

A photograph of a dark grey podium with a microphone. The podium has the text 'THE WHITE HOUSE' in large white letters and 'WASHINGTON' in smaller white letters below it, separated by a red horizontal line. To the left of the podium, an American flag is partially visible. The background is a light-colored wall with vertical lines.

Illiberal Narratives *and* Shifting Values:
Examining Competing Visions of the
U.S. and its Role in the World

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Geopolitical narratives—and the policies they supported in the post-World War II international system—are in a moment of transition, driven in part by an illiberal shift unfolding within democracies, including in the United States. The nature and end result of this transition remains unclear, yet it requires not only our attention but also a sober and consistent exploration. The stakes are high.

Today, key political and private sector actors across a range of open societies are increasingly using the language of liberal values as a *moral Trojan Horse* to advance illiberal goals. As actors seek to intentionally blur the line between liberal and illiberal values via new strategic narratives, the core principles of the international system risk losing their meaning and political potency.

Given the speed and scope of these challenges to the current system, it is necessary for institutions to convene new communities of practice to assess the emergence of illiberal narratives during this period of geopolitical disruption.

On June 10, 2025, [Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs](#) assembled a group of scholars and practitioners from the policy, media, communications, legal, and academic sectors to examine the rise of illiberal narratives emanating from within the U.S. government and the recent dismantling of U.S. soft power institutions.

The workshop was organized around the following key areas:

1. The emergence of U.S. illiberal narratives
2. The state of American soft power in perspective
3. The media landscape and misinformation ecosystem
4. Shifting norms regarding U.S. rule of law
5. The ongoing battle of ideas: autocracies vs. democracies



Issue Overview: Illiberal Narratives

In post-World War II America, the [tension](#) between moral idealism and political realism has often surfaced in the public narratives communicated by various presidential administrations and Congress, and their surrogates. These narratives served as a means for the U.S. to define its role in the world and to lay out a vision for the Liberal International Order (LIO).

For nearly 80 years, U.S. foreign policy discourse reflected a high-level bipartisan values consensus, producing narratives that drew from the values of peace, security, freedom, and pluralism in an effort to promote the associated principles of sovereignty, democracy, human rights, and multilateralism.

While U.S. values-based narratives remained relatively consistent in the post-World War II era, there were many instances where policies fell short of those ideals. This report acknowledges the gap between discourse and policy but focuses primarily on interrogating the shifting *narrative landscape* of this moment rather than evaluating previous U.S. policy alignment or misalignment with its purported values.

Within that framing, we argue that today the U.S. foreign policy values consensus and the soft power institutions that long supported the global dissemination of related liberal narratives have fractured. And with it, a new illiberal foreign policy discourse is emerging in the American political context, one that still seeks to claim the moral high ground but draws from a distinctly different values system.


In the first months of the second Trump administration, officials are projecting new values-based narratives—ones that [co-opt liberal rhetoric](#) to legitimize illiberal means and redefine what constitutes a “moral” approach to U.S. foreign policy. Unlike narrative contests [between autocracies and democracies](#), which

dominated the post-World War II and post-Cold War eras, these illiberal narratives often originate from within democracies themselves, particularly the United States.

While the first Trump administration did challenge the LIO—both through its policies and rhetoric—what we are experiencing today is more strategic in its approach and systematic in scope. Case in point are the ongoing efforts to dismantle the U.S. soft power institutions that have been integral to projecting liberal values globally—from USAID and National Endowment for Democracy to Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, and more.

Through these systematic illiberal values-based narratives, the Trump administration is making its own moral case for an America First foreign policy—one that minimizes the importance of liberal values while simultaneously seeking to redefine them, all in an effort to delegitimize the core principles, institutions, and norms of the international system.

In the practice of international politics, we define ***illiberal values-based narratives*** as **strategic communication that leverages, manipulates, and/or obscures the language of liberal values as a means to achieve an illiberal political end**. This builds upon the work of Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle and their “strategic narratives” framework (2017).



“To see through these ideological disguises and grasp behind them the actual political forces and phenomena is, then, one of the most important and most difficult tasks for the student of international politics.

