TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1915-video-event-the-republican-party-after-2020-a-conversation-with-michael-barone12021

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Walter Russell Mead:

Well, hello, everybody. It is both a pleasure and a privilege to be here this morning with probably the greatest living student of American political parties and most interesting analyst of American politics. Some of you, I’m sure, know of Michael Barone because of his pioneering work as co-founder of The Almanac of American Politics, a book that’s been as close to a bible for American politics as there has been for decades now. He is also, I think, one of the most interesting students of the Republican Party in particular, and given the dramatic events of the last couple of months, it's the Republican Party that we'll be talking about today.

So, let me just ask to kick things off, what is the state of the Republican Party today as President Biden settles into the White House?

Michael Barone:

Well, the state of the Republican Party today is, in the eyes of some observers, almost terminal and sure to be riven apart by schisms and be repudiated by the voters. I would say the Republican Party is in about as good shape as a party that has lost the presidency, lost the Senate, lost the House of Representatives, has ever been in the course of American history. I've been following this stuff for quite a few years now, going back to reading Time magazine and U.S. News & World Report when I was growing up in Michigan. I've lived through many predictions of the demise of the Republican Party, the demise of the Democratic Party. These parties are old. They've been around a long time. They've endured.

The Republican Party is 166 years old. The Democratic is 188 years old. They are the oldest and third-oldest political parties in the world, with British Conservative Party probably being number two, depending on when you date its founding. I think, as I argued in my recent pre-COVID book, How America's Political Parties Change (and How They Don't), they have a fundamental character, each of them different, which has enabled them both to endure for a long time, to suffer through seemingly terminal crises and repudiations by the voters, and to come back trumping.

The Republican Party, since its beginnings in opposition to Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, has always been a party centered around a core constituency of people who are thought by themselves and others to be typical Americans, but who are not by themselves a majority. When it started off, it was New England Yankees and their descendants, the Yankee Diaspora that ran through upstate New York, northeast Ohio, southern Michigan, out to Chicago and Iowa. That was the foundation of the Republican Party.

Today, you might say it's white, married Christian people are this core constituency of the Republican Party, increasingly a constituency of the subgroup that are not college graduates. Those have changed over the time. The Democratic Party has been a coalition of out groups, of people not thought to be typical Americans, who are often very different in their values and so forth, from each other. So, the Democratic Party has had great vivid splits, and also, when it's coalesced together, it's been a major majority party.

I think having two parties of those two different characters has been one way that politics has kept together a country that has always had diversity. It has always had ethnic, regional, religious, economic, racial diversity from its very beginning. We didn't suddenly become diverse in the last 18 months or the last 10 years. We were diverse when we were British colonies in the 18th and 17th century.

So, the Republican Party, it was supposed to disappear after Barry Goldwater. It was supposed to never be elected a conservative denominated president until the election of Ronald Reagan. When Bill Clinton
came in, it was going to be a minority again, and, in fact, has been competitive, and it continues to be competitive.

If you want to just do numbers, the Republican Party lost the presidency by virtue of 42,000 votes cast in margins for the Democratic nominee in Georgia, Arizona, and Wisconsin. Three states. That’s less than the margin by which Donald Trump won four years ago, 77,000 in three different states.

It has 50 of the 100 U.S. senators. It has … I think it’s now 212, 213 members of the House of Representatives in which 218 is a majority. It has majorities in most state legislatures in this country and actually gained state legislators in 2020, over 2018. It’s out of power. It’s got some serious differences of opinion among Republican officeholders and voters. But, in terms of where it starts off from, as a minority party, it is, by historical standards, in pretty strong shape.

Walter Russell Mead:
I guess when people talk about a crisis of the Republican Party, they’re really talking about the relationship between Donald Trump and the future of the Republican Party and the Trump movement. I think you’ve said that in some ways, in terms of his Republican approval, Trump was a fairly typical example of a Republican president. Does the Trump factor change the outlook for Republicans or complicate the outlook for Republicans?

Michael Barone:
Well, I think the Trump factor complicates the outcome for Republicans. One of the things you can see when you look at public opinion polls and support for presidential candidates is that Republican voters, voters who self-identify as Republicans, tend to show strong support for Republican incumbent presidents of varying stripes. That’s been true since polling began in 1935. The Republican presidents in question were Dwight Eisenhower. Very solid support from Republicans, although some conservative political writers and politicians were unhappy with some of his policies.

