

22 January 2006

Liberal International Theory in the Wake of 911 and American Unipolarity

G. John Ikenberry

INTRODUCTION

In retrospect, the decade of the 1990s looks like a “liberal moment” caught between two realist epochs.<sup>1</sup> The Cold War ended, democracy and markets flourished around the world, globalization was enshrined as a progressive historical force, and ideology, nationalism and war were at a low ebb. NAFTA, APEC, and the WTO signaled a strengthening of the rules and institutions of the world economy. NATO was expanded and the U.S.-Japan alliance was renewed. Russia became a quasi-member of the West and China was a “strategic partner” with Washington. Clinton’s grand strategy of building post-Cold War order around expanding markets, democracy, and institutions was the triumphant embodiment of the liberal vision of international order.

But this “liberal moment” seemed to come to an abrupt end with the election of George W. Bush, the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, and the invasion of Iraq. Basic liberal assumptions about world order were challenged. Bush campaigned for president and won in 2000 on a platform of a new realism, eschewing Clinton-era nation-building and humanitarian interventionism. A year later, the terrorist attacks jolted America and triggered a massive exertion of American military power. Bush launched the “war on terrorism” and the “national security state” returned to Washington. A grand strategy was introduced that combined a more assertive nationalism with a neo-conservative power-wielding vision that devalued the importance of the postwar system of allies, institutions, law, and norms. Indeed, in Bush’s view, an effective war on terrorism required breaking out of these old liberal internationalist constraints. In the meantime, globalization was now a source of danger and nationalism and “soft” balancing came back into fashion.

There are ironies, of course, in these developments. As the original realpolitik rationales for the Iraq war failed, the Bush administration increasingly wrapped its foreign policy goals in the language and aspirations of Wilsonian democracy promotion. (“So it is the policy of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for seminar on “IR Theory, Unipolarity and September 11<sup>th</sup> – Five Years On,” NUPI, Oslo, Norway, 3-4 February 2006.

United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world,” proclaimed Bush in his second inaugural.) The spread of democracy and national security were now tied together. Going further, Secretary of State Condi Rice has claimed that Bush foreign policy is actually following in the footsteps of FDR, Truman, and Acheson – the great architects of postwar liberal order.<sup>2</sup> Bush himself often speaks as an idealist who challenges realism. And in another irony, realist international relations scholars are decidedly hostile to Bush and the Iraq war.

It is a remarkably moment. Bush’s unilateralism, disdain for the United Nations, and general disregard for America’s postwar liberal hegemonic order is well established. But its evolving view of American national security is anything but realist. Condi Rice captured the essence of the Bush administration’s new view in a recent speech at Georgetown University: “Since its creation more than 350 years ago, the modern state system has rested on the concept of sovereignty. It was always assumed that every state could control and direct the threats emerging from its territory. It was also assumed that weak and poorly governed states were merely a burden to their people, or at most, an international humanitarian concern but never a true security threat. Today, however, these old assumptions no longer hold. Technology is collapsing the distance that once clearly separated right here from over there. And the greatest threats now emerge more within states than between them. The fundamental character of regimes now matters more than the international distribution of power. In this world it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines between our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals.”<sup>3</sup> This is the final irony – the Bush administration is embracing a liberal argument about security and world order and using it in a way that is subversive of the postwar liberal international order.

So how far away has the United States and the world moved from its liberal moment? Can a liberal order survive under conditions of global terrorism? How deep does the Bush revolution – and its rejection of liberal international order – go? How damaging has the Iraq war been to the United States and its traditional allies? In what ways have the transformation in America’s foreign policy and global position – and the current convulsions of the wider global system – rendered suspect liberal assumptions and expectations about international order?

I want to make three arguments. First, liberal international theory – in its various guises – is actually very helpful in explaining the deep shifts in the global system that set the stage for both the “rise of terrorism” and America’s neo-conservative response to it. These shifts include the rise of unipolarity, the privatization of war, eroding norms of sovereignty, and so forth. It is actually the breakdown of the old realist Westphalian world that brought us to this juncture.

Second, the Bush “revolution” is failing. This is important in that it shows that there are limits to the ability of powerful states to operate outside the norms and institutional frameworks of liberal international order. The Bush experience shows that the world’s leading state can break

---

<sup>2</sup> Condeleezza Rice, “The Promise of Democratic Peace,” The Washington Post, 11 December 2005, p. B7.

<sup>3</sup> Condeleessa Rice, “Transformational Diplomacy,” speech at Georgetown University, 18 January 2006.

out of institutional and normative constraints – even those that it itself helped create – but that there is a price to be paid for it. Lost legitimacy, partnerships, cooperation, and credibility do have consequences. Indeed, the Bush administration’s current effort to recast its foreign policy in the tradition of FDR and Truman and its emphasis on promoting freedom and democracy look to be efforts, in part, to regain legitimacy and international support.

Third, at a deeper level, there is an intellectual crisis of the liberal vision of international order. Unresolved dilemmas, contradictions, and ambiguities that have always been part of the liberal vision are today increasingly apparent and troubling. This is not a crisis that exists because the world – in the end – is more realist than liberals thought. Precisely the opposite. It is because the world is less realist than liberals anticipated that its intellectual problems ensue. This is another way of saying that the liberal vision of international order depends more on realist Wesphalian underpinnings – in particular, sovereignty and the balance of power – than liberals might admit.

In effect, my argument is that this is not an “E.H. Carr moment” – i.e., a moment when realists can step forward and say that liberal utopians had it all wrong and that the return of anarchy and war reveals the enduring truths of power politics. A crisis exists today in the global system but it is not one that can be explained or solved by a return to realist thinking and action. It is more of a “Karl Polanyi moment” – i.e., the liberal international order is in upheaval because of contradictions and long-term shifts in that order that can only be solved by rethinking, rebuilding, and extending that liberal order.

I first look at liberal international relations theory -- its assumptions, claims, and vision of international order. After this, I discuss the various features of the current global system that made post-911 shifts in world politics so far-reaching and consequential. I seek to show that these transformations really follow from rather than contradict liberal theoretical presumptions. In this discussion, I seek to show that the Bush “revolution” has failed – that is, in the contest between Bush and liberal international order, the liberal order will “win” and the Bush “revolution” will not. Finally, I look at the deeper crisis of liberal internationalism.

