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Contents

Introduction by Campbell Craig, Cardiff University	2
Review by Alena Drieschova, University of Cambridge, and Käthe Hamburger Kolleg, University of Duisburg-Essen	6
Review by Kjølsv Egeland, Sciences Po	12
Review by William C. Wohlforth, Dartmouth College	19
Response by Patrick Porter, University of Birmingham	22

INTRODUCTION BY CAMPBELL CRAIG, CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

The classic international relations debate between realism and liberalism has long been seen as rather old hat, if not reactionary, by scholars who are interested in new ways of understanding IR. Yet in a post-Cold War world of American unipolar preponderance this dusty debate has taken on a new and unexpected angle.

Liberals, who have long been associated with programmes for international peace and cooperation, are now increasingly promoting aggressive policies of U.S. leadership, if not domination, in the twenty-first century. Traditional liberals continue to stress the central roles of institutions and global commerce, though now clearly underpinned by U.S. power and capitalism; their neoconservative cousins favour a more muscular form of American liberal hegemony, with the United States using its hard power to coerce and defeat illiberalism worldwide.¹

On the other hand, realists, whose thinking has long been associated with policies of military coercion and security competition, are now the peaceniks. Almost every prominent American realist publicly opposed the second Iraq War; as a group they have led criticism of the other ‘endless wars’ waged by the U.S. over the past twenty years, opposed the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, and tend to argue today for an American foreign policy of restraint and diplomacy.²

What is more, as far as it is possible to discern, this new debate appears to lie at the very centre of the nascent foreign policy being developed by the Biden administration. President Joe Biden’s recent decision to pull American forces from Afghanistan was attacked by many prominent liberals, and applauded by most realists. Biden’s call for a restoration of American leadership of the international order has in turn been largely celebrated by liberals and denounced by realists.³

Among the latter is Patrick Porter, one of the most influential realist critics of U.S. foreign policy today. He argues in *The False Promise of Liberal Order* that the whole idea of a liberal international order is a myth, used cynically by the United States to pursue its own interests under the guise of touchy-feely cooperation and good intentions. Partaking of the theoretical tradition of classical realism, of the clear-eyed and unsentimental writings of towering figures like Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and especially, in this case, E.H. Carr, Porter sees international politics as a ruthless business in which states look after themselves and trust is for suckers.⁴ Porter writes with a lyrical flair that distinguishes his work from the plodding prose of much social science. The book is a contentious one, as we shall see, but it is also a pleasure to read.

This roundtable comprises reviews from three of the most incisive IR scholars working today: Alena Drieschova, Kjølve Egeland, and William Wohlforth. I will now summarise each review, and then Porter’s reply, adding after each of his responses a few of my own comments.

Drieschova provides a comprehensive, though sympathetic, critique. She makes several important points, including an objection to Porter’s U.S.-centrism and so his conflation of U.S. liberalism with liberalism in Europe and the Global South. Most American liberals supported the Iraq War, she notes, but most European liberals opposed it. Indeed, she insists, Porter

¹ See Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, “The Intellectual Foundations of the Biden Revolution,” *Foreign Policy online* July 2, 2021.

² See Eric Posner, “America’s Return to Realism,” *Project Syndicate online* September 3, 2021.

³ For overviews, see Ross Douthat, “Joe Biden’s critics lost Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2021, and Emma Ashford, “Strategies of Restraint,” *Foreign Affairs* 100 (September/October 2021).

⁴ See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Scribner’s, 1932); Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1946); and E. H. Carr, *The Twenty-Years Crisis* (Macmillan, 1939).

does not really ever define exactly the liberals he is attacking. Drieschova stresses the constructivist argument that legitimacy and recognition are “crucial components of international order,” and rejects Porter’s claim that President Donald Trump’s politics were not that much of a departure from those of previous U.S. presidents. Perhaps this is true with respect to formal policy, but it overlooks Trump’s “assault on reality” which threatened to undermine not simply the “rules-based order” but the willingness of international actors to agree about basic truth claims.

Wohlforth’s snappy review comes from a realist and largely sympathetic reading of Porter’s basic theoretical position. He nevertheless accuses Porter of making liberalism into a kind of straw man, and develops the exceptionally important argument, similar to one made by Robert Jervis last year, that an attack on any theory needs to show how other approaches would have been better.⁵ Porter documents the many failures of liberalism, but Wohlforth reminds us that “you cannot do a net assessment by only looking at costs.”

He is also surprised by one of Porter’s main recommendations, which is that the United States and its defenders need to be more open about American self-interest and avoid hypocritical claims about universal ideals. Is Porter therefore saying that what really matters is how Americans speak? Is he actually a constructivist?

Finally, Egeland’s contribution is broadly positive. He agrees with Porter about the failures of America’s liberal internationalism and praises the book’s exposure of U.S. hypocrisy and its record of ruthless self-interest. He does make a point which I would also have made: why does Porter pay so little attention to the realm of nuclear politics? Perhaps no other international institution more purely embodies the hypocrisy of the liberal order than the non-proliferation regime: the United States, a nation armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, dominates an institution that is purportedly dedicated to the universalist goal of preventing states from obtaining nuclear weapons. Wohlforth makes the important point that hypocrisy is a pervasive feature of all international politics, not just U.S. policy, and if that is the worst thing we can say about the liberal order then it is not doing too badly. But perhaps not when this hypocrisy goes on for decades. The cynicism that the non-proliferation double standard has engendered over the past half-century may end up biting the United States, when it tries once more to rally support against nations like Iran.

Egeland also agrees with Wohlforth that the book’s conclusion is rather tepid. Porter ruthlessly exposes the hypocrisies and pathologies of both the liberal order and American foreign policy, but would his realist alternative – a return to hard-nosed balance-of-power security competition, particularly between the United States and China – really be that much better?

In his response, Porter first takes issue with Drieschova’s criticism that a general definition of liberalism is missing, pointing out that he devoted a chapter to this question and discussing his engagement with numerous liberal thinkers and policymakers, though – as Drieschova was saying – the people he mentions are almost all Americans. He also disagrees with her argument that realism stipulates an endless cycle of violence and war, responding that other approaches – whether the naïveté of Melos, the obliviousness of Lindisfarne, or the revolutionary politics of the USSR – do not have a great record either, and in these cases they at least surely made things worse. For Porter, realism is an ideology of making the best out of a bad situation.

But the problem of defining liberalism as a general approach to, or theory of, international relations rather than the prevailing ideology of U.S. foreign policy remains. Let us consider the second Iraq war, a topic that none of the reviewers deal with at length but which remains the primary case for the prosecution of realist attacks upon liberalism and the central issue of contention in the broader realist-liberal debate.⁶ Indeed, take away the war and this debate would probably be much less intense and books like Porter’s would probably not have been written.

⁵ See Jervis, “Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology,” *Security Studies* 29 (2020).

⁶ For a recent foray, see Daniel Deudney’s and John Ikenberry’s recent piece doubling down on their claim that the war was a realist, not liberal, disaster: “Misplaced Restraint: the Quincy Coalition versus Liberal Internationalism,”

Was the war liberalism's fault? To be sure, it was justified by many of its most prominent architects and cheerleaders in terms of liberal objectives, especially democracy promotion. However, and as many realists, including Porter, have argued, many of those supporting the war may well have used liberal ideals as a cover for more parochial and illiberal purposes, such as feeding the military-industrial complex, catering to the right-wing Israel lobby, acting on behalf of the petroleum industry, or simply reckoning that a militaristic stance in the wake of the September 11 attacks would play well at election time.⁷ The 'blob' – the U.S. foreign policy establishment – certainly has adopted liberal internationalism as its defining ideology. That does not prove that it really believes in it.

Porter accepts Egeland's criticism that the liberal order was not just an American invention but rather a multilateral one – again, Porter appears to acknowledge that the book is either too U.S. –centric or needed to specify more clearly that he was targeting American liberalism as such rather than the doctrine more generally. He disagrees, however, with Egeland's concern that the book's conclusion is too mild given the intensity of the critique, replying that any attempt to contend with the blob is necessarily a bold move, albeit one that rests in the confines of American politics rather than in larger visions of the international.

