

Culture and Foreign Policy:

The American Liberal Tradition and Global Order Building

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Introduction

States operate in a world shaped by power and interests. The material capabilities of states go a long way in determining what states want and what they can do. The constraints, opportunities, and ambitions of states are shaped by their power and position. The distribution of power and the core interests of states are the building blocks of international relations. We can call this the “structural setting” of states – and it explains a great deal about patterns and dynamics of world politics. But power and interests do not tell us everything about what states want or do. States bring their own “baggage” to the conduct of foreign policy. The interests of states are not always obvious and power is not simply reducible to material assets. States have their own cultures – national ideologies, experiences, and beliefs – that inform the way their leaders think about world affairs.¹

The United States certainly has distinctive ideologies and beliefs -- rooted in its founding, political development, and world-historical trajectory – that have influenced the ways in which American leaders have pursued foreign policy. Observers have noted the unique ideology, beliefs, and polity principles of the United States, manifest and expressed across its history: as a weak and peripheral state in the 19th century, as a rising world power in the 20th century, and as the unipolar state in the aftermath of the Cold War. The United States is famous for embodying expansive notions of its liberal political ideals and their global significance. The birth of the United States has been seen by many Americans as the historical epicenter and leading edge of an ongoing world political movement. There is a widespread view in the United States that American political ideals about liberalism and democracy are universal in their scope and significance. But these ideologies and beliefs are multifaceted, and they have manifested themselves in complex ways. At some moments, these ideas and ideals have led the United States to retreat from the world, seeking to protect its unique polity, while at other moments, these ideas and ideals have led the United States to pursue grandiose agendas for global

¹ In this paper, the term “culture” is used in a very broad way, referring to the entire ensemble of ideational variables – collective ideas and ideals, regime principles, political values, national identities, and historical traditions and experiences.

transformation. And on other occasions, these ideas and ideals do not seem to have played much of a role at all. So we are left with the question: in America's encounter with the world, what are the ideas, ideals, and cultural legacies that have informed foreign policy, and how have they mattered?

In this paper, I will first look at what we mean by "culture" as it relates to American foreign policy, and I will suggest various ways in which it – that is, American-style ideas, ideals, and beliefs – can be manifest in foreign policy. After this, I look at a variety of specific realms of ideas, ideals, and beliefs, and trace their role and impact on American foreign policy, particularly in its 20th century efforts at world order building. If the "American century" is slowly giving way to a more decentralized distribution of power, how will American ideas and ideals fare? Are American ideas and ideals universal or parochial – or both?

Ideas, Cultural Traditions, and Foreign Policy

The United States has found itself with repeated opportunities to influence and shape the terms of world order. When it has, to what extent and in what ways does it bring distinct ideas and cultural traditions to the table? Clearly, states at major turning points in world politics – at "world ordering moments" – wield power in the service of their self-understood national interests. Power and interests are the "coin of the realm" in international relations, and it would be difficult to understand the flow of conflict and cooperation among states without reference to these basic realities. But how do states – not least the United States – think about their interests in the context of struggles over world order? In what ways do a cluster of ideational variables – ideas, cultural traditions, historical experiences – help give shape to the way interests are defined and power is exercised?²

The United States certainly brought distinct liberal ideas to its efforts to shape the terms of postwar order in 1919 and 1945. Henry Kissinger has noted that the United States has stood out among the great powers of the last two centuries in its national embrace of a liberal vision. "It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day."³ Certainly Woodrow Wilson's agenda for postwar peace – collective security, the League of Nations, and international order based on democracy and international law – reflected distinctive American ideas and ideals. After World War II, the United States again advanced ideas about the organization of

² In thinking about how "ideas matter," Max Weber famously argued that while "interests" tended to drive human action, ideas can act like a switch on a railroad track and alter the direction of human action. "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world-images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interest." Max Weber, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, edited and translated by Gerth and C.W. Mills, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948), p. 280.

³ Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 30.

economics, politics, and security based on the American experience and liberal ideals.⁴ At home, the New Deal recast state-market relations and generated new approaches to the management of the economy and national commitments to equity and social welfare. These programs – and the ideas about economic security and the management of markets – informed American efforts at creating postwar rules and institutions. Across the 20th century, American-style understandings of liberalism and modernization helped shape United States policies toward the organization of the international system.⁵

More generally, great powers have on various occasions undertaken sweeping shifts in their strategic orientation toward international order. Jeffrey Legro, for example, has explored the moments of transition when the United States and Japan shifted from isolationist to internationalist orientations, and the emergence of Gorbachev-era “new thinking” in the Soviet Union, which paved the way for the end of the Cold War. In each case, domestic political struggles created space for competing ideas about grand strategy and international order. The basic domestic understanding of the national interest was thrown open. International crisis and party-elite competition at home created circumstances where grand foreign policy alternatives were in play and ideas mattered.⁶

Of course, the distribution of power and national interests are never too far below the surface of struggles over international order. The United States would not have been able to think about the possibility of shaping the basic architecture of the global system after the two world wars and more recently if it did not possess such massive power advantages. And as realist scholars note, such as Robert Gilpin, when powerful states have opportunities to shape the rules and institutions of global order, they do so in ways that advantage themselves.⁷ In this way, American orientations toward world order are in some sense explicable in terms of their circumstances defined in terms of power and interests.

But there are at least three basic ways in which ideas, traditions, and historical experiences matter in influencing how interests are defined and power is exercised.⁸ First, countries can have distinctive ideas and ideologies about politics, economics, and the dynamics and direction of world historical change. Countries – certainly great powers with revolutionary foundings – tend to have “master ideas” about themselves, their political traditions, and their place within the larger global setting. In the case of the United States, these ideas and ideologies of national identity can remain in the background or they can – at specific moments – feed

⁴ G. John Ikenberry, After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Chapter Five and Six.

⁵ See David Ekbladh, The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶ Jeffrey Legro, Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁷ Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁸ See G. John Ikenberry, “Introduction,” in Ikenberry, Wang Jisi, and Zhu Feng, eds., The United States, China, and World Order (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

directly into preferences and policy. Samuel Huntington has depicted this dynamic in his study of American ideas and ideology. Huntington sees the United States alternating between “normal” foreign policy, driven by day-to-day considerations of interests and the play of domestic politics, and moments when ideas and ideals drive American foreign policy.⁹

Second, countries have distinctive domestic political institutions, and this has an impact on how they come to define their interests and pursue policies. Distinctive domestic political institutions can matter in several ways. They can matter as they shape the process and politics of policy making. Democratic and pluralistic institutions – such as those in the United States – can create competitive political dynamics and party competition that generate frequent sharp shifts in policy. Leaders come and go. Political parties offer different agendas for foreign policy. Democratic politics both explains why Woodrow Wilson became president and why, ultimately, he failed to realize his vision of American leadership in the League of Nations and a liberal world order. In accounting for American preferences and policies toward global rules and institutions, domestic political institutions – and the political culture which supports them -- matters.

Domestic institutions appear to have some impact on the manner and degree to which states seek and are able to make international commitments. The United States is deeply ambivalent about binding itself to international rules and institutions. The United States likes to live in a world where other states are tied to American-style global rules and institutions while it remains relatively free and unbound. The American system of liberal democracy has reinforced this ambivalent orientation. It has spread authority across branches of government and created high standards for congressional ratification of treaties. Even when American presidents have wanted to pursue treaty agreements in areas such as arms control and the environment, they have frequently found the Senate unwilling to sign on. More generally, the American democratic system provides a pluralistic and competitive setting that allows vocal and well organized minorities to resist American foreign policy action and leadership. In recent years, for example, right-wing opposition to the United Nations, global warming, and the International Criminal Court has undermined efforts by internationalist-oriented American presidents.¹⁰

Third, countries bring forward from their past different lessons and historical experiences that also help shape the way interests are defined and power is exercised. These are lessons and historical experiences that have shaped the identities and world views of leaders and peoples within these countries – narratives of the country’s founding, wars and national sacrifice, grand achievements and failures, and so forth. The United States has drawn on both national triumphs and tragedies as its national myths and narratives. Most grand, perhaps, is its self-image as the first “new nation” of the world. This is the American understanding of its own founding -- a

⁹ Samuel Huntington, “American Ideals versus American Institutions,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 97, No. 1 (Spring 1982), pp. 1-37.