## LIBERAL THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

. Liberal theory has many facets – it is a basket of loosely connected assumptions and arguments, it is a set of claims about the sources of global political change, and it is a theory about the logic and workings of international order.

As Michael Doyle observes, liberal international theory has at least three intellectual well springs. The first is commercial liberalism which dates back to Adam Smith. The spread of capitalism and markets creates economic interdependence, joint gains, shared interests, and incentives for international cooperation. The second is the democratic peace which traces to Kant. Republican or democratic polities seek affiliation with each other and manifest pacific relations. The third is liberal institutionalism that dates to Lockean writings on rights and the rule

of law. International law and institutions are outgrowths of liberal societies that establish rule-based expectations and obligations between them.<sup>4</sup>

Out of these classic intellectual inspirations, liberal international theory has moved in a variety of directions.<sup>5</sup> Behind these literatures are a set of background assumptions and expectations that are more or less generally shared by contemporary liberal international theorists – and which differentiate liberalism from realism. One is a modernization assumption. That is, science and technology are constantly evolving and changing human capacities. These transforming human capacities have manifold implications for the ways in which power, communication, relationships, interests, community, and political possibilities are arrayed. A second assumption is that states are not primordial or necessarily even the most important actors in international relations – individuals, societies, firms, associations, and groups all operate and matter in various ways and means, working through and around states. A third assumption is that individuals have incentives and impulses embedded in the deep structures of society to trade, bargain, negotiate, and seek cooperation for joint gain. A fourth assumption is that associations and political communities rise and fall based on shifts in interests, identities, and functional realities. Civil society is dynamic and elastic. A fifth assumption is that cosmopolitanism is as “natural” as nationalism. Networks and loyalties are fluid and constantly changing political boundaries. Transnationalism, transgovernmentalism, and epistemic communities operate freely. A sixth assumption is that modernization and advancement tend to take societies down a common path of political pluralism and market society. Modernization across societies and cultures tend to produce similar sorts of challenges and responses – and the general movement is toward loosely convergent sorts of political-economic institutions. A seventh assumption is that as violence capacity of states increase, war will increasingly be irrational and obsolete. An eighth assumption is that democracy, economic interdependence, and institutions mutually reinforce each other and together reinforce peace and stability. A ninth assumption is that – out of all these modernizing changes – there is such a thing as progress. The human condition can and will get

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael W. Doyle, The Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism (New York: Norton, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> No single modern theorist captures the whole of liberal international theory, but a variety of theorists provide aspects. On the democratic peace, see Michael Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 12 (1983), pp. 205-35; 323-53. On security communities, see Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds., Security Communities (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Karl Deutsch, et al, Political Community and the North Atlantic Area (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). On the interrelationship of domestic and international politics, see James Rosenau, ed., Linkage Politics: Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems (New York: Free Press, 1969). On functional integration theory, see Ernst Haas, Beyond the Nation-State: Functionalism and International Organization (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964). On international institutions, see Robert Keohane, After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); and Stephen Krasner, ed., International Regimes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). On the fragmented and complex nature of power and interdependence, see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Power and Interdependence (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977). On transgovernmentalism and networks, see Anne-Marie Slaughter, A New World Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). On the modernization theory underpinnings of the liberal tradition, see Edward Morse, Modernization and the Transformation of International Relations (New York: Free Press, 1976); and James Rosenau, Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

better. A final assumption is about the logic of change. While realists see war as a major engine of change, and Marxists look to revolution, liberals emphasize learning and adaptation.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, liberal international theory offers a set of ideas about the logic and practice of international order among modern and advanced democracies. The general claim is that these societies have incentives and mechanisms to build complex, stable, and mutually acceptable political relations. Liberal order is distinguished from other types of international orders – balance of power or imperial varieties – because of the way that power is checked and restrained. The problems of anarchy are reduced to such an extent that the distribution of power itself does not lead to balancing or coercive domination. Bargains, exchange, reciprocity, specialization, cooperative security, public goods provision – these aspects of liberal order are provided within a multilayered institutionalized setting.<sup>7</sup>

In one rendering of the logic of liberal order, Daniel Deudney and I explicitly invoke realist theories of order as a foil for the elucidation of the “structural liberal” character of Western order.<sup>8</sup> We argue that the post-Cold War international order does not seem to function in the way anticipated by classic realist theory. Neither anarchy nor realist-style hegemony seem to be generating the expected patterns of state behavior. In offering an alternative formulation of Western liberal order we do not advance a specific theory. We offer a series of basic characteristics or dimensions of this order.

The first characteristic is the special “security binding” logic of relations within the order. The United States and the other postwar democratic powers – Britain, France, Germany, and Japan – tied themselves together in alliance partnerships in ways that reduced the strategic insecurity and uncertainty among them – thereby dampening or eliminating the anarchy-driven sources of conflict and strategic rivalry that realist theory expects. The second characteristic is the penetrated and reciprocal aspects of American hegemony. The U.S. is an open democratic polity with multiple pathways leading from the outside into the center of the national government, thereby allowing weaker states to engage and influence the American exercise of power. These institutional features of the American system – both its domestic democratic system and the wider international system it leads – provides access points that reduce the coercive domination of the United States. American hegemony, in effect, takes on liberal

---

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of liberal theory, see Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” International Organization, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 513-53; and Mark W. Zacher and Richard A. Mathew, “Liberal International Relations Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands,” in Charles Kegley, ed., Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> For a sketch of American-led postwar liberal international order, see G. John Ikenberry, After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Thomas Risse, Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Robert Latham, The Liberal Moment (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). For a new critique, see Kanishka Jayasuriya, Reconstituting the Global Liberal Order: Legitimacy and Regulation (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” Review of International Studies, Vol. 25 (April 1999), pp. 179-96.

characteristics. Together, security co-binding and penetrated hegemony create incentives for other states to “bandwagon” rather than “balance” against the United States.