Hans Morgenthau

Politics Among Nations (1948)



This illiberal narrative shift was laid bare in February at the 2025 Munich Security Conference (MSC), a leading annual forum on geopolitics, where Vice President JD Vance delivered [remarks](#) arguing that the universal value of freedom, specifically freedom of speech, was under threat not from autocratic regimes, but from the governments of Europe: “The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it’s not China, it’s not any other external actor. And what I worry about is the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values—values shared with the United States of America.”

Further evidence of this narrative shift, that both obfuscates and deprioritizes values, can be found in [comments](#) from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at his first NATO press conference: “We can talk all we want about values. Values are important,” Hegseth said. “But you can’t shoot values, you can’t shoot flags, and you can’t shoot strong speeches. There is no replacement for hard power.”

In the July 1 article, “[Making Foreign Aid Great Again](#),” U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio marked the closing of USAID by deriding what he viewed as the “charity-based model” of U.S. international aid. He stated that any such programs moving forward would be “prioritizing trade over aid, opportunity over dependency, and investment over assistance”—reflecting a transactional pivot in U.S. foreign policy narratives.

The Vance, Hegseth, and Rubio comments, together with additional rhetoric by other administration officials and surrogates, are part of an emerging illiberal narrative strategy—one that reflects a profound transformation in the U.S. foreign policy values ecosystem and in the public discourse that is deployed strategically to support it.

This report will now highlight key trends and insights regarding the rise of illiberal narratives, both from the U.S. and globally, as identified by the participants of the Carnegie Council workshop held under Chatham House Rule on June 10, 2025.

Session 1: The State of American Soft Power in Perspective

During the opening session of the workshop, attendees broadly agreed that this period is unlike any other in recent history regarding challenges to liberal soft power.

The recent passing of Harvard’s Joseph Nye, who first coined the term “soft power,” was acknowledged by the participants, which sparked a discussion on whether the liberal values-based international system that Professor Nye famously studied might be coming to an end. As one attendee put it, the U.S. is “kicking out the legs” of its soft power apparatus at the worst possible time—a moment when autocracies such as Russia and China have made tremendous state-level investments in creating and projecting illiberal narratives to undermine democratic values. Another participant noted, “what Russia and China are doing isn’t soft power, it’s sharp power.”

Even before the targeted removal of State Department personnel and the defunding of institutions such as Radio Free Europe, USAID, and Voice of America, the U.S. was already on the back foot in the narrative battle, as Russia, China, and others were significantly outspending liberal democracies. Attendees also underlined the disconnect between U.S. aspirations for liberal values and actual conduct in many parts of the world, creating, at times, a yawning gap between the ways in which liberal narratives were presented and how they have been received. Such a gap, attendees argued, serves as a contributing factor to a moment in which sharp power and transactional relations are seemingly ascendant.

Perhaps most insidious, participants argued, is that this moment represents a perfect storm for the proliferation of illiberal narratives: While Russia and China have long viewed soft power as a form of hybrid warfare to counter liberal democracies, there is now a U.S. administration actively seeking similar suppression and obfuscation of liberal values. Today, the ruling governments of the U.S., China, and Russia share, in some respects, similar narrative goals: to shatter consensus and fracture any sense of shared values, both at home and abroad.

“The real challenge we face today is that we have a U.S. administration distorting the information space. If the U.S. was acting in a way it has historically, I would feel confident that we can push back on the authoritarian narratives. But we’re unilaterally disarming in the information space.

Workshop participant



Participants also drew a contrast between the current cuts to U.S. soft power and previous attempts at downsizing or reform. Unlike earlier periods, when individual programs or institutions were targeted for budgetary or foreign policy reasons, (for example, the Clinton administration’s proposal to end Radio Free Europe and USAID, and the closure of the U.S. Information Agency) today’s conversations about dismantling U.S. soft power have expanded far beyond the Beltway policy circles. Shrinking government and weakening liberal institutions has become a “national political football” for the MAGA movement. As one participant argued, the era of investments in U.S. soft power and the diplomatic inventiveness that such support produced is now over.

The shift in the U.S. soft power status quo is also felt internationally, particularly by traditional allies and partners, and citizens of those nations. Both international and U.S.-based workshop participants emphasized that Trump is no longer viewed as an aberration but as the captain setting a new course for America. As one attendee commented, “There is no return.”

As the ripple effects of the downsizing and closures of U.S. soft power institutions continue, the relationship between values and institutions comes into focus. Just as institutions designed to reflect liberal values can create a sense of optimism—as was the case during the Kennedy administration, participants noted—the absence of these institutions and the creation of illiberal ones are poised to have a tangible global effect in the other direction.

