

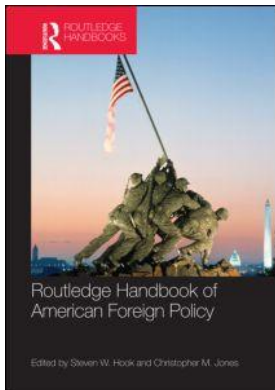
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6

Liberalism

Alynn J. Lyon

The chronicle of American foreign policy is composed by the liberal tradition (Kennan 1951; Kagan 2002). For more than 200 years, liberal thought provided ideological orientation, policy direction, and, at times, a rhetorical tool to justify strategic foreign engagements. The advocacy of free-market capitalism, the creation and use of international organizations, the commitment to human rights, and the promotion of democracy are all indicative of the liberal agenda's realization in U.S. foreign policy. This intellectual tradition is evident in pre-founding speeches, early directives of President George Washington, the long period of American expansionism through the world wars, numerous Cold War interventions, and the years following the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, liberalism remains central to the era of globalization, the post-9/11 security environment, and the "post-American world" (Zakaria 2009). In all these respects, liberalism is a "constant" in U.S. foreign policy (Desch 2007/2008).

Liberal theorists commonly focus on how U.S. foreign policy is crafted. Who are the primary architects of foreign policy and what are the inter-governmental dynamics surrounding U.S. relations with the world? How do interest groups, bureaucracies, and other societal-level actors influence the foreign policy process? What impact do trade relations, changing international actors, and interdependencies have on U.S. foreign relations? Specifically, how do international organizations, non-state actors, and norms influence U.S. foreign policy? Overall, these theorists seek to identify patterns of behavior, in the United States and elsewhere, which increase the likelihood of state cooperation and decrease the incidence of war.

This chapter examines the influence of the liberal research tradition on American foreign policy. It begins with an overview of the basic assumptions, concepts, and theoretical arguments associated with liberal scholarship. The discussion proceeds to a general overview of several variants of liberalism and the policy prescriptions that emerge from this research. The chapter identifies four streams of thought within liberalism and outlines the basic arguments of each variant as well as the influence of each on the tone and character of American foreign policy. The chapter concludes with an examination of the theory's primary contributions, deficiencies, and enduring debates. Overall, the work finds that the liberal tradition is consistently present in the American foreign policy agenda, at times it serves as a guiding principle whereas at other times it acts as a veneer legitimizing practices of *realpolitik* that are best explained by the rival perspective of realism (Morgenthau 1978; Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001).

The Liberal Approach—Primary Assumptions

Liberalism, as an academic endeavor, covers a vast body of scholarship and is often associated with idealism, moralism, pluralism, legalism, institutionalism, and even utopianism (Moravcsik 1997: 514). It is both a domestic political ideology that bestowed a framework and legitimacy for the American political system and an outlook on global engagement with significant foreign policy implications. Despite the issues with labeling, common assumptions create a cohesive body of scholarship.

Cooperation

The primary tenet of liberalism, as it is applied to foreign policy, holds first and foremost that long-term state cooperation is feasible: states can seek more than mere survival and their policies can move beyond national security. The lack of a comprehensive international governing body (i.e., the anarchical system) does not necessitate war for all states all the time. It is here that the liberal approach presents a direct antithesis to the realist assumptions of perpetual war, cycles of conflict, and the endless quest for security (Morgenthau 1951, 1978). Liberalism finds several paths to international cooperation, nonviolence, and system stability. Although states may have had to use force to protect themselves in the past, given the choice, rational states will choose non-violence and avoid the costs of war. Liberal scholarship tends to hold a linear and progressive understanding of history, as states are not doomed to cycles of violence. Overall, liberal scholarship predicts increased state cooperation, the dissemination of liberal values, the expansion of markets, and the growth of international institutions.

Rational Actors and Domestic Politics

Individual rationality is another constant that grounds the liberal perspective. The theoretical framework is built on the assumption that individuals have “natural rights” and governments are organized for the protection of those rights (Locke 1690; Paine 1791). In its application to foreign policy, states are also rational actors. In a classic work, Kenneth Waltz (1979) presents a neorealist theory of international politics based on several key assumptions, including state needs for self-preservation, the consistent parameters of the anarchical structure of the international system, and the low impact of domestic politics. In contrast, for liberalism, the state is not a unified, coherent actor. It is a collection of representative institutions and interest that include societal factors, interest groups, commercial sectors, and identity groups. The domestic context of policy making becomes a variable within the liberal tradition and there is considerable work on the impact that organized interest groups and how the dynamics within the U.S. government have on foreign policy outcomes (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974; Allison and Zelikow 1999).

