity, and
solidarity. They also perceive the regression of and across polities with increasing worry. The slide from a stage of more positive regard for the domestic in-group identities and for their distinctiveness, to a stage characterized by the externalization of domestic anxieties and feelings of domestic in-group supremacy, by sentiments of self-aggrandizement, and by a mutually exclusive fight for domestic victory can be seen as a spectrum. This way of viewing political regression unifies the social identity theory with a more evolutionary thinking.

FROM POLITICAL LEADERS TO INFLUENCERS, MOVERS, AND SHAKERS

Drama has transformative power. It can bring something to life. In politics, the creation of drama, even fake drama, can give life to abstract political principles and ideas. Drama moves people. Drama balances intellect and thought with emotion. It gives politics its excited yet continuously challenged flows. People cannot turn away even when disgusted. It can stimulate the movements and campaigns needed to gain power in open democratic systems. In a sense, political actors increasingly need to capture people’s attention, to motivate them, and to teach them to follow. This is true for domestic influence as well. But it is also true for global persuasion, for drama power.

In drama studies, staging a play can lead to spectators becoming spellbound by the activity they are watching. This attachment can open them to making new inferences. They feel engaged and are in a flow state. They can explore new meanings and experiment with new scenarios. The state or global dramas that people witness in the evening news or through their webpages are similar in their transformative potential. Such experiences can be considered as forms of national or global knowledge. The dramaturgy is based on mainly digitalized media formats, which are related to other popular TV formats such as reality television or game shows. It may be suggested that the nexus between news and fiction gives content to the way in which people understand world events. The dramas of US domestic politics, from its involvement in mass cyber spying and hesitation to engage in the Syrian crisis to Trump’s victory, investigations, North Korea, and the confrontation with Iran, are observed as distinct “bundles” with an overall expressive language. This language and its grammar have become popularized in a variety of media formats, many
of which originate in the US and have become enhanced by the spread of social media platforms.

When viewing the US political drama, the global audiences are experimenting with what is happening in the world and in their domestic contexts. The US still is a yardstick. They feel the world and also for/against what is taking place in Washington. They might be worried. However, they feel, and this feeling for/against the US, this intense interest in the US and in Western regressive events, is linked with the power of drama. Thus, paradoxically, the dramatic gesticulation in Washington, DC, facilitates the global comprehension of what should be normatively incomprehensible: what it means to be a lone superpower in an unpredictable global world where competition is rising, markets rule, cyberspace is part of daily life, and climate conditions are making the planet feverish. Even if the drama is not Shakespearean quality high art, it is bound to be deeply pedagogic and potentially lead to the reformation of political affinities and identifications in polities and across them. At least, the continuing drama disseminates sensitive understanding of what can be called Washington-ology or Trump-logy. It sensitizes the world’s publics to respond to events in Washington, DC. This is a form of association and attention that no other state has achieved to such an extent and intensity.

It is possible to see the so-called contemporary American political polarization as partially entangled with and, to a degree, a consequence of the change in how status is achieved and used. Larger-than-life figures and well-known personalities used to be celebrated because of their high achievements and because of their value in political pedagogy and memory. Today’s political culture favors being well known and highly visible. Previously, politicians, especially the supposedly great ones, were (relatively) seen as representatives of the common American spirit or extraordinary national virtues. The historical progress from this virtue- and honor-based system of political status to seeing politics as a form of drama and its protagonists as similar to stage actors or film stars is fascinating because its impact is increasingly felt globally.

Nationally important models for fame, success, and celebrity include people from popular culture. This has gradually redefined what Thomas Carlyle wrote about great figures: that it is important to find exemplary figures and to clean the dirt from them in order to make them models for others to follow. The celebrity industry in this time of reality television does the opposite. It finds dirt in the form of scandal and outrage
and turns the figures into momentary celebrities who interest and captivate audiences because of the dramatic fragility they embody. Fame is usually a passing phenomenon. However, today’s major statespersons are like Teflon—the dirt scandalizes, creates an uproar, yet does not stick, instead they build the reputation of being able to withstand troubles. Presidents Reagan and Clinton were good examples of this new type of fame. Trump, in a way, has reinvented the Teflon celebrity genre. One can hypothesize that this mode of fame has found a place for itself in the grammar of political expressions of meaning in contemporary American culture. Moreover, this language of politics as crisis and drama is increasingly recognizable and captivating for international audiences as well.