One point of contention that emerged in the first session was whether the U.S. should now be considered an authoritarian state, given its attacks on liberal soft power and its embrace of misinformation as a strategic tool. Some participants argued that while it may be premature to label the U.S. government as fully authoritarian, there are undeniable narrative sympathies between the current administration and regimes in China and Russia. At the same time, there was broad agreement that Americans still hold shared liberal values that stand in stark contrast to those of autocracies. In this environment, it is critical for non-governmental organizations and private

sector actors to step up and help articulate and defend a coherent narrative rooted in democratic principles, a key to which is the support of truly independent-local journalism both in the U.S. and globally.

Participants also held a robust discussion on the failure of U.S. liberal soft-power institutions to make an effective case for need within the U.S., not only to Washington, DC and civil society elites, but to the American people.

“The narrative that we had about the value of all of this [soft power] was obvious and innate [to those working in the space] but wasn’t obvious to the rest of the country.”

Workshop participant



It was also noted that there have been legal obstacles to making the case to the American public as to how and why soft power institutions are central to U.S. national security, particularly the prohibitions on using soft power domestically in the Smith-Mundt Act.

Session 2: The Media Landscape and Misinformation Ecosystem

Three key themes emerged during the second workshop session: 1) the alignment of anti-media narratives with executive action from the Trump administration; 2) the lure of community over truth; and 3) the strategic poisoning of the information ecosystem in the era of AI.

Participants focused on the collapse of a high-level values consensus grounded in a liberal conception of democracy, both in the policies that individuals support and in the narratives they encounter daily. This can also be seen as support dwindles for the institutions once considered centrally important (governmental and non-governmental). As part of this collapse, the audience for fact-based journalism is shrinking, local media is disappearing, and independent creators are dominating the narrative ecosystem, creating fertile ground for disinformation to thrive and proliferate.

This is happening as the Trump administration aggressively attacks U.S. media institutions and individual journalists, both narratively and through policy actions. In an ironic but effective twist, Trump 2.0 is deliberately cherry-picking liberal values such as freedom of speech and institutional accountability to undermine independent media.

In the private sector, narratives about the threat to democracy or the critical importance of soft power have largely failed to spur meaningful action. Participants noted little evidence that private sector actors are willing to risk short-term profits to promote counter-narratives

emphasizing democracy's role in sustaining open markets and independent institutions. Many participants argued that those working in the democracy space must do more to construct liberal values-based narratives that speak directly to private sector interests in order to catalyze engagement.

Discussion then turned to examining the phenomenon of *community loyalty over truth*. Participants highlighted the closed feedback loop created by new media and independent influencers that perpetuate and recycle similar illiberal narratives with no institutional checks or shared code of ethics. Creators are allowed to join the informal community and profit from their affiliation as long as they don't stray too far from [tribal narratives](#)—often prioritizing loyalty to a political figure or policy over objective truth. This dynamic is fueled and perpetuated by a long-term sorting in the U.S. along partisan lines and, at the same time, an epidemic of loneliness exacerbated by the decline of associational life and the rise of social media.

In closing, participants discussed the consequences for the information ecosystem stemming from the shuttering and defunding of government and nonprofit institutions that have historically promoted liberal narratives and defended democracy. The first and most immediate impact of this soft power retreat is the shrinking of the “democracy information space,” described as an ecosystem of organizations and nonprofits that have relied on

one another to operate effectively. For example, USAID has traditionally depended on insights from organizations like Radio Free Asia, and vice versa. The closure of institutions or deep cuts to their staffing and programming not only undermines their individual capacity but also weakens the broader network of actors who have long collaborated to project narratives and offer resources in defense of liberal values.

The shrinking of the *democracy information space* could not come at a worse moment. Just as liberal-values-based online research and resources are disappearing, large language models (LLMs) are ascendant—models that are trained on precisely the data now vanishing from the information ecosystem. Even before the Trump administration's cuts to U.S. liberal soft power institutions and the decline of independent local media, actors like Russia were already deploying sophisticated illiberal narrative campaigns. These efforts deliberately created content not necessarily for direct public consumption but to flood the information environment so that LLMs would be trained on distorted data. Amid these challenges, the Trump administration closed the Counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference office at the State Department, formerly known as the Global Engagement Center. Participants underscored the urgency of preserving liberal-values-based content to ensure that future AI systems are informed by credible sources rather than “poisoned narratives.”