The post-World War II boom in the U.S. foreign policy community triggered by the 1947 creation of the National Security Council (NSC) transformed a rather disjointed group of organizations into an elaborate and monolithic set of agencies engaged in the foreign policy process. The growth of several agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the NSC provoked scholars to explore the relationship within and between organizations in the creation and conduct of foreign policy. In 1957, Samuel Huntington found that the level of “threat perception” influenced tensions between civilian leaders committed to liberal agendas and the military (often guided by a more conservative

realism). Huntington (1957: 155) found that high-threat environments muffled the liberal agenda, whereas when threats appeared minimal, liberals were dominant.

Case studies on defense policy indicate that domestic interests and bargaining influence policy outcomes. This approach finds that domestic groups use leverage (in the form of campaign contributions, votes, and threatened capital flight) to access the foreign policy arena. In another example, Anne-Marie Slaughter (1997) argues that the federal government is losing its monopoly on foreign policymaking. She refers to “transgovernmentalism” in which international networks of lawyers, agencies, legislatures, and bureaucrats serve as a primary source of U.S. foreign policies. Thus, domestic groups influence policy choices within both the executive branch and the legislative branch (Keohane 1984; Keohane and Milner 1996). Here liberalism opens the “black box” that realism tends to neglect in its assumptions about the consistencies of state objectives and the cohesiveness of the policy process.

Liberal analysis thus concentrates on foreign policy as the product of a political process in which multiple agencies bargain, compete, and negotiate (Rosati 1981). Graham Allison’s classic work *Essence of Decision* (1971) builds on liberalism’s analytic inclusion of sub-state actors through which middle-range theories come into focus. This literature led to a rich body of scholarship that contradicted realist conceptions of states as unitary actors (see Kozak and Keagle 1988). At the same time, for some liberal scholarship, the state’s preeminence is waning in response to the growth of international organizations, normative diffusion, and patterns of globalization. Some liberal scholars (e.g., Kratochwil 1989) believe nonstate actors and international norms routinely compete with state power and alter foreign policy behavior.

“Soft” Power

Another common assumption of liberalism holds that power is not a zero-sum and finite commodity. Power is better understood as a variable that is positive-sum or Pareto efficient – that is to say, that one state’s gain may result in another state’s gain. This primary assumption holds relevance for state-to-state relations as policy coordination and cooperation can be mutually beneficial. In this respect liberalism introduces novel understandings of power to the study and practice of U.S. foreign policy. Joseph Nye (1990; 2004a) advanced the concept of “soft power,” which claims cultural, economic, institutional, and value-based resources can bring other states to “want what you want.” Soft power is co-optive and moves beyond the inventory of military capacity. Nye’s concept places considerable weight on the influence that American ideals have on its ability to maneuver globally. American values and economic assets attract international business, cultures, and resources to the United States. Many in the foreign policy community now use this concept. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2007) called for increased resources to promote American soft power abroad:

What is clear to me is that there is a need for a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development.... We must focus our energies beyond the guns and steel of the military, beyond just our brave soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. We must also focus our energies on the other elements of national power that will be so crucial in the coming years.

Others continue to build on the notion of power as more than a military cache. Walter Russell Mead (2004: 48) expands the concept and argues that “Economic power can be thought of as sticky power, which comprises a set of economic institutions and policies that attracts others toward U.S. influence and then traps them in it.” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

(2009a) folded each of the above elaborations of power into a new concept: “We must use what has been called ‘smart power,’ the full range of tools at our disposal—diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural—picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation ... With smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of foreign policy.” Thus, state power from a liberal perspective can be cultural, economic, and normative (see Monten 2005).

Four Variants of Liberalism

Liberalism includes several distinct variants that share the basic teleological assumptions outlined above. When examining the impact of liberalism on U.S. foreign policy, four distinct causal arguments emerge. The first approach, “principled liberalism,” examines foreign policy and world politics as human interactions. This approach presumes that there are universal principles (e.g., human rights, the rule of law, the need for global society) that should guide policy makers. A second variant of liberalism embraces *laissez faire* capitalism and predicts that states will prioritize economic prosperity over warfare. This approach, often referred to as “commercial liberalism,” anticipates that market expansions will increase state interactions and interdependencies, rendering war unlikely (Moravcsik 1997).

