

Creating America's World:

The Sources of Postwar Liberal Internationalism

G. John Ikenberry

INTRODUCTION

On December 31, 1945, President Truman's Secretary of State, James Byrnes, told a radio audience that "mobilizing the nation for war is a small job compared with the effort to mobilize the world for peace." But mobilize, organize, institutionalize, subsidize, integrate, underwrite, and manage the United States did. In the years after World War II, the United States led the world in creating a far-flung liberal multilateral order and Cold War alliance system that still exist today. Between 1944 and 1951, American leaders engaged in the most intensive institution building the world had ever seen – global, regional, security, economic, and political. The UN, Bretton Woods, GATT, NATO, and the U.S.-Japan alliance were all launched. The United States undertook costly obligations to aid Greece and Turkey and reconstruct Western Europe. It helped rebuild the economies of Germany and Japan. With the Atlantic Charter, the UN Charter, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it articulated a new vision of a progressive international community. In all these ways, the United States took the lead in fashioning a world of multilateral rules, institutions, open markets, democratic community, and regional partnerships -- and it put itself at the center of it all.

This was an extraordinary and unprecedented undertaking by a major state. It marked the triumph of American internationalism after earlier post-1919 and inter-war failures. It marked the creation of a new type of international order – fusing together new forms of liberalism, internationalism, and national security. It marked the beginning of the "long peace" – the longest period in modern history without war between the great powers. It laid the foundation for the greatest world economic boom in history. In almost all important respects, we still live in the world created during these hyperactive postwar years of internationalist order building.

But this expansive postwar American project was not foreordained. It still seems to be a bit of a puzzle that it all seemed to fall into place. It certainly was not obvious at the time that the U.S. would emerge from the war and do all that it did. Nor was it obvious that the U.S. could generate the requisite domestic political support to spend money, make commitments, and lead a open, liberal, and alliance-based system. Roosevelt and Truman confronted a skeptical and sometimes hostile Congress which was controlled in 1946 and 1948 by an isolationist and

tightfisted Republican party. It was not obvious that the American people would support the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan and undertake long-term commitments to rebuild and integrate Japan and Germany into the West. It was not obvious that the Congress would approve the United Nations charter, the Bretton Woods agreements, and the NATO pact. But it did all of that and more.¹

Obviously, the growing threat of Soviet Communism was the preeminent factor that motivated and ensured the passage of many of these initiatives. But there were various ways that the United States could have responded to the rise of Soviet power. Isolationism or a “cheap hawk” strategy of relying on nuclear weapons and “off shore balancing” rather than a build up and forward deployment of conventional forces were possible – and advocates for these options existed in various quarters.² What “the Cold War threat” cannot easily or directly explain is the wider agenda of order building and the deeper foundations of liberal internationalism that emerged after World War II. The UN, the multilateral economic institutions, and even the political vision behind the Atlantic pact were not simply or directly a response to the Soviet threat. The triumph of postwar American liberal internationalism fed off of the Cold War – it needed the Cold War to gain necessary domestic support at critical moments – but the explanation for the liberal internationalist breakthrough of the 1940s is a longer and more interesting story.

What explains this extraordinary moment of liberal internationalist order building? Why did American internationalism succeed in the 1940s when it failed at earlier junctures, particularly after World War I? How was domestic political support cobbled together for these ambitious and costly undertakings? What explains the particular type of liberal international order that emerged in the 1940s? Why did it last so long – outlasting the Cold War and even the post-Cold War 1990s? Lurking in the background is the question: are the domestic supports for this old-style American system eroding or even breaking down altogether?

This memo makes several arguments. First, at a general level, America’s postwar liberal internationalism reflected the basic 1940s-era realities of American power and interests. The U.S. emerged from the war as a truly global power – and it had economic and strategic incentives to ensure that the postwar order was open, stable, and friendly. Most of what it did after World War II can be understood in these straightforward terms. Second, the specific institutional strategies

¹ Robert A. Pollard notes: “Several domestic factors constrained the Truman administration’s freedom of action in foreign policy. A lingering isolationism among Congress and the public, manifested in sentiment for rapid demobilization and against large-scale foreign aid and defense programs, limited the administration’s ability to meet worldwide American responsibilities. The economic dislocation and high inflation attendant upon the end of the war, coupled with the President’s own fiscal conservatism, discouraged experimentation at home or abroad. By the same token, the Republic Party, after so many years out of power, hardly welcomed major foreign policy initiatives by the unelected President.” Pollard, Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1950 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 20.