Richard Nixon, until he got into political trouble with the Watergate scandal, was similar. Gerald Ford, as a president not been elected, did not have a strong support, perhaps, and had to win the primary fight. But, in the general election, he got solid support from Republicans in 1976. Ronald Reagan, the two George Bushes, maintain support from Republicans by and large. And, Donald Trump did.

I think one of the things we see is that Republican voters, centered around that core constituency, whose character has changed over time, but has always remained … There’s always remained a core constituency … support their incumbent presidents. Then, when they leave office, unlike Democrats, they don’t seem to have much sentimental regard for them. We see some of that for Ronald Reagan, but, generally speaking, the Republicans, if you go to Republican National Conventions … And, I have attended in one way shape or form, 11 of those, 13 Democratic National Conventions, going back to 1968. They don’t celebrate, write hymns to celebrate its philosopher kings, their previous Republican presidents. One reason for that was that President Nixon left office in unhappy circumstances. But, basically, they simply don’t do that very much.

With Donald Trump, what you saw was a stronger tendency on his part to repudiate past Republican presidents. He called President George W. Bush a liar about the Iraq War and things. That may explain why neither second President Bush nor his father, when he was alive, was supporting Mister Trump for president in 2016. Understandable in those circumstances. But, for Republican voters, once he was in office, Donald Trump got 90% support. Even though he had gotten less than half the primary popular votes in primaries and caucuses in the 2016 things, nobody ran against him in the Republican primaries in 2020, even though you had various people advertising themselves as Never Trumpers.
And so, I think the interesting question is whether or not Republican voters are going to discard President Trump as, in effect, they seem to discard the President Bushes after they were gone, as they have discarded most of their former presidents and historic heroes. They don't seem to have much sentimental regard for them. You hear them talking sometimes about Abraham Lincoln, but, of course, the policy lessons that Lincoln gives us from dealing with the issues of his time are not always very helpful relevant to the issues now. We don't have a Civil War, and they tend to have solidarity.

We've already seen signs in polls of support for President Trump plummeting. There are mixed results here, but Pew Research has a poll showing Trump's positive job approval going down to 29%. It's been oscillating in a very narrow range among voters generally, between about 42% and 46-47% during his whole term in office, and that reflected 90% of self-identified Republicans giving him job approval. In that Pew poll and in several others that we've seen, he's losing support from Republicans.

I think there will continue to be some arguments about Donald Trump and what his situation is. I've made some wrong bets about Donald Trump's enduring or not enduring appeal. But, my bet still is that he will fade with Republican voters. He will perhaps make a lot of noise, use some non-Twitter social media to show his stance on issues, denounce various other Republicans, and perhaps praise a few. But, I think he won't be the defining factor for the party in the quadrennium ahead of us.

Walter Russell Mead:

It's interesting to me. I take your point that the Republicans are in great shape for a minority party. But, for Republicans to lose Arizona and Georgia at the presidential level, and not have a single senator from either Arizona or Georgia, does strike me as interesting. If we think about how Colorado was once a pretty solidly Republican-leaning state, California, certainly, there does seem to be an erosion of the Sun Belt. Is that right?

Michael Barone:

Well, there has been a movement, which Trump amplified, increased, of the two parties' appeals to different demographic groups. If you want to oversimplify it, the Republican Party has lost support among upscale Americans, college graduates, relatively affluent people, and has gained support among downscale Americans. Regionally, the Republican Party has gained strength in the South and lost strength in the North.

Those changes have gone on for a long period of time. I mean, the Republicans won majorities or pluralities of the popular vote for House of Representatives in the North, going back to recoil against the Great Society of 1966 and '68. They've been winning majorities of the House of Representatives in most elections, starting in 1994. Only one time, I think, have they won a plurality of the popular vote in the northern states. But, they've had big majorities in the South. So, that has changed.

What changed in Georgia and in Arizona and, to a lesser extent, also in Texas, was that we saw in big metropolitan areas megametropolitan areas, multiple millions of people in Atlanta, in Dallas-Fort Worth, in Houston, and in Phoenix, which is a bigger metropolitan area than my native Detroit today, you have a movement by affluent voters away from the Republicans and toward Democrats. That mirrors what we saw in Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast metropolitan areas, starting in the 1990s or even before.

