Great Power and Global Responsibility in 1918 and 2018

A Conversation with Nicholas Burns
Former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

FLETCHER FORUM: What have been the most significant developments in diplomacy since the end of World War I and, in particular, since the beginning of your career as a diplomat? What do you think might change in the field of diplomacy in the future?

NICHOLAS BURNS: World War I was an epochal conflict and a fundamental turning point in modern history. Four empires fell in 1917 and 1918, which changed the whole map of Europe, and in the case of the Ottoman Empire, of the Middle East. Four new states were created in the Middle East, as well as new states in Eastern Europe. Those states were fragile. World War I was the first global killing machine with massive, tragic human losses: something like 1.7 million Germans, 1.3 million French, 900,000 Brits, and 116,000 Americans died between 1914 and 1918. The combined military and civilian death toll was more than 18
million people. And then the influenza epidemic of 1919 took more lives. It was transformational in terms of the loss of human life, the destruction of empires, the rise of new states, and the fragility of those states. And then followed the vindictiveness of Versailles, the failure of Wilson, and the fact that the United States—the strongest global economic power—did not join the newly created League of Nations to avoid another world war. It was a series of tragedies, especially the fact that the United States did not put itself in a position to counter Hitler and Mussolini and the rise of fascist states in the 1930s. During this period, the America First movement shamefully tried to escape U.S. responsibilities. The Second World War left 60 million people dead.

This was essentially a seventy-five-year war between France and Germany starting with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, through the First World War and the Second World War. The United States was pulled into two of these three wars, but it had great difficulty in deciding what its role would be. There isn’t an American alive who fought in the First World War—but what a consequential event it was. It was the first time the United States fought outside its borders in a major way. There’s so much for Americans to reflect on and to learn.

I have two other takeaways from the First World War. One was the lack of effective global institutions. The League of Nations wasn’t strong enough, active enough, self-confident enough, and the United States wasn’t in it. The second lesson is for Americans to reflect on today. Jefferson said we should not be like the other empires; that we should seek to become an “empire of liberty.” John Quincy Adams said, “America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Lincoln said we were the “last best hope for mankind here on earth.” Americans didn’t want to commit ourselves to global power in our first century, but our failure to do so in the 1920s and 1930s was a factor in bringing the world to the brink of ruin. We were strong enough to deter Hitler in concert with the United Kingdom and France but we did not do so.

We have another America First movement today led by President Trump. It is similarly isolationist and very self-centered. We’re just going to take care of our own country; we’re not going to question anyone outside our borders; we’re not going to call you out on human rights violations if
you’re Victor Orbán, or Mohammed bin Salman, or Rodrigo Duterte, or or another thug around the world. It’s very dispiriting to see, one hundred years after 1918, that we haven’t learned some of these lessons about what role we have to play in the world. What preceded World War I was the first age of globalization, and we were in it, and we rose to be the strongest global economy because we were outward looking. How do the America Firsters of 2018 think we can be successful if we smash the global trade pacts and don’t believe that helping refugees is part of our responsibility to a stable global order? We have to relearn some of the lessons of 1918.

What we have definitely learned since 1945 is that America is strongest when we are in alliances and coalitions with other countries. Think of NATO and our East Asian alliances as power differentials between the United States and Russia in Europe, and the United States and China in Asia. If we stand alone in the world, we’re very strong; if we stand with other like-minded countries, we’re exponentially stronger. Our president, Donald Trump, doesn’t seem to agree with that. He’s weakened the NATO Alliance. He’s made the European Union into a strategic competitor. He calls it a “foe” of the United States, which is almost unimaginable. He has not been a leader of our East Asian alliance. He skipped the APEC Summit and ASEAN meetings at the end of 2018. We know that alliance systems make us stronger. Coalitions against crime and drug cartels make us stronger. Multilateral free trade agreements, since the Second World War, have lifted millions of boats around the world and have made many countries, including the United States, much more prosperous. For the president to give up the strategic promise of the Trans-Pacific Partnership—which would have joined many democratic market economies together to force China to play by the trade rules—is a very powerful lost opportunity for the United States.

We value the liberal world order. We built it. It’s in our image. Every woman and man who’s led the country has believed in it. Suddenly, the president is pulling away from that. That is his greatest mistake.