There are three additional dimensions of liberal order. The semi-sovereign character of Germany and Japan is explicable in terms of the binding security ties that allow these states to make a virtue out of a postwar necessity – that is, to not acquire nuclear weapons but rather to embed their security into a multilateral (Germany within NATO and the EU) or bilateral (Japan within the U.S.-Japan security pact) framework. The open system of trade and investment is another dimension of liberal order. Remarkably, the 1930s-style notions of zero-sum and relative gains trade relations has given way to a system of open markets that has increasingly integrated the United States and its East Asian and European partners into a single global complex. The “embedded liberal” compromise of the early postwar era, noted by John Ruggie and others, has provided additional political cement for the wider liberal system. Finally, the “civic nationalism” of the United States and Europe has facilitated forms of political identity that go beyond old-style nationalism. The complexity of political identities is what is distinctive about the postwar liberal order. Ethnic, racial, and religious identities are semi-privatized in the advanced democratic societies which, in turn, allows for immigration, exchange, and transnational allegiances that tie these countries together. These aspects of liberal order are not definitive and they do coexist with more traditional – and realist-oriented – patterns of order.

This liberal order took shape during the Cold War but it survived its end. As noted earlier, the 1990s saw the unexpected expansion and solidification of the main features of this American-centered system. But by the end of the 1990s, the liberal international order seemed to be heading for trouble. Bush himself came to office with a strong critique of Clinton-era liberal internationalism. Soon thereafter, the September 11 terrorist attacks shocked the country and triggered a dramatic transformation of American foreign policy. A global “war on terror” was proclaimed. In eighteen months, two Islamic countries were invaded and their regimes overturned. The Bush administration articulated an expansive new grand strategy. This orientation – a combination of reasserted nationalism and neo-conservative ambition to use American power to transform hostile regimes – offered a vision of America as a unipolar state that operates above the old rules and institutions of the international system. It is a vision in which sovereignty becomes more absolute for America even as it becomes more conditional for countries that challenge Washington’s standards of internal and external behavior. As President Bush announced in a joint session of Congress soon after the terrorist attacks: “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” In effect, the administration was telling countries large and small that their treatment by the world’s most powerful state would hinge on their fidelity to Washington’s campaign against terrorism. The Bush administration’s more general impulse toward unilateralism and resistance to international rules, institutions, treaties, and commitments made it worse. Bush’s war on terrorism released the United States from the discipline of international law and obligations but simultaneously put other countries under Washington’s thumb, to be held to standards imposed by America.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 5 (September-October 2002), pp. 44-60.

So the question is: how deep does the Bush revolution – and its rejection of liberal international order – go? Can a liberal order survive under conditions of global terrorism?

## LIBERAL THEORY AND POST-911 TRANSFORMATIONS

Even before the Bush administration came to office with new ideas – nationalist, realist and neo-conservative – the postwar liberal international order was in transition, not least because of the end of the Cold War. Indeed, a series of deeper shifts in the global system set the stage for the September 11 attacks and the American response. We can look at these developments and assess what they mean for liberal international order and liberal theory.

### Unipolarity

One of the most salient features of the global system that set the stage for 911 and Bush foreign policy is American unipolarity. The end of the Cold War did not return the world to a multipolar system. Instead, the preeminent power position of the United States was strengthened. This was partly due to the relative weakness of the other traditional great powers – Russia collapsed, the European states grew slowly, and Japan entered a decade of economic stagnation. The United States had the largest and most vibrant economy in the system. The American dollar was the world’s reserve currency. The United States was also the only global military power – the only country capable of projecting military power to all corners of the world. It retained most of its Cold War-era alliance partnerships and far-flung bases in Europe and Asia. Rival ideologies and great power challengers were nowhere to be found.

So the international distribution of power favored the United States, the last remaining superpower. At the same time, there were liberal features – sketched above – that made American unipolarity more than simply a highly concentrated aggregation of power. The binding security partnerships and “penetrated” character of American hegemony made unipolarity more acceptable and legitimate to other states. Power disparities were tempered by institutionalized and reciprocal processes of doing business. The United States did provide some “public goods” – such as alliance security, protection of the flow of oil, markets, and a willingness of use its good offices to help settle regional disputes. The United States was – as Bill Clinton quipped – the “indispensable nation” that was uniquely positioned to keep world politics on a stable and cooperative course. The United States was the chief sponsor of the rules and institutions of the system – and it more or less operated within that consensual and loosely arrayed governance system.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, as the 1990s came to an end, the great powers were all essentially “bandwagoning” with American unipolar power. This geopolitical reality was really quite new in world historical terms. For most of the modern era, world politics was organized around a

---

<sup>10</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, ed., America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

bipolar or multipolar distribution of power. Now it was unipolar. This unipolar order was built on the realities implicit in the international distribution of material power capabilities. But it was also built on rules, institutions, partnerships, and political norms on how states do business with each other – aspects of the system that had been built up during the Cold War as the United States and its allies confronted the threat of Soviet communism. When Bush came to office, the questions already existed: How stable in unipolarity? Will the United States remain committed to the rules and institutions of the Western liberal system? Is a one superpower world consistent with a consensual and rule-based order?

The key point is that the rise of unipolarity brought with it a shift in the underlying logic of order and rule in world politics. In a bipolar or multipolar system, powerful states “rule” in the process of leading a coalition of states in balancing against other states. When the system shifts to unipolarity, this logic of rule disappears. Power is no longer based on balancing and equilibrium but on the predominance of one state. This is new and different – and potentially threatening to weaker and secondary states. As a result, the power of the leading states is thrown into the full light of day. Unipolar power itself becomes a “problem” in world politics. As John Gaddis argues, American power during the Cold War was accepted by other states because there was “something worse” over the horizon.<sup>11</sup> With the rise of unipolarity, that “something worse” disappears.

### Erosion of Westphalian Sovereignty

A more gradual and quiet transformation of the global system is also at work. This is the unfolding of the postwar human rights revolution – and the resulting erosion of the norms of sovereignty. The “international community” increasingly is seen to have a legitimate interest in what goes on within countries. Sovereignty is more contingent, increasingly a legal right that must be earned.

This has two implications relevant to this discussion. First, the rise of international human rights and the decline of norms of sovereignty have created a new “license” for powerful states to intervene in the domestic affairs of weak and troubled states. The norm of sovereignty has less “stopping power” in world politics. Sovereignty really was born as a legal doctrine and international norm in early modern Europe as a way to prevent the intrusion of transnational religious and imperial authority into newly evolving nation-states. This legal – or Westphalian – sovereignty has had a brilliant international career. It spread around the world and became, in many ways, the single most universal and agreed-upon norm of international politics. It underlies international law, the United Nations, and the grand historical movements of anti-colonialism and national self-determination. So when the norm weakens, it is not surprising that there are consequences. And indeed, with the erosion of Westphalian sovereignty, there are fewer international legal or political inhibitions on intervention and the use of force across national boundaries.