A third tradition of liberalism looks to the creation of international institutions to mitigate the treacherous relations between states. Organizations ranging from the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provide venues for cooperation, regularize state interactions, and decrease uncertainty. This version, often referred to as neo-institutionalism, holds that cooperation will be facilitated by ad hoc, issue-based “regimes” as well as formal organizations (see Krasner 1983). Finally, a fourth version owes its philosophical roots to the work of Immanuel Kant (1917) and later the ideas of Woodrow Wilson. From this foundation, democratic peace theory is one of the most influential and yet hotly debated bodies of scholarship within the study of international relations (Doyle 1986). For the most part, liberal scholarship finds these variants mutually reinforcing and part of a multicausal model of state cooperation.

Taken as a whole, the liberal research agenda recommends foreign policies that advance free-market capitalism, democracy promotion, international institutions, human rights, interdependence, and globalization. “Liberal theory ... forges a direct causal link between economic, political, and social change and state behavior in world politics” (Moravcsik 1997: 535). Table 6.1 provides a listing of the different variants of liberalism (broadly defined) and the major policy prescriptions each approach advocates, either directly or indirectly in its research findings.

Within these variants of liberalism, there are harder and softer applications in terms of causal arguments, levels of analysis, methodology, and normative commitments. For example,

Table 6.1 Liberal Approaches and Foreign Policy Agendas

<i>Variant of Liberalism</i>	<i>Foreign Policy Agenda</i>
Principled Liberalism	The promotion and protection of human rights, the creation of international society based on shared norms
Commercial Liberalism	Free trade promotion, support for open markets, attempts to spread capitalism as an economic system
Neo-Institutionalism	Creation, promotion and utilization of international organizations for governance, norm creation, and enforcement
Democratic Peace Theory	The promotion of democracy and confrontation toward non-democratic systems

there are those within the liberal approach who perceive the international system as anarchical, states as dominant actors, and security concerns as distinct from the “low” politics of trade and environmental issues (Axelrod 1984; Keohane 1984; Gilpin 1987; Ikenberry 2001). At the other end of this spectrum are scholars who hold a more normative orientation and find that the appropriate level of analysis may be international communities (Deutsch 1957; Bull and Watson 1984; Linklater 1998; Buzan 2005). The influence of domestic factors (i.e., bureaucracy, elites, interest groups, and public opinion) on state preferences presents another variable that is given divergent attention in liberal scholarship.

As noted above, liberalism is grounded in the philosophical tenets of John Locke. As a theory of government it values individual freedom, political equality, *laissez faire* capitalism, and political representation. The Declaration of Independence serves as a pinnacle of its expression as a domestic ideology. The text asserts liberal values as “self-evident” and declares an unquestionable commitment to the realization of freedom, individual rights, democracy, and rule of law. Yet, it foreshadows many of the contradictions of this approach and its application to U.S. foreign policy as it also served as a declaration of war against the British (Schlesinger 1949; Meyers 1963; Doyle 1997).

Principled Liberalism

Principled liberalism provides a foundation for all other variants noted earlier. This perspective is based on the work of Immanuel Kant, who found great potential for building an international community of mankind. He based most of his assumptions on human rationality and viewed political relationships, even at the international level, as first and foremost human endeavors. Thus, Kant (1983) identified moral standards for state behavior. In his view, those moral imperatives and the rise of an international community could overthrow the system of state-based conflict—“perpetual peace” was feasible (Kant 1983).

In 1630, John Winthrop’s characterization of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as “a city upon a hill” (quoted in Baritz 1964: 3) set the stage for centuries to come. This tradition of American exceptionalism maintains that the United States represents the exemplar of a successful democracy that other states may wish to emulate (de Tocqueville, 1835). “American foreign policy is necessarily more virtuous and altruistic than that of other states. The sense of mission is expressed both in declarations that the United States must convert the world to its values by serving as an example and in a more activist crusading spirit” (Davis and Lynn-Jones 1987: 23).

In its early application, principled liberalism colored the internal expansionism of Manifest Destiny as well as geopolitical aims advanced in the Monroe Doctrine. This perspective is found in Woodrow Wilson’s (quoted in Shaw 1924: 815) statement about U.S. involvement in World War I: “all the world believes in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world.... America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world.” The modern application to American foreign policy materialized in Wilson’s 1918 post-war speech to Congress as he outlined a framework to realize Kant’s goal of peaceful relations between states. Wilson translated the core domestic principles of the United States into a foreign policy agenda highlighted by the advocacy of democracy, transparency, free-trade, self-determination, and the creation of a “general association of nations” that would promote these values. Although domestic politics undermined Wilson’s agenda and blocked the United States from joining the League of Nations, many of these ideas guided foreign policy makers for much of the twentieth century.