As suggested above, this answer seems too easy. Porter argues, at the outset of his reply, that "We live, inescapably, in an illiberal world, a world of resistance and competitive power politics." But this is an assertion: it is based upon the premise that change is impossible, if Porter means what he says about "inescapably," and so runs the risk of reification. That is an intellectual problem, but in the real world it is also an existential one. An illiberal system of competitive power politics is unsuited to deal with transnational threats, such as the looming possibility of environmental catastrophe. Do we just throw up our hands and say that there is nothing we can do? Or take the question of nuclear war. In a world of interstate anarchy and nuclear arsenals, such a war will eventually happen, if the word 'anarchy' is to have any substantial meaning. Are realists telling us that we must simply accept that fate? On this problem, it is instructive to remember that the most influential classical realist of all, Morgenthau, concluded that the nuclear revolution invalidated the interstate system and necessitated world government. He did not believe that anarchy was immutable.⁸

Finally, Porter responds to Wohlforth's review. He argues that the charge that he makes liberalism into a straw man overlooks the fact that he is criticizing not only liberal academics but also beltway officials, who may often not be as aware of the failures of liberal internationalism as their more scholarly counterparts. Porter accepts Wohlforth's point that institutions do matter in international politics, though here restating his argument that they are nevertheless always employed in the interests of the great powers, as his Australian farmer can confirm. He also offers an eloquent reply to Wohlforth's observation that Porter seems most of all to want U.S. officials to alter their rhetoric, and to acknowledge U.S. power for what it is rather than dressing it up in universalist ideals.

Porter acknowledges that this is probably a "losing struggle" and so therefore "idealistic." But surely he would not have written the book if he believed that the cause was impossible. Surely we scholars have to believe that our arguments might have an effect that advances the public good – otherwise, we are just complaining. And if Porter accepts that it is possible to fix American discourse about its liberal delusions, then it is difficult to see how he can rule out the idea that it might be possible to fix larger problems as well.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187>. In his response Porter describes this piece as "a claim so manifestly wrong on its face, and so desperate, that it need not detain us further."

⁷ I do not understand why proponents of liberalism like Deudney and Ikenberry do not employ this argument.

⁸ See for example Hans Morgenthau, "International Relations," in *Politics in the Twentieth Century* volume 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). I discuss the realist response to the nuclear revolution in *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Participants:

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Patrick Porter is Professor of International Security and Strategy at the University of Birmingham, Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). He also worked at the British Defence Academy, King's College London, the University of Reading and the University of Exeter. He grew up in Melbourne, and graduated at the Universities of Melbourne and Oxford, where he obtained his doctorate in history. He has written four books. *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* appeared in November 2018 with Oxford University Press. His latest book is *The False Promise of Liberal Order*, published by Polity in 2020. He has also written in *International Security*, *Security Studies*, *International Affairs* and *War in History*, amongst others. His research interests are US and British foreign and defence policy, great power politics, realism, and in particular the causes and consequences of power shifts and the problem of self-defeating behaviour.

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REVIEW BY ALENA DRIESCHOVA, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, AND KÄTHE
HAMBURGER KOLLEG, UNIVERSITY OF DUISBURG-ESSEN

As the title of his book suggests, Patrick Porter contributes to the burgeoning literature on the crisis of the liberal international order from a classical realist perspective.¹ He argues that the liberal order has always been a myth. The order has never actually been liberal and rules-based. It has always been built on coercion. While the order might be more benign than its predecessors, and the United States a more benevolent hegemon than others, the term liberal order is an oxymoron, because the international system does not allow for a liberal order. Instead, the order has been built as an imperialist project focused on exporting democracy and free markets, with force if need be. The assumption has been what was good for the United States was good for the world. The United States employed such anti-liberal tools as spheres of influence, war for peace, and protectionism as opposed to free markets, when it was in its interest. The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016 was the result of the internal difficulties of the order, rather than an external shock or a coincidence.

Porter acknowledges that Trump was more authoritarian, corrupt, and erratic than President Barack Obama was, but still sees him “more (as) an accumulation of the order than an aberration from it” (26). For Porter Trump continued along the well-trodden path of continual war and oligarchy, which have been lasting features of the liberal order. To cope in an increasingly harsh global environment Porter prescribes for U.S. foreign policy classical realist remedies. The United States should focus on containing China, creating a rift between Russia and China, and decreasing its military engagement in the Middle East. Perhaps particularly painfully, it needs to reach an understanding with Russia, which might well involve serious concessions. Porter is concerned though, that the United States will not be able to adapt its hegemonic practices to reflect the loss of its unipolar standing and adequately focus on deterrence as the new distribution of power would require.

Porter is to be commended for explicitly highlighting much of the wrongdoing the United States has done in the last decades. He is refreshingly critical of specific imperialist tendencies in US foreign policy and the damage they have caused in countries of the global South, but also in the United States itself. His policy prescriptions could lead to a more benevolent world, for example when he suggests that the United States “can develop a prudential capacity to practise a more restrained and self-aware power politics, to husband power more than waste it, to practice intrigue and competition without excess brutality, and to wage war without it destroying the state, or, in America’s case the republic” (26).

Yet, I have seven substantive concerns that I would like to raise, and which in their combination suggest that Porter is throwing out the baby with the bath water in his critique of the liberal international order. First, as Richard Ashleigh noted in the 1980s the proclaimed need for a *realpolitik* in a merciless world risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy and legitimizing immoral foreign policy choices.² There is a certain logical inconsistency in Porter’s argument as it is not clear whether the violent excesses of U.S. foreign policy are due to the needs the international system imposes on the United States, or whether they are the result of misguided liberal ideology. Some of them might have been the result of misguided realist ideology. Furthermore, liberalism is not a single coherent ideology with a clearly prescribed path for action as Porter

¹ See among others Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (New York: Polity, 2014); Jeff Colgan and Robert Keohane, “The Liberal Order Is Rigged: Fix it Now or Watch It Wither,” *Foreign Affairs* 96 (2017):36–44; Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony. The Unravelling of the American Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020); Martha Finnemore, Kenneth Scheve, Kenneth A. Schultz, and Erik Voeten, eds., Special Issue, “Challenges to the Liberal International Order: International Organization at 75,” *International Organization* 75:S2 (2021): E1-E230; Joseph Nye, “Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017): 10–16.

² Richard Ashley, “Political Realism and Human Interest,” *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2 (1981): 204-236; Richard Ashley, “The Poverty of Neo-Realism,” *International Organization* 38:2 (1984), 225-286

seems to suggest; it is rather a very broad approach with many contradicting norms, and the liberal international order consists of at times opposing rules.

While Porter never defines who is a liberal, one gets the impression that he mainly focuses on American establishment politicians, Republican and Democrat alike, but not on other professional groups or nationalities. Yet within and outside the United States liberals consistently disagree with one another about the appropriate foreign policy choices. This matters all the more so as it is not possible to equate the liberal international order with American hegemony. The order has been co-constituted by many other actors who have significantly contributed to shaping its norms. Those norms have significance, despite Porter's allegations to the contrary, and for gauging their import one needs to focus not just on the behavior of the United States, but primarily on how the international community responds to it. Porter, then, underestimates the danger Trump posed for international order in general, and the liberal international order in particular, as Trump challenged the very foundations of order, namely a collectively shared understanding of common sense reality. Others, like Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, have preceded him, and some, such as Jair Bolsonaro, have imitated his style of governing, which seeks to make communication, coordination, and therefore ordering impossible.

While Porter openly criticizes some of the atrocities of the United States, the disappointment is that he claims that some of that violence is inevitable because the international system is inherently dangerous. In the 1980s scholars such as Robert Cox and Richard Ashley had already criticized such realist claims.³ Notably, they argued that this approach refuses to see history as a process, and presumes a certain fixity that cannot change. Realism assumes that it has discovered an ahistorical truth, rather than being a part of history, just like liberalism, a theoretical perspective that animates people to act in certain ways and not others. Yet, people have consciousness and they can adapt and change their behavior. Politics is not merely a game of calculation, but people can collectively reflect upon what they want to achieve and how they want to organize themselves. An approach which assumes that violence in the international system is inevitable justifies unethical behavior, serves to maintain existing power structures, rejects the possibility of learning from other theoretical perspectives, and objects to the prospect of change in international politics. Instead, a realist perspective provides technical tools to enhance the power of the powerful.⁴

The disproportionality with which Porter treats realist perspectives as establishing the truth of how international politics works in actuality (rather than as a theoretical perspective), and liberal perspectives as misguided ideology causes some confusion, and creates inconsistencies in his argument. On the one hand Porter claims that the liberal international order has been an inherently imperialist project, and much of the violence that occurred within that order (but has been discursively downplayed) resulted from a liberal zeal to export democracy and market capitalism abroad. On the other hand, he claims that violence is inevitable in international politics, and accordingly that liberals sometimes simply have to be pragmatic. It is not clear whether the liberals are at fault or not.