---

<sup>11</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, Surprise, Security and the American Experience (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 66-67.

Second, the erosion of norms of sovereignty has not been matched by a rise of new norms and agreements about who and how sovereignty-transgressing interventions can proceed. The “international community” has more authority to act inside of troubled states – but who precisely is the international community? To some extent, the answer is: ideally, the United Nations. But there are unresolved disagreement on the standards of legality and legitimacy that attach to the actions of powerful states acting on behalf of the international community.

As a result, the erosion of norms of sovereignty has ushered in a new global struggle over the sources of authority in the international community. This problem is made worse by the rise of American unipolarity. Only the United States really has the military power to systematically engage in large-scale uses of force around the world. The United Nations has no troops or military capacity on its own. The problem of establishing legitimate international authority grows.

It is important to note that this human rights revolution is deeply embedded in the postwar liberal international project. It has been liberals – wielding liberal assumptions about world order – who have pushed forward the human rights revolution. The breakthrough was probably the Universal Declaration on Human Rights 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.<sup>12</sup> A steady stream of conventions and treaties followed that together constitute an extraordinary new vision of rights, individuals, sovereignty, and global order.<sup>13</sup>

This liberal project is deeply rooted in the postwar international order launched in the 1940s. American postwar planners brought to their task notions of security, justice, and governance forged within the United States during the New Deal. Roosevelt and Truman were clearly sobered by the failure of Wilson but convinced that a new global order committed to human rights, collective security and economic advancement was necessary to avoid the return to war. In the various postwar institutional initiatives – the UN, Bretton Woods, and the human rights conventions, a new synthesis of ideas about security, rights law, and institutional cooperation informed American efforts.

This point is made by Borgwardt, who traces the intellectual breakthrough to the 1941 Atlantic Charter: “The Atlantic Charter called for self-determination of peoples, freer trade, and several New Deal-style social welfare provisions. It also mentioned establishing ‘a wider and permanent system of general security,’ arms control, and freedom of the seas. But this Anglo-American declaration was soon best known for a resonant phrase about establishing a particular kind of postwar order – a peace ‘which will afford assurance that all the men in all the lands may

---

<sup>12</sup> See Mary Ann Glendon, A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Jack Donnelly, Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002). Second edition.

live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.’ To link anti-fascist politics and economic well-being was unusual in an international instrument. But to speak explicitly of individuals rather than state interests – to use the phrase ‘all the men in all the lands’ in place of a more traditional reference to the prerogatives of nations – was positively revolutionary. The phrase hinted that an ordinary citizen might possibly have some kind of direct relationship with international law, unmediated by the layering of a sovereign state. Though oblique, this hint that ideas about dignity of the individual were an appropriate topic of international affairs was soon to catalyze groups around the world committed to fighting colonialism and racism as well as nazism. It marked a defining, inaugural moment for what we now know as the modern doctrine of human rights.”<sup>14</sup>

In this way, the notion was established that Westphalian sovereignty was not absolute and that the international community had a moral and legal claim on the protection of individuals within states. In the 1990s, this “contingent” character of sovereignty was pushed further. The international community was seen as having a right – even a moral obligation – to intervene in troubled states to prevent genocide and mass killing. NATO intervention in the Balkans and the war against Serbia were defining actions of this sort.

The final step in the erosion of the norm of state sovereignty occurred after September 11. The American-led intervention in Afghanistan – where outside military force was used to topple a regime that actively protected terrorist attackers – was widely seen as a legitimate act of self-defense. The outside world had a legitimate claim to what goes on within a sovereign state if that state provides a launching pad, breeding ground, or protected area for transnational violence. The Bush administration pushed the limits of this principle in its invasion of Iraq. Now it was the anticipatory threat of a state itself – and its ambitions to gain weapons of mass destruction – that provided the justification for intervention.

Richard Haass has captured this new thinking. There is, in his view, “an emerging global consensus that sovereignty is not a blank check. Rather, sovereign status is contingent on the fulfillment by each state of certain fundamental obligations, both to its own citizens and to the international community. When a regime fails to live up to these responsibilities or abuses its prerogatives, it risks forfeiting its sovereign privileges including, in extreme cases, its immunity from armed intervention.”<sup>15</sup> He argues that there are three circumstances when exceptions to the norm of non-intervention are warranted: (1) when a state commits or fails to prevent genocide or crimes against humanity; (2) when a state abets, supports, or harbors international terrorists or are not capable of controlling terrorists operating within their borders; and (3) when a state takes steps – such as attempt to acquire weapons of mass destruction – that are a clear threat to global security, particularly a state with a history of aggression and support for terrorism.

---

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> For a good description of this evolution in international thinking about sovereignty, see Richard Haass, “Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving Responsibilities,” lecture at Georgetown University, 14 January 2003.

Liberal internationalism has pioneered this new thinking, bolstering the legitimacy of the international community's intrusive interest in what goes on within countries. The layers of the onion of sovereignty were being peeled away. The Bush administration built upon this liberal tradition – and took it several steps forward. Some liberal internationalists, such as Michael Ignatieff, joined with conservatives and neo-conservatives to support the Iraq war.<sup>16</sup> Sovereignty is more contingent but the norms about intervention – who acts, who authorizes, and according to what rules? – remain unclear.

### Privatization of War

Another deep change in the international order is the way in which violence is manifest. This is a transformation in the ways and means of collective violence in international politics that is driven by technology and the political structure of the system itself. The effect of this transformation is to render more problematic old norms of sovereignty and the use of force. It raises troubling new questions about the relationship between domestic politics and international relations and raises to greater national security significance parts of the world that previously could be ignored. It also creates new functional challenges that inevitably will influence patterns of security cooperation.

This new development might be called the “privatization of war” or the rise of “informal violence.” In the past, only states – primarily powerful states – were able to gain access to violence capabilities that could threaten other societies. Now we can look out into the future and see the day when small groups – or transnational gangs of individuals – might be able to acquire weapons of mass destruction. The technologies and knowledge almost inevitably will diffuse outward. Determined groups of extremists will increasingly be in a position to obtain this WMD.