Winston Churchill came to Harvard in September 1943. He had been in Washington to meet with FDR and he came to Harvard to accept an honorary degree. At that time, there were many men at Harvard training
to go into the Officer Corps. The Soviets had defeated the German Army at Stalingrad, the British had defeated Rommel at El Alamein, and we had prosecuted the Sicily campaign and were invading Italy. It was becoming clear that the Allied Powers were going to win the war at some point in the future. Churchill also came at a time when the United States was overtaking Britain as the most consequential global power. I picture this visit to Washington and his remarks at Harvard as him handing the baton of leadership to the United States, telling these young men and women that this was going to be their time. Here is what he said to them at Harvard: “the price of greatness is responsibility.” The price of greatness is responsibility.

I love that phrase because it speaks to what we still have to do in the world. We are the largest economy, the most powerful military, and we have the dominant technological and scientific base in the world. We are the global leader. President Trump wants to “make America great again.” If we want to be great, we have to be responsible. I don’t think tearing down the alliance system like President Trump has, negating global trade, shutting doors to immigrants and refugees, and not standing up for democracy—which is in peril in many parts of the world—is acting like a great power should in the world.

FORUM: Many of the winners from the 2018 Midterm Elections have experience in the U.S. military and in the U.S. government in various capacities. Do you think this experience may help sell a more internationalist foreign policy to the American people?

BURNS: You’re right about the November 2018 Midterms. We will have at least 101 women in the House. This is the highest number in American history. It is very positive to see more women take their place in the leadership of our country.

There is a 9/11 generation in our country. The men and women who have seen combat—many who have had multiple combat tours—make them the most intensively deployed generation of military officers in U.S. history. To see so many young members of Congress with military backgrounds is heartening because we face forbidding national security challenges and we need people who have seen the face of war, who understand the limits of power and who understand that the military is not the only instrument the United States has to deter conflict. I find military people sometimes the biggest supporters of diplomacy and development. They understand that America has to be multi-faceted in the way we face the rest of the world. We can’t just fight the rest of the world.
It is also very important to get young people elected to represent our country. After World War II, there was a wave of young veterans—JFK, Richard Nixon—who had served in that war. President Kennedy’s inaugural speech in January 1961 was about the promise of that generation and the challenges they faced. That is what we’re looking at now. We have seen a real youth moment in the tech industry. But it’s different, and it’s probably more meaningful in government. To see veterans of past administrations—Tom Malinowski, Andy Kim—win is very encouraging. I think America does best when we are multigenerational in our major institutions.

I think America does best when we are multigenerational in our major institutions.

It is that way in the Foreign Service—junior-, mid- and senior-level officers. We’re beginning to see that in politics. The Midterms were hopeful.

On a more partisan basis—since I think President Trump has demonstrated that he is completely unfit for office—I am encouraged that the power grip that the Republicans had on Washington has been broken as a result of the Midterms. At least one chamber is in control of the opposition party. That’s healthier for America. There are so many challenges, from healthcare to income inequality to racism, which reared their head in the elections in Florida and Georgia. We have got to do better and it’s good to have a contest of ideas where two parties on an equal footing can try to make this a better country.

FORUM: How do you think challengers to Trump’s America First foreign policy can create an appealing and effective alternative, and how might they sell it to the American people? Why have so many people failed to learn the lessons from past wars, which has contributed to the reemergence of tensions between globalist and isolationist policies?

BURNS: I was a member of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign. In retrospect, one of the mistakes that I think many Democrats made was that it wasn’t enough to say, “He’s not worthy, he’s not good enough, pox on him.” You have to offer an alternative. The person who runs against Trump for president in 2020 and people who run for other offices have to make a case on their own that they’re the better alternative. It can’t just be, “Trump is not worthy.” That won’t work.

We will do best—those of us who oppose President Trump—if we provide a logical alternative and if we are able to convey that in a convincing
way to the American people. Most Americans are just trying to pay the bills, give their kids a good education, and gain access to healthcare. How do you relate their daily concerns with the bigger foreign policy challenges? We have to convince Americans of the reality that the success of our economy is tied to our ability to trade effectively and for us to be good custodians of our economic power. We have to make clearer the direct connection between our physical security here at home and the threat of pandemics, climate change, and terrorism from overseas. I don't think that leaders from either party have made those connections clear to Americans.

