

# United Service

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## **Towards a new American isolationism?**

At his inauguration on 20 January, the incoming president of the United States, Donald J. Trump, seemed to usher in a new era of American isolationism when he declared: "From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first." His message resonated powerfully with key segments of the United States electorate who have been left behind economically by globalisation, but it raised fears among America's allies.

Isolationism has been a recurring theme in American political history. Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries understandably were loath to become involved in wars among the European powers. The United States did not enter the Great War, which began on 28 July 1914, until 6 April 1917. Post-war, United States president Woodrow Wilson, the architect of the League of Nations, could not convince his countrymen to join the League. Then, following the outbreak of world war on 1 September 1939, the United States remained neutral until Japan attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941.

For the past 70 years, the United States has put its isolationist tendencies to one side. It has become the leader of the free world and the champion of a rules-based global order. A reversion now to isolationism would have major implications for international trade and for the network of defence alliances which underpin global

security. A policy of isolationism, though, would be difficult to implement as the twin genies of globalisation and the information revolution are well and truly 'out of the bottle'. There also would be resistance from American institutions, including the congress and the courts. But even if the reversion were only partial, very considerable damage could be done to the exiting world order.

What would this mean for Australia? As I indicate on pp. 9 – 13, the Trump phenomenon is but a symptom of a wider global malaise. This malaise demands that we re-think our defence strategy (see also Michael Evans' paper on pp. 21 – 25); develop a much stronger defence force; adopt a far more independent defence posture; and avoid becoming squeezed between the United States and China.

The world stands at a crossroad. It can continue to move forward towards greater international co-operation on trade and security within a rules-based global order; or regress towards nationalism, with its regions dominated by hegemony. Should the latter direction be taken, it will not be a comfortable environment for Australia. We must do what we can to avoid that outcome, but plan and prepare ourselves for it, because what was unthinkable a year ago is now very much in prospect.

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