I mean, you go back to the 1988 election, first George Bush winning over Michael Dukakis. That was an election where Bush, by the way, got 53.6% of the vote. That's higher than any president has gotten in any popular vote percentage since 1988. Bush carried or ran basically even in metro Boston, metro New York, metro Philadelphia, metro Cleveland, metro Chicago, metro Detroit, metro Los Angeles. That was because affluent areas, the suburbs, to put it in political demographic shorthand, were voting for him by large margins. That affluent support has changed. Bill Clinton started making gains there for Democrats
in the 1990s, even as Democrats were losing in the South, and in particular, in the rural South. So, those changes have happened over time.

Trump’s appeal to non-college-educated voters and his repulsion to many college-educated voters has amplified or increased those trends. But, they have been part of the political landscape for a considerable amount of time, the regional North and South going on for 50 years. But, now you have states like Arizona and Georgia suddenly starting to look more like northern areas because those affluent voters who had been solidly, hugely Republican went there.

Texas moving in the same direction, but not as much as to go Democratic this time, staying with Trump by basically the same margin as four years before. But, if you go back to look at President Bush winning in 1988, in Texas, his biggest margins are in Dallas and Dallas County, in Houston and so forth, and he’s losing in his elections to rural counties, big swaths of counties in the north and central parts of the state. Those counties are now going 80% for Republicans for Donald Trump, for Greg Abbott, the governor, for Ted Cruz and so forth.

So, the parties have switched appeal, and one of the things we see, there's almost a kind of Newtonian second law of motion. For each action, there's a certain amount of reaction. The very policies and stances and styles that gain you votes among upscale voters, for example, will lose you votes among downscale voters, because where they have differences of opinion, differences of basic cultural attitudes.

The kind of politics we have now, and going on since '88, and the changes since '88 and the movement towards Democrats among upscale, towards Republicans and downscale, is the result of values to a large extent. It's not because voters in the lower income areas want to have tax cuts as an important thing. It's because they feel that the more conservative cultural values are more in line with the ways they've lived or the ways they're trying to live their lives, and the way they hope people in their communities will live their lives. That's why they've gone that way.

**Walter Russell Mead:**

Do you see a future for the Never Trumpers in the Republican Party, and, if so, what kind of future?

**Michael Barone:**

Well, there are Never Trumpers and Never Trumpers. Obviously, some of the people have become ... The former Republican consultants who have styled themselves The Lincoln Project are now partisan Democrats. I call them the Jouett Shouses of their times. Jouett Shouse was briefly a Democratic Congressman, committeeman from Kansas in the 1920s and early '30s. He didn't like Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. He was also married to Catherine Filene Shouse, who was a very rich woman from Boston Department Store fortune. Lived in Washington. And, he said, "I can't support Franklin Roosevelt."

Every four years, Jouett Shouse would indicate that he can't support Roosevelt. He can't support Truman. He can't support Adlai Stevenson. And, I thought to myself, as a young person watching this, why doesn't he just say he's a Republican? I mean, it's not a criminal offense to change parties. President Reagan changed parties. Other people have changed parties. He has views which put him in a different party at a different time. And, I think a lot of the people, the Never Trumpers, The Lincoln Project crowd, Bill Kristol, a former editor of the former Weekly Standard and so forth, are basically functionally Democrats at this point.

I think that where there is going to be continuing tension in part is Republicans' particular stance towards what President Trump has done since November 3rd, the 2020 election, and in his repudiation, his claim that he won by a landslide and that this has somehow been obviated by election fraud. Not
only have he and his lawyers been unable to really specify or identify any significant amount of election fraud that had anything like the potential of changing any of the electoral votes, the idea that he won by a landslide, to me, is delusional and indicative of the cavalier response that he's taken to data that doesn't support his position. And, his role in Georgia, in characterizing the electoral system there as fraudulent and rigged, clearly resulted in the loss of two Senate seats and the loss of a Senate majority by the Republican Party. It's going to result almost surely in substantial policy wins for Democrats and policy defeats for most Republicans.

You still have a majority of House Republicans that voted to contest the Electoral College results in Arizona and Pennsylvania, interestingly, not in Georgia, which wasn't brought up, and there are bad feelings about actions against Liz Cheney, number three position in the House Republican leadership, posts who voted for impeaching President Trump. I think there's still going to be some ruckus about that. But, my prediction is that there will be a diminishing desire to fight that fight over and over again.

