

United States In 2025: Social Problems Denied Via Rhetorics Of Refusal



Richard D. Wolff

01-17-2025 ~ Societies survive and grow when they successfully navigate their contradictions. Eventually, however, accumulating contradictions overwhelm existing means of navigating them. Then social problems arise that persist or worsen inside such societies because they are unsuccessfully navigated or go unattended. Sometimes, the dominant conscious reaction to such social problems is denial, a refusal to see them. Denial of internal social problems displaces navigating the contradictions that cause them. The resulting social decline, like the set of internal contradictions it reflects, is denied and ignored. Instead, narratives or rhetorics can arise that position such societies as victims of abuse by foreigners. The United States in 2025 illustrates this process: its rhetorics of refusal aim to end its victimization.

In today's United States, one such rhetoric refuses to allow continued abuse by foreigners "threatening our national security." This rhetoric blames bad U.S. political leadership for its failure to put America first and thereby make it great again. Another rhetoric demands that "we" refuse to allow "our democracy" to be destroyed by foreign enemies (and their domestic equivalents): people who are said to hate, not understand, or undervalue "our democracy." Still another rhetoric of refusal sees foreigners "cheating" the United States in trade and migration processes. Most Americans embrace one or more of such rhetorics. Yet, as we propose to show here, such rhetorics are ever less effective.

One reactionary rhetoric, Trump's, gestures toward former greatness by literally renewing American imperialism. He threatens to retake the Panama Canal, change Canada into the 51st of the United States, conquer Greenland from Denmark, and possibly invade Mexico. All those foreigners are said to threaten national security or else "cheat" the United States. Trump's typical bloviating aside, this is remarkable expansionism. Such repeated colonialist gestures feed broader notions of making America *greater again*.

Colonialism repeatedly helped European capitalism navigate its internal contradictions (temporarily escaping the social problems it caused). Eventually, however, it could no longer do so. After World War II, anti-colonialism limited that escape. The subsequent European neo-colonialisms and the informal colonialism of the American empire had shorter life spans. China and the rest of the BRICS countries are now everywhere closing that escape. Hence the frustrated rage of Trump's insistence on refusing that ending by deliberately reopening the idea of an escape hatch of colonial expansions. It resembles Netanyahu's idea (if not yet his violence) in trying to reopen that hatch for Israel by driving Palestinians out of Gaza. United States support for Netanyahu likewise associates the U.S. with colonialist violence in a world overwhelmingly committed to end colonialism and its unwanted legacy.

The United States boasts the world's strongest military establishment. The dominant rhetoric in the United States casts everything it does as self-defense necessitated by foreign enemies. That justifies the government spending much more on defense than on the few internal social problems that rhetoric even recognizes. Yet the United States lost the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and now Ukraine, and these countries' military establishments were far from the world's strongest. It turns out that the proliferation of nuclear weapons and technical competition among nuclear powers have changed military balances around the world. The United States' gross underestimates of Russia's warfare capacities in 2022 illustrate the change very dramatically. They also illustrate that a rhetoric stressing a refusal to be victimized by foreign militaries undercut or displaced sober analyses of a militarily changed world. Now the world observes not only changed global military configurations but also the costly denials of them by U.S. leaders. Political and economic leaders everywhere else are now rethinking their strategies accordingly. Rhetorics of refusal to be victimized can become self-destructive.

Another reason those leaders are redesigning their growth plans follows from the intertwined declines of the U.S. empire and the U.S. capitalist system. What U.S. leaders deny, many foreign leaders have incentives to see, evaluate, and take advantage of. The [BRICS members](#) (9) and partners (9), as of January 2025, account for nearly half the world's population and 41 percent of the world's GDP (in purchasing power parity terms). Four other nations have been invited and are likely to join in 2025: Vietnam, Turkey, Algeria, and Nigeria. Indonesia just joined as a full BRICS partner adding its roughly 280 million population. In contrast, the G7—the world's second-largest economic bloc—accounts for about 10 percent of the world's population and 30 percent of its GDP (also in purchasing power parity terms). Moreover, as data from the International Monetary Fund documents, recent years show a widening gap between the annual GDP growth rates of the G7-leading United States and the BRICS-leading China and India.