¹⁰ See Charles A. Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz, “Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” International Security, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007); and Walter Russell Mead, “The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy: What Populism Means for Globalism,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011).

bold new experiment in the affirmation of universal ideas of democracy and the rights of mankind. Later generations added narratives of world war, the rise of American power, the New Deal and the modernization of the American state, and great accomplishments in building and leading the liberal world of democracies. The United States has also carried forward lessons of failure and upheaval. The mercantilism and breakdown of order in the 1930s has reinforced ideas about the virtue of free trade. The Great Depression was seen as a failure of American leadership and international cooperation. The Munich Agreement in the fall of 1938 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 created bitter illusions and world weary lessons about power and weakness. The Vietnam War and the more recent Iraq War are also woven into these grand narratives of American global power and interests. When the United States debates issues of global order today, this rich set of narratives and lessons are always close at hand.

In these various ways, the ideas and ideological traditions of countries can have direct and indirect impacts. These ideational variables almost always are found to work together with power and interests to account for outcomes. That is, to argue that ideas, institutions, and legacies matter is not to argue that power and interests do not. Rather these variables are brought into the account in efforts to explain the ways in which interests are defined and power is exercised. The United States has made efforts to build international order, drawing on its power advantages and its prevailing understanding of its own interests. But the substantive definition of interests have come, at least in part and in various ways, from ideas, institutions, and historical experiences.

Beyond this, it is also clear that the ideas, traditions, and legacies that inform American preferences and policies do not all speak with a singular voice. The United States has a rich sets of ideas and legacies that can be used to advance a wide array of policies. To see the ways in which ideas, traditions, and legacies play a role in American foreign policy toward global order, it is necessary to look closely at specific policy areas and moments. The United States is not prisoner of its past or of its native grown ideas and ideals. History – as the old saying goes – is always changing. Leaders do look back to learn from the past, but what they see and how they can use the past is not fixed.

America and the “First New Nation”

The United States entered the world at a particular time and place, bearing a particular set of founding ideas and principles. This setting and these regime principles have formed the core of a set of national political ideas and ideals that resonate throughout the centuries of American foreign policy. These ideas and principles are enshrined in various documents – the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Federalist Papers, and other founding documents. The United States established itself as a particular type of regime – a republic or what we now call a liberal democracy. The principles and declarations that were used to forge the regime contained assumptions and aspirations of the historical era in which independence and self-government occurred. Broadly, these regime principles include limited government, popular sovereignty, rule of law, free speech, and constitutionalism. Out of this founding – and the struggles that

followed to settle the nation and build a modern state – these ideas and principles were affirmed, adapted, and evolved into the American creed.

There are three aspects of these founding ideas and principles that are important in providing a backdrop for American foreign policy over the centuries. First, the United States was founded out of a colonial rebellion against the British empire. Indeed, the thirteen colonies were the first colonies to engage in revolt against what we call the “first British empire.” This is what Seymour Martin Lipset refers to when he described the United States as the “first new nation.”¹¹ The American war for independence was conducted as a struggle against empire. The colonies established their right of independence and self-determination by articulating the general principle of the illegitimacy of imperial rule. As Thomas Bender argues: “The Declaration of Independence promulgated by the thirteen colonies was the first time a people had formally and successfully claimed ‘independence’ from the imperial power that had ruled them.”¹² The colonies and, later, the United States itself proclaimed itself to be a member of the international community of sovereign states. It did not just reject British rule – it announced itself as a new member of the Westphalian system of state. In these ways, the United States was established with political ideals and principles self-consciously set in opposition to monarchy and empire. The American founders told their story to the world in the language of sovereignty and self-determination. It is an anti-imperial language which has remained a part of the American discourse on “who we are as a country” well into the current era.

A second aspect of these founding ideas and principles was their universalist Enlightenment assumptions. The Declaration of Independence was framed in terms of a set of universal principles – principles of natural rights, popular sovereignty, and self-determination. David Armitage argues that the Declaration of Independence was a “global moment” because the case for independence was one that all peoples around the world could claim as their own.¹³ It was a view of political independence organized around universal principles. A people – by virtue of being a people – had rights that others could not abridge or transgress. Americans claimed their independence not on the basis of ethnic or religious particularities, but on the basis of political principles with potentially universal application. A new era of politics and political order was emerging guided by universal-style principles. The institutions of government would be the product of the rational and enlightened efforts of man, and these efforts promised to yield laws and institutions that would bias the future in the direction of human betterment.

The American founding was, in effect, an Enlightenment project. The late-18th century was an era when new ideas about politics – the people and the state – were emerging. These ideas dealt with rights and self-determination. Assumptions and understandings about the world, emerging from the discourses of the Enlightenment and the rise of the natural sciences

¹¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective (New York: Basic Books, 1932).

