

The Intellectual Foundations of the Biden Revolution

Why is there no Rooseveltian school of foreign policy? American past and future greatness is unthinkable without it.

By Daniel Deudney, G. John Ikenberry

The unexpected four years of the Donald Trump presidency took U.S. foreign and domestic policies in troubling directions. Frontally rejecting all the pillars of what he took to be the bipartisan establishment's foreign policy, Trump set the United States on a boldly different path. He rejected long-standing alliance commitments, calling into question NATO and the security pacts with Japan and South Korea. He attacked international institutions and withdrew the United States from numerous arms control and free trade agreements, even going so far as pulling out of the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic. He embraced climate denialism and withdrew from the Paris climate accord. He was hostile to the promotion of democracy and human rights. Trump aggressively alienated allies while cozying up to a rogues' gallery of despots, autocrats, and populists, including Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Trump's foreign policy was purely transactional. It was fundamentally hostile to multilateralism and institutionalized cooperation.

At home, Trump aggressively assaulted the modern liberal state and its commitment to progressive social inclusion. Trump doubled down on the Reagan-era program of tax cuts, deregulation, and dismantling of the social safety net. He sought to reject a multicultural United States, cultivating white nationalism and anti-immigrant nativism instead. For Washington's long-standing friends in other liberal democracies and elsewhere, the Trump turn was met with surprise, shock, and dismay. Many wondered whether America was still America.

With the new Biden administration's bold foreign and domestic initiatives, the United States is now rapidly pivoting in an equally transformative, but altogether different, direction. As many have noted, President Joe Biden's raft of major initiatives—including the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan—are in their scale, novelty, and ambition comparable only to the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's response to the Great Depression and the crisis of global capitalism in the 1930s. Responding to the new reality of a planetary climate emergency, a U.S. president has put climate change at the top of the domestic and international agendas for the first time. The Biden administration has also rapidly sought to rebuild solidarity among the liberal democracies, advance human rights, and strengthen international institutions. Building on Trump and Obama administration policies, Biden has further elevated the challenge of China to the top of the policy agenda. Returning to Washington's World War II and Cold War playbook, Biden seeks to build a United States capable of leading a free-world coalition against this new autocratic challenge. The new strategy aims to champion aspirations for freedom everywhere, while at the same time showing that democracies can effectively solve the great problems of 21st-century modernity.

Like its earlier 20th-century model, the Biden program links domestic renewal with a new international agenda. Biden's focus is on decaying foundations, physical and political, at home and abroad, and on rebuilding them to deal with central emerging problems. With federal

investments in infrastructure, education, and research and development, Biden's domestic renewal program serves his international goal of rapid decarbonization of the world's economy. Like Roosevelt's model, the Biden strategy aims to reverse a rising, global illiberal and autocratic tide by deepening and modernizing liberal democracy. With this agenda, the Biden administration has staked out a bold program to extend and refurbish the liberal state and reestablish global internationalist leadership in problem-solving. In effect, Biden seeks to show that not only is America still America, but it's ready to do again what it has successfully done before.

The Biden agenda is—and explicitly casts itself as—a continuation, not departure, from the main path of U.S. success in the 20th century and beyond, a path that has been quintessentially Rooseveltian. Surprisingly, however, one looks in vain for a Rooseveltian tradition among the various vibrant schools of U.S. foreign policy that dominate contemporary U.S. debates among international relations scholars, commentators, and practitioners. As a result, there is no self-conscious tradition of political and international thought within which the Biden program is readily intelligible and historically rooted. Yet the Biden program should be seen as the next step in the evolution of what has arguably been the United States' most influential and successful 20th-century tradition—one that should appropriately be labeled the Rooseveltian tradition.

At the center of the Rooseveltian approach is a recognition that the survival and success of liberal democracy depends on periodically making sweeping and innovative institutional and policy reforms, both domestically and internationally, to respond to relentlessly rising levels of interdependence and complexity generated by ongoing industrial and technological revolutions.

When one looks at the various competing contemporary U.S. foreign-policy schools, one sees in their labels the names of many presidents and leading historical figures: Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, and even John Quincy Adams. Other schools are cast as -isms: neoconservatism, realism, isolationism, anti-imperialism, idealism, and liberal internationalism. Strikingly absent are Roosevelt's name and any philosophical school that captures the essential features of the Rooseveltian approach. Given the trajectory of the United States and its foreign policy, this absence is even more glaring because the policies implemented from the Rooseveltian agenda have arguably been the most influential, important, and successful in propelling the United States to the zenith of its world-historical position and accomplishment. The foundation of Pax Americana, the great 20th-century advance of the U.S.-led liberal democratic project in the world, is nothing if not straightforwardly Rooseveltian.