The US has enjoyed a stable enough global stature to withstand domestic shocks and scandals both at home and abroad. The US’ status has been based on the honor of winning “great” wars, successfully fighting totalitarianism, and the general appeal of the American experiment. But this exceptional appeal has disappeared as the global hierarchy is no longer solely based on status through honor and reputation. At the same time, the US has been losing not so great wars, the battle against ideological enemies has been replaced by skirmishes with terrorist religious zealotry, and the experiment has been overshadowed by the rise of Asia and other models of development.

As said, global audiences are still and perhaps increasingly intrigued by the US. But the reasons for this are connected more and more with its ability to capture global attention for new reasons less connected with honorable qualities. To conclude, the dramas in Washington, DC, might reveal a new form of power, more related to so called junk culture than highbrow articulations of soft power. A revealing contrast could be made with popular phenomena such as the initially scandalous but virulent and by now normalized emergence of twerking, a dance characterized by the expressive power throwing, shaking, and thrusting of hips and buttocks. This point of contrast is not made to demean drama as a mode of power nor, for that matter, twerking as a mode of dancing and sport, but to point out that show and spectacle, as modalities of power, are different and often over-looked yet also expressive, innovative, and captivating. Drama power can be regressive and grim in its consequences as well. Twerking is an apt descriptor of the underlying change toward the virulency-aiming political expressiveness and influencing. The overall changing dynamics depends much on how the rising transnational fifth estate—the cyber estate—enables celebrity-based status, of being famous because of being famous. The political drama has become a measure of
Whenever Washington, DC, stages a drama, people at home and abroad are interested to see how the factions and personalities involved thrust, rise, shake, collide, and fall. Celebrity culture turns people into exaggerated caricatures. This can be done by using moral as well as sensual controversies. These same themes are present also in political high drama. However, power itself is as fascinating as money and sex. Power plays in the heart of the lone global superpower always sell. The emerging cyber dimension ensures that the power plays in Washington, DC, create a wider buzz the more they create outrage and panic. People have a deeply rooted desire to gaze with interest, yet also with fear and disgust, at these power plays that have human characters winning and losing, and that seems to indicate decadent about the present and future state of global power hierarchy.

**US Global Appeal and Status Re-evaluation**

Norm entrepreneurship refers to the creation of new norms or the solidification of underused norms. One major way of pointing out these new or underused norms is to create scandals or crises or to co-opt existing scandals or crises to highlight what norms are needed. The crisis and scandals in recent US and Western political drama are not only about new norms, but about uplifting the status of an individual, faction, or party in the power hierarchy. This seems to be evident for domestic actors. However, it may be said that a similar effect can influence the state’s global standing. The recent scandalous political episodes have had a detrimental effect on the US position. It would be tempting to say that the US’ overall global soft power and status depend on the balance of positive and negative interpretations. However, as indicated, the situation is much more complicated. Positive and negative views are unevenly distributed geographically. Different types of domestic crises and scandals influence different popular opinion zones in a widely different manner.

However, the enhancement of the US’ general status mirrors the general production methods of global public cognitions used by popular media formats. The circulation and recycling of Western, and often US, TV formats is a vast phenomenon that is overshadowing many local and traditional cultural practices. This adaptation of generic formats to local audiences is part of the homogenizing influence of globalization. It may be suggested that, as a result, global public cognitions become alike: format-based, imitated, franchised, hybridized, and adapted. From the perspective of the US’ status and position, the key characteristic of this global format dissemination has been the emergence of celebrity culture.
Celebrityhood tends to have a limited shelf life. Because of its ephemeral nature, it is not seen as a significant resource in politics or global affairs. This might be changing as fame industries become increasingly important and celebrityhood becomes one of the most substantial global commodities. Celebrityhood is present also in the global scene. It provides what can be called a global cultural resource to be exploited in global affairs and cultural diplomacy. A case in point is the United Nations’ practice of using celebrities as ambassadors for its different social programs.