To be sure, I agree with Porter that democratic peace theory was a significant force leading to the war in Iraq, as Robert Jervis has so aptly demonstrated.⁵ Yet, I wonder whether this particular excess, and others, have actually contributed to making the world a safer place, or whether they have rather been misguided foreign policy choices the world would have been better without. In other words, this kind of violence might have harmed the liberal order, rather than having helped to promote it. Moreover, following conventional perspectives on the discipline of international relations, during the Cold War the dominant approach in international relations theory was realism, in particular when it came to guiding the relations between the two blocs. As Friedrich Kratochwil writes "many of the important decisions in the post war era were made by

³ Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interest"; Ashley, "The Poverty of Neo-Realism"; Robert Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders," *Millennium* 10:2 (1981): 126-155.

⁴ Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interest."

⁵ Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118:3 (2003): 365-388.

practitioners who called themselves ‘realists’. They correctly challenged ‘idealists’ who had depreciated the practical problems of establishing a viable international order in actuality.”⁶ Was the war in Vietnam the result of misguided liberal policy aimed at “protecting the US-led free world” (110), or an element of necessary “anti-Soviet containment” in a hostile international system (41), or, perhaps, rather the result of misguided realist policy advice? Did it, and events like the Bay of Pigs, which was not unrelated to the Cuban Missile Crisis,⁷ the closest the world has come to nuclear war, make the world a safer, or a more dangerous place? In short, perhaps realist and a specific strand of overly zealous liberal perspectives held by portions of the American establishment might at times both have led to aggressive foreign policy choices without which the world might have been a more benign place, and whose absence would have served the liberal international order better.

For liberalism is not a coherent ideology, but it is rather a very broad theoretical approach which contains numerous, at times contradictory, norms and principles. In the liberal order the principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and the peaceful resolution of disputes can stand in opposition to principles of human rights protection, the responsibility to protect, or the rights of political refugees for asylum.⁸ The principle of “embedded liberalism” sought to combine free trade and market liberalization with the welfare protection of the losers of globalization.⁹ The liberal international order is not as coherent as it might look at first sight; it can be subdivided into several issue specific orders, such as the human rights order, the international trade order, and the environmental order.¹⁰ Each of these orders has a slightly different membership, and exposes different rules which can be at times in opposition to one another. The United States is not even a member of all the core organizations and institutions of some of these issue specific orders. It is, for instance, not a party to the International Criminal Court; yet this does not render the Court’s work meaningless.¹¹ Furthermore, there are different regional liberal orders, each of which again has different membership, and which also vary in terms of their organizational principles. In fact “they constitute varieties of liberal orders.”¹² In other words, the liberal international order is not the singular, coherent, exclusively U.S.-designed and led enterprise that Porter makes it out to be, but rather an amalgam of varied, multifaceted and at times contradictory initiatives, not all of which are dependent on one another. It can therefore be entirely feasible to eradicate certain excesses from the order without eliminating all its beneficial features. The order is reformable.

Related to the previous point is that Porter never clearly defines who is a liberal, and who is not. It appears that when Porter is referring to liberals, he effectively means American establishment politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike. He appears to assume that all of them are and have been since the end of World War II guided by liberal, and not realist, ideas. Furthermore, Porter does not reflect all that much upon the liberalism of other world leaders, or upon the possibilities that there could be fundamental rifts and disagreements among various liberals. The war in Iraq was extraordinarily contested on

⁶ Friedrich Kratochwil, “The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of Realpolitik without Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 19:1 (1993): 63-80.

⁷ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, “The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies,” *Review of International Studies* 32:2 (2006): 329-352.

⁸ Marcos Tourinho, “The Co-constitution of Order,” *International Organization* 75:S2 (2021), 258-281.

⁹ John Ruggie “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36:2 (1982): 379-415.

¹⁰ David Lake, Lisa Martin and Thomas Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization,” *International Organization* 75:S2 (2021): 225-257, here, 227.

¹¹ Beth Simmons and Allison Danner, “Credible Commitments and the International Criminal Court,” *International Organization* 64:2 (2010): 225-256; Hyeran Jo and Beth Simmons, “Can the International Criminal Court Deter Atrocity?” *International Organization* 70:3 (2016): 443-475.

¹² Lake, Martin, and Risse, “Challenges to the Liberal Order,” 227.

the world stage, and many liberals, such as German and French state representatives, opposed it. In Duncan Bell's words, "self-declared liberals have supported extensive welfare states and their abolition; the imperial civilizing mission and its passionate denunciation; the necessity of social justice and its outright rejection; the perpetuation of the sovereign state and its transcendence; massive global redistribution of wealth and the radical inequalities of the existing order."¹³

Part of the problem is that Porter equates the liberal international order with American hegemony. Yet, the liberal international order is not just an American order. It has been co-constituted by a large number of different actors, including actors from the global South. Such key norms as the right to self-determination, non-intervention, sovereign equality, human rights, and sustainable development were either first developed in the global South, or found significant advocates among states from the global South.¹⁴ For example, Latin American states signed the Charter of the Organization of American States and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man which contained human rights protections before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. The right to self-determination, non-intervention, and the principle of sovereign equality were norms that resulted from the decolonization movement, and had not been foreseen by the initial architects of the international order in the wake of World War II.¹⁵ The Responsibility to Protect doctrine is typically perceived as a Western initiative, but it actually emerged from the advocacy of several African leaders and diplomats for the West to respond to problems on the African continent.¹⁶ Actors from the global South have been advocating for the rule of international law and the principles of multilateralism.¹⁷ In the area of economics, Latin American, Chinese, Indian, and Eastern European representatives were the strongest advocates for an international institution that would support development, which became the World Bank.¹⁸ In short, portraying the liberal international order as an American order mischaracterizes the order and some of its key features. It also highlights, against realist premises, that weak states (in terms of capabilities) can be powerful when it comes to shaping the fundamental norms and principles of international orders.

These norms and principles matter. Porter's argument misrepresents how norms operate, and therefore also how powerful they are. Porter argues that if the rules of the liberal order worked, the superpower would be constrained by them; it "would mostly submit itself to the demands of liberalism in circumstances where it would prefer to do otherwise, and behave differently than it otherwise might" (83). Porter further argues that the counter-argument about the meaningfulness of rules based on the claim that the superpower at least justifies its behavior in terms of rules is merely cheap rhetoric. The assertion that the order is at least loosely rules based means that the hegemon can abandon the rules at will. It is therefore meaningless (83). Porter concludes that "the claim of rules-based order needs so many caveats that it dissolves in a sea of qualifications" (83). Yet, does not the same apply to the balance of power theory, power transition theory, and so many other grand theoretical perspectives in international relations? It might simply not be feasible to explain all international political behavior with a singular theoretical perspective.

More importantly though, Porter's almost exclusive focus on the United States means that the book misses a key dimension of how norms operate. The question is not only what the United States does or does not do, but also how others respond to it. In domestic politics a law prohibiting murder does not mean that murder will never happen, nor that all murderers will

¹³ Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 62-63.

¹⁴ Amitav Acharya, "Idea-shift: How Ideas from the Rest are Reshaping Global Order," *Third World Quarterly* 37:7 (2016): 1156-1170.

¹⁵ Tourinho, "The Co-constitution of Order," 261.

¹⁶ Acharya, "Idea-shift," 1165.

¹⁷ Tourinho, "The Co-constitution of Order," 268.

