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[Home](#) > The Myth of the Liberal Order

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The Myth of the Liberal Order

From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom

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Among the debates that have swept the U.S. foreign policy community since the beginning of the Trump administration, alarm about the fate of the liberal international rules-based order has emerged as one of the few fixed points. From the international relations scholar [G. John Ikenberry's](#) ^[1] claim that “for seven decades the world has been dominated by a western liberal order” to [U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's call](#) ^[2] in the final days of the Obama administration to “act urgently to defend the liberal international order,” this banner waves atop most discussions of the United States' role in the world.

About this order, the reigning consensus makes three core claims. First, that the liberal order has been the principal cause of the so-called long peace among great powers for the past seven decades. Second, that constructing this order has been the main driver of U.S. engagement in the world over that period. And third, that U.S. President Donald Trump is the primary threat to the liberal order—and thus to world peace. The [political scientist Joseph Nye](#) ^[3], for example, has written, “The demonstrable success of the order in helping secure and stabilize the world over the past seven decades has led to a strong consensus that defending, deepening, and extending this system has been and continues to be the central task of U.S. foreign policy.” Nye has gone so far as to assert: “I am not worried by the rise of China. I am more worried by the rise of Trump.”

Although all these propositions contain some truth, each is more wrong than right. The “long peace” was not the result of a liberal order but the byproduct of the dangerous balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States during the four and a half decades of the Cold War and then of a brief period of U.S. dominance. U.S. engagement in the world has been driven not by the desire to advance liberalism abroad or to build an international order but by the need to do what was necessary to preserve liberal democracy at home. And although Trump is undermining key elements of the current order, he is far from the biggest threat to global stability.

These misconceptions about the liberal order's causes and consequences lead its advocates to call for the United States to [strengthen the order](#) ^[4] by clinging to pillars from the past and rolling back authoritarianism around the globe. Yet rather than seek to return

to an imagined past in which the United States molded the world in its image, Washington should limit its efforts to ensuring sufficient order abroad to allow it to concentrate on reconstructing a viable liberal democracy at home.

CONCEPTUAL JELL-O

The ambiguity of each of the terms in the phrase “liberal international rules-based order” creates a slipperiness that allows the concept to be applied to almost any situation. When, in 2017, members of the World Economic Forum in Davos crowned Chinese President Xi Jinping the leader of the liberal economic order—even though he heads the most protectionist, mercantilist, and predatory major economy in the world—they revealed that, at least in this context, the word “liberal” has come unhinged.

What is more, “rules-based order” is redundant. Order is a condition created by rules and regularity. What proponents of the liberal international rules-based order really mean is an order that embodies good rules, ones that are equal or fair. The United States is said to have designed an order that others willingly embrace and sustain.

Many forget, however, that even the UN Charter, which prohibits nations from using military force against other nations or intervening in their internal affairs, privileges the strong over the weak. Enforcement of the charter’s prohibitions is the preserve of the UN Security Council, on which each of the five great powers has a permanent seat—and a veto. As the Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan has observed, superpowers are “exceptional”; that is, when they decide it suits their purpose, they make exceptions for themselves. The fact that in the first 17 years of this century, the self-proclaimed leader of the liberal order invaded two countries, conducted air strikes and Special Forces raids to kill hundreds of people it unilaterally deemed to be terrorists, and subjected scores of others to “extraordinary rendition,” often without any international legal authority (and sometimes without even national legal authority), speaks for itself.

COLD WAR ORDER

The claim that the liberal order produced the last seven decades of peace overlooks a major fact: the first four of those decades were defined not by a liberal order but by a cold war between two polar opposites. As the historian who named this “long peace” has explained, the international system that prevented great-power war during that time was the unintended consequence of the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States. In John Lewis Gaddis’ words, “Without anyone’s having designed it, and without any attempt whatever to consider the requirements of justice, the nations of the postwar era lucked into a system of international relations that, because it has been based upon realities of power, has served the cause of order—if not justice—better than one might have expected.”

During the Cold War, both superpowers enlisted allies and clients around the globe ^[5], creating what came to be known as a bipolar world. Within each alliance or bloc, order was enforced by the superpower (as Hungarians and Czechs discovered when they tried to defect in 1956 and 1968, respectively, and as the British and French learned when they defied U.S. wishes in 1956, during the Suez crisis). Order emerged from a balance of

power, which allowed the two superpowers to develop the constraints that preserved what U.S. President John F. Kennedy called, in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the “precarious status quo.”

What moved a country that had for almost two centuries assiduously avoided entangling military alliances, refused to maintain a large standing military during peacetime, left international economics to others, and rejected the League of Nations to use its soldiers, diplomats, and money to reshape half the world? In a word, fear. The strategists revered by modern U.S. scholars as “the wise men” believed that the Soviet Union posed a greater threat to the United States than Nazism had. As the diplomat George Kennan wrote ^[6] in his legendary “Long Telegram,” the Soviet Union was “a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*.” Soviet Communists, Kennan wrote, believed it was necessary that “our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power [was] to be secure.”