¹² Thomas Bender, A Nation Among Nations: America’s Place in the World (Hill and Wang, 2006), p. 61.

¹³ David Armitage, The Declaration of Independence: A Global History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

were taking hold. Modern society represented a break with older feudal and ancient societal formations. Societal change was the product of the accumulation of knowledge, discovery, and evolved social institutions. These transformations had a developmental logic, with laws and dynamics that could be discovered. At the center of these grand transformations were man, manifest in various capacities – as agents, innovators, interest groups, classes, and thinkers. The Enlightenment vision was of a world-historical transformation. Modern society and government was taking shape. All the world is in motion – and the United States was leading the way. Indeed, as Armitage points out, the Declaration of Independence did in fact become a model for other peoples and societies around the world.¹⁴

A third aspect of the founding that set the stage for American thinking about foreign policy was the idea that a well organized international order was essential to the protection of limited government. The American regime was organized around principles of limited state constitutionalism. The rule of law, checks and balances, and electoral accountability all worked together to make the state “weak.” But the problem that republics – ancient and early modern – faced was how to protect their weak states in a world of strong states and violent and competitive conflict. Geopolitical competition and the threat of great power war was a looming menace to republican forms of rule. Mobilization for war – and survival in a competitive geopolitical environment – requires building stronger states, threatening popular rule and limited government. The great vision of Immanuel Kant was that republics needed to cooperate. They needed to work together and build unions, federations, and other associations that would create stability and protection.

The American founding struggled with this problem. The geographic isolation of the United States was clearly the most important line of defense for the young and weak American republic. The United States, an ocean away from Europe, stayed out of the great power rivalry of the Old World. The iconic admonition of George Washington in his Farewell Address to avoid “entangling alliances” was in this spirit. The dangers of the Old World included a danger to the integrity of the American regime itself. If the United States could not build or live in a world of peaceful democracies, it was better to remain aloof and protected within its own hemisphere. Until the 20th century, this remained a remarkably durable American view. Of course, with the technological revolutions of the industrial age and the coming of world war, this solution to the problem of limited state vulnerability gave way. American foreign policy in the 20th century became quite activist – dramatically proclaimed in Woodrow Wilson’s post-World War I goal of making the world “safe for democracy.” If the United States could not protect itself from the world, it would need to go out into the world and try to shape the geopolitical environment.

Taken together, these facets of the American founding and regime principles have created tendencies and orientations in U.S. foreign policy. The United States has enshrined ideas about anti-colonialism and anti-empire in its creed, reflecting its own identity as a regime forged in colonial rebellion. Its identity as a “new nation” is one that associates itself with what we would now call the “liberal” tide of history, seen in opposition to the earlier era of Old World empire. The United States also has enshrined principles understood to be potentially universal in scope –

¹⁴ Armitage, The Declaration of Independence.

democracy, rule of law, human rights. The United States might have pioneered or championed these universal principles, but they are principles that “belong to the world.” The expectation is that the world will move America’s direction because the United States is moving in a direction that is charted by the enlightened movement of modernity. Finally, the United States sees the integrity of its limited government and liberal regime principles dependent on developments in the wider global system. If the United States cannot hide from the dangerous dynamics of great power politics, it will need to help make the world more congenial with American-style polity principles.

Liberal America in the 20th Century

The United States projected ideas and political values into the world at critical turning points across the 20th century. Perhaps no state has done more to shape the global system in a way that accords with its ideals and polity principles. Certainly the United States has had opportunities. The United States rose quickly in power in the early 20th century and joined the ranks of the great powers. In the aftermath of the two world wars, the United States found itself in an extraordinary position to advance ideas about the postwar order. In each instance, the old order had been shattered by great power war. The wars intensified and hastened sharp shifts in the distribution of power. Older great powers were weakened, and the United States moved up in the ranks. In both 1918 and 1945, American presidents had ambitious ideas about peace and security. It was at these turning points that the United States pushed distinctive ideas and political principles onto the world.