¹⁸ Acharya, Amitav "Idea-shift."

get caught and put in jail, but it does mean that there will be a reaction to murder, an attempt to capture the perpetrators.¹⁹ Similarly, flagrant violations of international law tend to carry significant reputational damage for the perpetrators of those violations.²⁰ The reputational damage matters, because power does not purely depend upon material capabilities, but ultimately upon recognition within a given community. Coercive force stops at the end of a human being's life. Having the ability to kill someone or to induce suicide is not equivalent to power, even if we take for instance Robert Dahl's classic definition of power, which realists generally tend to accept. Dahl defined power as "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."²¹ Holding a gun at someone's head allows one to shoot that person; it does not ensure that the person would do what they otherwise would not do. That depends on a whole range of other factors that are entirely unrelated to the gun at the person's head. The United States managed to kill in Vietnam, and in Iraq; it did not quite succeed to get the Iraqi or the Vietnamese people to do what they otherwise would not do. Many of them preferred to die.²² Human beings have consciousness, and they have the free will to decide that they value their independence more highly than they value their lives. Even if one possesses all the material capabilities in the world, coercive power has limits; its ultimate threshold is the death of the individual human being. Thucydides already made this clear in the Melian dialogue, when the Melians preferred to die rather than subject themselves to the Athenians.²³ Coercion alone can never bring about order, but only chaos and destruction. Legitimacy and recognition are crucial components of international order; at times they can even work without much coercive force.²⁴

From a perspective focusing on the distribution of material capabilities, Trump then did not represent a significant challenge to the order. Porter argues that the election of Trump as president of the United States emanated from the flaws of the liberal order rather than representing an anomaly to the order. Many liberal scholars would agree that Trump won the U.S. presidential election in 2016 because a substantive section of the American population was discontented with the liberal order, and that the order's flaws need to be addressed.²⁵ Yet, that does not mean that Trump represents an accumulation of the order, and purely a more extreme version of the hypocritical moments expounded by previous American presidencies. Although Trump emerged from the flaws of the order, he still represents a fundamental threat to the order and a substantive deviation from it. In fact, the kind of presidency Trump exemplified poses a threat to any kind of international order.

¹⁹ Thomas Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

²⁰ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

²¹ Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science*, 2:3 (1957): 201–215, here, 202-203

²² Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Kenneth Roth, "War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention," In Richard Ashby Wilson, ed., *Human Rights in the War on Terror*, 143-156 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²³ Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review* 95:3 (2001): 547-560.

²⁴ Rodney Bruce Hall, "Moral Authority as a Power Resource," *International Organization* 51:4 (1997): 591-622. For how legitimacy works in international orders, see among others: Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions, On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

²⁵ See, for example, the special issue, "Challenges to the Liberal International Order: International Organization at 75," *International Organization* 75:S2 (2021).

As Emanuel Adler and I have argued elsewhere, the discursive practices of truth-subversion Trump employed aimed to destroy a collectively shared understanding of common-sense reality without which communication is impossible and coordinated activities become unfeasible.²⁶ Even basic balance of power calculations among essentially hostile states rely on some shared understanding of reality and coordinated actions. Appeals to emotion rather than reason, fundamental challenges to the liberal order's key institutions, and conspiratorial thought further threaten the foundations of the liberal international order. The fact that Trump was ousted from office does not mean that the danger has subsided. Trump's presidency has significantly strengthened a movement that continues to be powerful among Republican voters in the United States, and, as well as having predecessors, found imitators among illiberal and populist leaders across the world. Given that the liberal international order has been a collectively led enterprise that has overall resulted in a more benign world, it deserves being protected, but it also requires fundamental reform. Porter's criticisms of the order are valid ones. Several of Porter's U.S. foreign policy suggestions are a good start for some of the necessary changes, but others in the political economic, environmental, and cultural realms are needed as well.

²⁶ Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova, "The Epistemological Challenge of Truth Subversion to the Liberal International Order," *International Organization* 75:S2 (2021): 359-386.

Surviving the Liberal Order

Patrick Porter opens *The False Promise of Liberal Order* by recalling the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, an honorable sheriff who seeks solace from the harsh, lawless realities befalling his Texan county by imagining a lost era of chivalry. For Porter, the sheriff is America's foreign policy establishment and the cruel Chihuahuan desert the international system. American hegemony, he suggests, gives way not with a bang but a denialist, panegyric whimper. Yet this was not the only possible end to *Pax Americana*. In another historical timeline, separated from ours only by chance, the dejected protagonist of McCarthy's dystopian novel *The Road* limps through a charred, post-apocalyptic landscape. "We're the good guys. And we always will be," he assures his son.¹ In this timeline, American hegemony succumbs not with a nostalgic sob but a thermonuclear whomp. "We're the good guys," the foreign policy wonks chant as hunger grips their survival bunkers.

The False Promise of Liberal Order provides an incisive addition to the growing literature on the mythologies and excesses of the U.S. foreign policy blob.² "Liberal international order" is a contradiction in terms, Porter maintains. There never was a liberal Camelot, nor can there ever be one. Any international order, in his view, relies inescapably on the creation and maintenance of hierarchies, privileges, and threats to use force. Nostalgic rhetoric about the liberal or benevolent characteristics of U.S. hegemony can be understood as a wishful justification members of the foreign policy elite incant to convince themselves and others that—despite ineluctable power shifts, lasting societal vulnerabilities, and a succession of disastrous military campaigns—U.S. global 'leadership' remains necessary and good. For the blob, there is no need to fundamentally reconsider the approximately 800 overseas military bases, the interminable swelling of the Pentagon's budget, the expansion of military and alliance entanglements, the constant interference in the internal affairs of other countries, or the utility of a huge nuclear arsenal deployed across six nations. All will be well now that former president Donald Trump and his boisterous posse of 'isolationists' are gone.

But might it be that the light at the end of the tunnel is in fact the headlights of an oncoming train? Can American democracy survive more U.S. global 'leadership'? Efforts to expand liberal hegemony abroad have eroded civil society and democracy at home, Porter finds, pointing to Trump's electoral popularity in communities that had been injured by liberal trade policies and forever wars (131–137).

Trump was "more a culmination of the order than an aberration from it," Porter argues (26). As others have also maintained, what was unique about Trump was not what he did in practice—though he was certainly more authoritarian than most previous presidents—but his apparent disregard for the rhetoric, sugar-coating, and rites of political legitimation cultivated by many of his predecessors.³ Where the Reagan administration publically championed the United Nations

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 40.

² Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); S.M. Amadae, *Prisoners of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Richard Ned Lebow, *A Democratic Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). My review of the latter: "Toward a Foreign Policy of the Democratic Party," *International Studies Review* 23:1 (2021): 223–224.

³ See, for example, Daniel Bessner, "Trump's America May Be Declining in Global Soft Power—But US Empire Rolls On," *Prospect* (15 January 2020), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/american-us-empire-not-in-decline-superpower-trump-proves-it-is-stronger-than-ever-militarism-daniel-bessner>, and Eli Stokols, "'Saying the Quiet Part Out Loud': Trump Says What Other Presidents Only Thought, Or Never Would Think," *Los Angeles Times* (7 September 2018), <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-impolitic-outbursts-20180907-story.html>.

Convention on Torture while quietly enabling anti-socialist death squads and torturers in Latin America,⁴ Trump openly complained that the United States was fighting a “very politically correct war” in the Middle East and that the best way to combat terrorism would be to “go after” militants’ families.⁵ Where the Obama administration talked loudly of abolishing nuclear weapons while at the same time agreeing to an enormous nuclear modernization program, Trump gleefully invited Russia to join him in a new nuclear arms race and explicitly threatened U.S. adversaries with “fire and fury” on a scale “the world has never seen.”⁶ In Porter’s words, “Trump’s presidency horrifies, but not, at root, because it threatens an abrupt departure from the established order. Instead, it exposes the order’s contradictions in full glare” (131).

Tellingly, Trump’s pithy response to a question on Fox News about whether he thought Vladimir Putin was “a killer” (“What, you think our country’s so innocent?”) caused an uproar within the liberal foreign policy establishment.⁷ Another major incident occurred when the commander-in-chief cancelled a visit to a U.S. military cemetery in France (it was raining).⁸ From the point of view of the foreign policy elite, the Trump administration’s greatest sins were perhaps not so much its par for the course ruthlessness (assassinations, drone strikes, nuclear threats) or support for authoritarian regimes (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE) as its bumbling style and disrespect for tradition, its readiness to cede the moral high ground, and its almost embarrassing inability to grasp that empire is a dish best served discretely—and preferably “by invitation.”⁹ Trump’s ultimate shortcoming in this regard was his apparent failure to understand that NATO is not something American leaders have nurtured out of the goodness of their hearts but rather out of a sober acknowledgement that military patronage is the United States’ most important instrument for extracting political backing, influence, and *servitude volontaire* from its European sphere of influence.¹⁰ Trump, in short, was an incompetent imperial administrator.