Before the nuclear age, such a threat would have required a hot war as intense as the one the United States and its allies had just fought against Nazi Germany. But after the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb, in 1949, American statesmen began wrestling with the thought that total war as they had known it was becoming obsolete. In the greatest leap of strategic imagination in the history of U.S. foreign policy, they developed a strategy for a form of combat never previously seen, the conduct of war by every means short of physical conflict between the principal combatants.

To prevent a cold conflict from turning hot, they accepted—for the time being—many otherwise unacceptable facts, such as the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. They modulated their competition with mutual constraints that included three noes: no use of nuclear weapons, no overt killing of each other’s soldiers, and no military intervention in the other’s recognized sphere of influence.

American strategists incorporated Western Europe and Japan into this war effort because they saw them as centers of economic and strategic gravity. To this end, the United States launched the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe, founded the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and negotiated the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to promote global prosperity. And to ensure that Western Europe and Japan remained in active cooperation with the United States, it established NATO and the U.S.-Japanese alliance.

Each initiative served as a building block in an order designed first and foremost to defeat the Soviet adversary. Had there been no Soviet threat, there would have been no Marshall Plan and no NATO. The United States has never promoted liberalism abroad when it believed that doing so would pose a significant threat to its vital interests at home. Nor has it ever refrained from using military force to protect its interests when the use of force violated international rules.

Nonetheless, when the United States has had the opportunity to advance freedom for others—again, with the important caveat that doing so would involve little risk to itself—it has acted. From the founding of the republic, the nation has embraced radical, universalistic ideals. In proclaiming that “all” people “are created equal,” the Declaration of Independence did not mean just those living in the 13 colonies.

It was no accident that in reconstructing its defeated adversaries Germany and Japan and shoring up its allies in Western Europe, the United States sought to build liberal democracies that would embrace shared values as well as shared interests. The ideological campaign against the Soviet Union hammered home fundamental, if exaggerated, differences between “the free world” and “the evil empire.” Moreover, American policymakers knew that in mobilizing and sustaining support in Congress and among the public, appeals to values are as persuasive as arguments about interests.

In his memoir, *Present at the Creation*, former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, an architect of the postwar effort, explained the thinking that motivated U.S. foreign policy. The prospect of Europe falling under Soviet control through a series of “‘settlements by default’ to Soviet pressure” required the “creation of strength throughout the free world” that would “show the Soviet leaders by successful containment that they could not hope to expand their influence throughout the world.” Persuading Congress and the American public to support this undertaking, Acheson acknowledged, sometimes required making the case “clearer than truth.”

UNIPOLAR ORDER

In the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s campaign to “bury communism,” Americans were understandably caught up in a surge of triumphalism. The adversary on which they had focused for over 40 years stood by as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and Germany reunified. It then joined with the United States in a unanimous UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force to throw the Iraqi military out of Kuwait. As the iron fist of Soviet oppression withdrew, free people in Eastern Europe embraced market economies and democracy. U.S. President George H. W. Bush declared a “new world order.” Hereafter, under a banner of “engage and enlarge,” the United States would welcome a world clamoring to join a growing liberal order.

Writing about the power of ideas, the economist John Maynard Keynes noted, “Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.” In this case, American politicians were following a script offered by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his best-selling 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama argued that millennia of conflict among ideologies were over. From this point on, all nations would embrace free-market economics to make their citizens rich and democratic governments to make them free. “What we may be witnessing,” he wrote, “is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” In 1996, the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman went even further by proclaiming the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention”: “When a country reaches a certain level of economic development, when it has a middle class big enough to support a McDonald’s, it becomes a McDonald’s country, and people in McDonald’s countries don’t like to fight wars; they like to wait in line for burgers.”

This vision led to an odd coupling of neoconservative crusaders on the right and liberal interventionists on the left. Together, they persuaded a succession of U.S. presidents to try to advance the spread of capitalism and liberal democracy through the barrel of a gun. In 1999, Bill Clinton bombed Belgrade to force it to free Kosovo. In 2003, George W. Bush

invaded Iraq ^[7] to topple its president, Saddam Hussein. When his stated rationale for the invasion collapsed after U.S. forces were unable to find weapons of mass destruction, Bush declared a new mission: “to build a lasting democracy that is peaceful and prosperous.” In the words of Condoleezza Rice, his national security adviser at the time, “Iraq and Afghanistan are vanguards of this effort to spread democracy and tolerance and freedom throughout the Greater Middle East.” And in 2011, Barack Obama embraced the Arab Spring’s promise to bring democracy to the nations of the Middle East and sought to advance it by bombing Libya and deposing its brutal leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi. Few in Washington paused to note that in each case, the unipolar power was using military force to impose liberalism on countries whose governments could not strike back. Since the world had entered a new chapter of history, lessons from the past about the likely consequences of such behavior were ignored.