In the 20th century, liberal order building was pushed forward by the United States and it went through several phases. After World War I, Woodrow Wilson and other liberals pushed for an international order organized around a global collective security body in which sovereign states would act together to uphold a system of territorial peace. Open trade, national self-determination, and a belief in progressive global change also undergirded the Wilsonian world view – a “one world” vision of nation-states that trade and interact in a multilateral system of laws creating an orderly international community. “What we seek,” Wilson declared at Mount Vernon on July 4, 1918, “is the reign of law, based on the consent of the governed and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind.” Despite its great ambition, the Wilsonian plan for liberal international order entailed very little in the way of institutional machinery or formal great power management of the system. It was a “thin” liberal order in which states would primarily act cooperatively through the shared embrace of liberal ideas and principles.¹⁵ In the end, this experiment in liberal order building failed and the world soon entered an inter-war period of closed economic systems and rival imperial blocs.

After World War II, the Roosevelt administration again engaged in liberal order building, embracing a vision of an open trading system and a world organization in which the great powers would cooperate to keep the peace. Beyond this, American architects of postwar order – drawing lessons from the Wilsonian failure and incorporating ideas from the New Deal period –

¹⁵ See Thomas Knock, To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

also advanced more ambitious ideas about economic and political cooperation embodied in the Bretton Woods institutions. But the weakness of postwar Europe and rising tensions with the Soviet Union pushed liberal order building toward a much more American-led and Western-centered system. As the Cold War unfolded, the United States took command of organizing and running the system. In both security and economic realms, the United States found itself taking on new commitments and functional roles. Its own economic and political system became, in effect, the central component of the larger liberal hegemonic order.

A more recent phase of liberal internationalism was quietly launched after World War II. This was the elaboration of universal rights of man, enshrined in the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This human rights revolution is deeply embedded in the postwar liberal international project. It was liberals – wielding liberal ideas about world order – who pushed forward the campaign for international recognition of human rights. The breakthrough was the Universal Declaration adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1948. Championed by liberals such as Eleanor Roosevelt and others, this document articulated a notion of universal individual rights that deserved recognition by the whole of mankind and not simply left to sovereign governments to define and enforce.¹⁶ A steady stream of conventions and treaties followed that together constitute an extraordinary vision of rights, individuals, sovereignty, and global order. In the decades since the end of the Cold War, these norms of human rights have been further articulated, and notions of “responsibility to project” have given the international community legal rights and obligations to intervene into the affairs of sovereign states.

In both 1918 and 1945, the United States articulated versions of political values and regime principles rooted in the American founding and national experience. Both moments featured liberal internationalist ideas and principles – open markets, multilateral rules and institutions, security cooperation, and so forth. These liberal internationalist ideas were not simply or exclusively “American,” but they were ideas embedded within America’s evolving political culture and identity. At both junctures, American leaders gave voice to founding ideas and principles mentioned earlier.

First, the United States saw itself as standing against Old World empire and imperialism. Wilson’s efforts to keep America aloof from its European allies – depicting the United States as a Associative Power – was in keeping with this impulse to remain outside the realist power politics of Europe. Wilson’s early advocacy of “peace without victory” and his later arguments against German autocratic militarism both spoke to this American view. The European war was caused by artifacts of an old illiberal European order. Indeed, the Great War itself and the Versailles peace marked the end of four of Europe’s old empire – Russian, Hapsburg, Ottoman, and German. This impulse appeared again during and after World War II. FDR and Truman made efforts to thwart and undercut older imperial projects. The United States was decisive in defeating both German and Japanese imperial aggression. The U.S. government also used the Lend Lease program with the British as leverage to end the Imperial Preference System. The

¹⁶ See Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration* (New York: Random House, 2002).

1941 Atlantic Charter meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill, which discussed war aims, also found FDR articulating an anti-imperial vision of the postwar order. In the Cold War decades, the United States again championed an open order built around multilateral rules and institutions and norms of sovereignty and self-determination. In these various ways, the United States stood against empire and imperial orders.

Second, the ideas and principles advanced by the United States after the two world wars echoed founding political ideas and values that were widely seen as potentially universal in appeal. Wilson's vision of a global order based on open trade, collective security, and international law was not seen as a Western or regional system. It was to be global – at least eventually. Wilson, of course, was famously parochial and retrograde in his view of race and civilization. He resisted efforts by Japan at Versailles to accept a racial equality clause in the charter. Some peoples and societies were more ready to join international society than others. But Wilson and other Americans understood postwar order building as a “one world” project in which countries would develop and mature, undergo political transitions, and join the system as peaceful participants. The League of Nations was to enshrine a global system of security cooperation. So too did FDR seek to build a postwar order that would have universal-style rules and institutions. Americans in the 1940s were perhaps more sober about the pace and possibilities of global movement toward liberal democracy. But the global order that FDR and others championed was premised on underlying modernizing movements of peoples and societies that would lay the groundwork for a liberal-oriented global order.