Across the history of capitalism from its earlier times in England through the American empire's peak early in the 21st century, most nations focused chiefly on the G7 in strategizing economic growth, debt, trade, investments, currency exchange rates, and balances of payments. Large- and medium-sized enterprises did likewise. Yet over the last 15-20 years, countries and enterprises have faced an altogether new, different global situation. China, India, and the rest of the BRICS countries offer an alternative possible focus. Everyone can now play the two blocs off against one another. Moreover, in this play, the BRICS now hold better, richer cards than the G7. Rhetorics of refusal spin these changes in the world economy as the evil intentions of foreign others—who likely hate democracy. The United States should righteously refuse and thereby frustrate those intentions, they argue. In contrast, far less attention is paid to how internal U.S. social problems both shape and are shaped by a changing global economy.

The changing world economy and the relative decline of the G7 within it have turned U.S. capitalism away from neoliberal globalization toward economic nationalism. Tariffs, trade wars, and "America first" ideological pronouncements are concurrent forms of such turning inward. Another form is the call to bring parts of the outside of the United States inside: Trump's unsubtle imperialistic threats directed at Canada, Mexico, Denmark, and Panama. Yet another form is the advisory many major U.S. colleges and universities are sending to enrolled students from other countries (over a million last year). It suggests they consider the likelihood of great visa difficulties in completing their degrees amid

increasing U.S. government hostility toward foreigners. A [reduced foreign student presence](#) will undercut U.S. influence abroad for years to come (much as it fostered that influence in the past). U.S. higher education institutions, already facing serious financial difficulties, will find them deepening as paying foreign students choose other nations for their degrees. “America first” rhetoric risks the self-destruction of the United States’ global position.

Politically, the U.S. strategy since World War II was to contain perceived foreign threats by a combination of “hard” and “soft” power. They would enable the United States to eliminate communism, socialism, and, after the Soviet implosion of 1989, terrorism, wherever possible, overtly or covertly. Hard power would be deployed by the U.S. military via hundreds of foreign military bases surrounding nations perceived to be threatening and via invasions if, when, and where deemed necessary. Hard power also took the form of implicit threats of nuclear warfare (made credible by the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and by total U.S. arms race expenditures on nuclear and non-nuclear weapons that no other countries, alone or in groups, could match.

“Soft power” would serve globally to project particular definitions of democracy, civil liberties, higher education, scientific achievement, and popular culture. These definitions were presented as best and most exemplified by what actually existed in the United States. In this way, the United States could be exalted as the global peak of civilized human achievement: a kind of partner discourse to other discourses that denied internal social problems. Enemies could then readily be demonized as inferior.

U.S. soft power was and remains a kind of political advertising. The usual commercial advertiser promotes only everything positive (real or plausible) about his client’s product. Typically, everything negative (real or plausible) is associated by that same advertiser only with his client’s competitor’s product. One might call this “advertising communication.” In the 20th century’s Cold War, U.S. soft power entailed an application of advertising communication where the United States and its supporters, public and private, functioned as both client and advertiser. The United States advertised itself as “democracy” and the USSR as its negative opposite or “dictatorship.” Cold War advertising communication continues today in the slightly changed form of “democracy” versus “authoritarianism.” But like advertising, after too many repetitions its influence lessens.

Unfortunately for the United States, economic problems now besetting its capitalist system—both those caused by accumulated internal contradictions and those caused by its declining position within the world economy—directly undercut its soft power projections. Brandishing tariffs and repeatedly threatening to increase them reflect the need for governmental protection for decreasingly competitive U.S.-based firms. U.S. rhetorics that instead blame foreigners for “cheating” sound increasingly hollow. Deporting millions of immigrants signals an economy no longer strong and growing enough to absorb them productively (what once “made America great” and showed that greatness to the world). U.S. rhetorics denouncing “foreign invasions” of immigrants encounter growing skepticism and even ridicule inside as well as outside the United States.

The gross inequality of wealth and income in the United States and the global exposure of billionaires’ power over government (Musk over Trump, CEOs donating millions of dollars to Trump’s inauguration celebration) replace perceptions of the United States as exceptional in its vast middle class. The record levels of government, corporate, and household debt alongside abundant signs that such indebtedness is worsening do not help project the United States as an economic model. The year 2024’s experience with a dominant U.S. strategy denying social problems while rhetorically stressing the dangers of evil foreign forces suggests it may be approaching exhaustion. The year 2025 may then provide conditions for a profound challenge to that strategy matching the challenges confronting the global position of U.S. capitalism.

By Richard D. Wolff

Author Bio: Richard D. Wolff is professor of economics emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a visiting professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School University, in New York. Wolff’s weekly show, “Economic Update,” is syndicated by more than 100 radio stations and goes to millions via several TV networks and YouTube. His most recent [book with Democracy at Work](#) is *Understanding Capitalism* (2024), which responds to requests from readers of his earlier books: *Understanding Socialism* and *Understanding Marxism*.

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