As is now clear, the end of the Cold War produced a unipolar moment, not a unipolar era. Today, foreign policy elites have woken up to the meteoric rise of an authoritarian China ^[8], which now rivals or even surpasses the United States in many domains, and the resurgence of an assertive, illiberal Russian nuclear superpower, which is willing to use its military to change both borders in Europe and the balance of power in the Middle East. More slowly and more painfully, they are discovering that the United States’ share of global power has shrunk. When measured by the yardstick of purchasing power parity, the U.S. economy, which accounted for half of the world’s GDP after World War II, had fallen to less than a quarter of global GDP by the end of the Cold War and stands at just one-seventh today. For a nation whose core strategy has been to overwhelm challenges with resources, this decline calls into question the terms of U.S. leadership.

This rude awakening to the return of history jumps out in the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, released at the end of last year and the beginning of this year, respectively. The NDS notes that in the unipolar decades, “the United States has enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain.” As a consequence, “we could generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted.” But today, as the NSS observes, China and Russia “are fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely.” Revisionist powers, it concludes, are “trying to change the international order in their favor.”

THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT

During most of the nation’s 242 years, Americans have recognized the necessity to give priority to ensuring freedom at home over advancing aspirations abroad. The Founding Fathers were acutely aware that constructing a government in which free citizens would govern themselves was an uncertain, hazardous undertaking. Among the hardest questions they confronted was how to create a government powerful enough to ensure Americans’ rights at home and protect them from enemies abroad without making it so powerful that it would abuse its strength.

Their solution, as the presidential scholar Richard Neustadt wrote, was not just a “separation of powers” among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches but “separated institutions sharing power.” The Constitution was an “invitation to struggle.” And presidents, members of Congress, judges, and even journalists have been struggling ever since. The process was not meant to be pretty. As Supreme Court Justice Louis

Brandeis explained to those frustrated by the delays, gridlock, and even idiocy these checks and balances sometimes produce, the founders' purpose was "not to promote efficiency but to preclude the exercise of arbitrary power."

From this beginning, the American experiment in self-government has always been a work in progress. It has lurched toward failure on more than one occasion. When Abraham Lincoln asked "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, . . . can long endure," it was not a rhetorical question. But repeatedly and almost miraculously, it has demonstrated a capacity for renewal and reinvention. Throughout this ordeal, the recurring imperative for American leaders has been to show that liberalism can survive in at least one country.

For nearly two centuries, that meant warding off foreign intervention and leaving others to their fates. Individual Americans may have sympathized with French revolutionary cries of "Liberty, equality, fraternity!"; American traders may have spanned the globe; and American missionaries may have sought to win converts on all continents. But in choosing when and where to spend its blood and treasure, the U.S. government focused on the United States [9].

Only in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II did American strategists conclude that the United States' survival required greater entanglement abroad. Only when they perceived a Soviet attempt to create an empire that would pose an unacceptable threat did they develop and sustain the alliances and institutions that fought the Cold War. Throughout that effort, as NSC-68, a Truman administration national security policy paper that summarized U.S. Cold War strategy, stated, the mission was "to preserve the United States as a free nation with our fundamental institutions and values intact."

SUFFICIENT UNTO THE DAY

Among the current, potentially mortal threats to the global order, Trump is one, but not the most important. His withdrawal from initiatives championed by earlier administrations aimed at constraining greenhouse gas emissions and promoting trade has been unsettling, and his misunderstanding of the strength that comes from unity with allies is troubling. Yet the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the decline of the United States' share of global power each present much larger challenges than Trump. Moreover, it is impossible to duck the question: Is Trump more a symptom or a cause?

While I was on a recent trip to Beijing, a high-level Chinese official posed an uncomfortable question to me. Imagine, he said, that as much of the American elite believes, Trump's character and experience make him unfit to serve as the leader of a great nation. Who would be to blame for his being president? Trump, for his opportunism in seizing victory, or the political system that allowed him to do so?

No one denies that in its current form, the U.S. government is failing. Long before Trump, the political class that brought unending, unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as the financial crisis and Great Recession, had discredited itself. These disasters have done more to diminish confidence in liberal self-government than Trump

could do in his critics' wildest imaginings, short of a mistake that leads to a catastrophic war. The overriding challenge for American believers in democratic governance is thus nothing less than to reconstruct a working democracy at home.

Fortunately, that does not require converting the Chinese, the Russians, or anyone else to American beliefs about liberty. Nor does it necessitate changing foreign regimes into democracies. Instead, as Kennedy put it in his American University commencement speech, in 1963, it will be enough to sustain a world order "safe for diversity"—liberal and illiberal alike. That will mean adapting U.S. efforts abroad to the reality that other countries have contrary views about governance and seek to establish their own international orders governed by their own rules. Achieving even a minimal order that can accommodate that diversity will take a surge of strategic imagination as far beyond the current conventional wisdom as the Cold War strategy that emerged over the four years after Kennan's Long Telegram was from the Washington consensus in 1946.

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