

Editor: **Diane Labrosse**

Web and Production Editor: **George Fujii**

Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth. "The Future of the Liberal Order is Conservative: A Strategy to Save the System." *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2019).

Published by ISSF on **5 September 2019**

<https://issforum.org/to/iar125>

Review by **John A. Thompson**, University of Cambridge

As the Cold War ended in 1989-1990, scholars made contradictory predictions about the effect this would have on United States foreign policy. Those who saw the extensive and expensive commitments of the previous forty years as the product of a sense of threat induced by Soviet and Communist power anticipated some retraction of these commitments, together with a significant reduction in the resources devoted to national security and even in the degree of involvement in world politics. On the other hand, those who saw it as in the nature of great powers to extend their sway as far as possible expected that the collapse of one of the poles in a bipolar international order would lead to an expansion in the scope of the other pole's ambitions.¹

In the event, the latter prediction seems to have been more accurate than the former. There was a modest "peace dividend" in that whereas the proportion of GNP devoted to military spending had averaged almost 6 per cent through the 1970s and 1980s, it declined to 4 per cent thereafter.² But there was nothing like the large-scale demobilization and repatriation of overseas forces that there had been after the two world wars. In 2012, there were still more than 175,000 U.S. army, navy or air force personnel stationed on overseas bases or other facilities and these were deployed far more widely than they had been during the Cold War—in no fewer than 130 countries.³ As Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth point out, rather than reducing its specific security commitments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States greatly added to them.

¹ These contrasting expectations were expressed (in both cases in a cautious and qualified way) in the chapters by R.J. Vincent and myself in David Armstrong and Erik Goldstein (editors), *The End of the Cold War* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 65-80, 196-202). Vincent's was the better prediction.

² These figures are drawn from Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is Not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 123-125.

³ Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 63.

NATO grew from 16 members in 1989 to 29 by 2016, and developed “neighborhood policies to enhance security, prosperity and liberal practices across Eurasia, the Middle East, and North Africa.” It also became more active, launching missions not only in the Balkans but also “out of area” in Afghanistan, the Gulf of Aden and Libya. A number of these missions were justified by “the responsibility to protect” doctrine - which gained qualified United Nations approval in 2005 (though in a way that did not legitimate NATO authorization of such interventions).⁴ Non-military means, too, have been used to promote American values and interests more widely. The leverage enjoyed by international economic bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been employed to further liberal conceptions of human rights, freedom of information, markets, and politics while provisions have been written into multilateral trade pacts that embody U.S. preferences and values. Official support and funds have been given to non-governmental organizations that seek to develop civil society and democracy around the world—for example, the National Endowment for Democracy, a nonprofit that promotes democracy and human rights in China, Russia and elsewhere. (72-74)

The grand strategy that shaped and justified this expansive policy has come to be described as the pursuit of “liberal hegemony.”⁵ In the words of Richard Haass, former director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, the central objective of U.S. foreign policy has been to integrate other countries “into arrangements that will sustain a world consistent with U.S. interests and values, and thereby promote peace, prosperity and justice.”⁶ The final strategy statement of the Clinton administration proclaimed the need to “deploy America’s financial and military resources to stand up for peace and security, promote global prosperity, and advance democracy and human rights around the world.”⁷ This commitment has enjoyed consensual support in political circles and from most members of the foreign policy establishment, in and out of government. But it has long been criticized by some realist political scientists on the grounds that neither the nation’s security nor its prosperity is dependent on a liberal global order, and that the attempt to establish and maintain one involves the United States in unnecessary conflicts. The preferred alternative of most of these critics is a strategy of “offshore balancing.”⁸

A few years ago, Wohlforth was one of the authors of an extensive riposte to such advocacy, and the current article is by no means a call for an abandonment of America’s core alliances or basic commitment to

⁴ David C. Hendrickson, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition* (2018), 85-86.

⁵ For the term and a brief review of the process by which it emerged as a consensus strategy, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 5-16.

⁶ Richard N. Haass, “Defining U.S. Foreign Policy in a Post-Post Cold War World,” Arthur Ross Lecture. Foreign Policy Association, 22 April 2002, quoted in Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, 22.

⁷ President William Jefferson Clinton, *A National Security Strategy for a Global Age*, Preface (White House, December 2000).