The triumphalist narrative of liberal order, Porter points out, unduly glosses over the actual and potential violence on which the American order rests, including the “bloodlands” from the Middle East to Indochina (108–110) and series of nuclear close calls that bubbled under the surface of the “long peace” between the major powers. (In his litigation of the liberal order’s offences, Porter omits the considerable health and environmental consequences of the hundreds of nuclear test

⁴ See Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 317–318.

⁵ CNN, “Trump: ‘You Have to Take Out’ Terrorists’ Families,” YouTube (2 December 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHUfOWrA45A>.

⁶ Ramesh Thakur, “Nuclear Turbulence in the Age of Trump,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 29:1 (2018): 105–128. Admittedly, president Trump also called for global nuclear disarmament on at least two occasions. These calls were, however, made with less fanfare and PR follow-up. See Kjølsv Egeland, “The Ideology of Nuclear Order,” *New Political Science* 43:2 (2021): 10.

⁷ See, for example, G. John Ikenberry, “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 96:3 (2017): 2–9; Christopher Mele, “Trump, Asked Again About Putin, Suggests U.S. Isn’t ‘So Innocent,’” *New York Times* (4 February 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/us/politics/putin-trump-bill-oreilly.html>.

⁸ BBC, “Armistice Day: White House defends Trump WW1 no-show,” (12 November 2018), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46179291>.

⁹ Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ See Christopher Layne, “US Hegemony and the Perpetuation of NATO,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 23:3 (2008): 59–91; Mikael Nilsson, “The Power of Technology,” *Comparative Technology Transfer and Society*, 6:2 (2008): 127–149; Kjølsv Egeland, “Spreading the Burden,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31:1 (2020): 143–167.

explosions carried out in the name of the free world between 1945 and 1996.¹¹) As suggested at the top of this essay, were it not for nuclear good fortune—a factor former United States Strategic Command (STRATCOM) chief George Lee Butler referred to as “divine providence”¹² and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara simply called being “very, very lucky”¹³—the liberal order might well have turned out quite disorderly indeed.¹⁴

The “nuclear order” was a “near run thing,” Porter writes, with “high-stakes near misses, caused by fear, misperception, false alarms or system errors” (98). In stunning tension with the central liberal values of individual rights and consent, the assemblage of nuclear deterrence practices and norms upheld by the United States—admittedly in concert with the Soviet Union—placed every human on the planet on the front line.¹⁵ As the English author Martin Amis put it, in the thermonuclear missile age “we are all in the military.”¹⁶ The so-called liberal international order, in this view, was perhaps not so much a protective “egg carton,” as suggested by some liberals,¹⁷ as a planetary-scale powder keg.

Nowhere was this metaphor more fitting than in Cold War Europe. To give body to the doctrine of extended nuclear deterrence—a policy that allowed America to assume the role of the ultimate patron to its nonnuclear European clients—the United States deployed thousands of tactical/nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Europe. West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt famously quipped that “the Americans” had a peculiar habit of calling “strategic” only those missiles that could reach the United States, regarding as “tactical affairs” the weapon systems that could level European capitals but not reach the U.S. homeland.¹⁸

Would the world after 1945 have been more violent without nuclear weapons or extended nuclear deterrence? Would it have been safer for conventional war? Perhaps. But how does one weigh the risk of a civilization- or species-ending war against the risk—or, for the sake of argument, certainty—of recurring “conventional” wars? Counterfactual history is a

¹¹ See, for example, Tilman A. Ruff, “The Humanitarian Impact and Implications of Nuclear Test Explosions in the Pacific Region,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97:899 (2015): 775–813.

¹² George Lee Butler, *Uncommon Cause. Vol. II*. Denver: Outskirts Press, 2016), 172.

¹³ National Security Archive, “Interview with Robert McNamara” (29 November 1998),

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/interviews/episode-11/mcnamara2.html>.

¹⁴ Two recent works on the Cuban Missile Crisis identify luck as a critical factor in the non-occurrence of war between the superpowers in October 1962: Martin Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon* (New York: Knopf, 2020); Serhii Plokhii, *Nuclear Folly* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021). For a list and discussion of close calls more generally, see Patricia Lewis et al., “Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy,” Chatham House (April 2014), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2014/04/too-close-comfort-cases-near-nuclear-use-and-options-policy>. For theoretical perspectives on nuclear luck see Benoit Pelopidas, “Power, Luck and Scholarly Responsibility at the End of the World(s),” *International Theory*, 12:3 (2020): 459–470; Benoit Pelopidas, “The Unbearable Lightness of Luck,” *European Journal of International Security*, 2:2 (2017): 240–262.

¹⁵ On America’s central role in the crafting of the “nuclear order,” see William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁶ Martin Amis, “Nuclear City: The Megadeath Intellectuals,” *Esquire* (September 1987).

¹⁷ See G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 308; John Peterson, “Present at the Destruction? The Liberal Order in the Trump Era,” *The International Spectator*, 53:1 (2018): 30.

¹⁸ Helmut Schmidt, “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age; Zero Hour; Interview with Helmut Schmidt, 1987,” Open Vault (2 November 1987), https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_55D8B7AC02BD4D7CA6D1E705F68A0604#at_180.066_s.

crucial but difficult exercise. In an imagined world where Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's nuclear weapons had remained on Cuba after 1962, how many analysts would today insist that a second Bay of Pigs or even full-scale American invasion was deterred by the Soviet overseas deployment of nuclear arms?

At the height of the Cold War, approximately 4,000 American nuclear warheads were stationed in West Germany alone. Many of these weapons were 'usable' nuclear artillery shells and mines deployed close to the NATO/Warsaw Pact border. The result was the creation of what one analyst described as a "regional doomsday machine," a system more or less deliberately constructed to circumvent U.S. presidential sole authority over decisions to launch nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Arguably, the predisposition to "chaos, loss of political control [...] and rapid nuclear escalation in the event of a serious crisis or conflict" was the only way to get around what in a realist perspective remains a crippling problem at the heart of the policy of extended nuclear deterrence, namely that no U.S. president could realistically be expected to authorize nuclear use against Russia or any other major nuclear power (thus risking retaliation and ultimately the destruction of America) in response to incursions against allies in another hemisphere.²⁰ Of course, this so-called credibility problem is really a democratic constraint, as the limited plausibility of vicarious nuclear warfighting flows directly from the commander-in-chief's constitutional responsibility to act in the best interest of their own citizens. According to a 2019 survey of European views on nuclear weapons, only about 3 per cent of the voting-age populations of nuclear-armed France and the United Kingdom think it could ever be acceptable for their armed forces to use nuclear weapons to protect another country.²¹

In the liberal order fashioned during the Cold War, nuclear war was deemed too important to be left to the American people or its representative(s).²² It was left, instead, to a system predisposed to uncontrollable escalation or, in Thomas Schelling's formulation, a posture that left something to chance.²³ It certainly was not left to the citizens of the liberal European democracies that became hosts of American nuclear arms. The deployments of U.S. nuclear weapons to European countries enjoyed limited public support and came about largely through classified executive agreements. As late as 2013, two former Dutch prime ministers were threatened with prosecution for publically confirming the open secret that U.S. nuclear weapons continue to be stationed in the Netherlands.²⁴ The hosting of nuclear weapons remains deeply unpopular with European publics.²⁵

As the above suggests, the politics of extended nuclear deterrence, which are left largely to one side by Porter, provides further meat to the overall claims advanced in *The False Promise of Liberal Order*. Nuclear alignment was and remains an illiberal politics of hierarchy and clientelism. But observers have argued that the connection between liberalism and the nuclear predicament runs deeper still. According to the author Jonathan Schell, the failure of more decisive steps toward

¹⁹ Paul Bracken, *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 164.

²⁰ Shaun R. Gregory, *Nuclear Command and Control in NATO* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 1996), 194.