Principled liberalism also influenced President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s call for “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms:” freedom of speech and expression; freedom

of religion; freedom from want; and freedom from fear. The creation of the United Nations and later the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights present the pinnacle of principled liberalism's prescriptions (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997: 26–27). During the post-World War II era, the notion of American exceptionalism remained popular within the country's policy elite and the public (Hartz 1955; Foley 2009). Liberalism served as a narrative that was invoked as a “folktale” to push reluctant publics and members of Congress into international engagement early in the Cold War (Ruggie 1997: 93). Henry Kissinger (1994: 33), a foreign policy manager in the Nixon administration known for his realist perspective, later observed that “[a] majority of the American leaders were convinced then as they are now that America has a special responsibility to spread its values as its contributions to world peace.”

Applications of principled liberalism were later found in unlikely places, as the U.S. government sought to transform several political systems that did not conform to the U.S. model or threatened American interests. The United States, for example, used normative justifications for ousting the governments of Iran (Mohammed Mossadegh), Guatemala (Jacobo Arbenz), Indonesia (Sukarno), and Chile (Salvador Allende). Yet most of these cases reveal a problematic inconsistency as the liberal agenda was routinely subordinated to national security imperatives. The contradictions reached an apex with U.S. involvement in Vietnam (LaFeber 1983; Lytle 1987; Gleijeses 1991; McMahon 1994; Kahin and Kahin 1995). One scholar (Buzzanco 1999: 18) called the war a “test case for global liberalism.” The Vietnam experience haunted the military establishment for decades and effectively blocked American involvement in subsequent humanitarian crises (Lake 1976; McDougall 1995; Simons 1998; Welch 2006).

With the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy community celebrated the fall of the Soviet Union as an American victory for democracy and capitalism. Liberalism once again provided a guiding narrative. Many scholars embraced an optimistic outlook and predicted an era of political stability based on the proliferation of international institutions and economic interactions. Francis Fukuyama (1992: 4) epitomized this confidence by asserting that Western liberal democracy remained the only legitimate and viable form of government: “What we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

The first Bush administration is credited with a return to principled liberalism in its policies associated with the Persian Gulf War. In this case, the administration embraced multilateralism in its policy formation and implementation and utilized the United Nations Security Council to enforce international law and restore Kuwait's sovereignty. The Somali conflict also produced similar justifications as the African country's clan-based conflict resulted in widespread civilian casualties and famine. At the time, President Bush argued that “a failure to respond to massive human catastrophes like Somalia would scar the soul of our nation” (Goshko 1992: A22). The United States, with no strategic interests at stake, sent 28,000 American military personnel into an African country under a multilateral United Nations operation.

This resurgence held a brief honeymoon, but within a decade there were overt rejections of principled liberalism as a guide to U.S. foreign policy (Desch 2007/2008). Early in the Clinton years, a pattern of unilateralism emerged, driven largely by Republican Party leaders in Congress. This approach continued with the second Bush administration's flaunting of international norms, embarking on a largely unilateral war in Iraq, and imposing significant restrictions upon civil liberties. Paradoxically, several scholars found liberal tendencies in the Bush administration's worldview (Desch 2001; Kaplan 2003; Kennedy 2005). In the months following the terrorist attacks of 2001, the Bush administration borrowed the vocabulary of

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" and justified U.S. military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan as an effort to bring freedom and democracy to these states.¹

President Barack Obama sought to reclaim principled liberalism by emphasizing U.S. moral responsibility in the international arena. In September of 2009, Obama (quoted in Shear and Balz 2009) proclaimed he would repair the "skepticism and distrust" that had built up under his predecessor: "We have sought—in word and deed—a new era of engagement with the world. Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges." His chairing of a United Nations Security Council meeting (the first time a U.S. president served in this capacity) supported this view. At the same time, domestic conflicts over climate change, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and continued military involvement in Afghanistan forced Obama to suspend many of his liberal foreign policy ambitions.