⁸ For example, Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press and Harvey Sapolsky, “Come Home. America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21:4 (Spring 1997); Christopher Layne, “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America’s Future Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 22:1 (Summer 1997), and more recently Posen, *Restraint*, and Walt, *Hell of Good Intentions*, especially 260-282.

international order.⁹ It simply recommends curtailing further efforts to spread liberal values and norms. Such expansion does bring “geopolitical rewards” to the United States in the form of enhanced influence and “more perquisites,” but it is “profoundly revisionist” with respect to the status quo in a way that poses a threat to all authoritarian regimes and impinges on the interests of other great powers. The authors do not suggest that the expansion of the liberal sphere in the aftermath of the Cold War was altogether misguided; rather, they argue that the circumstances which encouraged and facilitated it have changed—in two basic ways. The first is the decline in the margin of superiority enjoyed by the west; since 1995, the share of global output produced by the United States and its major allies has fallen from 60 to 40 percent, and in direction (though not scale) this shift has been mirrored in defense expenditures. The second change is in western public opinion as war-weariness in the United States has coincided with a disenchantment with economic globalization that is shared by many Europeans. (70, 74).

The authors present the “conservative” course they are advocating as “a third way” between “at one extreme, undoing long-standing alliances and institutions or, at the other extreme, further extending American power and spreading American values.” It would entail “first and most important...a shift to a status quo mindset in Washington and allied capitals,” and thus setting aside “such revisionist projects” as the “effort to radically scale back Iran’s influence.” Other elements would include a skeptical reluctance to take on commitments to new allies, and also “drawing clearer lines” between the independent activities of civil society groups to promote democracy and the actions of the U.S. government. Rather than aggressively confronting illiberal great powers like Russia and China in a manner that drives them together, the west should be prepared for “a prolonged period of competitive coexistence” that would allow the differences between these power to become more salient, and make it possible to strike “explicit, or more likely, implicit bargains with them” (71, 76-78).

In terms of U.S. grand strategy, this recommendation approximates to what Robert J. Art called “selective engagement,” a stance Wohlforth has advocated before.¹⁰ The sort of international system it envisages may be characterized, in the terms recently suggested by John Mearsheimer, as a combination of a “thin” order at the global level with a “thick” one that is bounded. To Mearsheimer, a “thin” order consists of mechanisms and institutions to promote agreements between states on matters of common concern, regardless of their particular political or economic systems. “Thick” orders involve more extensive co-operation in the economic and military spheres, and usually a high degree of ideological alignment.¹¹

Mearsheimer’s analysis illuminates an important distinction between the forms of internationalism American leaders have promoted in different contexts. The goal of a “thin” global order can be traced back to the efforts to develop international law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to the League of Nations

⁹ Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37:3 (Winter 2012-2013), 7-51.

¹⁰ Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), especially chapters 6-7; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43:4 (Spring 2019), 15-16, 18-20, 44-45.

as President Woodrow Wilson envisaged it when he first committed himself to the goal in 1916-1917.¹² This approach seeks to establish co-operation between states, regardless of different types of regime, to address problems that affect them all. The avoidance of devastating war was the common interest that principally propelled the establishment of the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, but other important examples of such interests would be combating epidemic diseases or, more recently, climate change. This cooperation may be effected not only through global institutions or treaties but also by deals between great powers such as the Soviet-American arms agreements during the Cold War cited by Lind and Wohlforth as a precedent for the course they recommend. In terms of world politics, this line of policy is essentially conservative, and the commitment to it of the United States reflects the country's position as an essentially 'satisfied' power, one whose material strategic and economic interests are well served by the status quo.

The revisionist element in American internationalism derives by contrast from domestic pressures, and particularly those flowing from the belief that the values upon which the United States was founded are universal ones. A commitment to the worldwide promotion of democracy, self-determination, and human rights involves putting pressure on, and in the last resort opposing, regimes that do not observe (and may not even pay lip service to) these values. This aspect of the nation's stance has generally come to the fore when leaders are seeking to muster domestic support for policies making significant demands on the nation's resources. Thus, it found classic expression in Wilson's war address of April 1917, and his later espousal of the anti-imperialist principle of national self-determination. Wilson set out his ambitious program as the United States was for the first time mobilizing its great financial and military strength to play a shaping role in world politics, and it has generally been when Americans have been most confident of their nation's pre-eminent power that its evangelical ideological commitment has been given fullest rein—as in the aftermath of the Cold War.¹³

Lind and Wohlforth see Americans' belief in the universality of liberal principles as the greatest obstacle to the adoption of their recommended approach, quoting Mearsheimer's observation that "Liberal states have a crusader mentality hardwired into them." (79). But evidence suggests that public support for the promotion of democracy and human rights overseas is neither as strong nor as indiscriminating as such generalizations imply. Studies of public opinion indicate that the promotion of democracy, although widely approved of as a general goal of US foreign policy, is regarded by the majority as less important than America's own security or economic interests and as not, in itself, justification for enterprises involving significant human or financial costs. A 2013 poll found that only 15 per cent thought that the United States "should try to change a dictatorship to a democracy where it can," with 72 per cent favoring "staying out of other countries' affairs."¹⁴