²¹ Kjølv Egeland and Benoit Pelopidas, "European Nuclear Weapons? Zombie Debates and Nuclear Realities," *European Security*, 30:2 (2021): 237–258.

²² Daniel Ellsberg discusses other exceptions to sole authority in *The Doomsday Machine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), chapter 3.

²³ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

²⁴ Nuclear Threat Initiative, "One-time Leaders May Face Charges for Discussing Dutch-Based Nukes" (14 June 2013), <https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/former-leaders-may-face-charges-discussing-dutch-based-nukes/>.

²⁵ ICAN, "Polls: Public opinion in EU host states firmly opposes nuclear weapons" (2020), https://www.icanw.org/polls_public_opinion_in_eu_host_states_firmly_opposes_nuclear_weapons.

nuclear disarmament after the end of the Cold War confirmed a suspicion that Western nuclear arsenals were “less a response to any particular external threat, totalitarian or otherwise, than an intrinsic element of the dominant liberal civilization itself [... We] will have to ask what it is in the makeup of liberalism that pushes it again and again, even at the moment of its greatest triumphs, into an abyss of its own making.”²⁶ In a planetary perspective, it is cold comfort that American ICBM bases have begun celebrating international women’s day.²⁷

There is a tendency, Porter finds, for the admirers of the supposed liberal order to blame problems on exogenous forces. He notes that “major shocks somehow arose from outside the system, coming from Americans’ loss of faith or nerve or from the failure to sell the order to those whose labour, taxes and blood maintain it, or from malign populists” (130). Closely related narratives are ubiquitous in the expert discourse on nuclear arms control and disarmament.²⁸ As I’ve written elsewhere, a common trope portrays the international community as having embarked on a “path” or “road” to nuclear abolition in the late 1980s and early 1990s.²⁹ This brilliant progression toward nuclear zero, so goes the argument, has in recent years been stolen by unenlightened leaders (Trump, Putin, Kim Jong-un) or a lack of respectful dialogue between states (non-nuclear powers daring to adopt a nuclear weapon ban treaty aimed at stigmatizing nuclear arms). In this view, the task for advocates of disarmament is to “rebuild” or “recover” an erstwhile abolitionist consensus, restoring a tried and tested formula of incremental progress toward nuclear zero. This narrative is convenient, of course, because it suggests that nuclear abolition—a goal nominally endorsed by all the world’s states—can be accomplished without contestation, antagonisms, or systemic change. The only trouble is that a meaningful abolitionist consensus never existed. Nobody stole disarmament.³⁰

For Porter, norms and institutions function to “legitimize the hegemon’s preferences” (81). There is undoubtedly much to this, not least in the field of nuclear nonproliferation, where the United States and other major powers have cultivated a politico-legal framework that legitimizes their own possession of nuclear weapons while delegitimizing the acquisition of such weapons by others. That said, there is considerable evidence that norms and structures of “productive power” have also had constraining and constitutive effects on the United States and other key actors.³¹ The various efforts by major powers at legitimating nuclear deterrence—from the French nuclear establishment’s sponsoring of think tanks³² to STRATCOM’s

²⁶ Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth and the Abolition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), xxxix.

²⁷ Shalayne Pulia, “This is What It’s Like to Be in Control of the Most Powerful Weapons on the Planet,” *In Style* (8 March 2020), <https://www.instyle.com/celebrity/air-force-missileers-international-womens-day>.

²⁸ See for example Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, *Kyoto Appeal* (Tokyo: Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 2019), 3; International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, *Eliminating Nuclear Threats: A Practical Agenda for Global Policymakers* (Canberra and Tokyo: Paragon, 2009), 5–6.

²⁹ Kjølv Egeland, “Who Stole Disarmament? History and Nostalgia in Nuclear Abolition Discourse,” *International Affairs* 96:5 (2020): 1387–1403.

³⁰ Egeland, “Who Stole Disarmament?”

³¹ See e.g. Adam Bower, *Norms Without the Great Powers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). On “productive power” see Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, eds., *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³² Kjølv Egeland and Benoit Pelopidas, “European Nuclear Weapons? Zombie Debates and Nuclear Realities,” *European Security* 30:2 (2021): 237–258.

exertions on Twitter³³ to the Russian nuclear security state's collaboration with the Orthodox Church³⁴—suggests that, even in the field of nuclear high politics, the key players are convinced that legitimacy matters.

Porter's main argument—and it is a convincing one—is that the discourse of the liberal order fosters self-righteousness and overambitious efforts at global 'leadership,' undercutting arguments for caution and restraint. Yet for all the problems associated with hubris and overreach, a central challenge in recent years has been the United States' refusal to meaningfully engage, let alone lead, on deeply consequential global challenges, most notably the climate crisis. For the last three decades, states and organizations working to cut greenhouse gas emissions have had to work around the fact that the world's most powerful state, and until relatively recently its largest emitter, has been unwilling to make sacrifices or changes that might disadvantage its economic elite.

Even President Joe Biden's much-touted green investment plan is "far short of any reasonable estimate of the investment needed for decarbonisation" (the plan breaks down to spending commitments of about 0.5% of GDP annually for a period of eight years. For comparison, the American COVID-19 relief package amounts to approximately 25% of GDP).³⁵ American liberals will argue that presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Biden were sincerely committed to decarbonization and that blame must be placed not with "America" but the Republicans in Congress. Yet Congress is hardly an external force or alien tumor in American politics. It is the body entrusted with 'all legislative Powers' granted through the U.S. Constitution. At any rate, America looks set to "remain a fundamentally unreliable partner in the effort to halt global heating."³⁶

Arguing that "The world cannot be domesticated" (160) and that America must ration its dwindling relative power, Porter offers three overall policy recommendations. The United States should endeavor "to contain a rising China, to divide China and Russia, and to reduce its footprint in the Middle East" (184). While these suggestions will resonate with many, they are perhaps somewhat less radical than what one would expect two thirds into the book. In the end, Porter ends up staking out a middle way that arguably looks a lot like a proposition to do much the same as before—only less of it and without euphemism or self-flattery.

In his enlightening prosecution of the liberal order's faults, Porter highlights unseen violence, climate change, economic dislocation, and the jeopardy of relying on nuclear deterrence on an indefinite basis. But in his conclusion these challenges are treated somewhat hastily or left hanging, leaving space for the thought that no radical alternative to the status quo is either desirable or feasible. Can a radical decarbonization agenda coexist with a securitized containment policy vis-à-vis China? As Porter points out, the Pentagon's climate footprint dwarfs that of many countries (132). And if it is true that the nuclear order was a near run thing—that *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* are separated by chance alone—how might the world transition to something safer? What does an economic settlement "somewhere in the middle" (196) look like in a world of ecosystem breakdown and automation? In fairness, though, these questions may be too broad and complex to be answered in a critique of liberal order, which is what *The False Promise of Liberal Order* is and aims to be.

³³ Emma Claire Foley, "STRATCOM Twitter Is Bombing," *Inkstick* (11 August 2020), <https://inkstickmedia.com/stratcom-twitter-is-bombing/>.

³⁴ Dima Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2019).

³⁵ Adam Tooze, "America's Race to Net Zero," *New Statesman* (21 April 2021), <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/north-america/2021/04/america-s-race-net-zero>.

³⁶ Adam Tooze, "America's Race to Net Zero," *New Statesman* (21 April 2021), <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/north-america/2021/04/america-s-race-net-zero>.

Against Porter's pessimistic outlook on the domesticability of world politics, there is widespread agreement in peace and conflict studies that the world has seen "a clear, albeit erratic, decline of organized violence,"³⁷ a finding variously ascribed to economic growth and increased prosperity, democratization, and the advance of institutions (including the nation state itself).³⁸ Wars, hot or cold, are not inevitable. Neither, hopefully, is runaway climate change. In this reviewer's opinion, the most valuable contribution of *The False Promise of Liberal Order* is its eminent analysis of how nostalgia and rose-tinted interpretations of history can muddy understanding and, by extension, undermine opportunities for progressive change. As Porter writes, "a richer historical consciousness can widen our sense of possible options" (156).

³⁷ Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Toward a Social-Democratic Peace?" *Ethics & International Affairs* 34:1 (2020): 67–75.