Understanding the essentials of the Rooseveltian tradition and its impact in the 20th century vitally illuminates the central logic and direction of the Biden foreign and domestic turns. By understanding this tradition, we can understand the intellectual foundations of the Biden agenda. Looking at contemporary developments through Rooseveltian lenses offers an account of the Biden turn superior to those provided by the other well-established foreign-policy schools. In continuing the oddly obscured and fragmented Rooseveltian tradition, the Biden program is staked in ground that is historically proven and solid.

The order that Roosevelt forged out of the cauldron of depression and war was the baseline for U.S. policies for the rest of the 20th century and beyond, and his successors in both U.S. parties made important extensions and modifications. Despite important continuing advances, the Rooseveltian order has also come under assault from many sides, making its advance difficult

and at times incomplete. And since the so-called Reagan Revolution in the 1980s, efforts to thwart have turned into a push to dismantle—a trend that culminated during the Trump presidency. It is against this backdrop of the Rooseveltian revolution and decades of counterrevolution that the nature of the Biden agenda of restoration and extension becomes clear.

The Rooseveltian Tradition

That Roosevelt is a colossus in U.S. history is a truism. Over the course of his unprecedented 12 years in office, he accomplished a revolutionary recasting of the United States' domestic order and place in the world. At home, his administration largely reinvented the liberal democratic state, vastly expanding its activities, resources, and reach. Internationally, the United States went from being a major regional power to a global military, economic, and diplomatic superpower. It became hegemonic among the democracies, a global leader of a multicontinental wartime alliance, and the architect and initiator of a panoply of new global organizations and institutions. More than anyone else, Roosevelt laid the foundations for Pax Americana and inaugurated what became known as the American Century. The Rooseveltian revolution was decisive in the development of modern liberalism and internationalism, but it built on predecessors, such as Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Wilson's New Freedom, and was in turn built on by successors, including Harry S. Truman's Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. It was this political project—to which Biden has returned—that brought the United States to its peak of greatness.

At its core, the Rooseveltian tradition of liberalism and internationalism is based on an understanding of the novel features of the modern world. The basic insight is that the world, both domestically and internationally, is marked by much higher levels of interdependence in more areas than existed in previous eras. The industrial revolution and subsequent technological ones have made the contemporary world quite unlike the great sweep of human history. Today's world is marked by large and growing spillovers, externalities, and unintended consequences that have produced intense interdependencies in violence, economics, and ecology.

The move of modern liberalism and liberal internationalism is to secure and realize basic liberal values in these radically changed industrial and global circumstances. Modern liberals and internationalists hold strong versions of basic liberal values and goals, but are distinctive in attempting to link these core commitments to a fundamentally new set of global developments. In contrast, the realpolitik approach to politics that focuses on relative power fails to register the epochal shift in the absolute levels of power generated by industrial modernity. In these highly interdependent circumstances, laissez-faire and anarchic systems are simply unable to provide appropriate and adequate mechanisms for restraint and cooperation. Traditions that arose and thrived in a low-interdependence world are utterly ill-suited for providing insight and guidance in a highly connected world.

The Rooseveltian tradition is more relevant than ever because many of the central problems in world politics, ranging from nuclear proliferation and climate change to transnational migration and pandemic management, are problems of interdependence that spill across borders. To address these problems, both domestically and internationally, liberal internationalists argue that cooperation and institutions are required, which invariably restrains the freedom of everyone to some degree. The pursuit of the public interest and the successful functioning of modern industrial societies require not the minimization of restraints but rather the crafting of appropriately configured and distributed restraints. In a world of high interdependence, the

realization of basic security and welfare requires not fewer restraints but smarter ones. This modernist and global worldview is completely alien to the laissez-faire and realist approaches.

Making the Modern Liberal State

The Rooseveltian turn rested upon an updating of liberalism. Building on the liberalism of Montesquieu, Adam Smith, James Madison, and John Stuart Mill, 20th-century liberals, such as Leonard Hobhouse, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, sought to reinvent the state in ways that were responsive to the new industrial world of giant cities, powerful corporations, extreme economic stratification, and the complexities of societies increasingly dependent on a cascade of new technologies shaping every aspect of life. The essence of this new approach is contained in Dewey's concept of the public as an interdependence group whose scope changes as technology changes, thus requiring new forms of community and government. This tradition of modern liberalism gave birth to pragmatism as a philosophy and is highly experimental and adaptive. It looks to modern science and engineering as sources of new wealth, power, and authority. Without the modern regulatory state, the negative effects of industrialism would surely have overshadowed its positive ones. At every step of reform, old liberals and laissez-faire libertarians argued that these extensions of democratic government were essentially erosions of freedom. But modern liberals argue that new circumstances require the state to provide new arrangements to realize freedom and the public interest.