We also have to give people hope. Think about the two duties of a President or a Congress or the American Foreign Service or the American military. First, it's to defend the country from all of our adversaries and threats. You have to speak honestly to people: “Here are the threats that we face, and here's how we shall face them.” Second, there is another responsibility for those in government and that is to advance human progress. Look at all the positive trendlines in the world today. We are seeing the greatest alleviation of poverty in human history, and Americans can help further that.

We are seeing the imminent eradication of polio, and maybe the future eradication of malaria in the coming two decades. Your generation is probably the breakthrough generation in terms of opportunities for women to lead. Part of the job of government is to push those trends forward, and that excites people. When President Kennedy said, “We're going to put a man on the moon,” that was a breathtakingly ambitious vision, and we did it in nine years.

We are in such a fearful age because of 9/11, the financial crisis, violence in our cities, and that's all real, but there are a lot of positive trend lines too, and there is a potential to encourage people to think positively about the future.

FORUM: We've seen a rise in right-wing extremist groups across Europe. What can be done to prevent further erosion in Europe and strengthen alliances? Are you concerned for the NATO alliance?

BURNS: Americans need to remember that we are a country with enormous global influence. There’s no question that, looking three or four decades
out, the preponderance of our interests might be in the Indo-Pacific. But right now, our leading trade partner is the European Union—not China or India. The greatest level of capital investment in our economy is from Europe. The leading number of treaty allies that we have in the world are the twenty-seven European countries and Canada in NATO. Europe is vital for us, and Americans need to remember that. We need to be a good friend to Europe.

At the same time, Europe is faced with an extraordinary set of problems—from Putin challenging the borders of Georgia and Ukraine, and possibly even the Baltic States and Poland in the future. We must contain him. The major cities of Western Europe face much more difficult challenges from terrorism than we do. There is the problem of anti-democratic populism: Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, AFD in Germany (now the largest opposition party in the Bundestag), Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary, the government of Poland, and half the government of Italy. Those battle lines are drawn where democracy is under challenge, and some of the defenders of democracy have faltered recently. Angela Merkel, who has been a tremendous leader for Europe, is in the last phase of her time as Chancellor, as leader of Germany. A new generation is coming to power and we will have to see if they are up to this challenge. Macron was so promising, and yet his approval rating is at less than 30 percent (in December 2018) and he is under siege from domestic protests. Theresa May is distracted by the existential crisis of Brexit. You have to wonder, how can the champions of democracy compete for the hearts and minds of Europeans with these narrow autocratic voices—the Steve Bannons of Europe—who would take Europe in an anti-democratic direction? Add to that the refugee crisis and the long-term migrant push into Europe. How is Europe going to cope with all these challenges? You can see that the issue of immigration is already dividing their politics. It is fueling the anti-democratic-populists. This is a time of real challenge in Europe. Along comes our president, who should be a natural ally, but who is instead siding in some ways with Orbán in Hungary and Salvini in Italy. He’s not siding with Merkel and May and Macron in standing up to the challenges facing democracy. That is tremendously disappointing. It is a refutation of FDR, Eisenhower, JFK, and every president we have had since the Second World War. We have an American president who is actively trying to weaken the European Union.

When FDR was fighting the America First crowd that said, “It’s not our job to fight Hitler,” he told the American people, “When your neighbor’s house is on fire, you lend them a garden hose.”
two messages in that statement: it’s the right thing to do, but it’s also the smart thing to do. The fire could spread to your house. I think our biggest problem is a hopelessly inadequate, self-centered president who doesn’t understand the challenges that we face, who doesn’t understand our obligations in the world, and who doesn’t understand the responsibility that comes with being an actively engaged global leader.

I think NATO is durable, however. NATO will outlive the Trump presidency. Any future American president, a Republican or a Democrat, that I can imagine following Donald Trump will look at NATO and say, “If we didn’t have this institution, I would want to create it, because look at the power it gives us and the protection it gives us in Europe.”

FORUM: In the past, we looked to a country’s army to assess its power. Today, we have new challenges and tools. How do you understand what makes a power great today?