I look back to history on this, perhaps misleadingly. But, the Republican Party has had bigger ruptures before. That was in 1912, when incumbent President William Howard Taft was chosen by the man who had handpicked him, former President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt was denied the Republican nomination, formed the Progressive Party around himself. He was the most popular guy in the country. He had one percentage of the vote for a full term in 1904, by a larger percentage than anybody had ever won by.

His Progressive Party ran candidates in a majority of non-southern congressional districts in 1912, and they ran nearly as many in 1914. This was as strong of a move towards a third political party as you could hypothesize. A highly popular leader, a strain of thought, progressivism, that was getting a lot of exposure in articulate media of the time, that had a great public appeal.

Roosevelt was a magnetic figure and a highly capable person. If they'd had polls at that time, he would've had a job rating in the sixties or seventies during much of his term. And, he lost. He cost Taft the election. Taft carried eight electoral votes, interestingly, Utah and Vermont, which are now one of the most Democratic and one of the most Republican states in the Union, a century later. Roosevelt won 88 electoral votes. He came close to winning almost 180 electoral votes.

And, how enduring is this split? Well, four years later, it's gone. Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, are all supporting the Republican presidential candidate, Charles Evans Hughes, who nearly beats the incumbent. President Woodrow Wilson loses by one state's electoral votes. One of the close elections of our history. Roosevelt looks like the strongest candidate to run again for president in 1920, except he dies in January 1919 of what now is regarded as the very youthful age of 60, compared to our current leaders. The last two presidential candidates are more than a decade older than that. That split disappears and is papered over, and the party basically supports its next presidents, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover overwhelmingly in their elections.

Walter Russell Mead:
I suppose the Mugwumps are a point of comparison here, too, for Never Trumpers.

Michael Barone:
Well, the Mugwumps, like some of the Never Trumpers, were guys that wrote for magazines, and magazines with low circulation, which didn't actually make money in most cases. It was kind of an intellectual's movement. Theodore Roosevelt and his young PhD friend Henry Cabot Lodge did not support that. They stayed with the regular Republican, James G. Blaine, young men in their twenties or so, who would become very important leaders of the party.
Yeah. The Never Trumpers, in some sense, they've represented people who have voted for Democrats, those upscale suburbs and things, where Trump has run worse than previous Republicans. In my old home county, Oakland County, Michigan, relatively affluent suburban area northwest of Detroit, in places with high degrees of social connectedness, the stuff that Robert Putnam writes about and that Charles Murray wrote about in his books, about how when people live in socially connected communities, they don't vote for Donald Trump.

We saw this. I wrote about it in March 2016, in the primaries, where Trump was running very poorly in Dutch American areas. Those are areas that have got Protestant Reformed Churches, which have close cohesion. Their members are involved in charitable activities and, in some cases, major philanthropy. If you look at counties in Iowa, northwest Iowa, south central Iowa, or in Grand Rapids metro area, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which are the most heavily Dutch American areas of the country, they didn't vote for Trump in the primaries. They voted for Ted Cruz. They didn't vote. Trump ran much behind historic Republican votes there and, in fact, lost metro Grand Rapids this last year, which was Gerald Ford's hometown, which is a heavily Republican area.

Utah. The Mormons have more social connectedness probably than any group in America. They clearly have a real problem with Trump and Trumpism. So, there is a group there that's gone that way, but they haven't prevented Trump or Trump Republicans in the Trump area from being competitive.

Now, if I put on my old hat as a political consultant, I would say that both parties are being a little remiss in not hearing and responding to cues they should be getting in the political marketplace. The Republicans for president are winning or coming very close to winning the presidency, and the Electoral College not getting a majority or a plurality of the popular vote is a weakness that they should be addressing. If they could get themselves getting a majority or plurality of the popular vote, they'd be in a lot better shape to win the presidency.

The Democrats, they're in a situation where they're piling up huge majorities in New York and California, where they don't do them any good, and are states which, by the way, are almost sure to lose seats in the apportionment following the 2020 Census when it's finally revealed. They should be trying less concerned about piling up even bigger majorities in California and trying to win some states that can give them electoral votes that would enable them to win the presidency. And so, they haven't done a very good job of responding to that, either. But, we shall see what happens.