Session 3: Shifting Norms Regarding U.S. Rule of Law

The next session of the convening focused on a key aspect of the illiberal turn in the U.S.: shifting norms regarding rule of law. Before delving into the specific narratives that are being deployed to advance this illiberal turn, participants discussed select trends shaping the current legal space in the United States.

The first trend concerns the recent Supreme Court ruling that essentially makes it impossible to prosecute President Trump for any crimes committed while in office, completely shattering not only legal precedent but the post-WWII domestic accountability norm for U.S. presidents. The second trend is the administration's expansive view of executive power via Article II of the U.S. Constitution and an embrace of unitary executive theory. The

third is the abdication of Congress' authority as a co-equal branch of government.

Taken together, these trends have provided the legal and political conditions for the administration to enact increasingly brazen actions against the media, universities, migrants, law firms, etc., while also, in select cases, refusing to comply with court rulings countermanding such orders.

Participants identified the following language related to illiberal narratives as integral to shifting conceptions of liberal values domestically and the rule of law:

Issue	Shifting Legal Narratives: Liberal to Illiberal
January 6th	From “criminals” and “insurrectionists” to “tourists” and “political prisoners.”
Migration	From “asylum seekers” to “terrorists” and “invasion.”
Corruption	From “corruption” and “malign foreign influence” to “transactional diplomacy” and “deal-making.”
Courts	From “independent judiciary” and “balance of powers” to “lawless” and “unelected.”
Public Assembly	From “protests” to “rebellion,” “violence,” and “insurrection.”
Due Process	Suspension of a “right” due to a “national security threat.”
Tariffs	From “economic policy” with consultation and consent from Congress to “national emergency” allowing the U.S. to operate outside political rules and norms.

The legal tools now available to the Trump administration are particularly concerning, given what is known about democratic backsliding. Participants raised that while such regression is rare globally, and that on the whole democracies are incredibly resilient, when backsliding is successful, it is often due to effective “executive aggrandizement,” defined as highly strategic and effective attacks on the media, judiciary, and anti-corruption mechanisms. Participants also noted the use of executive orders targeting U.S. law firms and the differences in the ways those firms responded, with some accepting the administration’s terms and others resisting, both strategies carrying inherent risks.

In remarking on the reaction of civil society to this moment, one participant commented that nonprofits should not try to “bob above water” regarding democratic principles. They must avoid adopting the watered-down and illiberal language perpetuated by the administration related to the “value” of democracy as a vehicle to deliver only “national security” and/or a robust “economy.”

Independent from these issues, participants argued that there are aspects of liberal values and democracy that are normatively important. Civil society must avoid speaking on the administration’s terms by embracing or acquiescing, even partially, to illiberal narratives regarding the value of democracy.

Session 4: The Ongoing Battle of Ideas: Autocracies vs. Democracies

In the final session of the workshop, discussion pivoted back to the geopolitical landscape, diving deeper into the sharp power efforts of actors such as China and Russia.

Participants identified that the last decade, in particular, represented a global pushback against democracy driven, in large part, by highly effective illiberal narratives. These narratives are both ideological (anti-democratic) in nature and tactical (tailored to prop up individual political actors and constructed for specific regions and states) in their construction. From an ideological perspective, the narratives target not only democracy as an idea or

political system, but the “West” and its related institutions as a whole (again highlighting the relationship between values and institutions). A key ingredient to such narratives is the inclusion of fear and anxiety, i.e. “grievance-based” discourse that is not only effective at the local level but can be recycled, tailored, and promoted via an illiberal red thread powered by transnational social media networks.

The most effective transnational illiberal narrative strategies work to generate content and then inject it locally and amplify it inauthentically via monetized influencers, trolls, etc. to game the algorithms of social networks. This method not only introduces bad-faith discourse regarding liberal values, it also fundamentally changes the information ecosystems within countries, creating self-perpetuating echo chambers for illiberal narratives.