In the thinking of modern liberal economists, such as John Maynard Keynes and John Kenneth Galbraith, a mixed economy that combines capitalism with extensive but carefully crafted governmental regulation is necessary for both the flourishing of capitalism and the realization of other core liberal democratic values and goals. As the power of modern industrial technology has grown, the modern regulatory state has grown up to restrain the many negative externalities—including air, water, and noise pollution and resource degradation—that threaten human well-being and erode the foundations of prosperity. The essential task of the modern liberal state is to protect its citizens by harnessing the fruits of science and technology. With its commitment to universal education and the creation of skilled labor, the modern liberal project seeks to ensure that the great mass of the people is capable of self-government and able to economically flourish.

Left to their own devices, capitalist societies stratify, with ever-greater privilege for the few and restrained opportunities and circumstances for the many. While the pursuit of complete equality would be stifling and coercive, extreme inequality is a problem especially for social orders committed to the realization of freedom. Money is power, and when wealth becomes highly concentrated, power does too. Redistribution by government on behalf of the large majority is not a threat to free societies but necessary to sustain them. Modern liberal democrats view extreme inequality as a problem. As Roosevelt put it, “economic royalism” threatened the foundations of democracy. It could be combated with progressive taxation of income, capital, and inheritance.

Rooseveltian Internationalism

From its beginnings, liberalism has had foreign-policy projects striving to alter the world order. Within the family of liberal internationalist approaches, Rooseveltian internationalism is distinctive in emphasizing that high and growing global interdependence has profound implications for peace, security, prosperity, capitalism, health, and the environment. Since Roosevelt, this new type of liberal internationalism has been in progressive development,

innovating to solve problems that his administration could not have imagined. Over the decades, the project has shaped the modern world order by greatly increasing the number and role of international organizations and multilateral problem-solving efforts.

Rooseveltian internationalism also rests on a recognition that successive industrial and technological revolutions have profoundly altered the nature of war and peace. Early liberals looked to treaties and diplomacy to moderate international conflict and reduce the severity and frequency of war. But with the coming of industrial warfare and its much greater potential for violence, modern liberals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries increasingly argued that it was not just beneficial to avoid war and restrain violence, but increasingly necessary to prevent civilizational disaster. In the Roosevelt era, this new interdependence of violence was widely captured in the claim that modern science and technology had produced “one world.” And with the emergence of nuclear weapons in the 1940s, the avoidance of great-power war and the creation of new architectures of restraint became even more central to the liberal international project. To respond to these new dangers, American liberal internationalists developed a distinctive and far-reaching agenda for international institutional restructuring. The League of Nations, the United Nations, and the arms control regimes that were such a distinctive feature of 20th-century global politics were all attempts by liberals to adapt to these new realities.

In the Rooseveltian vision, the Industrial Revolution and the global spread of capitalism brought new forms of interdependence requiring new international economic institutions. The world economy, like the domestic economy, required carefully designed supports and restraints. In the wake of the mass disruption and impoverishment caused by the Great Depression, Rooseveltian liberals laid out an evolving program to channel and enable international trade and finance. In the wake of World War II, modern liberals designed and implemented the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—the last of which ultimately became the World Trade Organization. These international institutions provided a framework for reopening the world economy after World War II, paving the way for a golden era of sustained global economic growth and the spread of capitalism and its attendant prosperity to previously very poor societies all over the world.

In turn, the spread of industrial production and the acceleration of economic growth created major new problems of environmental degradation. Liberal progressives early in the 20th century invented modern nature conservation and environmentalism. Roosevelt placed great importance on reforestation and the conservation of natural resources. And his Civilian Conservation Corps was an artful combination of environmental restoration, jobs program, and civic education. In the postwar era, awareness of the limited capacities of the planetary biosphere to withstand the demands of resource extraction and mounting pollution triggered another wave of institution-building that was typically spearheaded by U.S. internationalists and the U.S. government. Internationally, the paradigmatic liberal internationalist project was the highly effective global regime to protect Earth’s ozone layer by first restraining and then eliminating chlorofluorocarbons everywhere on the planet. Most recently, emissions of carbon dioxide and methane have begun to seriously affect the planetary climate system. Once again, the liberal internationalist response seeks to avert a global-scope civilizational catastrophe.

Liberal Democracy and the Struggle for the World

Roosevelt’s stature as one of the greatest American presidents rests on a twofold accomplishment: lifting the United States out of the Great Depression and fighting a world war.