In the Georgia Senate races, we know that the candidates, Sonny Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, ran a little better in January 5th than they had run in November, in the affluent areas. They were getting a little more votes. But, they were running way behind what Republicans had been running in affluent metro Atlanta suburban counties prior to that. They have some ground to make up. They may make it up with Trump not being on the ballot.

Then the question is can they continue to win enough of the votes from that downscale constituency, where Trump did better than previous Republican presidential candidates? They have tended to do so, but it's an open question. It's one that requires a certain amount of political finesse and political aptitude, if not to the high level of somebody like Bill Clinton, at least to the level of somebody like George W. Bush.

Walter Russell Mead:

When you look around at active Republicans today, who are some people who you think in 2024 would be of particular interest and have some of the qualities that might shake things up in a Republican direction?
Michael Barone:
Well, my own view is that Senators Ted Cruz and Joshua Hawley, who resulted bringing us that vote dispute that led to the January 6th violence in the Capitol, are not well positioned for 2024. But, they may rehabilitate themselves at that time. They also both have Senate seats up in 2024, which leads me to wonder whether or not they’d want to risk a presidential candidacy.
I look at people like Marco Rubio, the senator from Florida, the third largest state now and one that has been relatively close in presidential races. I look at Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who managed the feat of writing an article that got the editorial page editor of the New York Times fired. That’s a scalp that may appeal to some Republicans, although I shouldn’t say a scalp because James Bennet actually doesn’t have a lot of hair on his scalp.
There are a number of people that I think that have the potential. Others will come forward. I think that the Republicans have done a fairly good job of generating appealing candidates across the country in various places than a party usually does when it holds the White House. And, some of those came from earlier eruditions. But, we’ll see. You’ve got former governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina certainly throwing her chapeau into the ring, and numerous other candidates. I think the Republican Party has got a fairly good number of potential candidates sitting around. Their problem in 2016, in many ways, was too many.
You had Donald Trump getting two billion dollars’ worth of free time on cable news channels, and not the more conservative-leaning Fox News Channel, that reputation. CNN and MSNBC just loved having him on. And, you had the multiple Republican candidates have one of these things ... I guess it’s not the prisoner’s dilemma, but it’s one of these things. One of your problems, if you want to go naked up against somebody who’s leading the race, and there are multiple candidates in the race, if Candidate A attacks Candidate B, he may knock Candidate B down a few notches. But, he also hurts himself, Candidate A. And, Candidate C is the one that comes out ahead of this, or in the Republican case in 2016, Candidate D, Candidate E, Candidate F, and so forth through the alphabet. None of them wanted to be Candidate A. They badly needed a Candidate A earlier on, and they simply didn’t rise to the occasion. So, those intraparty things.
And, who really predicted, by the way, that the 2020 Democratic race would come down the way it did, with Congressman Clyburn of South Carolina endorsing Joe Biden, who had been nowhere in Iowa and New Hampshire? And, suddenly, he wins a big victory from the majority Black constituency in South Carolina. Oh, and then, we shut down the country because COVID, so there aren’t really any more contests, and he is nominated by the Democratic Party, which rejected him in 1988 and 2008. It’s a little hard to predict these multi-candidate contests.

Walter Russell Mead:
I’d like to get onto foreign policy and the Republicans, but just one other question for you as an observer. We do seem to be seeing ... We hear a lot, human life expectancy has grown and that older people are staying active and alert longer. It’s interesting that in both parties, we have so many active politicians in their seventies and even in their eighties, who seem to have all of the caniness and skill that they’ve accumulated over this long period of time, and are hanging on. At the same time, you have younger people who are increasingly restless. Does this increase in generational diversity, if that’s the word for it, have implications for American politics?

Michael Barone:
Well, it does seem like 78 is the new 50. If you go back to The Making of the President 1960, Theodore H. White explains why Nelson Rockefeller ran for president briefly during that cycle. He said, "Look, he
looked ahead, and he thought the presidency wouldn't really be up again until 1968." At that point he would be, quote, "60, too old to run," close quote. Well, Rockefeller did run at the advanced age of 60, nonetheless, in 1968. But, look, we had a race between a 78-year-old man and a 74-year-old incumbent who probably is thinking about running again at age 78 four years from now. And, among the defeated Democratic candidates in this cycle, you had people like Elizabeth Warren, who is already past 70, Bernie Sanders, who is actually born a year before Joe Biden, and so forth.