Robert Wright has called this the “growing lethality of hatred.” The actual number of individuals in the world that are willing to inflict harm on others may not be growing. What is growing is the capability. In the past, groups who were willing to use violence to express their hatred were limited in the damage they could cause. In the future, this limitation may well drop away.

What does seem clear is that the privatization of war alters how states conceptualize security and cooperate to advance new threats and insecurities. Robert Keohane argues: “Effective wielding of large-scale violence by non-state actors reflects new patterns of asymmetrical interdependence, and calls into question some of our assumptions about geographical space as a barrier.” He goes on to say: “Contemporary theorists of world politics face a challenge similar to that of this earlier generation [who had to make sense of the nuclear revolution]: to understand the nature of world politics and its connections to domestic politics, when what Herz called the ‘hard shell’ of the state has been shattered. Geographical space, which

---

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Ignatieff, “Who Are Americans for Thinking that Freedom is Theirs to Spread?” New York Times Magazine, 26 June 2005.

has been seen as a natural barrier and a locus for human barriers, now must be seen as a carrier as well.”<sup>17</sup>

No one knows precisely what to do about this new type of threat – the “privatization of war.” But it plays havoc with the old notions of deterrence, alliance, self-defense, and Article 51 of the United Nations charter.

### Evolving Norms of International “Deviance”

A growing normative consensus appears to be emerging among most of the states in the global system about acceptable and unacceptable types of state behavior. If the old fault lines of global conflict were between the traditional great powers, the new fault lines appear to be between the international community and an assortment of “rogue” or “outlaw” or “renegade” states that do not conform with these global norms about what is considered acceptable and fully legitimate. This new normative consensus can be seen in the way in which the international community has registered complaints and taken actions against countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and North Korea. This new type of international “deviance” is based on both the character of the regimes themselves, their method of rule and ideology, and their behavior. If true, this represents a profound shift from the old conflicts and fault lines of international relations.

This emerging global norm about state deviance appears to be driven by the factors mentioned earlier that are eroding the norms of sovereignty. The widening agreement over human rights is at work here. So too are the new forms of transnational and privatized violence. Behind all this is probably the spread of democracy and the growing consensus that it is a universal standard. Robert Cooper observes: “We need an orderly world, and democracies are in the long run more stable than dictatorships. Besides, like it or not, our democratic values are universal. If all men are equal, then oppression anywhere is offensive: it may not threaten our security, but it threatens our self respect, for we are involved in mankind.”<sup>18</sup>

Miroslav Nincic notes this evolving consensus and its consequences: “The evolving accord within significant portions of the global community has several consequences that cannot easily be interpreted via conventional theoretical frameworks. To begin with, this apparent convergence throws into clearer relief the values that separate a preponderant portion of the world’s nations from those occasional regimes and movements that defy them: the differences simply seem sharper relative to the sum of other differences that fragment the international system. This allows challengers to offer particularly stark alternatives to the dominant normative order. Coupled with this, the progressive convergence of their values allows the bulk of the world’s nations, especially its leading members, to focus their attention more powerfully on such

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert Keohane, “The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and ‘The Liberalism of Fear,’” in Craig Calhoun, Paul Price, and Ashley Timmer, eds., Understanding September 11 (New York: The New Press, 20xx), p. 78, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Cooper, “Imperial Liberalism,” The National Interest (Spring 2005), pp. 25-34.

challenges than when they had each other to worry about. Along with the unipolar distribution of international power, this elevates the confrontation to a dominant position on the world's political agenda.”<sup>19</sup>

The development of this loose normative consensus was emerging before September 11 and the Iraq war. There was obviously a great deal of disagreement about the virtues and legitimacy of the Iraq war, but behind these disputes is a wider agreement that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were unacceptable and the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan is necessary and justified. Geopolitical conflicts among the great powers may reappear. But even if there is a return to forms of strategic rivalry among these states, what is striking is the growing convergence among them on what is acceptable behavior. The emergence of this agreement on international deviance is in many ways a triumph of liberal thinking but – along with the more general erosion of norms of sovereignty – it opens up new problems and controversies about how the international community should act.

### Democratic Legitimacy

A final background shift in the global system has been the rise and maturation of the democratic world. Call it the Western security community, the democratic complex, or simply the community of democracies. This grouping has been around for most of the last century but it has been evolving, expanding, and deepening. Indeed, the most powerful and rich countries in the world are now all democracies.

This fact of democratic community has two important implications for world politics. First, it has the effect of creating a stable, cooperative, and interdependent core of major states. Democracies are unusually willing and able to cooperate. Led by the United States, these democracies built an international order around multilateralism, alliance partnership, strategic restraint, cooperative security, and institutional and rule-based relationships. The institutional underpinning of this order made America's power position both more durable and less threatening to other states – rising, declining, or otherwise. It is the order that came to dominate the global system for half a century – surviving the end of the Cold War and other upheavals.<sup>20</sup>

Second, the fact of democratic community sets some constraints on how powerful states can operate within it. Put simply, coercive domination and realpolitik behavior has its limits and liabilities in a world of democracies. Attempts at bullying or strong arming fellow democratic countries is likely to backfire.

Robert Cooper captures this insight: “We live in a democratic era. . . . This has consequences for the international system. The realist world of rational policy making, equilibrium, alliances of convenience, and the balance of power, worked best when we were governed by rational, oligarchs – Richelieu, Pitt, Palmerston or Bismarck. Democratic ideas

---

<sup>19</sup> Miroslav Nincic, Renegade Regimes: Confronting Deviant Behavior in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> I sketch this logic in Ikenberry, After Victory.

mean that policy requires a more basis. The idea of the dignity of man will not go away; and policies have to be based on ideals and human sympathy as well as on interest. In a democratic world, the use of force becomes more difficult to handle. Wars need greater moral legitimacy than in an autocratic age. . . . The balance of power, which calls for the application of power with calculation and restraint, is no longer sustainable in a democratic age. Nor is the exercise of hegemony by force – which has been the other source of stability in the international system. In a democracy domination by the ruthless use of force ceases to be an option in the international field as it is in the domestic – as Gandhi well understood when he began the process of dismantling the British Empire.”<sup>21</sup>

This environment of democratic community has paradoxical effects on American foreign policy. On the one hand, it gives the United States the ready access to partners and the ability of pursue complex forms of cooperation. American power itself is seen as more benign and accessible. The United States is surrounded by affluent, capable, and friendly states. On the other hand, these democratic states are not likely to respond to domination or coercion by the United States. Indeed, they will expect the United States to operate within the rules and institutions of the democratic community.

