# Liberal Internationalism and Freedom

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Peter Berkowitz on Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order by G. John Ikenberry

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G. John Ikenberry. Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order. Princeton University Press. 372 Pages. $35.

Confronting a war-weary nation, candidate Obama ran in 2008 as the anti-Bush, particularly in regard to foreign policy and national security. Obama promised no more reckless military adventures based on poor intelligence and ill-conceived goals. On his watch, he insisted, the shredding of the Constitution in the detention, interrogation, and prosecution of enemy combatants would cease; to that end he promised to promptly close the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and to bring enemy combatants, such as self-confessed 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, to trial in federal court. He made clear that when he was at the helm, America would refrain from imposing its way of life on other countries and cultures, and so would abandon the Bush administration policy of seeking to advance democracy and freedom abroad. His administration, he declared, would engage hostile powers and cultivate multilateral relations. And the hunt for Osama bin Laden and the struggle against al Qaeda would be conducted consistent with our values and in accordance with our obligations under international law.

President Obama has discovered that the conduct of foreign policy and national security is not so simple. Flying the flag of humanitarian intervention while confusingly demanding that Qaddafi must go but by means of diplomacy and not force, the president ordered limited military action in Libya in the face of considerable, and continuing, uncertainty about the character and intentions of the rebels to whose aid the United States came. On Obama's watch, Gitmo will remain open indefinitely — and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed will be tried there by military commission (a decision formally announced by Attorney General Eric Holder on the same day in early April that the president launched his reelection bid). The Arab spring has further altered the presidential script. It was set in motion in mid-December 2010 when a humiliated vegetable vendor immolated himself in front of the governor's office in Sid Bouzid, Tunisia, and reached a culmination of sorts with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's ouster in mid-February. This prompted President Obama — as he refused to do in June 2009 when Iranian military forces wielded lethal force against citizens protesting the corrupt presidential election that preserved Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hold on power — to affirm America's interest in advancing democracy and liberty abroad. Meanwhile, engagement with Iran and Syria proved a total failure, and relations between the U.S. and vital allies Britain, France, and Germany cannot be said to be on a better footing than they

were under President Bush. And finally, President Obama gave the orders to Navy seal Team Six, an elite unit formerly denounced as "Cheney's death squad," that resulted in the long-awaited killing of Osama bin Laden. The successful raid on bin Laden's compound in early May was unilateral, based, in part, on intelligence obtained through the much-decried coercive interrogations authorized by the Bush administration, and flew in the face of the European and generally progressive view that bin Laden was a criminal who needed to be brought to trial.

To record the deviation of President Obama's foreign and national security policy from candidate Obama's promises is not to underestimate the difficulty of translating intentions into practice. Nor is it to deny the difference of strategic sensibility that separates Obama policy from Bush policy. Nor is it to minimize what is at stake in the different approaches to international relations and national security that generally distinguish progressives and conservatives. It is to suggest, though, that clarifying the issues presents complex challenges.

In the quest for clarity about America's foreign policy, consulting the great theoretical alternatives propounded by academic political scientists will provide limited assistance. Some international relations theorists are realists; they tend to believe that, operating in an essentially anarchic system, states seek to advance their national interests by achieving a balance of power that maximizes their room to maneuver while minimizing that of other states. Others are idealists or liberal internationalists; following in the footsteps of Woodrow Wilson, they argue that the primary goal of foreign affairs should be the formation of an international order devoted to democracy and human rights. And still others are constructivists; they contend that states' national identities and vital interests, along with core moral and political concepts, are socially constructed — that is, historically contingent artifacts determined by shared values and fundamental assumptions. In the rarefied world of political science, each of these theories purports to explain the whole of international relations.

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However, common sense — to say nothing of the spirit of adjustment, balance, and calibration that John Stuart Mill, no less than Edmund Burke, saw as essential to grasping the requirements of a free society — counsels a more subtle approach. It suggests the utility of the insight at the core of each of the major theoretical alternatives in contemporary international relations theory — the importance of power, principles, and perspectives; the inadequacy of each by itself; and the need to combine them in proper measure to make sense of world politics.

G. John Ikenberry, the Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, brings a welcome common sense to his application of international relations theory to the problems of world order and the analysis of the opportunities and dangers that America confronts. A leading member of the liberal internationalist bloc, Ikenberry believes that the liberal world order — "that is, order that is relatively open, rule-based, and progressive" — that America has led since the end of World War II is undergoing a crisis, but is capable of being renovated by America to its and the world's advantage. In making his case, Ikenberry provides an unusually accessible and instructive synthesis of the last several decades of liberal internationalist theory.