Commercial Liberalism

Private property rights and minimal governmental interference within the economic sphere serve as the foundation for commercial liberalism (Moravcsik 1997). Like principled liberalism, this tradition begins with Kant's Perpetual Peace as economic interdependence acts as one leg of a three-legged stool that secures peace between nations. This perspective builds on works by Adam Smith (1777/1776) and David Ricardo (1891) which called for open markets and increased economic exchange to promote comparative advantages and international economic growth. The underlying argument is that economic interactions will benefit states financially and promote cooperation. As one theorist (Domke 1988: 137) argued, "Governments of nations that are more involved in foreign trade are less likely to make decisions for war."

Essentially, commercial liberalism holds that there is an inverse relationship between international economic exchange and international conflict. Cohen (1990: 266) illuminates this reasoning and claims that the "triumph of the trading system in international relations today would be the best possible guarantee of sustained world peace in the future." The implication is that economic factors may lead states to foreign policies that will not jeopardize a profitable relationship with other states. Since rational states will find economic exchange more advantageous than conquest "the incentive to wage war is absent" (Rosecrance 1986: 24). War interrupts trade, undermines the national economy, and damages society, thus the costs of war override any benefits gained through combat (Milward 1977; Goldstein 1988). The Correlates of War data set provided empirical evidence of this pattern (Oneal and Russett 1999; Russett and Oneal 2001). At the same time, this research based on large-n studies presents counter evidence that questions the positive relationship between peace and trade (Barbieri 1996, 2002; De Vries 1990).

Commercial liberalism finds causality at several levels of analysis. Schumpeter's "sociology of imperialisms" (1950) focuses at the individual level and maintains that capitalism creates a population with an "unwarlike disposition" and focuses instead on production (see Doyle 1986). At the group level, research finds that economic incentives among domestic groups will push for increased economic interactions and lobby for conflict avoidance. Ruggie found (1982) found that state-society relations within states with open trading relationships propel cooperative relations. For Ruggie, there is a fundamental agreement between governments engaged in cooperative economic relations that prioritize domestic stability and advancing the welfare of the population. Milner (1988: 292) supports this logic and finds that "the consequences of interdependence are internal to states: they affect domestic 'social actors' preferences, not states' policy instruments." Building on the work of Karl Polanyi (1944), this works finds that commercial liberalism is "embedded" within society.

When focusing on the state level, scholars find that positive externalities of trade are observed at both the dyadic and monadic levels (Barbieri 2002; Gartzke and Li 2003). That is to say, economic exchange has a pacifying effect for a state in isolation from its trading partner (Polachek 1980; Pollins 1989, Russett and Oneal 2001). This approach introduces the idea of mutual cost of interdependence between states that inhibit conflict (Cain 1979; Stein 1993). Richard Rosecrance (1986: 213) presents a systemic version of this argument, finding that capitalism increases trade, bolsters interdependence, and increases the cost of war. This approach finds that globalization, as both a product and enhancement of commercial liberalism, has a positive impact on peaceful relations between states (Mueller 1989; Doyle 1997; McMillan 1997; Rosecrance 1999; Friedman 2000). Debate remains about whether general market forces decrease the likelihood of conflict, domestic economic interests push a country toward less bellicose policies, or interdependencies resulting from trade are the key to conflict reduction.

American leaders have long been proponents of an international liberal economic order and this view clearly shaped two centuries of U.S. foreign policy.² In fact, some have called the application of commercial liberalism the “American model” (Howell and Diallo 2007). This approach is often associated with the “Washington consensus” in global development and U.S. efforts to tie financial support to free-market reforms. There are critiques of this approach from several camps, including neo-Marxists who reject liberalism as exploitative and those who view increased economic interactions as potentially volatile (De Soto 1989; Naím 2000; Pollin 2003; Stiglitz 2002; Harvey 2005).

The realization of commercial liberalism came with the creation of the modern international economic system in June 1944 with the Bretton Woods agreements, which established the IMF and World Bank. Commercial liberalism was transferred abroad and created a global economy based on open markets. This agenda also guided the Marshall Plan (1947–51), which served to rebuild America’s allies’ economies, create robust trading partners, and discourage Soviet interference in Western Europe. This tradition continues with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the G-20, and other multilateral arrangements.