Despite the deep ethical and factual issues with illiberal narratives, participants warned that to dismiss such narratives as pure disinformation and misinformation to be countered with “truth” was a strategic error. Often, what makes illiberal narratives so effective is that they are a combination of malign information and truth. The imperfections of democracy are leveraged as convenient and easy-to-digest narratives to “prove” its ineffectiveness as a system, despite many experiences and studies that indicate the effectiveness of democratic states across time and place. Attendees stressed the need

to construct civic spaces where citizens of democracies can debate, interrogate, and seek to improve the shortcomings of democracy without the malign and bad-faith influence of illiberal narratives from autocratic actors. This is a dangerous time to be bowling alone.

In addition to highlighting the flaws of democracy, participants noted that illiberal narratives often seek to challenge the prioritization of values within traditional open societies, e.g. that individual rights should take priority over collective security. In this we see overlapping strategies or shared “narrative sympathies,” (as highlighted in Session 1 of the workshop) between the Trump administration, Russia, and China. While participants pointed out the privileging of [order over freedom](#) is not a phenomenon distinct to Trump. Increasingly, we’re seeing a narrative concentric circle between the U.S. and autocracies, specifically in regard to the claim that states are the final arbiters to the exclusion of any universal rights or rules—except those set by the people in power.

Conclusion

The convening at Carnegie Council and this subsequent report aimed to interrogate the emergence of illiberal narratives alongside the recent dismantling of U.S. soft power institutions. The initial findings highlight the critical need for continued analysis of illiberal narratives, both domestically and transnationally.

Particular attention should be paid to the shifting digital information ecosystem, which narrative types are most effective in the current geopolitical environment, and the impact of said narratives on the LIO.

We call upon global professionals across the policy, media, communications, legal, and academic sectors to recognize the co-opting of liberal discourse as a means to both achieve illiberal ends and to redefine what constitutes a moral approach to foreign policy.

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IMAGE CREDITS

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Pg. 4: Andy Feliciotti/Unsplash

Appendix: Recommended Readings and Resources

[“Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms,”](#) Alexander Cooley, *Journal of Democracy*, July 2015

[“Autocracies win the minds of the democratic public: how Japanese citizens are persuaded by illiberal narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes,”](#) Tetsuro Kobayashi, Yuan Zhou, Lungta Seki & Asako Miura, *Democratization*, March 12, 2025

[“China and Russia are deploying powerful new weapons: ideas,”](#) *The Economist*, May 15, 2025

[Defending Democracy in an Age of Sharp Power,](#) eds. William J. Dobson, Tarek Masoud, & Christopher Walker, *Journal of Democracy/Johns Hopkins University Press*, 2023

[“Distortions of Normativity,”](#) Herlinde Pauer-Studer & J. David Velleman, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, June 2011

[“Do Morals Matter? Presidents & Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump, with Joseph Nye,”](#) Joseph S. Nye, Jr. & Joel H. Rosenthal, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, February 4, 2020

[Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations,](#) Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, & Laura Roselle, University of Michigan Press, 2017

[Invisible Rulers: The People Who Turn Lies into Reality,](#) Renee DiResta, PublicAffairs, 2024

[“The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions,”](#) Hans J. Morgenthau, *The American Political Science Review*, December 1950

[“Misinformation and Disinformation as ‘Soviet-Era Words:’ How JD Vance is Gaslighting the World,”](#) Matthias Risse, Harvard Kennedy School, Carr Center for Human Rights, February 18, 2025

[“Morality and Power from the Individual to the Institution, with Joel Rosenthal,”](#) Kevin Maloney & Joel H. Rosenthal, Values & Interests, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, February 20, 2025

[“Munich Security Conference 2025 Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions,”](#) ed. Benedikt Franke, Munich Security Conference (MSC), 2025

[“Narratives That Win \(or Lose\) Democracy: A Collective Interview,”](#) Yery M. García & Ignacio Saiz, Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion Collaborative, 2023

[Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics,](#) Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, & Hal Roberts, Oxford University Press, 2018

[“Sentiment Shifts and a New Approach to Strategic Narratives Analysis: Russian Rhetoric on Ukraine,”](#) Juris Pupcenoks, Scott Fisher, Graig Klein, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Winter 2024

[“Winning the Battle of Ideas: Exposing Global Authoritarian Narratives and Revitalizing Democratic Principles,”](#) Joseph Siegle, National Endowment for Democracy, February 5, 2024

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