³⁸ See Gary Goertz et al., *The Puzzle of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Nils Petter Gleditsch, ed., "The Forum: The Decline of War," *International Studies Review* 15:3 (2013): 396–419; Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War* (New York: Plume, 2011); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Penguin, 2011); James L. Payne, *A History of Force* (Sandpoint: Lytton, 2004); Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

REVIEW BY WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

I'm beginning to feel sorry for the liberal order. For decades, leftists and critical theorists of all kinds slashed at its hypocrisies and pretensions. Then Russian President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and their counterparts in other authoritarian powers took to bludgeoning it with scathing rhetorical contempt. Later, Bannonesque 'anti-globalists,' nationalists and populists across the wider west got into the liberal-order-bashing game. A few years ago, realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer weighed in with *The Great Delusion*, which seeks to pin all America's foreign policy blunders of the last 30 years on the liberal order.¹ Now comes Patrick Porter, who saddles the order not only with most post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy disasters, but also Cold War ones, such as Vietnam. Oh, and he also claims that the order is to blame for the presidency of Donald Trump.

After all of this, anyone who tends to root for the underdog is tempted to rush to the order's defense. But I can't, in part because Porter and I come from a very similar intellectual place, namely realism, but more importantly because the liberal order as he describes it in his first chapter is naïve—even silly—and hence indefensible. It is an order with no U.S. coercion, no hypocrisy, no skullduggery, and no compromises for national interest in which the superpower hegemon binds itself to laws and institutions and, notwithstanding its massive power advantage, treats all its allies as peers, never so much as issuing a 'transactional demand' on its partners.

There's no gainsaying the contribution of Porter's book here. Repeatedly and effectively, he shows how the order's defenders elide or downplay the violent side of building and sustaining any order in the rough-and-tumble world of international politics. But who really believes in this milquetoast order where everyone just gets along, and the U.S. never plays hardball? It's hard to say because Porter employs an area- rather than precision-bombing approach. His target is those who have ever said nice things about the order, be they pundits, politicians, decision-makers, or scholars. (And, for scholars, Porter makes no allowance for the difference between punditry and peer reviewed research.) For each group, however, to determine whether a given defender of the order really believes the fairy-tale version, readers need some context. To focus just on scholars for a moment, the context is that much of this work appeared at a time when realism was (or was thought to be) dominant in IR scholarship, and so the burden was to show that the order fostered under U.S. leadership was different from what realism expects. The fact that the U.S. sometimes bullied allies, broke rules, coddled dictators, or bombed the bejeezus out of enemies was common knowledge. Scholars like John Ikenberry, Anne-Marie Slaughter or Robert Keohane were of course not unaware of these facts.² The key works in this canon accept much of what realism has to say about power politics as givens—indeed, almost banalities—but then try to show that there are elements of the post-World War II institutional order and patterns of cooperation that elude realist models.³

This context relates directly to what order Porter identifies as the key issues: "...not whether the Pax Americana was more liberal than its predecessors – it clearly was – but whether calling it 'liberal' adequately describes its working, and whether it in fact works" (104). In the context I just discussed—in which core realist claims loomed large over the academic

¹John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

²G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Robert O. (Robert Owen) Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1984); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order: Anne-Marie Slaughter*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³The canonical collection of articles in liberal institutionalist theory stressed that "The essays presented here focus on nation-states as primary actors in world politics, treat national preferences as sovereign, and assume that any ultimate escape from international anarchy is unlikely. Our focus is on non-altruistic cooperation among states dwelling in international anarchy." Kenneth Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," *World Politics* 38:1 (1985): 1-24, here 1.

conversation—calling the order “liberal” may well be adequate as a description, given that it is the most liberal international order that has ever existed. Liberal IR scholars highlighted aspects that are arguably more benign and cooperative than realist models would predict. One can easily pull quotations from their works that make them look like naïfs or apologists, but that does not mean some of their core scholarly arguments are without merit.

Which brings us to the second key issue that Porter raises: whether the liberal order “works,” by which I assume he means advances US national interests. That is a question that Porter’s book cannot answer, because it focuses only on things that do not work. One cannot do a net assessment by only looking at costs. Aside from showing how institutionalists and other scholars writing in a liberal vein did not dwell on the realist side of order-building, Porter leaves this scholarly edifice unscathed. At no point does the book attempt to refute the proposition that by creating institutions infused with liberal ideas the United States in fact advanced its interest in fostering greater cooperation in pursuit of issues it could not handle on its own. Aside from reminding readers that the United States frequently exploited its position to get special deals for itself – something that was well established in 1980s hegemonic stability scholarship⁴ – Porter does not undermine the claim that the United States’ interest in a more open global economy was in fact advanced by fostering a deeply institutionalized international economic order based on such institutions as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organization (GATT/WTO). Aside from showing that the Atlantic alliance embraced dictatorships and pushed its post-Cold War expansion against Russia’s stated preferences, the book does not provide evidence or arguments to counter the contention that the United States in fact advanced its interest in containing the Soviet Union and fostering security cooperation on other matters by creating a deeply institutionalized NATO. All that institutionalization? That’s liberal stuff. Realism contains scant intellectual architecture for explaining it.

Following Mearsheimer’s *Great Delusion*, Porter argues that the costly excesses of U.S. foreign policy were to an important degree caused by the effort to build and sustain a liberal order. In other words, the implication is that there is some other way to build an order that would have been better for the United States and perhaps for the world. But as with Mearsheimer’s work, Porter looks only at the connection between liberal order and excesses in US foreign policy. Without comparisons – either to other real orders or carefully constructed counterfactual ones—one cannot demonstrate a connection between the liberal aspect of the order and the costly excesses. All the top-level examples of U.S. excesses that Porter attributes to liberal order building have non-liberal explanations. As he acknowledges, building *any* order is a nasty business; getting an international system working for any country will involve the breaking of a lot of eggs.

In this crusade against liberal pretension and elision, Porter at times underestimates the difficulty of containment, and therefore blames liberalism for some of the excesses that inevitably emerged when any country attempts to be a great power with global containment ambitions. As he observes (192), “in a security competition, is tempting to view all conflicts as interlinked, to obsess over saving face and waging wars to establish credibility” (192). Exactly. Countries fall prey to these issues whether they are liberal or not. The United States in the Cold War was trying to maintain extended deterrence across Asia and Europe against what was thought to be a formidable adversary in the Soviet Union. Extended deterrence – and, overall, containing a potent land power from offshore – is a very, very difficult job. The main reason the United States carried on fighting in Vietnam, expending most of the blood and treasure it lost in that conflict long after the initial assumptions for going in were proved to be ill-founded, was credibility. Credibility is something that any hegemon, particularly an offshore one with far-flung commitments, is going to care about. Quagmires far away from the homeland tend to bog down states that are in the position of the U.S. occupied at that time.

In short, as Porter stresses, from a realist and historical perspective, order-building by any powerful state is a nasty business, and all states that engage in it tell stories about how exceptional and virtuous they are. So, what is so special about the *liberal*

⁴ Robert. Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stephen Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade,” *World Politics* 28:3 (1976): 317–347.

version of this age-old story? The answer is not clear given that Porter's book offers no sustained comparison to any other kind of order.

Speaking the truth about the dark side of order-building may well increase the prospects for a more prudential, responsible US foreign policy, as Porter intends. Here, his prose is powerfully persuasive. "The history of ordering must accommodate the rougher acts done in its name, and their darker logic, rather than artificially exercise them (115)." His aim is thus

to reveal the hard-wired realities and constraints of an anarchic world, the hard trade-offs it imposes. If emancipation is impossible in this pessimistic tradition, if some hypocrisy and brutality is inevitable, if states and their rulers cannot be "good", they can at least be wiser and more self-aware. They can develop a prudential capacity to practice a more restrained and self-aware power politics, to husband power more than to waste it, to practice intrigue and competition without excess brutality, and to wage war without it destroying the state, or, in America's case, the republic (25- 26).