¹² "An universal association of nations to maintain the inviolate security of the highway of the seas for the common and unhindered use of all the nations of the world, and to prevent any war begun either contrary to treaty covenants or without warning and full submission of the causes to the opinion of the world—a virtual guarantee of territorial integrity and political independence." Address to the League to Enforce Peace, 27 May 1916. Arthur S. Link et al. editors, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-94), vol. 37, 116.; Benjamin Allen Coates, *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ For this pattern, see John A. Thompson, "Wilsonianism: The Dynamics of a Conflicted Concept," *International Affairs* 86:1 (January 2010): 27-47.

¹⁴ Ole R. Holsti, "Promotion of Democracy as Popular Demand?" in Michael Cox, G. John Ikenberry, Takashi Inoguchi (eds), *American Democracy Promotion: Impulses, Strategies, and Impacts* (New York: Oxford University Press,

At the time this poll was taken, the immediate issue was intervention in Syria and people's views doubtless reflected disillusionment with the recent efforts to establish democracy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. But the findings also highlight the specificity of most Americans' concern with other people's rights to liberty and self-determination. Wilson's commitment to these principles was largely limited to Europe rather than the colonial world, as Erez Manela makes clear.¹⁵ More recently, the desire of countries like Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic states to be free to join NATO evoked much stronger support from public and congressional opinion than did the movements arising from the Arab spring.

The enlargement of NATO, which Lind and Wohlforth rightly see as representing geopolitical expansion by the United States, was promoted by domestic lobbies sympathetic to particular foreign countries. No such lobby enjoys as much influence with public and congressional opinion as the one upholding the commitment to Israel, and it is surely the case that this bond will do more to sustain continued American involvement in the politics of the Middle East than the putative sympathy for demonstrators against authoritarian regimes that Lind and Wohlforth suggest would be the main political obstacle to the pragmatic circumscription of U.S. commitments that they recommend. (79).

There is the further point that an idealistic desire to spread the blessings of liberty to other peoples is not the only influence on U.S. foreign policy that tends to be strengthened by confidence in the scale of American power. Such confidence also reinforces a reluctance to make concessions to the interests or demands of other states. Historically the unilateral nationalism expressed in the slogan 'America First' has been associated with isolationism. But we are now learning that it can also be invoked in support of a belligerent assertion of narrow conceptions of the national interest, and of an arrogant diplomacy addressed more to domestic opinion than to international problems.

Given this, it seems unlikely that the course recommended in this article will be followed in the near future. President Trump and his advisers show no sign of recognizing the decline in America's relative power that Lind and Wohlforth, like other advocates of 'restraint,' see as one reason for adopting a more conservative approach. On the contrary, recent administration actions have shown not only the continuing confidence of some in Washington that the United States can impose its will on other countries but also the extent to which it still possesses the ability to do so. The efficacy of the means recently employed has not been much affected by the decline in the U.S. share of world production so commonly cited by scholars who assess the relative power of states in traditional terms. More relevant has been the importance of access to the huge American market for other countries' economies and the central role of the dollar and U.S. banks in the financial underpinning of globalization.¹⁶

2000), 151-180; John Tures, "The Democracy-Promotion Gap in American Public Opinion," *Journal of American Studies* 41 (December 2007), 557-579; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 135.

¹⁵ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ For more detail on this, see *The Economist*, June 8-14, 2019.

The constraints arising from American public opinion that Lind and Wohlforth also cite are likely to be more influential. Politicians are clearly very conscious now of the unpopularity of costly and unsuccessful overseas wars. But a foreign policy that is shaped by anticipations of how it will play at home is unlikely to possess the coherence and rationality of these proposals—or indeed of any ‘grand strategy’ as this is conceived by scholars.

John A. Thompson gained his BA and Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge where he is now Emeritus Reader in American History and an Emeritus Fellow of St Catharine’s College. His principal research interests have been American liberalism and U.S. debate about foreign policy. His publications include *Progressivism* (British Association for American Studies, 1979), *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), *Woodrow Wilson* (Longman, 2002), and numerous articles and book chapters. His most recent book, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Cornell University Press, 2015), was the subject of an H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable in 2016, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/8-15-sense-of-power>.

©2019 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)