Third, the United States also linked postwar order building to the world-wide spread of liberal democracy. After 1918 and 1945, American officials connected the nation's security and long-term interests to an expanding community of liberal democracies. Woodrow Wilson saw his vision of a “community of power” made possible by a global democratic revolution. The world was moving in a liberal democratic direction, and because of this a postwar order based on collective security and international law was possible. Wilson shifted his position back and forth on whether only democracies could gain membership to the League of Nations. Despite this ambiguity, Wilson did believe that liberal democracies would form the core of the postwar world order. This core of liberal democracies would eventually spread outward to all regions of the world. It was this faith in democracy movements and liberal political transitions that lay at the heart of his progressive international vision. The world would be made democratic, and a democratic world would provide the setting for a revolution in world politics – and America's democracy would be made safe. After World War II, American officials again sought to build order around a core of advanced democracies. Originally, of course, this was not FDR's vision. In FDR's original conception, order would be maintained by the great powers, built into the institutional structures of the United Nations. But as the Cold War took hold, the United States increasingly circled its geopolitical wagons around the Western liberal democracies, along with other strategic partners and client states. The NATO alliance was infused with lofty language and imagery about shared values and institutions. The Cold War struggle was not just a realist grand strategy aimed at containing and balancing Soviet power. It was a struggle for a way of life – ideals and values that could be traced back to America's own polity principles.

In the decades after 1945, the United States led in the creation of a liberal-oriented

international order. It was a vision of order in which security came from stable peace, prosperity and economic development were widespread, democracy and individual liberty flourished, great power rivalry was moderated through accommodation, self-restraint, and a diplomacy of conflict resolution, and common global problems were addressed with international law, regimes, and organizations. American liberal internationalism was intimately connected with and enabled by the domestic programs of the Progressives and the New Deal. These programs aimed to address domestic economic, social, and racial inequalities, to create a free but efficiently regulated capitalism, to recast the American state for the industrializing and globalizing world, and to adapt the constitutional order and the pursuit of freedom to the new modernizing age.¹⁷

The post-1945 order was shaped by many forces. The rise of American power and the destruction of Japanese and German bids for dominance in Europe and Asia provided the setting for liberal order building. The United States set out to shape the postwar order so as to advance its own position and interests. Regardless of its regime principles and norms, the United States had an overriding interest in creating an open and stable postwar system. The United States had the largest and most productive economy in the world. It had world-wide interests. It wanted a postwar order that would allow it to have access to all the regions of the world. It had the capacity to project power and organize the relations of states. During the late 1930s and into the war years, American elites debated alternative visions of postwar rules and institutions. The key question was whether the United States would need to have access for trade and resources to the vast regions of Eurasia. If the world was divided into imperial zones and blocs, would the United States be able to thrive as a great power confined to the Western Hemisphere? The authoritative answers to this question were clear: the United States would need access to all the regions. Long before the end of World War II, American elites saw the country's interests tied to breaking down blocs and zones of control to construct an open global system.¹⁸

America's interest in an open and stable world economy was reinforced by deeper historical and geopolitical factors. The United States rose to power in the 20th century in a global system that was organized and dominated by empires and closed regions. The United States was a "late arriving" global power, finding a world that was closed and divided. So the United States championed global rules and institutions rather than old-style imperial organizing ideas. It championed the Open Door, self determination, and anti-colonialism, not so much for idealist reasons but because of the practical need to get Europe, Asia, and other regions open for trade, investment, and diplomacy. In this sense, the United States pursued an ambitious global order building agenda because it needed to organize the system to serve its interests. It was globally oriented – and championed universal-style rules and principles – because it needed to open up and link itself to the major regions of the world. This, in turn, gave it incentives to articulate anti-imperial principles and rules, such as openness, non-discrimination, and self-determination. From this standpoint, it is easy to explain why the United States did what it did. It was the most powerful state in the world. It had the most productive and expansive economy of its era.

¹⁷ See G. John Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ For a portrait of this debate, see Carolo Maria Santoro, Diffidence and Ambition: The Intellectual Sources of U.S. Foreign Policy (Bolder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992).