BURNS: We have to be very careful, at a time when we have a trillion-dollar budget deficit and when our debt-to-GDP ratio will be so ominous, not to weaken the military. We need to maintain our military strength because, as we have seen in the last twenty years—with Bosnia, Kosovo, 9/11, the Iraq and Afghan wars, the rise of the Islamic State—that we need to be strong to protect ourselves, to protect our friends, and to be the globally responsible leader we must be. I don’t want to see us decide that we can live on three-quarters of the current defense budget.

Cyber is a potential game changer in the way that atomic and nuclear weapons were in the 1940s and 1950s. New technology can never be put back in the bottle. It’s out there, and it’s disrupting power in a negative way. It’s allowing North Korea to attack Sony, the Iranians to attack our bank accounts, and the Russians to hack our elections. We have to strengthen our defenses and have the ability to go on offense when necessary. We are also going to have to be smart and find a way to restrain the use of cyber weaponry for the global good. Just as we negotiated limits on nuclear weapons, we will need to do the same with cyber. If we don’t do that, then the unbridled competition could destabilize the entire international system.

Just as we negotiated limits on nuclear weapons, we will need to do the same with cyber. If we don’t do that, then the unbridled competition could destabilize the entire international system.
Then, there’s the battle for technological supremacy. We’re entering a digital age where artificial intelligence, robotics, quantum computing, biotechnology, and other emerging technologies will be militarized. People who really understand these issues predict that the next twenty years could see an emergence of new defense technologies that could make obsolete the current systems that have traditionally defined military power, such as aircraft carriers, F-35s, and ballistic missiles. Imagine a world in which the revolution in military technology is so fast and so complete that we risk losing our military superiority if we’re not as technologically proficient as China. That race for military technology may be the most important determinant of our future, and that race rests on the backs of the young women and young men who are at Cal Tech, Carnegie Mellon, MIT, and all of our universities. It rests on what Walter Isaacson calls the “innovation triangle.” Isaacson said that “what made America great” during and after World War II was this triangular relationship between the government, the private sector, and universities in producing new technologies in virtuous harmony. He says that relationship has broken down. The government isn’t funding scientific research in the way that it once did, and some tech companies aren’t working with government in the way that Bell Labs did a generation ago. The Chinese don’t have that problem. The Chinese have all the money in the world to throw at their university research efforts and they can compel their companies and scientists to transfer technologies to the People’s Liberation Army. We need to be purposeful and at least keep par if not continue to have technological superiority. We don’t want to have a situation in which we’re suddenly at a competitive disadvantage militarily. That would put everything that we believe in and care about in peril.

**FORUM:** Over the past one hundred years, there’s been a significant increase in the number of actors in foreign affairs. Not only are there more countries, but there are also myriad international businesses and NGOs. Does the prevalence of new actors and the existence of new technologies that allow them to work together change the role that governments play or should play?

**BURNS:** I think about what my grandchildren’s lives will be like fifty years from now. I think we have reason to be hopeful. We have seen tremendous changes in opening up power in our society to people outside of government. I came into our government for the first time as a twenty-four-year-old intern in 1980, and that was a very different time. Government had most of the power in foreign affairs. It was a closed, cloistered priesthood
that practiced diplomacy behind a curtain. No one could really see into it and everything was classified.

Look where we are now. That state-to-state world still exists, but maybe the biggest change that I’ve seen in my career is the rise of the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), almost all virtuous. It’s the climate NGOs, the NGOs that organize around trafficking of women and children, and those that advocate for justice and human rights, such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International where my daughter worked. There are thousands of them. They work in every aspect of human life, and they are filling niches that governments either can’t fill or don’t want to fill. They keep government honest. Sometimes they can help democratic governments succeed; other times they are the watchdogs on what the Chinese are doing against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang Province or what the Burmese military is doing to the Rohingya population. Hamilton and Madison did not want those of us who go into government to be unchallenged. They wanted the press and private citizens to be able to challenge us.

Hamilton and Madison did not want those of us who go into government to be unchallenged. They wanted the press and private citizens to be able to challenge us.

What we need is leadership. We need women and men in all parts of our society who recognize the dangers that we face and are prepared to meet them, but who also have an optimistic, positive view of our ability to meet them. We have become so fear-centered that we need to be more confident we can meet the challenges ahead of us. Think of our greatest leaders—Lincoln, FDR, MLK Jr.—people who took on huge challenges and said, “We can do it.” We don’t have that kind of far-sighted and self-confident leadership right now. We need it.