We haven't got exactly a Konrad Adenauer equivalent this year, and we haven't got anybody that has quite the hauteur of Charles de Gaulle. But, we do seem to be, having extended that period, it may be that this is the baby boom generation hanging on, that group that is no longer the largest generation, as they're described in the very good Strauss and Howe book on generations, which was written a generation ago, by the way. Boomers are still hanging around.

I used to say in my speeches that the good news about the baby boomers was that it's of the point the baby boomers were going to die out. The bad news was that I'm going to die about the same time. And, that's ... We are going on to that point. We'll see how people fare and how they go. But, we've had three presidents now born in the same year, 1946, which is often considered to be the first year of the post-World War II baby boom. President Clinton, President Bush, and President Trump. We've now got a president born just a little earlier than the baby boom generation, President Biden. We've got a bunch of post-boomers that are itching to run, but so far, the Mayor Petes of the world are settling for being a transportation secretary.

Don't discount the chances of somebody new emerging from the pack in 2021, 2022, et cetera. That has the potential to catch on. One advantage for a Republican emerging from the off-year elections is that he or she would be less involved in the disputes about Donald Trump because it would be post-Trump presidency, period, that this person's career would've been made.

Walter Russell Mead:

Interesting. Well, as we think about foreign policy, and at Hudson Institute, as you know, we think about foreign policy a lot, I, at least, had some sense in 2016 that part of what was driving Trump's primary success was some wariness or skepticism about basic elements of traditional Republican foreign policy ideas, whether it was strong alliances in NATO, whether it was free trade, immigration. Is the Republican Party changing direction on foreign policy? What do you see?

Michael Barone:

Well, I think Donald Trump was the first candidate of either party in at least a long generation to take positions on trade that are on the less free trade side, more protectionist side. And immigration, which was more of a restricting immigration position than we've seen from any candidates as immigration became a national issue, after the 1965 Immigration Act. He carried through his positions to some extent, kind of a sloppy manner. Didn't achieve as much as some of the people who backed his positions might've effected.

But, I think that the support that most Republican voters voted for, a voice for George W. Bush on Iraq and foreign policy, is now a thing of the past in the Republican Party. I think the appetite for extended foreign military interventions is very weak among Republicans. I think it's a mistake to call them isolationists at any point. That's an epithet from a different era and doesn't really apply to what they were doing. But, certainly, less willingness for military intervention while relying with some ... And, I use the term hopefully, I think in the literal sense here, relying hopefully on deterrents through military preparedness. This is, I think, at least a policy that President Trump was aiming at, if not fully succeeding in implementing, is more the Republican side.
I think on trade, the Republicans historically, of course, started as a protectionist party in the 19th century and well into the 1960s. President Kennedy's major legislative initiative in 1961-'62 was the Trade Bill, which was towards free trade. Most Democrats in Congress voted for it. Most Republicans voted against it. Disabling amendments were produced by Senator Prescott Bush of Connecticut, the father and grandfather of future Republican presidents who identified as more free traders.

But, the Republicans were never as pure free trade party as in the Reagan and Bush era as they would have you think. You read Douglas Irwin's treatment of trade, his book on trade issues. There's always been some element of protectionism in that. And, Trump was not a pure protectionist, either, basically renewing with some cosmetic and small changes to the U.S.-Canada-Mexico Free Trade Agreement, the NAFTA that he'd run against, he renegotiated.

But, I don't think the Republicans ... You're not going to see more free trade initiatives, I think. Will the Biden administration revive the Trans-Pacific Partnership Act that the Obama administration negotiated but didn't get to the finish line when they were in office, and then was repudiated not just by Donald Trump, but by candidate Hillary Clinton? I think we're not going to see something in that era.

But, there are challenges out there that are still there. I think what Trump's performance on trade tends to show is that the Republican Party, even moving in a Trump-ward direction and even if that becomes more or less permanent, which I think it roughly will be, it still retains what you called in your book, in Special Providence, the Hamiltonian Sense, that one of the purposes of foreign policy to make the world safe for American trade and American interaction economically. And, an economic framework, which one could argue, and I think correctly, is essential for American prosperity, setting a world framework of relative really free trade and the trade commercial intercourse between nations. And, I think that's going to remain unspoken. It's not usually a campaign issue, but it will remain part of the landscape, even while people are talking about restricting trade in some specific areas.