American prosperity and security hinged on the construction of an open, stable, and friendly global system. This was the sort of “environment” most suited to America’s long-term interests. Out of this structural and situational setting, the United States endeavored to build a U.S.-led liberal international order.

This account makes sense, but it does leave out American ideas, political values, and regime principles. Where do they fit in? They help define and direct how American power was exercised and its interests were pursued. If the United States had been an authoritarian, fascist, communist, or autocratic regime, it is difficult to believe it would have endeavored to build a liberal-oriented international order. As John Ruggie argues, if Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union had become the leading state after World War II, it is inconceivable that either would have organized a liberal-oriented open, multilateral system. “Politically, Germany pursued an imperial design in the European core, complete with tributary states on the periphery. Economically, the Nazi scheme of bilateral, discriminatory, and state-controlled trade pacts and monetary clearing arrangements would no doubt have been extended geographically to complete Germany’s political objectives. The Soviet Union presumably would have sought political control through a restored Comintern while causing the modes of production in its subject economies to be socialized and relations among those economies to be administered on a planned and discriminatory basis.”¹⁹ The United States had deep interests in an open world economy. But its ideas and regime principles were critical in giving content to those interests – and in structuring and legitimating a complex system of rules, institutions, partnerships, and universal-style principles that would make them sustainable over the long term.

Liberal America in a Unipolar World

The United States emerged from the end of the Cold War as the world’s lone superpower. This was a novel distribution of power. For most of the modern era, world politics was organized around a multipolar or bipolar distribution of power. But suddenly, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of hostilities between East and West, the United States became something new – a unipolar power. In these circumstances, the United States found itself more unconstrained than ever. It did not face a global geopolitical or ideological rival. It was surrounded by liberal democracies and various sorts of strategic partners and client states. Its economic and military capabilities were truly unrivaled. Under these circumstances, America’s liberal ideas and regime principles again came into play.

First, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the United States found itself faced with allies and alliances but no enemies. The far flung system of alliances and strategic commitments were the product of a half century of bipolar struggle with the Soviet Union. This strategic environment was suddenly transformed. The great question of American foreign policy at this juncture was: what are the purposes of this global security system and, more broadly, American hegemonic leadership? The core of this global security system was the Atlantic

¹⁹ John G. Ruggie, ed., Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 24..

Alliance. So here the question was: what unites the United States and Europe? The answer that America leaders tended to give to these existential questions was “shared values.” The United States argued that the “glue” that held the American-led order together was a common set of values – democracy, liberalism, rule of law, and human rights. The elder Bush and Clinton administrations both put forward visions of liberal internationalist values and principles as the legitimating rationale for what used to be known as the “free world.” In many ways, this was a return to the Wilsonian version of liberal order. The world’s liberal democracies were joined together not to respond to external threats, but to build upon and deepen their shared commitment to liberal democratic values.

Second, the Clinton administration went beyond this to articulate a grand strategy of promoting liberal democracy world wide. This was their response to the question: what comes after containment? The 1990s was a decade of global growth and democratic transitions. The “liberal narrative” was in the ascendancy. The United States faced no great ideological clashes with the other great powers. Russia was taking steps toward democratic rule and China was on the road to capitalism. Countries in East Asia, Latin America, Southern Europe, and the former Soviet bloc were establishing democratic regimes. Trade and investment were expanding within and across regions. The World Trade Organization was formed. “Globalization” and “global governance” became terms of art to describe the expanding foundations of the post-Cold War world order. The Clinton administration put forward notions such as “enlargement” and “engagement” to summarize the global aspirations of American foreign policy. At this juncture, the United States could see itself and its role in the world in grandly liberal terms. The ideas and principles of the American regime were finding world wide appeal.