Neo-institutionalism

Another variant of the liberal research tradition, neo-institutionalism, holds great confidence in the creation of international institutions to mitigate conflict among states (Betts 1993/94; Keohane 1990). For Hirschman (1977: 51), international regulatory frameworks mitigate the “passionate” actions of states and highlight shared interests. In response to the prisoner’s dilemma’s assumption that independent actors have little incentive to cooperate, the neo-institutional approach finds cooperation resulting from repetitive interactions (Snidal 1985). This modifies the nature of the game as a lack of cooperation in one area can lead to problems in other issue areas and impede prospects of cooperation at later dates. Thus, reputation, credibility, and future engagements alter the policy choices available to decision makers. For most liberal scholars, international institutions serve as both an independent and an intervening variable that enhances cooperative collaborations while changing state preferences and behaviors.

Specifically, institutions create rules, decision-making procedures, and enforcement mechanisms that reduce the incentives for states to “cheat” (Keohane 1984). In this manner, “international behavior is institutionalized” (Ruggie 1975: 559). With the creation of international organizations, states can engage in collaborative policy formation, adoption, and implementation at relatively modest costs (Karns and Mingst 1992). In addition, organizations allow states to pool their resources in terms of information, finances, and personnel to

enhance the response to global problems that demand policy coordination. “Carefully designed international institutions that facilitate international cooperation can overcome the requirement for conflict in the anarchic system of realism” (MacCuish 2005: 50). The utility of international organizations is not lost on U.S. leaders. As Keohane (1998: 83) observed, “Even the administration of President Ronald Reagan, which took office ill-disposed toward international institutions, had grudgingly come to accept their value in achieving American purposes.” Superpowers need general rules because they seek to influence events around the world. Even an unchallenged superpower such as the United States would be unable to achieve its goals through the bilateral exercise of influence: the costs of such massive “arm-twisting” would be too great.

Regime theory finds considerable cooperation in policy coordination between states even in the absence of institutions.³ Regimes institutionalize rules and norms, provide information to states, reduce transaction costs, and link issues. Puchala and Hopkins (1983: 63) found that “a regime exists in every substantive issue-area in international relations. Wherever there is regularity in behavior, some kinds of principles, norms or rules must exist to account for it.” For example, climate change initiatives can be linked to development assistance through the IMF. Other cases of state cooperation find the United States a central player in creating and sustaining cooperative governing arrangements (Ikenberry 2001).

Evidence of neo-institutionalism in U.S. foreign policy is found in many cases. In 1945, the United States played a leadership role in creating the United Nations, an innovation designed as an institutional support for conflict resolution and the building of international norms of foreign policy behavior. The creation of the UN after World War II was part of U.S. efforts to promote American interests in several sectors, including security and trade. According to Ikenberry (2001), powerful states create international organizations in their own image, one that reflects their preponderance for an extended period of time. After World War II, the United States entered into a “constitutional bargain” with weaker, like-minded states to secure “an American-led liberal political order” (Ikenberry 2001: 170).⁴

Although the United States remains the predominant player in the creation and funding of many international organizations, its relationship is often conflicted and contradictory. During the Cold War, American leaders found it difficult to work within the UN system, which in their view had become dominated by developing countries and their patrons in communist states. There were also tensions with the International Labor Organization under President Carter and the U.S. withdrawal from the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization under Reagan in 1985. The George H. W. Bush administration announced a renewed commitment to the UN in the early 1990s as the United States was temporally freed from gridlock in the Security Council. The president’s remarks illustrated the liberal agenda: “Now, we can see a new world coming into view ... A world where the United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.”

The subsequent complexities of Somalia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia brought renewed American scorn and accusations of UN ineffectiveness. The relationship deteriorated to the point where George W. Bush declared the institution “irrelevant” and predicted its demise. Despite the fact that the United States often leads the charge in the promotion of democracy and human rights, it rejected several initiatives that address the realization and implementation of these standards (i.e., the Ottawa Treaty, the International Criminal Court, and the convention to ban the illicit sale of small arms).

Liberal research focuses on the increased presence of domestic as well as transnational actors in the making of foreign policy. Several studies document how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private corporations influence the policy making process (Adelman 2003; Haufler 2004; Hocking 2004). Stoddard’s (2006) work illustrates how in the cases of

U.S. involvement in Somalia and Kosovo, the government relied extensively on information from the NGO community, making it part of both the agenda-setting stage and policy-formation process. Other case studies point to instances in which NGOs pushed an issue onto the international agenda, wrote the policy, and lobbied for its adoption (Davenport 2002/2003). Some identify a “power shift” away from state actors to nongovernmental organizations and multinational corporations (Mathews 1997).⁵ Other scholars, however, have expressed concern that many NGOs lack accountability to any constituency and thus produce a “democratic deficit” (Keohane 1998).