Walter Russell Mead:
So, continued strong support for a strong military, but maybe some less enthusiasm for using it, and continued support for economic openness in some form, but with a little bit less ideological push to it? Is that what you’re suggesting?

Michael Barone:
I think that's a pretty fair description of it. I think in some ways, you might say this resembles the Republican Party of the 1920s, which writers like Arthur Schlesinger Junior and partisan Democratic historians have characterized as isolationist, but which, in fact, was a party that, during the presidencies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, supported some protectionist tariff measures in trade. But, in terms of intervention, in terms of promoting the Naval Disarmament Treaties, promoting changes in the arrangements of reparations in post-World War I Europe, was a party that was active internationally, was a party that even attempted to move towards international government into international law institutions and so forth.

It was not a party that was totally disengaged from everything, but was not a party that was eager or anticipated being involved in major military actions abroad after the Syrian experience of World War I and the Syrian experience of its aftermath, which included, of course, the Communist Revolution in Russia.
Walter Russell Mead:

Yeah. Well, there is, however, the specter of China, which there wasn't a China equivalent in the 1920s. How do you think concerns about China, whether economic or strategic, are likely to play into Republican politics?

Michael Barone:

I think looking at our engagement with China over the long run, going back to President Nixon, Henry Kissinger flying secretly from Pakistan to China in 1970-'71, President Nixon's trips to Peking in 1972 ... The hopes that both the Clinton and both Bush administrations had, that engagement with China increased trade with China, increased economic interconnection, would promote a China that would obey the international framework of trade rules and economic rules, as Robert Zoellick argued when he was in the second Bush administration, and a China that would move towards more democracy, towards a better, more favorable attitude towards human rights.

All these administrations and leaders of both parties had this goal, and by the time Donald Trump comes down the escalator in June 2015, it's looking to like a lot of Americans that those hopes haven't been realized. The Obama administration is still talking about as if they were there. But, we no longer ... which, one of the attractions of Hank Paulson, the treasury secretary in the Bush administration, that he had spent so much time in China, that he, as the head of Goldman Sachs, had been negotiating with China.

I don't see people in the Biden administration advertising their long experience with China or their great sense of engagement with and sympathy and understanding of China. I think the American people have soured on that point. I think that there was a conclusion, which has been backed up by some significant policy research, that the engagement with China cost the United States a lot more manufacturing jobs, in the hundreds of thousands, than anyone anticipated when we began the neutral trade, normal trade relations with China in 2000 and 2001, sponsored by both the outgoing president Clinton and the incoming President Bush.

I think that on the Republican side, particularly, China is now seen as an enemy economically and is one that has hurt us and one that is a menace in international terms. Whether or not that will be a political issue between Republican critics and a Democratic administration, I think, remains to be seen. I think, as you've written in your Wall Street Journal column, the potential of China doing something nasty vis-à-vis Taiwan is a pretty scary potential for people that care about human rights. And, oh, by the way, while we were so embossed with whether or not the vice president could count or could question the electoral votes coming out of that envelope in the Capitol, China just clamped down and got rid of all civil liberties in Hong Kong, which is a major economic locus of the world and so forth.

So, there's been a real disillusion with China. Public opinion polling shows the vast majority of the American public now sees China as an enemy, China as somebody who has hurt our economy. I think the engagement with China was a bipartisan project, and it left open the way towards Donald Trump becoming president and moving our policy at least somewhat in a different direction, which, at the same time, was the direction that has been supported by public opinion, including a lot of people that didn't like Donald Trump.

And so, just as he was a great force and his 2016 campaign was juiced up by his opposition to dynastic politics, to families having a lease on the White House, running against Jeb Bush in the primaries, running against Hillary Clinton in the general election, so is seeming hostility towards China, towards the arrangements we've had with China, I think was a mode of force in his candidacy. And, I think, going forward, and not just because of what Trump did, but because of the failure of the hopes which many people, including me, had about our relationships with China, that's going to be a permanent fixture in
our political environment and for the Republican Party in particular, as the out party now with the Democratic Party, at least some members of whose foreign policy establishment want to maintain a kind of entente with China.

Walter Russell Mead:
Right. Well, thank you very much. I think those who've been following this conversation now know why I consider you such a distinguished student of American politics. Thanks for your time, Mike. Very much appreciate it.

Michael Barone:
Well, thank you. Thanks, Walter. It's been great meeting with you.