In a way, the new political format undercuts the possibility that a dull bureaucrat-like politician can successfully represent the state on the world stage. Increasingly, it seems, you need someone with star power—someone who can get the global public star-struck. Obama offered one version of this. Trump is offering another much more devious interpretation of attracting followers in far-away places. It is clear that celebrity power turns off some of the educated elite, the more critically minded, and those who want to avoid mainstream behavior. They criticize the shallowness of this aspect of US modes of power. At the same time, the elites are often attempting to calibrate their own political celebrities to be better role and propaganda models. Contrasting with the American drama, the state branding of its regime focuses on a monolith/likeness and steadiness. A new generation of leaders is shown largely as an iteration, an evolution, of previous politicians. Instead of governance by crisis, a regime can do its utmost to show steady progress. This is not to say that the cumulative effect of the iteration would not be staggering, for example, in terms of economic power. This is especially the case with regard to China. However, in terms of soft power, China is much behind the US. Similar to Russia, its main influence in its neighboring regions has to do with the ethnic Chinese communities. The incremental and steady branding of the regime can lead to a sense that the thrill or interest will decrease. The element of drama is often missing in this pattern of general and sequential iteration. As such, the ability of Chinese leaders and China’s political system to capture people’s attention in terms of charisma and status is weak. It does not hold that special place in the minds of the global audiences. Putin in Russia is different. In a way, Putin and Trump—and perhaps Boris Johnson, Emmanuel Macron and few other European leaders—are examples of the same genre; they are alike even though Putin does not tweet.

Thus, drama-less iteration can become a victim of its own success. China-watchers, from time to time, read big changes and create major expectations of upheavals or at least major disagreements within the
leadership. If the standard is drama power, some audiences can feel let down and lose their interest. With each drama-less political succession, paradoxically, China loses a bit of the world’s public mindshare and attention-catching buzz. It seems that a country can fall into the trap of sticking to the script. Due to the overall political regression, people increasingly do not want to watch endless replays. They want political entertainment, human fragility, and authenticity since many of them believe that genuine politics must involve passion and drama. Thus, one additional important characteristic of US-influenced celebrity politics is the constant demand for new figures. This political machinery constantly needs to be fed by new dramatic personalities—their rise and downfall. New recruits are needed and, instead of erecting barriers, the audience often expresses its dissatisfaction with the present scene or candidates.

Global viewing audiences are increasingly turning away from channels of high-quality drama in their local culture to transnational cultural products characterized by global formats, reality shows, and narratives akin to celebrity rehab. There might be a connection between this general media format and the political figures that people want to see and hate/love. This might give rise to politicians representing a narrow, yet curious, interest, who are capable of being publicly vilified, humiliated, and shamed. The strangeness of these figures might lead also to fame and votes. These politicians are expected to go to their capitals to have their dramatic voices heard. This is happening even as commentators decry crazies, zealots, and ideologues becoming a common phenomenon in Washington, DC. The drama format seems to support marginal oddities as these curious figures can bring in additional drama.

However, drama is a characteristic that should be understood more fully in order to get an insight into how, arguably, the recent governance crises have not hurt the US as much as experts have been evaluating. This celebrity status is more episodic, as it contains short-lived hyperbole—scandals, crises, and emergencies—that comes and goes on the same trajectory: speedy rise, gradual decline in attention, and replacement by a new drama episode. The US is constantly in the headlines for positive and negative reasons. Status based on drama does still coexist with status based on honor. Status based on honor has to be built up over decades. It erodes slowly since any scandals that are judged as temporary will be ignored as anomalies.
Compared to honor-based prestige, celebrityhood is more ephemeral and fleeting. It does not accumulate over the years. It has the status of speedy and varying tempos. The US, through its actions and events, becomes a norm entrepreneur. It disseminates as well as attracts. Its behavior sets “oughtness” and gives meaning to how states function and behave. This ability to be followed can decrease as US honor and prestige are seen to decline. Trump’s first term has seen an increase in the fame-type of influencer who has mixed global appeal. The trend is toward increasing regression, toward slip-minded anti-politics, toward the brink.

Power is a complex art. The US governmental entanglements have led to a loss in some specific modes of power. It has let its power to set examples for others to decline while it remains preoccupied with its internal power struggles. The highbrow aspect of soft power has undeniably leaked away. However, drama allows emotive reactions and identifications. Yes, US governance seems to take place through crises and mismanagement. Cyclical short-termism prevails, instead of longer-term political processes. Everything is on the table, including settled laws and long-established practices. The US seems to have regular appointments with destiny, with decline and fall. And, still, people feel for it, perhaps even more intensively. Its modality of power, which derives from fragility, shame, and human frailty has perhaps increased. This modality can have a regressive impact on the external states where it is felt.

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