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5 on 45: Why former presidents spoke out against Trump

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

GALSTON: I'm Bill Galston, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, and I'd like to spend just a few minutes talking with you about some very interesting speeches that have been given in the past week by a former Republican president George W. Bush, a former Democratic president Barack Obama, and a former Republican presidential nominee John McCain whom Barack Obama defeated in 2008.

I group these three together because in their speeches and statements in the past week they actually made very similar points. They are worried about the fundamental orientation of the Trump administration, what it means first for America's role in the world, and secondly, for American democracy here at home. With regard to America's role in the world, President Bush, President Obama, and Senator McCain defend different versions of the cross-partisan consensus that prevailed for most of the period after World War II. The idea was that the United States would take the lead in building an international order. It will be an order dedicated to peace and security but founded on certain principles. Principles of democracy, individual rights, open markets, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

I think it is fair to say that this order would not have come into being and it would not have been sustained for so many decades without a leadership role for the United States. And all three of the speakers saw troubling trends in the Trump administration. A denial of the importance of the post-war order, a willingness to replace an order based on principles and values with an order based on national interests, an order that is willing to set aside the American tradition of regard for countries other than itself not as an act of charity but as part of who we are as a country.

The second prong of their critique had to do with the effect of the Trump administration on American democracy. They believe and strongly stated that American

citizenship has nothing to do with dissent, or blood, or history. It has, furthermore, nothing to do with religion. American citizenship is defined by dedication to the ideals and institutions that have bound us together as a nation from the very beginning, the principles laid out in the Declaration of Independence, the institutions that were enshrined in the US Constitution.

They are troubled by the anti-immigrant tone of the administration. They are troubled by the attack on the press. They are troubled, and Senator McCain underscored this, by what they see as the administration's effort to import a European conception of citizenship based, as McCain put it, on blood and soil. To replace what Mr. McCain and the other speakers saw as the authentic definition of American citizenship based, as Abraham Lincoln once put it, on our shared national dedication to a proposition. As you can see this critique of the Trump administration goes to the heart of what its critics see as its most questionable tendencies. And this is a great debate within American democracy that I suspect will rage for some years to come.

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