It is this situation that appears to have caused the Bush administration so much grief. The Bush invasion of Iraq and general disregard for rules and institutions has triggered an outpouring of resentment and disapproval across the democratic world. Whatever pressure the United States can bring to bear on its democratic allies and partners is offset by the public opinion within these democratic states. The Bush administration has discovered the limits of its power in the age of democracy. It has gotten into trouble – losing credibility, prestige, respect, and political support – when it has been seen to side-step or disrespect the rules and norms of the liberal order. The fact that the Bush administration is now signaling a new interest in diplomacy and the reassurance of allies is evidence that costs do exist – and that they have been incurred – when the United States does not operate within the system that it itself shaped and led.

Overall, what is striking about today’s international order is not the breakdown of the “liberal international project” but its success. The crisis of the moment is not the failure of liberal internationalism but the dilemmas and controversies that have arisen in its wake. It is a crisis of success not a crisis of failure.

The global system has evolved away from the Westphalian order that is best depicted in realist theory. It is no longer a system built on equilibrium and balance among the great power. The unipolar distribution of power and the spread of democracy have made this older model obsolete. The building of a liberal international order was more successful – and during the Cold War largely unnoticed – than anyone in the 1940s really imagined was possible. But the erosion of the old norms of sovereignty, the spread of international norms of human rights, and the rise of new sorts of threats of collective violence have generated problems with the functioning of that liberal order.

---

<sup>21</sup> Cooper, “Imperial Liberalism,” [The National Interest](#).

In a fundamental sense there is an authority crisis within today's liberal order. The international community is the repository for new human right and national security norms – but who can legitimately act on its behalf? American leadership of the liberal international order was made acceptable to other states during the Cold War because it was providing security protection – and, over the horizon, there was “something worse.” American power and authority are not one in the same anymore. How to establish legitimate authority for concerted international action on behalf of the global community – and do so when the old norms of order are fading away – is the great challenge of international order.

## THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

On the surface, the Western liberal order is a stable and widely embraced realm of world politics. Within its cooperative frameworks, the world's democratic-capitalist countries are engaged in unprecedented cooperation – policy coordination, investment and exchange, social and cultural entanglement, and strategic partnership. This is what liberal internationalist thinkers of the twentieth century envisaged, and this is what they got.

But dilemmas and contradictions infuse this order. In many ways, they are inherent in the unresolved intellectual tensions within liberalism itself. But they have been sharply revealed anew in the controversies and political disputes that have erupted in the wake of American unipolarity, September 11, and the Iraq war.

There are at least four dimensions to the crisis of liberal internationalism – all of which ultimately relate to the problem within the liberal vision of establishing stable and legitimate political authority within the global system.

### Liberalism and the Balance of Power

It appears that -- more than liberals understood -- law and institutional cooperation rested on a system of balanced power and sovereign states. These traditional pillars of realist international order are for liberals both a blessing and a curse. Today the balance of power underpinnings of the system is gone and this is a problem for liberal internationalism. The balance of power state system provided a foundation for international law and rule-based order in several ways. One is by “solving” the power problem through an equilibrium of power among the major states. The other is that states themselves sought law and rules to strengthen their position and capacities within the international order. When balanced power disappears and sovereignty are attenuated, these foundational supports are lost.

International law emerged in the modern era as a way of protecting and enshrining the sovereignty and supreme legal authority of the state. Treaties and legal doctrines as well as the wider array of international rules and institutions emerged inside the West and the global system over the centuries as tools by which states could signal restraint and commitment. At the same time, this emerging infrastructure of laws and rules was built upon a shifting great power system

where power was diffused and balanced among major states. In effect, laws and rules did not “check” power – it was the underlying balance of power system that did the checking. When power was checked and in a stable equilibrium, the circumstances were present to construct and operate within a loosely rule-based order.

This view about the importance of the distribution of power for the establishment of international law is articulated by the pre-World War I legal scholar Lassa Oppenheim, who argued that a balance of power among states is “an indispensable condition of the very existence of international law. . . . If the Powers cannot keep one another in check, no rules will have force, since an overwhelming State will naturally try to act according to discretion and disobey the law.”<sup>22</sup> Hans Morgenthau made a similar argument: “International law owes its existence and operation to two factors, both decentralized in character: identical or complementary interests of individual states and the distribution of power among them. Where there is neither community of interest nor balance of power, there is no international law.”<sup>23</sup>

Of course, there are compensating features that the liberal order itself provides. If the great powers themselves are democracies, power disparities are of less significance. But when one country is overwhelmingly powerful and the protections of balance are lost, uncertainties do emerge over the commitment of that unipolar state to law and rule-based order. The “system” does not generate the protections (which a balance of power system does). The protections are based not on the functioning of the system but on the willingness and capacity of the leading state to act in an enlightened way. This is different – and arguably it is a weaker foundation for law and rule-based order.

The foundations of liberal order are weakened in a second sense. In the postwar era, international law and institutions flourished in the West partly because it created rules and institutions that strengthened the capacity of states. For example, the post-war economic rules and institutions – starting with the Bretton Woods agreements – provided mechanisms by which Western governments could strengthen their ability to stabilize and manage their economies. A great deal of contemporary international rules and institutions are still of this sort – facilitating state ability to open up the flow of goods and investment and manage these complex interactions.

But where state sovereignty is eroded and states themselves are highly penetrated and embedded in wider international networks, this statist impulse for capacity-enhancing rules and institutions is lost. More than liberals might admit, the postwar system of rules and institutions were embraced by politicians and parliaments because they strengthened the ability of governments to realize domestic liberal goals. When the liberal international agenda shifts its

---

<sup>22</sup> Lassa Oppenheim, International Law, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1912), p. 193.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace (New York: Knopf, 1967), Fourth Edition, p. 266.

attention to the management of post-Westphalian global relations, this underlying political support for rule-based order is not brought into play.<sup>24</sup>

If this argument is correct, the best pathway forward for liberal international order is – ironically perhaps – to emphasize rules and institutions that strengthen the state. A rule-based international order will be most stable if its rules enhance rather than erode the ability of states to protect their borders and govern their economies and societies.