Third, the United States took a new turn toward world order after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The Bush administration articulated a sweeping new doctrine of national security based on provocative ideas about American global dominance, the preventive use of force, coalitions of the willing, and the struggle against tyranny and illiberalism. In the spring of 2003, this intellectual doctrine provided the intellectual backdrop for the invasion of Iraq. As the invasion turned into a protracted war, the Bush administration increasingly invoked liberal internationalist ideas to justify the war. The United States would stand over the global system as a unipolar security provider. It would use force – unilaterally if necessary – to go after terrorists. The United States would play by different rules than other states, but, in return, it would provide security to the international community. Ultimately, the Bush administration argued, the war on terrorism would only finally succeed when tyranny and illiberal states were turned into liberal democracies. The United States would, once again, need to promote liberal democracy abroad. Doing so was now integral to the fight against “terrorism with global reach.” In his Second Inaugural address, George W. Bush provided the culminating vision: “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.” The echoes of Woodrow Wilson and the Cold War liberal internationalism of Truman and Kennedy were not an accident. Bush put forward an historic American commitment – reaching back to Woodrow Wilson – to advance the cause of freedom and democracy worldwide.²⁰

²⁰ See G. John Ikenberry, “Introduction,” in Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie

The Bush-era vision of global order and America's leadership role went beyond the older Wilsonian conception. Wilson wanted to make the world "safe for democracy." This did entail a commitment to promoting democracy abroad. But the Bush version tied democracy promotion to America's immediate national security. Unless the rest of the world is made democratic, the parts that remain illiberal and mired in tyranny will threaten the United States as sites for terrorism. In the age of weapons of mass destruction, the political character of the world would need to be transformed.²¹ The Bush version also differed in the way American power would be exercised. The United States would claim rights to act unilaterally and preemptively. The United States could go anywhere at any moment to attack terrorists. If the terrorists had "global reach," so too would the United States.²² The United States was the unipolar state, and this generated unique – or "exceptional" – rights and responsibilities. In the Bush administration view, this new unipolar global order would serve the interests of all the countries of the world. The United States would need to act "above the laws of nations," but it would do so for the global common good.

The ambitious vision of American unipolar leadership was ultimately unsustainable. It was unsustainable because the unipolar distribution of power did not last. It was unsustainable because even a unipolar state could not project power and remake the world as Bush promised. It was unsustainable because peoples and states around the world did not want to be governed by a unipolar police force. The part of the American liberal vision that the Bush doctrine left out was the strengthening of international rules and institutions. Bush-era unilateralism gave little respect to multilateralism and rule-based international order. This was not a vision of order that the world was willing to buy into. Indeed, by the end of the Bush administration, the rhetoric of global transformation had mostly disappeared.

Conclusion

American foreign policy has been manifest in many different ways across the centuries. The United States has been isolationist and interventionist, it has been passive and aggressive, it has upheld the Westphalian system of sovereignty and violated it, it has been coldly realist and ambitiously liberal internationalist. America's position in the global system has also shifted and

Slaughter, and Tony Smith, eds., The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²¹ See Robert Jervis, "The Remaking of a Unipolar World," The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2006).

²² The Bush doctrine is discussed in Ian Shapiro, Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey, America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003).

transformed itself over the centuries. It was initially a weak and marginal country, later it joined the ranks of the great powers, and at the end of the 20th century it emerged as the unipolar state. No other state has traveled so far from one extreme to the other. The United States is also unique in terms of its geography and the historical timing of its rise. It is the only great power in the New World. All the other great powers reside in crowded regional neighborhoods. The United States emerged on the global stage in the early 20th century when the other great powers were all pursuing empire. The United States was “off shore” and on the “outside looking in.” Under these circumstances, the United States grew in power, playing a pivotal role in the world wars and the rebuilding of the world economy. The United States became a sort of “system operator” for the global order. It did not become powerful through conquest of peoples and societies across oceanic distances. The 20th century was a graveyard for empires. The world wars undermined and destroyed most of the great imperial projects. The Cold War put an end to the Soviet imperial order. American power and influence grew across the 20th century as these imperial ventures came to an end. The United States became powerful by “filling vacuums” and taking on regional and global security and economic leadership roles.

Across this grand geopolitical transformation, the United States brought a set of ideas, ideologies, historical experiences, and regime principles to its foreign policy. It is difficult to make sense of the American “approach” to global order without reference to these liberal democratic ideas and values, rooted in the American founding. Paradoxically, the United States saw itself simultaneously as unique and exceptional, but also embodying regime principles and ideals that were potentially universal in appeal. The United States has seen its own political founding and national experience as part of a singular global drama. It has seen its world-historical breakthrough as the “first new nation” as a harbinger of a wider global transformation in politics and society. At the same time, it has seen the success of this wider global transformation to be critical to the preservation of its own national experiment. Because of this, the United States has both seen itself as different from the rest of the world but also deeply implicated in what happens elsewhere in the world. When it comes to the wider-world, the United States can’t live with it and it can’t live without it.