It is often forgotten that liberal democracy in the 1930s was everywhere under assault and in retreat. It was challenged from both the left and the right by powerful movements and states dedicated to the destruction of Western democracy and to global domination. The fate of liberal democracy literally hung on the outcome of a violent global-scale struggle for the world. To meet this mortal threat, Roosevelt forged the “arsenal of democracy,” a massive mobilization of men, materiel, and organizations that not only profoundly reshaped the domestic landscape but also provided the military foundations of the postwar world order led by the United States. Then, as now, democracy’s success was not inevitable but depended on winning a grand competition with its alternatives and on making far-reaching changes in how liberal democracies organized themselves.

A central tenet of Roosevelt’s new liberal internationalism was that the survival of liberal democracy and market capitalism in the United States ultimately depended on the survival and flourishing of free governments and economies globally. In a highly interdependent world, isolationism was no longer compatible with national survival. Roosevelt realized that a world dominated by illiberal regimes of the right and left would fundamentally imperil democracy in the United States. Roosevelt also recognized that democracy could not survive in smaller and more vulnerable countries without protection by the United States. As a result, the new Rooseveltian internationalism emphasized democratic solidarity. Roosevelt and subsequent liberal internationalists believed that the prospects for peace, prosperity, and effective global problem-solving are all advanced with the spread of liberal democracy and capitalism to more states. As a result of this understanding, Roosevelt’s war aims were not simply the defeat of the fascist Axis but their reconstruction as liberal democracies.

Another pillar of Rooseveltian internationalism is anti-imperialism. Opposition to empire was a defining commitment of early-modern republicans and liberal democrats. Ideological anti-imperialism pervaded the United States’ founding; progressive liberals opposed overseas U.S. expansion and European colonialism. For Roosevelt, the imperialist ambitions of the Axis powers—he called them “gangster states”—was the cause of World War II. Roosevelt’s thinking carried into the postwar era when the United States strongly supported European decolonization and the independence of the peoples of what was then called the Third World, even if that commitment was sometimes superseded by the global struggle against communism. The Rooseveltian tradition has been, and continues to be, a work in progress. Its advance is often an uphill battle against powerful opponents at home and abroad.

Rooseveltian Foundations of American Success

The historical record provides ample evidence of the impact and success of the Rooseveltian project. The New Deal state, with its institutional innovations and ideological appeal, saved liberal democracy in its great hours of peril during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Domestically and internationally, the American Century rested on progressive liberal foundations. The America that brought unprecedented peace, prosperity, and security to the international system was the America brought into existence by Roosevelt’s New Deal. Had the laissez-faire and isolationist opposition to the New Deal, the United Nations, NATO, and other domestic and international projects been successful, the United States might well not have sought or been able to play its pivotal role in the great struggles of the 20th century.

Liberals argue that the United States’ success has depended on a combination of power, democratic ideas, and liberal internationalist projects. That success was possible in part because

the liberal democratic ideal, as manifested in the modern United States, was profoundly appealing to peoples all over the world. U.S. success in the 20th century also came from the superior capacity of modern liberal democracies to solve the problems of global interdependence and modernity itself. In sum, the Rooseveltian project made the world safer for democracy both at home and abroad.

A major success of the Rooseveltian project was the reconstruction of Germany and Japan and their integration into the U.S.-led international order. Another major success has been the construction of strong alliances. These served the purpose of containing the Soviet Union and its allies well, but they are more than that. They have been made stronger and more resilient because they are largely pacts between democracies with shared social purposes and deep economic and societal linkages. In making sense of these successes, realist accounts remain incomplete in important ways, failing to grasp the accomplishments of the liberal project at the domestic level and in building enduring transnational webs of cooperation.

Americans guided by the Rooseveltian agenda have played a major role in bringing about the decline of empires, the independence of nations, and the advance of human rights. American liberal democrats and their ideological allies everywhere are rightfully critical of the many lapses in the policies of the U.S. government. But overall, liberal democracies and their movements have over two centuries of often difficult struggle expanded freedom, human rights, and mass prosperity in ways that are cumulatively revolutionary. During the 20th century, the United States played pivotal roles in thwarting and subverting empires, including the global empire-building of Germany, Japan, Italy, and the Soviet Union. Left-leaning critics who characterize the U.S. system as yet another empire fail to recognize that it is one “by invitation” and that the number of independent countries in the world rose explosively during the period of greatest U.S. influence. Leftist critics and historians have shown that the glass of freedom has never been full, but they fail to acknowledge that it has become steadily fuller—and that the United States has played a key role in filling it.