The Democratic Peace

One of the most influential applications of liberal thought to American foreign policy is the democratic peace literature. To President Harry Truman (quoted in Rupert 2000: 27), “Totalitarian regimes imposed on free peoples ... undermine the foundation of international peace and hence the security of the United States.” Half a century later, one scholar (Cox 2000: 226) observed that “no other idea emanating from the academic community exercised as much influence as this one on the White House.”

The democratic peace theory is based on several premises. The first is that within democracies, populations restrain elected leaders as they are reluctant to bear the costs of war. Second, democracies are more prone to use political institutions to settle their international disputes. Another tenet at the societal level holds that democracies produce a political culture of negotiation and conciliation (Weart 1998). If a war-prone leader comes to power in a democracy, institutions (e.g., Congress) will slow the march to war and decrease the chance of military engagement. The democratic peace theory is home to some of the most mathematically rigorous scholarship within this tradition. Four decades of research consistently finds support for this position; in fact, one scholar argues that the democratic peace theory is “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations” (Levy 1988: 88).

This approach combines insights from the other liberal variants of liberalism described earlier. The economic relationships between democracies tends to favor more open trade relations and thus interdependence; the risks of economic loss within both states thus raise the cost of war considerably (Oneal, Russett, and Berbaum 2003). Building on the neo-institutional approach, scholars argue that democracies tend to favor transnational institutions to manage foreign affairs and reduce transaction costs; these institutions then provide venues for conflict resolution.

This influence comes close to conventional wisdom and provides an intellectual backdrop to a variety of U.S. foreign policy undertakings. The Kennedy administration, for example, planned to create a “showcase for democracy” in the Dominican Republic. President Clinton, in his 1994 State of the Union Address, proclaimed, “Ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advancement of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other” (see Brinkley 1997). Clinton went so far as to make “democratic enlargement” a centerpiece of his national security strategy. More recently, George W. Bush adopted democratic peace theory as a justification for his “global war on terror.” “The reason why I’m so strong on democracy is democracies don’t go to war with each other.... I’ve got great faith in democracies to promote peace. And that’s why I’m such a strong believer that the way forward in the Middle East, the broader Middle East, is to promote democracy.” This sentiment was carried into the rhetoric justifying military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For American foreign policy, one enduring debate concerns how to promote a world of democracies. Here we find two minds, one that advocates the active pursuit of a globe full of democracies and one that promotes a more passive policy. This latter position assumes that democracy will be welcomed across the globe and can be transplanted with relative ease. A second, stickier position involves the forceful promotion of democratic political systems. Here “gunpoint democracy” may present a contradiction to the liberal ideal of institutional conflict resolution and respect for human rights. Another thorny issue is that elected governments may not guarantee concordant interests as democratically elected leadership may actually pursue agendas in contrast to American interests. For example, in 2003, Turkish voters pressed their government not to provide logistical support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Despite hundreds of attempts at the creation of democratic political systems, the American record is spotty, inconsistent, and full of failure (Hook 2002). There are often contradictions between American economic and security interests, on the one hand, and the goal of promoting democracy abroad on the other. Other critics find U.S. efforts at democratic state building naïve: “The [Iraq] war’s supporters seemed to think that democracy was a kind of default condition to which societies reverted once the heavy lifting of coercive regime change occurred, rather than a long-term process of institution-building and reform” (Fukuyama 2006: 65). Once on the ground, the U.S. democracy promoters tend to become preoccupied with institutional reforms (e.g., constitutions and elections) while neglecting the crucial social and cultural foundations that are needed for democracy to be sustained.

Deficiencies of the Liberal Tradition

As a body of scholarship, liberalism’s strengths lie in its ability to account for changes in the international context (i.e., complex interdependence and globalization), its consideration of the domestic context, as well as explaining the unique qualities of the foreign policies of modern Western industrialized states. Liberalism contributes a perspective that examines domestic political dynamics, thus allowing for a more robust understanding of U.S. foreign policy than that offered by system-level theories. For realism, increased military spending during the Reagan administration is best explained by a rational response to increased insecurity as a response to Soviet arms build-ups (see Schneider and Merle 2004). A liberal analysis, by contrast, explains the rapid increase in the Defense Department budget as a result of domestic pressure by powerful interest groups and Reagan’s deference to their preferences.