### Democracy and International Authority

A second crisis point in liberal internationalism is the inherent tension that exists between democracy at home and strengthened authority of international bodies. Here the problem is: how do you build up authority and capacity at the international level – in international bodies and agreements – without jeopardizing popular rule and accountability built into liberal democratic states? Can the authority and capacity of the international community to act be strengthened without sacrificing constitutional democracy at home?

This is a deep unresolved problem in the liberal international project. Liberals anticipate a growing role for the “international community” in the functioning of the global system. The postwar era itself has seen a radical increase in the norms and cooperative efforts launched on behalf of the international community. The human rights revolution and the rise of international norms of “deviance” carry with them expectations that the outside world will act when governments fail to act properly. The growing interdependence of states also creates rising demands for governance norms and institutions. But how do you square the domestic and international liberal visions? That is, how do you reconcile the international liberal vision of increasing authority lodged above the national state – where there is sharing and pooling sovereignty among states – with domestic liberal democracy built on popular sovereignty?<sup>25</sup>

This is an age-old problem, of course. International cooperation is a process where states make commitments to other states that involve giving up some policy autonomy in exchange for similar commitments. Rules and institutions are embodiments of these reciprocal commitments

---

<sup>24</sup> A variation of this problem is advanced by Stanley Hoffmann. He argues that liberal internationalism has been particularly good at “negative tasks.” In the economic area, liberalism’s great goal has been to open up markets and tear down trade barriers. In political arenas, liberalism has battled against colonialism and imperialism – and during the Cold War it struggled against communism. As Hoffmann argues, liberalism is political thinking that was forged in the effort to protect the individual against tyranny, aggression, and illegitimate violence. It runs into difficulties when it sets about tackling positive tasks. See Hoffmann, “The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism,” in his book of essays, World Disorders: Troubled Peace in the Post-Cold War Era (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 75-77.

<sup>25</sup> See Robert Keohane, “Global Governance and Democratic Accountability,” in David Held and Mathias Koenig-Achibugi, eds., Taming Globalization: Frontiers of Governance (London: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 130-59; and Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Redefining Accountability for Global Governance,” in Miles Kahler and David A. Lake, eds., Governance in a Global Economy: Political Authority in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 386-411.

that circumscribe state freedom of action.<sup>26</sup> In the postwar era, the world saw a massive expansion in institutionalized cooperation that entailed such commitments. These institutional agreements varied widely in regard to the degree to which they entailed legal-binding commitments. Generally speaking, the more states wanted other countries to behave in predictable and rule-based ways, the greater their own requirements to bind themselves to a set of multilateral rules and institutions. This entire logic is at the heart of the liberal internationalist vision.

But when these commitments bind a state to international bodies that have realms of autonomous authority, the costs in state autonomy go up. Countries within the European Union have indeed made fundamental trade-offs of this extreme sort. When the European Court can hand down rulings that require national governments to alter their domestic laws, domestic judicial governance – and indirectly domestic democratic governance – is compromised. External courts and judges are setting the parameters for domestic courts and judges. The postwar human rights revolution pushes democracies in this direction – toward transnational justice and supranational judicial authority. This was the subversive move implicit in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in which peoples rights were now seen as embedded in international society and not simply defined and defended by national governments. Liberalism foresees a future where there will be a fuller realization of universal values and standards of justice – and the obligations and commitments of national governments will need to adjust accordingly. International authority – in the form of courts and collective governance mechanisms -- will be expanded. So the age-old problem of the trade-off between national autonomy and rule-based global order will intensify. And with it, so too will the questions about lost democratic accountability and popular sovereignty.<sup>27</sup>

### The Limits and Dangers of Interventionism

Another set of dilemmas that liberal internationalism faces are the limits and temptations of interventionism and use of force. There are two problems here – the problem of choice and capacity, and the problem of imperial opportunism.

The first problem is this: the norms and principles that establish the legitimacy and moral obligation for the international community to intervene in troubled countries far outstrip the capacity of countries to act – and this serves to erode the legitimacy of the liberal order that upholds these norms and principles. There are a cluster of thorny issues. There is the problem of

---

<sup>26</sup> I lay out this logic of institutional cooperation in various papers. See G. John Ikenberry, “State Power and the Institutional Bargain: America’s Ambivalent Economic and Security Multilateralism,” in Rosemary Foot, S. Neil MacFarlane, and Michael Mastanduno, eds., U.S. Hegemony and International Organizations: The United States and Multilateral Institutions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 49-70; and “Is American Multilateralism in Decline?” Perspectives on Politics, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Fall 2003).

<sup>27</sup> For a conservative argument that “global governance” threatens national constitutional democracy, see Jeremy A. Rabkin, Law Without Nations? Why Constitutional Government Requires Sovereign States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

who is to act on behalf of these norms and obligations. There is the problem of when and how to act. And there is the problem of making choices when states cannot respond to them all.

Because there is no neutral and independent global government that determines when and where interventions will take place, major states themselves decide – and they inevitably act when their more parochial or strategic interests are at stake. Bosnia and Kosovo were on the doorstep of Europe, and so NATO acted. Rwanda suffered mass killings but the international community did not respond. The weakly established international arrangements to deal with humanitarian emergencies and the selectivity of the interventions threaten the legitimacy of the norms and principles themselves.

The second problem is the danger of liberal imperialism and militarism. There is a fine line between forceful intervention to overturn tyranny and mass killing and imperial exploitation.

David Rieff makes this argument, namely that the human rights movement provides unwitting intellectual and political support for neo-conservative imperial intervention – seen most clearly, in Rieff's view, in Bush's invasion of Iraq. Rieff writes: “. . . the endless wars of altruism posited by so many human rights activists (no matter what euphemisms like ‘peacekeeping,’ ‘humanitarian intervention,’ ‘upholding international law,’ or the like they may care to use) or the endless wars of liberation (as they see it) proposed by American neoconservatives – Iraq was supposed to be only the first step – can only lead to disaster.”<sup>28</sup> In effect, neo-conservatives are an extreme and distorted version of liberal internationalism. They do not have the commitment to multilateralism and the norms of democratic community, but their ideas are nonetheless an outgrowth of liberal internationalism.