² See Francis Fukuyama, “A Moral Compass to the World,” New York Times, 23 August 1998. [Review of James Chase, Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).]

and internationalist vision reflected distinctive New Deal-era liberal ideas about economics and politics and security. America approached order building with ideas about social security and national security that did not exist when Woodrow Wilson pursued his liberal ambitions. The liberal internationalism of the 1940s was also more closely tied to a vision of Western or Atlantic community than Wilson's democratic universalism – which delimited and, therefore, facilitated political-institutional commitments. Third, a remarkable confluence of ideas and agendas fed into the Roosevelt-Truman postwar project – ideas that tended to reinforce each other and create multiple constituencies for an ambitious and sustained postwar liberal internationalist undertaking. Realist geo-strategists, free traders and business internationalists, anti-communist crusaders, old-style Atlanticists, and one-world idealists all could support the synthesis of internationalism and national security liberalism that defined the evolving post-1945 American vision of order.

The Setting: American Power and Interests

The first observation to make is that the U.S. emerged as a global power after World War II with both the opportunity and incentives to organize its environment in a way that would serve its long term interests. One does not need to dig too deeply into American domestic culture, ideas, or political identity to explain this simple point. Preeminent power gave it opportunities – other states were diminished by the war, the United States had grown more powerful. The old order had collapsed and its reigning ideas had been discredited. At the same time, the U.S. had new global interests. It was less able to secure its interests by isolating itself in the Western Hemisphere. It could rely on no other major state for protection or to uphold an open and stable order. Hence American opportunities and interests.

Paul Kennedy nicely captures this new reality:

“Given the extraordinarily favorable economic and strategical position which the United States thus occupied, its post-1945 outward thrust could come as no surprise to those familiar with the history of international politics. With the traditional Great Powers fading away, it steadily moved into a vacuum which their going created; having become number one, it could no longer contain itself within its own shores, or even its own hemisphere. To be sure, the war itself had been the primary cause of this projection outward of American power and influence; because of it, for example, in 1945 it had sixty-nine divisions in Europe, twenty-six in Asia and the Pacific, and none in the continental United States. Simply because it was politically committed to the reordering of Japan and Germany (and Austria), it was ‘over there’; and because it had campaigned via island groups in the Pacific, and into North Africa, Italy, and western Europe, it had forces in those territories also. There were, however, many Americans (especially among the troops) who expected that they would be home within a short period of time, returning U.S. armed-forces deployments to their pre-1941 position. But while that idea alarmed the likes of Churchill and attracted isolationist Republicans, it provided impossible to turn the clock back. Like the British after 1815, the Americans in their turn found their informal influence in various lands hardening into something more formal – and more

entangling; like the British, too, they found ‘new frontiers of insecurity’ whenever they wanted to draw the line. The ‘Pax Americana’ had come of age.”³

The war itself had turned America into global power with new internationalist interests. Its power now had global reach – and so it had opportunities to structure the wider world in a way few states ever do. At the same time, it confronted new geopolitical worries – and so it was harder for it simply to remain isolated at home.

This profound American interest in an open, stable, and friendly geopolitical environment was made clear during the war within academic and post-war planning circles. The central foreign policy question that American experts wrestled with was defined by the specter of a world divided into competing great power blocs. The question was: could the U.S. remain a viable major state if its trade and access to resources were confined to the Western Hemisphere? From the perspective of the late-1930s – when Japan, Germany, Russia, and Britain each controlled or sought to control large portions of the world – this was a question of great urgency. In planning circles, the question was asked in terms of the “grand area” – i.e., the minimum size of the world’s territory that the U.S. would need to have access to and defend so as to remain a viable and growing great power.⁴ The conclusion was that the U.S. could not remain isolated within its own region – it would need to be able to operate and defend sea lanes and outposts around the wider Eurasian landmass. The same judgment was reached by scholars, such as Nicholas Spykman, during the war as well.⁵

Operationally, this meant – at the very least – forging strategic relationships, building up democratic states, and balancing regional powers so as to ensure that no other major military state dominated or gained hegemony in Asia or Europe. Importantly, this was a strategic goal the U.S. had – and its experts embraced – even before the Soviet Union emerged as a menace. It was America’s globally updated version of Britain’s centuries-old grand strategy of ensuring that no single great power dominated the European continent. In earlier decades – including in 1919 – the U.S. did not have the power, opportunity, or security imperative to reach out and organize Asia and Europe in this way. By the 1940s it did, and this imperative became a driving force behind American internationalism.

³ Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000 (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 359.

⁴ See Carlo Maria Santoro, Diffidence and Ambition: The Intellectual Sources of U.S. Foreign Policy (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 92-96.

⁵ Nicholas J. Spykman, America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power (Hamden: Archon, 1942). Others making similar arguments include William T.R. Fox, The Super-Powers: The United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union – Their Responsibility for Peace (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944); and Robert Strausz-Hupe, The Balance of Tomorrow: Power and Foreign Policy in the United States (New York: Putnam, 1945).

New Deal Liberalism and the Invention of National Security

American leaders wanted to take advantage of the country's postwar power advantages to build a congenial geopolitical environment. But how it would try to do this – that is, how it would seek to build a stable, open, and peaceful order – was defined by the prevailing ideas and experiences of the era. In the 1940s, this meant the New Deal and the American lessons drawn from the previous decades of war and depression. So mid-century American internationalism bore the marks of New Deal liberalism and the emerging notions of national security.

The New Deal experience had four impacts on the character of American liberal internationalism. The first was the importance attached to economics as such. Indeed Truman's own understanding of the causes of World War II was nothing if not economically deterministic. Protectionism, trade blocs, and currency unions were the culprits. Second, open markets were seen as good – but governments were needed to regulate and manage them. Markets left to their own devices would end in calamity. At the international level, this meant putting in place regulatory and public goods mechanisms to guard against economic dysfunction or failure – and its spread to other countries and regions.⁶ Third, governments were now obligated to ensure employment, economic well being, and social security – and so the U.S. needed to create a more facilitating international environment to make good on its economic security obligations.⁷ Finally, the progressive notions embedded in New Deal liberalism were brought forward into America's vision of an international order. The architects of the American order sought to do things in their day to make each succeeding generation more modern, prosperous, and secure.

The depression and New Deal brought into existence the notion of “social security” – but the violence and destruction of world war brought into existence the notion of “national security.” It was more than just a new term of art – it was a new and expansive internationalist notion of security. In earlier decades – and during World War I – the notion of “national security” did not really exist. The term most frequently used was national “defense,” and this had a more restricted meaning to protection of the homeland against traditional military attacks. Sometime during World War II the new term emerged and it captured the new vision of an activist and permanently mobilized state seeking security across economic, political, and military realms. “National security” required America to be actively attempting to shape its external environment -- coordinating agencies, generating resources, making planning, building alliances, and laying the ground work. The National Security Act of 1947 embodied this new vision.

What New Deal and national security liberalism brought to postwar American internationalism was a wider domestic constituency for liberal order building than in earlier eras.

⁶ See Anne-Marie Burley, “Regulating the World: Multilateralism, International Law, and the Project of the New Deal Regulatory State,” in John G. Ruggie, Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 125-56.

⁷ See John Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., International Regimes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 195-232.

The desired international order would need to have more features and moving parts. It would need to be more elaborate and complexly organized. In several senses, the stakes had grown since the end of World War I – more had to be accomplished, more was at risk if the right sort of postwar order was not constructed, and more of American society had a stake in a successful American internationalist project.

Postwar Visions and Strategies

American postwar liberal internationalism was a synthesis of competing visions or strategies of order. Various ideas for postwar order were put forward – and some found their way into actual policy and others disappeared. Domestic opposition, European weakness and resistance, the growing fear of Soviet power, and other unfolding realities all exerted an impact on the viability of particular ideas and grand designs. The result was a sort of “rolling process” where different ideas gained ground or lost support and where coalitions of experts and political groups formed and reformed around postwar policies. 1940s liberal internationalism emerged out of this process.

Six groups of ideas and grand designs competed for dominance at the end of the war. One was a loose set of idealist aspirations for “global governance.” Some proposals were advanced by scientists and other activists seeking international control of atomic weapons and new global security institutions. Others were seeking new forms of global governance to deal with industrial modernism and rising economic interdependence. Nation-states were seen as no longer capable of dealing with the technological and economic scale and scope of the modern world. Prominent “one worlders,” such as Albert Einstein, Cord Meyer, Norman Cousins, and Emery Reeves, put forward passionately felt hopes and visions of a great leap forward toward world government.⁸ These groups and ideas existed mostly outside of the American government and remained peripheral to the politics of postwar order building – although the founding of the UN was seen as a partial achievement.