Still, as illustrated by the four approaches reviewed above, liberalism lacks a tidy “set of positive social science assumptions” (Moravcsik 1997: 514). To Keohane (1996: 166), “In contrast to Marxism and realism, liberalism is not committed to ambitious and parsimonious structural theory.” Others have termed liberalism an “approach” rather than a unified theory with “canonical” attributes (Doyle 1986: 1152; Zacher and Matthew 1992).

Critiques of liberal scholarship come from several camps. Liberal thought is often criticized as too ideologically oriented and optimistic in its outlook for peace (see Long 1995; Jahn 2009). Steve Smith (2000) finds that the democratic peace literature is riddled with normative assumptions and implications that there is a “correct” form of democracy—that is to say, the American model is the preferred variety. From this critique, Smith points out that liberalism still holds hints of modernization theory that does not question an inevitable progress toward the American model of political and economic development. When taken to their logical conclusion as policy mandates, one variant’s prescriptions (i.e., free market economics) may undermine another’s (i.e., promotion of human rights). Commercial liberalism is often viewed as especially harmful: “An economy based on competitive individualism has unhappy

implications for social justice, all the more since liberalism assigns priority to efficiency over equity when the two conflict” (Scholte 2005: 16).

Critics also emphasize the double standards in U.S. foreign policy. American support for authoritarian dictators during the Cold War strongly contradicted the government’s liberal rhetoric (Robinson 1996). More recently, another critic charged that “The excesses of the war on terror—including abuse of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib—have devalued the attractiveness of American values” (Kurlantzick 2005, 421). The double standards appear more glaring when a president pledges to reform U.S. foreign policy. Obama, for example, faced constant criticism from liberals for appeasing the governments of China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other repressive states that were otherwise important to U.S. economic and security interests.

Despite liberal contributions into how states and international organization enhance cooperation, the tradition has yet to overcome issues associated with the free-rider problem and the problem of cheating. From the realist camp, critics focus on the liberal assumption that states have the ability to transcend anarchy and insecurity. Most realists reject the notion the international organizations can be more than mere tools of state interests—and that liberal democracy can mitigate the security imperative of anarchy. Such assertions, these critics contend, are naïve and even dangerous (Mearsheimer 1994/1995).

Conclusion

As described in this chapter, American leaders since the founding of the United States have embraced liberal principles and foreign policy goals. Recent leaders as disparate as Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have appealed to different liberal beliefs to justify their foreign policies, from foreign aid to military intervention. In its application of foreign policy, liberalism is more relevant at several key junctures in American history, particularly the periods immediately following World War I, World War II, and the Cold War (Ruggie 1997). Still, its presence can be found in the rhetoric, if not the actions, of political leaders at any time in U.S. history.

The events of September 11, 2001, triggered a revival of liberal rhetoric and policy agendas, yet national security priorities trumped liberal commitments. American foreign policy is saturated in the rhetoric of liberalism, yet this does not necessarily suggest that liberal traditions guide American foreign policy in practice. Overall, this complex interplay between liberal values and foreign policy behavior spans more than two centuries. Often there appears to be an inverse relationship between the two: the rhetoric of liberalism is often invoked at the very times when power politics are most present.

Overall, the liberal scholarship is trending away from an ideological orientation and toward more scientific analysis (Moravcsik 1997). Liberal theorists acknowledge the complexity of foreign policy behavior and are more likely than realists to devise multicausal explanations for foreign policy behavior. In this respect, liberal scholars endeavor to match their tradition’s normative appeals not only with sound empirical evidence from the past, but with prescriptions for future U.S. foreign policies that are likely to bring about constructive change—for the United States and the international community.

Notes

- 1 However, as Desch (2007/2008) points out, the neoconservative commitments, although embracing the democratic enlargement mandate (discussed below), veer away from the traditional liberal emphasis on the utility of international organizations and the value of human rights.

- 2 Yet, there are examples where the United States pursues policies that are protectionist and create domestic barriers to cross-border mergers (Salvatore 1992).
- 3 Stephen Krasner broadly defines a regime as “principles, norms, rules, and decision making procedures around which actor’s expectations convergence in a given issue-area. Norms are standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations” (Krasner 1983: 1).
- 4 If states commonly institutionalize their power gains into long-term influence through the creation of international organizations, this is more reflective of power politics and less indicative of a liberal agenda.
- 5 Within this approach, there are those that predict the demise of the state where there is “societal interconnectedness to the extent that societal borders lose importance or even dissolve, indicating the merging of formerly nationally defined units” (Zürn 2002: 237).

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