Rieff argues that to both liberal internationalists and “people like Paul Wolfowitz, it appears self-evident that a safer world is contingent on so-called humanitarian military interventions in the name of either ‘preventive security’ or the so-called ‘responsibility to protect’ peoples from what Anne-Marie Slaughter and Lee Feinstein once called ‘the needless slaughter or severe mistreatment of human beings anywhere.’ Anywhere? Slaughter and Feinstein may claim that is not a radical proposal. . . . But it is indeed radical because, precisely, ‘anywhere.’ For given the state of the world, and the number of ‘needless slaughters’ and peoples suffering ‘severe mistreatment,’ it is a recipe, or at least a call, for endless wars of altruism. Not humanitarian interventions, wars. Or, to quote that demonstrator in the massive New York rally against the invasion of Iraq in February, 2003, ‘perpetual war for perpetual peace.’ Again, it is radical – radical and dangerous both for international order and any hope that the dangerous flirtation of the Bush administration with militarism can be halted and rolled back.”<sup>29</sup>

Liberal internationalists think that the international community can distinguish between good and bad interventions. The Iraq war, after all, was not originally justified as a humanitarian

---

<sup>28</sup> David Rieff, *At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> David Rieff, quoted in an online debate at America Abroad at TPMCafe.com. See Anne-Marie Slaughter and Lee Feinstein, “A Duty to Prevent,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83 (January-February 2004).

intervention – it was a preventive war. But the challenge remains to develop agreed upon standards and practices for intervention. Whether this can be done in a way that makes good on liberal international norms and principles but stops short of disasters and abuse of good remains uncertain.

### Liberalism and American Hegemony

A final crisis point in liberal internationalism is that the postwar liberal project depended on enlightened American hegemony – and now that hegemony is more problematic. Like the balance of power, American hegemony has been more of a pre-condition for the emergence of liberal order than its champions might admit. But the character of that hegemony is under strain and changing.

For half a century, the United States held the keys to global order – and in many ways it still does today. If America engages in the right amount of commitment and restraint – anchoring its power in partnerships, alliances, multilateral institutions, "special relationships," and governance regimes -- the overall international system will tend to remain stable, open, and integrated. The world has, in effect, "contracted out" to the United States to provide global governance. The United States provides public goods, frameworks of cooperation, "good offices," and an enlightened but U.S.-centered system of rules and modes of doing geopolitical business. In return, the world "bandwagons" with the U.S. rather than resists or balances against it. This special type of open or liberal American hegemony trumps any other type of rival global order – and all the key players in world politics know this to be true. So no great power or regional grouping has an incentive to challenge or overturn the current order. It is a quintessential American vision – the great diversity of peoples and societies around the world will together troop down a grand pathway to modernity. Again, if the United States understands the logic of its own system and runs it correctly, this American-style liberal hegemonic order can last indefinitely.

A grand bargain stands behind this American-led liberal order. In the past, the United States provided global "services" – such as security protection and support for open markets – which made other states willing to work with rather than resist American preeminence. The public goods provision tended to make it worth while for these states to endure the day-to-day irritations of American foreign policy. But the trade-off seems to be shifting. Today, the United States appears to be providing fewer global public goods while at the same time the irritations associate with American dominance appear to be are growing.

It might be useful to think of this dynamic this way: the United States is unique in that it is simultaneously both the provider of "global governance" -- through what has tended in the past to be the exercise of "liberal" hegemony – and it is a great power that pursues its own national interest. America's liberal hegemonic role is manifest when it champions the WTO, engages in international rule or regime creation, or reaffirms its commitment to cooperative security in Asia and Europe. Its great power role is manifest, for example, when it seeks to protect its domestic steel or textile industry. When it acts as a liberal hegemon, it is seeking to lead or manage the global system of rules and institutions; when it is acting as a nationalist great power, it is seeking

to respond to domestic interests and its relative power position. My point is that today, these two roles – liberal hegemon and traditional great power – are increasingly in conflict.<sup>30</sup>

So the danger to liberal internationalism lies with its greatest champion. The United States does not appear to be doing as much today as in the past to sponsor and operate within a system of consensual rule-based governance. Why the United States is less willing to do so is actually a complex issue. Some of it is very specifically about the Bush administration – and therefore these biases and viewpoints will pass from the scene eventually as Bush and his team leave office. But America's global position and the structure of incentives that this setting generates is also part of the explanation. American unipolarity seems to have created problems in how the U.S. thinks about the provision of international rules, institutions, and public goods.

## CONCLUSION

The United States, together with allied European and East Asian partners, created a distinctive type of international order – organized around open markets, social bargains, intergovernmental institutions, and cooperative security. This political order was cemented by both the hegemonic power of the United States and the unusual bonds of cooperation that are possible among democracies. Today this order is in jeopardy. The United States is deeply ambivalent about making institutional commitments and binding itself to other states – ambivalence and hesitation that has been exacerbated by the end of the Cold War, American unipolarity, and new security threats. But the United States still possesses profound incentives to build and operate within a liberal rule-based order. Just as importantly, that order is now not simply an extension of American power and interests – it has taken on a life of its own. American power may rise or fall and its foreign policy ideology may wax and wane between multilateral and imperial impulses – but the wider and deeper liberal global order is now a reality that America itself must accommodate itself to.

This depiction of postwar liberal international order puts the Bush "revision" of liberal internationalism in perspective. This is true in two ways. One is that Bush's new neo-Wilsonian focus on democratic promotion is only a small part of the larger liberal internationalist project. If Wilson had an inadequate "theory" of international order, so too does Bush. Second, it is possible to argue that the postwar liberal order is much bigger and more deeply rooted than often thought – and, therefore, its prospects of surviving Bush are greater than sometimes thought. Not all of the liberal order is under attack. The multilateral strategies of governance and the alliance partnerships seem to be most at risk but the economic dimensions are still operating.

But even if liberal order survives the Bush era, it is an order that rests on shifting and transformed foundations. The "liberal project" was brought into the postwar world with the help of a hidden hand of American hegemony and Cold War bipolarity. The end of the Cold War, unipolarity, eroded sovereignty, and transformed security threats provide a less favorable environment in which to safeguard and manage liberal order. The liberal project itself has partly

---

<sup>30</sup> See G. John Ikenberry, "A Weaker World," Prospect Magazine (November 2005).

brought us to this impasse – its success has helped strip away the old foundations of the order. Liberal internationalism stands triumphant but also more alone and vulnerable.