A second group was concerned with the creation of an open trading system. The most forceful advocates of this position came from the State Department and its Secretary, Cordell Hull. Throughout the Roosevelt presidency, Hull and other State Department officials consistently held the conviction that an open international trading system was central to American economic and security interests and was also fundamental to the maintenance of peace. Trade officials saw liberal trade as a core American interest that reached back to the Open Door policy of the 1890s. In the early years of the war, this liberal economic vision dominated initial American thinking about the future world order and became the opening position at the U.S. engaged Britain over Lend-Lease and the postwar settlement. Bretton Woods and the GATT system were the eventual result.

⁸ For an overview of these ideas and personalities, see Welsey T. Wooley, Alternatives to Anarchy: American Supranationalism since World War II (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1988).

A third American position on postwar order was primarily concerned with creating political order among the democracies of the North Atlantic region. The vision was of a community or union between the U.S., Britain, and the wider Atlantic world. Ideas of an Atlantic union can be traced to the turn of the century and a few British and American statesmen and thinkers, such as John Hay, British Ambassador to Washington Lord Bryce, American Ambassador to London Walter Hines Page, Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, and Henry Adams. These writers and political figures all grasped the unusual character and significance of Anglo-American comity, and they embraced a vision of closer transatlantic ties. These ideas were articulated and rearticulated during the following decades. During World War II, Walter Lippmann gave voice to this view, that the “Atlantic Ocean is not the frontier between Europe and the Americas. It is the inland sea of a community of nations allied with one another by geography, history, and vital necessity.”⁹

The failure of the League of Nations reaffirmed in the minds of many Americans and Europeans the virtues of a less universal security community that encompassed the North Atlantic area. Others focused on the protection of shared democratic values. These ideas were famously expressed by Clarence Streit’s 1939 book, Union Now.¹⁰ In the years that followed, a fledgling Atlantic Union movement came to life. American and European officials were willing to endorse principles of Atlantic community and unity – most explicitly the 1941 Atlantic Charter – but they were less interested in a supranational federation.

A fourth set of ideas focused more directly on considerations of American geopolitical interests and the Eurasian rimlands. This is where American strategic thinkers began their debates in the 1930s as they witnessed the collapse of the world economy and the emergence of German and Japanese regional blocs. As noted earlier, the upshot of their thinking was clear – the U.S. must seek openness, access, and balance in Europe and Asia. This view that America must have access to Asian and European markets and resources – and must therefore not let a prospective adversary control the Eurasian land mass – was also embraced by postwar defense planners. As the war was coming to an end, defense officials began to see that America’s security interests required the building of an elaborate system of forward bases in Asia and Europe. Hemisphere defense would be inadequate.¹¹ Leffler notes that “Stimson, Patterson, McCloy, and Assistant Secretary Howard C. Peterson agreed with Forrestal that long-term American prosperity required open markets, unhindered access to raw materials, and the rehabilitation of much – if not all – of Eurasia along liberal capitalist lines.”¹² Some defense studies went further and argued that postwar threats to Eurasian access and openness were more social and economic than military. It was economic turmoil and political upheaval that were the

⁹ Lippmann, U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic (Boston: Little Brown, 1943), p. 83.

¹⁰ Streit, Union Now: The Proposal for Inter-democracy Federal Union (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939).

¹¹ See Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginning of the Cold War, 1945-48,” American Historical Review 48 (1984), pp. 349-56.

¹² Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security,” p. 358.

real threats to American security, as they invited the subversion of liberal democratic societies and Western-oriented governments. A CIA study concluded in mid-1947: “The greatest danger to the security of the United States is the possibility of economic collapse in Western Europe and the consequent accession to power of Communist elements.”¹³ Access to resources and markets, socioeconomic stability, political pluralism, and American security interests were all tied together.

A fifth view of postwar order was concerned with encouraging political and economic unity in Western Europe – a “third force.” This view emerged as a strategic option as wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union began to break down. In 1943 and 1947, the world increasingly began to look as if it would become bi-polar, and “one world” designs for peace and economic order were less relevant. As officials in the State Department began to rethink relations with Western Europe and the Soviet Union, a new policy emphasis emerged stressing the importance of establishing a strong and economically integrated Western Europe. The idea was to encourage a multipolar postwar system, with Europe as a relatively independent center of power. This view of building Europe into a center of power was held by George Kennan and it was articulated with some vigor by Kennan’s new Policy Planning staff in 1947. Encouraging European unity also appealed to State Department officials working on European recovery. In their view, the best way to get Europe back on its feet was through encouraging a strong and integrated Europe – and this view informed the launch and funding of the Marshall Plan.