He is very much of the tell-them-what-you-are-going-to-tell-them, tell-them, and then tell-them-what-you-told-them school of presentation. In his scholarly commitment to clarity, precision, and comprehensiveness he goes overboard in restating points with at best minute variations from at most slightly different angles. But the repetition serves a good cause. Ikenberry succeeds in bringing into focus the large stake America has in refurbishing and extending the liberal international order over whose construction and expansion it has, for more than half a century, presided.

In the least compelling parts of his book, Ikenberry blames the crisis of liberal international order, or its dramatic exacerbation, on the George W. Bush administration. Through "its controversial 'war on terror,' invasion of Iraq, and skepticism about unilateral rules and agreements," the Bush administration not only "triggered a global outpouring of criticism" and intensified anti-Americanism around the world, but also gave rise, contends Ikenberry, to the justified fear that the U.S. sought to mold a unipolar globe in which it placed itself above international law and at the head of an imperial and illiberal order.

The main argument of his book, however, has to do with the pressures for change produced by the internal dynamics and abiding logic of liberal international order itself:

> the crisis of the old order transcends controversies generated by recent American foreign policy or even the ongoing economic crisis. It is a crisis of authority within the old hegemonic organization of liberal order, not a crisis in the deep principles of the order itself. It is a crisis of governance.

Shifts in its "underlying foundations" have called into question "how aspects of liberal order — sovereignty, institutions, participation, roles, and responsibilities — are to be allocated, but all within the order rather than in its wake." What is needed is "a new bargain, not a new system."

Ikenberry advances four major claims about the rise and prospects of liberal international order. First, after World War II, America led the way in constructing a world order whose hierarchical roots and liberal principles were in tension. On the one hand, as the most powerful and dominant nation the world had ever seen, the U.S. established itself as a

hegemon, providing collective security, distributing economic aid, and maintaining open markets. On the other hand, the U.S. built an international order grounded in multilateral rules, reciprocal political processes, and international law and international institutions in which it voluntarily yielded some of its freedom of action to induce other states to do the same. This order promised, and to a remarkable extent delivered, stability and predictability which in turn allowed for the achievement of extended peace and prosperity. It fused American preeminence with respect for the sovereignty of all nations and deference to universal principles and general rules. It created a liberal hegemonic order with the U.S. at its top.

Second, the crisis of authority that both America and the international system face stems from several factors quite independent of which party holds the White House. One destabilizing factor has to do with American unipolarity in the international system. In a bipolar world, with two major powers, or a multipolar world, with several major powers, coalitions form to achieve a balance. A unipolar world, however — in which one state, by virtue of its military might and economic clout, dominates — is inherently threatening to weaker states, even when that dominant state is a liberal democracy. Another destabilizing factor has to do with the rise of new major powers including China, India, and Brazil. Also a factor is that norms of state sovereignty — the principle that states have the last word on what takes place within their borders, on which international order has been based since the mid- 17th century — have eroded. Particularly in the last few decades, international institutions and organizations, led by progressive Western intellectuals, have labored to establish the principle that nations and international bodies have a responsibility to protect endangered peoples, including from crimes committed by their governments. Furthermore, all states, progressive Western intellectuals argue, including the United States, have on obligation to bring their domestic practices in line with evolving international understandings of human rights. A final factor is the rise of new security threats — in particular, though Ikenberry avoids precisely naming it, the transnational terrorism practiced by Islamic jihadists seeking weapons of mass destruction. The new threats have impelled America, given its special responsibilities, to reexamine the requirements of international law and the strategic bargains by which it has been bound.

Third, the American-led liberal international order is characterized by distinctive forms of power, law, and legitimacy. Throughout history, the common form of order, imperial order, has been based on force. In it, “rules are imposed and compliance is ultimately enforced through coercive uses of power.” In contrast, the liberal order whose leadership the U.S. inherited from Britain after World War II “is based on bargained and rule-based relations.” In it, “weaker and secondary states have voice opportunities, and their agreement to operate within the order is based on the willingness of the dominant state to restrain and commit its power and lead in the provision of public goods.” In the liberal order, no state, even the hegemon, is above the law. Ideally, the participation of all states in the system is based on the logic of consent.

Fourth, preserving and extending liberal international order should become the centerpiece of American grand strategy. Renovating the "architecture of global governance and frameworks of cooperation" is necessary to deal with a great variety of challenges such as global pandemics and international health concerns, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and failed states. In addition, the U.S. should refurbish its security alliances so that America remains first among equals even as other nations rise to challenge its preeminence; this will involve partners taking on more responsibilities in exchange for the U.S. relinquishing some autonomy. Also, America should band with the other capitalist democracies to further promote the incorporation of China into the liberal international order. And finally, American elites must recover the "public philosophy" of liberal internationalism. That public philosophy is devoted to developing international rules and institutions that strengthen the capacity of national governments to provide security and promote prosperity; it emphasizes America's provision of public goods to other states in exchange for their cooperation with the international system; it values close consultation and cooperation with fellow liberal democracies; and it counsels humility concerning the capacity of the United States to promote the expansion of liberal order by direct intervention in the affairs of other states.