Liberal Renewal and the Biden Agenda

Much to the surprise of many observers, both on the left and right, the Biden administration has laid out a comprehensive Rooseveltian agenda of change that aims to put the United States back at the center of progressive liberal leadership to address 21st-century problems. Whether the U.S. political system is capable of realizing this agenda is, at this writing, much in question. But it seems that Biden’s progressive agenda at home and abroad is a logical next step in the evolution of modern liberalism and internationalism.

The problems that the Biden administration has elevated to grand strategic importance are a mixture of familiar and novel. Building on efforts begun by the previous two administrations, it has made the problem of the rise of China a central focus. In responding to the Chinese challenge, Biden’s liberal emphasis on rebuilding alliances, championing democracy and human rights, and promoting a national industrial policy is clearly superior to the realist, libertarian, and Trumpian emphasis on pulling back internationally and dismantling the modern U.S. state. The Biden strategy rests on the assumption that China, with its strong central government, booming capitalist economy, modernized autocratic model, and revisionist foreign policy, poses a full-spectrum threat that will require a full-spectrum response. The laissez faire-libertarian opposition to the mixed economy and the use of government resources and power for public works and infrastructure in pursuit of domestic economic renewal is a woefully inadequate response to the

Chinese juggernaut. As Biden pointed out in his joint address to Congress, the federal government has repeatedly played a key role in the construction of infrastructure, from canals and railroads to the interstate highway system and the internet. A realist or Trumpian program of alliance-shedding and hostility to international organizations essentially disarms the United States of some of its most important global assets at a time when these assets are needed more than ever. In the same way, the aspiration of many to reduce U.S. power and impact is out of date and out of place at a moment when the global balance of power between liberal democracy and autocracy is unfavorably shifting. In the face of the novel and powerful Chinese autocratic challenge, the task for the United States, as Biden has succinctly captured, is to show the world that democracy works in solving problems.

Throughout the 20th century, liberals have advanced a wide array of projects to respond to the problems of growing interdependence, including in the areas of public health and the environment. But while these projects were often successfully pursued, they always had a second-tier status in the conversation about U.S. interests and strategy. What is particularly striking about the new Biden vision is the central role it accords to the previously secondary issues of pandemic disease and climate change. While the environment has been on the foreign-policy agenda for decades, the planetary emergency of global warming has propelled this issue to the top tier, both domestically and internationally. While the United States played a leadership role in building the World Health Organization, eradicating smallpox, containing Ebola, combating HIV, and pursuing a global influenza response, COVID-19 has pushed global public health to the forefront in importance and urgency.

In responding to pandemics and climate change, Trumpians and other opponents of modern liberalism wield an agenda that is woefully mismatched to the critical problems of the day. They have impoverished the country's public health care system, hobbled the creation of an international capacity for disease response, and hysterically exaggerated simple public health measures, such as mask-wearing, as an abridgment of fundamental freedoms. On climate change, Trump aggressively pursued climate denialism, deregulation, and vigorous opposition to the Paris climate accord—relegating these issues to the rearguard, not vanguard, of modern American progress.

A key assumption of the Biden program is quintessentially Rooseveltian: The achievement of basic national interests requires making difficult domestic reforms in response to shifting global challenges. Just as the United States in World War II quickly and dramatically ramped up production, the Biden program recognizes that responding to climate change requires far-reaching domestic innovations. The mobilization to defeat the Axis powers and then the Soviet Union left no aspect of American life untouched and unchanged. So too, effectively responding to the climate crisis will remake America. If this reconstruction serves liberal democratic values, the United States will be made stronger and more capable—and more liberal and democratic.

Realities dictate that the United States must both compete effectively and cooperate extensively. The Biden administration's program therefore recognizes that ramping up the capacity to compete with China must occur alongside efforts to cooperatively work with China to jointly address the climate emergency and the threat of pandemics. Due in large measure to the influence of U.S. liberals and internationalists, the United States not only competed with the Soviet Union but also cooperated with it on arms control and smallpox eradication. Rooseveltian internationalism, not minimalist realism or belligerent Trumpian nationalism, offers the playbook

for a U.S. foreign policy that effectively competes with the Chinese but also cooperates with them on shared global problems.

In making sense of 21st-century realities and guiding U.S. grand strategy, modern liberalism and internationalism as first shaped during the Roosevelt era have the intellectual and programmatic resources that no other tradition of U.S. foreign policy can provide. Unlike those of his rivals, Biden's worldview and program build on the successes of earlier Rooseveltian liberal and internationalist projects. As in the past, the success of the United States of America in the world—and the success of the free-world project—depend on the extension and implementation of a progressive liberal agenda.

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