A final position was a full blown Western alliance aimed at the bipolar balancing of the Soviet Union. This strategy emerged reluctantly in response to the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe and the persistent efforts of Europeans to draw the U.S. into an ongoing European defense commitment. European reluctance to become an independent “third force” was reinforced by threatening developments in the East, such as the February 1948 Czechoslovak coup. The result was a quickening of European security preparations and an appeal to American involvement. It was not until the Berlin crisis in June 1948 that American officials began to favor some sort of loose defense association with Western Europe.

This survey of competing postwar visions and ideas show how multiple and varied the internationalist impulses were after World War II. In particular, three conclusions follow. First, there was a range of ideas and plans that predated the rise of bipolarity and containment. Indeed it is remarkable how late and reluctant the U.S. was in organizing its foreign policy around a global balance of power. Internationalism did not “kick in” with the Cold War – in various guises, it was already well underway at least in government planning circles. Second, most of the ideas that were proposed and debated before containment and the breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union dealt with the reconstruction of relations within the West, particular among the Atlantic countries. Some postwar designs were more universal – such as those concerning free trade and global governance – but they also were anchored in a deepened set of relations and institutions among the Western democracies. Other ideas, such as the geopolitical arguments about access to the Eurasian rimlands, saw the stability and integration of the liberal capitalist

¹³ CIA, “Review of the World Situation as It Relates to the Security of the United States,” September 26, 1947. Quoted in Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security,” p. 364.

world in essentially instrumental terms. But the goals and policies were the same. Likewise, many of the supporters of NATO and containment did so not simply to build an alliance against the Soviet Union but also because these initiatives would feed back into the Western liberal democratic order. Third, in the “rolling process” of adaptation to postwar realities, a synthesis of these positions was forged. That is, there was a synthesis of economic, business, national security, Atlantic community, and “one world” ideas that fed into the new American internationalism. Liberal internationalism – in its multifaceted and Western-centered synthesis – could be supported by liberal idealists, free traders, New Dealers, hard-headed geo-strategists, and democratic unionists.

Conclusion

Seen in this light, it is easier to understand why the post-1945 liberal internationalist project was so successful and enduring. It had a remarkable array of intellectual and political components that brought a diversity of social and political constituencies together in support of the larger edifice. Security, economic, and political visions, strategies, and institutions fit together in mutually-reinforcing ways. The liberal internationalism of Woodrow Wilson looks utterly one-dimensional in comparison. Wilson assumed the world would be democratic – and so he sought to build a universal collective security institution on top of this anticipated global democratic revolution. FDR and Truman didn’t just propose an institution – they built in international order. They offered a much more elaborate vision of liberal internationalism, if only because so many ideas and constituencies and demands pressed themselves onto the leaders at a critical moment of opportunity. To be sure, FDR and Truman were in a much stronger position than Wilson, if only because the war itself destroyed more of the old order – the other great powers and their rival ideologies – and the U.S. emerged in a more commanding position. But their “theory” of international order was more comprehensive, articulated, and ambitious. To hold all of its parts together, the U.S. had to invent the expansive notion of “national security.” But while it was more elaborate, 1940s-style liberal internationalism was also more deeply anchored in a notion of Atlantic or Western community. This made it easier for the U.S. to make commitment and bear costs.

There are implications of this analysis for today’s debate about the future of American liberal internationalism. One is simply that liberal internationalism is deeply embedded into today’s international order. It is not simply a foreign policy doctrine or policy idea – it was a strategy for building liberal order that in fact created a liberal order. The fact that so many interests and aspirations could be met within this amalgamated liberal order makes that order all the more durable. There are lots of semi-autonomous components to liberal international order – an economic component, a political-institutional component, a security component.

But the domestic coalition for this order may be weaker today than in the past. The U.S. may be less willing to make costly commitments to uphold this order. So we need to ask whether American support for liberalism can survive on a more fragile and narrow domestic foundation. We also need to ask whether the order itself can continue to endure even if its original champion takes a powder.