By cooperating with other states "to rebuild and renew the institutional foundations of the liberal international order," America can, Ikenberry concludes, "reestablish its own authority as a global leader."

Although his state-of-the-art elaboration of liberal internationalism gracefully incorporates realist insights and responds to realist challenges, Ikenberry's analysis suffers from weaknesses characteristic of his theoretical outlook and larger discipline.

First, Ikenberry's account is marred by partisan progressive bias, if relatively restrained, typical of the political science professoriate. Notwithstanding a few of President Bush's more pithy and pungent public statements, Ikenberry wrongly presents Bush administration foreign policy as a deliberately sharp break with the principles of liberal internationalism. To be sure, the Bush administration pushed back against progressive interpretations of what international law and cooperation with the international community required — in regard to the detention, interrogation, and prosecution of enemy combatants; the role of the UN in authorizing the use of military force; and the value of particular international institutions such as the International Criminal Court and particular international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol. At the same time, the Bush administration went to considerable lengths to establish that it was complying with its obligations under international law; aggressively collaborated with European allies in the war on terror; and, contrary to Ikenberry's suggestion that it proceeded unilaterally, assembled a large coalition for Operation Iraqi Freedom comprising 40 nations, with crucial logistical support coming from, among other Arab Gulf monarchies, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain. The determination to view the Bush

administration as seeking to exit or upend the liberal international order reflects the progressive habit, on exhibit every now and again in President Obama's rhetoric, of suggesting that conservative opinions are contrary to American principles.

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Second, Ikenberry displays a tendency to blame America for disagreements that arise between the U.S. and Europe and the ensuing instabilities in the international system. To take one telling example, following the progressive and French line of analysis, he faults President Bush for taking the United States to war with Iraq without formal Security Council approval. But, even beyond the formal coalition the U.S. assembled and the extensive cooperation of Arab Gulf states, there is more to consider. Ikenberry does not note that the Bush administration argued that its decision to invade Iraq drew support from no fewer than seventeen Security Council Resolutions over the course of more than a decade requiring Saddam to abandon his weapons of mass destruction and wmd programs; that in November 2002 the Bush administration won unanimous passage of Security Council Resolution 1441, which found Iraq "in 'material breach' of its obligations under previous resolutions" and promised "serious consequences" if Saddam failed to promptly comply with his obligations under international law; that the French, among others, had large commercial interests with Iraq that disinclined them to enforce the international law that Saddam was flouting; that failure to enforce international law against Iraq threatened to turn that law and the Security Council into toothless tigers; and that Saddam's stealing of revenues from the un-sponsored Oil-for-Food program was producing a humanitarian crisis in Iraq among children and the ill. In other words, in the case of Iraq the Bush administration sought to respect international law and institutions and respond to a humanitarian crisis, and had a respectable argument that by removing Saddam it was doing just that. At the same time, some European criticism of the U.S. can be traced to the very envy and resentment that, as Ikenberry notes elsewhere, great powers inevitably engender among weaker and secondary states.

Third, and most importantly and surprisingly, Ikenberry neglects the importance of individual freedom to the theory and practice of liberal internationalism. The words "freedom" and "liberty" are almost entirely absent from his book; they don't appear as terms in the index. Certainly, Ikenberry does not include dedication to the principle of individual freedom as a hallmark of liberal international order. It's true that the central features he does discuss — openness, the rule of law, consent, reciprocity, progress — are bound up with the belief in the natural freedom and equality of all. But his account obscures the connection. This is in stark contrast to Hobbes, who made clear that the interest individuals have in exiting the state of nature and creating a commonwealth or leviathan is to protect, through mutual limitation, the natural and inalienable rights that each shares equally with all. Surely the liberal leviathan that Ikenberry celebrates is not less dedicated to, and does not draw less legitimacy from, the idea of the equal freedom of all individuals than Hobbes's leviathan.

The neglect of freedom's centrality to liberal internationalism has consequences. It contributes, among other things, to the difficulty that Ikenberry and his fellow liberal internationalists have in understanding the conservative critique of liberal internationalism. In many cases — certainly in that of the Bush administration — the conservative critique is grounded in a commitment to individual freedom that it shares with liberal internationalism. The debate between more-progressive and more-conservative analysts of American foreign policy, in fact, tends to revolve around the practices and policies that best advance America's interest in making freedom more secure at home by advancing it abroad. More attention to freedom's centrality to liberal internationalism would not only clarify puzzles in political science. It would also contribute to the moderation and refinement of a great deal of progressive foreign policy analysis and rhetoric, including that of the president.

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