I want to believe this. It is classical realism to the core: international politics is bloody and nasty, but it will be less bloody and nasty if the United States is realist in word and deed instead of deluding itself with tales of its special virtue. E.H. Carr, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau would nod their heads in approval.⁵

Upon reflection, however, this claim is awfully idealistic. It holds that changing how we talk about U.S. statecraft can fundamentally change it. To fully appreciate the flaws of the argument, one has only to consider it a different context. Russian officials and state media always stress Moscow's fealty to international law. No "rules-based order" for Putin and Lavrov. It's international law, full stop. Does any scholar believe that were Russian officialdom and elites to fess up about their hypocrisy and openly acknowledge their unlawful behavior in places like Ukraine and Syria that Moscow would suddenly shift to a less risk-acceptant, more prudential foreign policy? Perhaps, but count me a skeptic. Russian officials know what they are doing. Like all leaders of great powers, they assume that a dose of hypocrisy helps grease the gears of foreign policy.

Porter's vision of a sound U.S. grand strategy is compelling: buttress the core Asian and European alliances on a conservative, defensive footing, dial back democracy promotion, try to break the downward spiral in relations with Russia, address the China challenge with smart, non-escalatory defense postures, and limit involvement in the Middle East. My colleague Jennifer Lind and I have argued along these same lines.⁶ Perhaps some straight talk about the rougher history of U.S. order building will help nudge Washington in this direction. More important are likely to be tough political and bureaucratic deals, and compelling arguments about national interest.

Nothing I have written here is meant to detract from the fact that Porter's most fundamental claims are clearly right. Order building is a rough affair and many of the liberal order's defenders, explainers and proponents have elided this. Hammering those truths home is a worthy object. And in this lively, engaging, smart book, Porter wields one hefty hammer.

⁵ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, [2nd ed.]. (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1951); George F. (George Frost) Kennan and George F. (George Frost) Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, expanded ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Hans J. (Hans Joachim) Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations ; the Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. [rev. and reset]. (New York: Knopf; [distributed by Random House], 1972).

⁶ William C. Wohlforth and Jennifer Lind, "The Future of the Liberal Order is Conservative," *Foreign Affairs* 98 (March/April 2019): 70-80.

 RESPONSE BY PATRICK PORTER, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

For this forum and the responses, I am grateful to *H-Diplo*, the Commissioning editor and Chair Campbell Craig, and three reviewers - Alena Drieschova, Kjølvi Egeland and William Wohlforth, for their critiques. I will focus on the most central and pressing comments.

First, to summarize *The False Promise of Liberal Order*, I argue that visions of liberal, rules-based international order are wrong about the anarchic world we live in, and make it harder to think through and formulate prudent strategies for surviving in it. Our planet is not one that any power, even a superpower, can domesticate to its own values. The interlocking crises that now beset the United States are partly due to a set of delusions and attempts to transform the world in America's image. We live, inescapably, in an illiberal world, a world of resistance and competitive power politics. We cannot have a 'liberal order' in the sense that its proponents mean it. And attempts to create one through great acts of transformation tend to create cures that are worse than the disease, from economic 'shock therapy' in post-Soviet Russia to disastrous wars of regime change, inviting history's wrath. The history of U.S. foreign policy is messy and conflicted, driven by several impulses. One of those impulses, the belief that the United States succeeded by being benign, non-imperial and even clairvoyant (in Madeleine Albright's words, 'we see further'⁷⁹) is the book's target.

This is an urgent issue. In the recent era of President Donald Trump, amidst the resurgence of authoritarianism, geopolitical rivalry and trade conflict, a penumbra of security minds responded by affirming the virtues of a dying "liberal order," reviving and recasting a theological world view, built on a set of euphemistic stories about the past in varying degrees. Their panegyrics form almost a sub-genre. They talk about a world that never was: portraying the U.S. as a rule-bound and peaceable superpower that both preached and practiced free trade, consistently respected sovereignty and human rights, and exercised a non-imperial hegemony. These accounts do not always deny, and sometimes grudgingly admit, the darker side of this history, but they also marginalize it.⁸⁰ They appear in "grey" literature, but build on a body of academic ideas.⁸¹ In the

⁷⁹ Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Interview on NBC-TV *The Today Show*, 19 February 1998: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

⁸⁰ G. John Ikenberry, "The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 96:3 (2017): 2–9; James Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of Liberal Order, And Why They Matter Again," *The Washington Quarterly* 41:3 (2018): 7-20; Ivo H. Daalder & James M. Lindsay, *Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019); Richard N. Haass, "Liberal World Order: R.I.P.," *Project Syndicate*, 21 March, 2018; Robin Niblett, "Liberalism in Retreat: The Demise of a Dream," *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017), pp.17-24; Kori Schake, *America vs The West: Can the Liberal World Order Be Preserved* (Lowy Institute Paper, 2019); Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016); Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Brookings Institution, 2017); Brands, "America's Global Order Is Worth Fighting For; The Longest Period of Great-Power Peace in Modern History Is Not a 'Myth'," *Bloomberg*, 14 August, 2018; David H. Petraeus, "America Must Stand Tall," *Politico*, 7 February, 2017; Joseph S. Nye Jr, "The Rise and Fall of American Hegemony from Wilson to Trump," *International Affairs* 95:1 (2019), pp.63-80; Robert Kagan, "The Twilight of the Liberal World Order," in *Big Ideas for America*, ed. Michael O'Hanlon (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2017): 267–75; Edward Luce, "The New World Disorder," *Financial Times*, 24 June 2017; Bonnie S. Glaser & Gregory Poling, "Vanishing Borders in the South China Sea" *Foreign Affairs* 5 June 2018; Daniel Drezner, "Who is to Blame for the state of the rules-based international order?" *Washington Post* 5 June 2018; Gideon Rose "What Obama Gets Right: Keep Calm and Carry the Liberal Order On," *Foreign Affairs* 94:5 (2015): 2-12; Marc Champion, "International (Dis)Order," *Bloomberg*, 26 September 2018; Hans W. Maull, "The Once and Future Liberal Order," *Survival* 61:2 (2019): 7-32; Michael Fullilove, "The Fading of an Aging World Order" *Financial Times* 23 October 2015. A more agnostic account is Rebecca Lissner & Mira Rapp-Hooper, "The Liberal Order is More than a Myth: But it Must Adapt to the New Balance of Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 31 July 2018.

⁸¹ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); (with Daniel Deudney), "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," (with Deudney) *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 179-196; J. G. Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded

tradition of Niccolò Machiavelli and with classical realism as a source of restraint, my book argues that the best a great power like the U.S. can do is to follow the reason of state while doing minimal excess harm, and be wary of destroying one's order at home through overreach abroad.

As a brief note, now that the book is being debated before this public audience, may I offer an apology to Paul Miller of the University of Georgetown, whose argument I inadvertently mischaracterized on page 118. In his article in *Foreign Policy*, "Critics Should Stop Declaring Defeat in Afghanistan," Miller was describing - not advocating - a permanent counter-terrorism campaign in South Asia.⁸² This error will be removed from future editions.

In her critique, Alena Drieschova levels several criticisms. One of them is hard to disagree with and deserved more emphasis in the book, that international "orders" are not just designed and made by hegemony, but are co-created. Otherwise, the review mischaracterizes my argument. I can't bleat too hard about this, given my own misreading of Miller. Nevertheless, some corrections are due.

Drieschova claims that I "never define who is a liberal," that I disregard how liberals "disagree with one another," and that I focus on establishment politicians to the exclusion of "professional groups or nationalities." To the contrary, there is an entire chapter that taxonomizes liberalism, its order and moving parts. The book acknowledges its complexity: liberalism is "a rich tradition that is continually remade" (19), and "a contradictory and multisided tradition that only draws coherence from what it is said to be against" (35). The book is not an attack on liberalism generally, but an attack on the notion of liberal international order. Moreover, *False Promise* ranges widely beyond politicians, addressing the arguments of a professional security class that moves through "the revolving door between think-tanks, governments, foundations, universities and media commentary" (14). Beyond prominent politicians, the book engages with the arguments of people who straddle the world of strategic thought and policymaking, in and beyond the United States: G. John Ikenberry, Daniel Deudney, Kori Schake, John Ruggie, Joseph S. Nye Jr, Andrew Moravcsik, Robert Kagan, Margaret MacMillan, Jeremy Suri, James Goldgeier, Hal Brands, Michael McFaul, Robert Keohane, Richard Haass, Robin Niblett, Daniel Drezner, Gideon Rose, Jake Sullivan, Stewart Patrick, Ulrich Speck, Max Boot, and Anne Applebaum. Drieschova alleges that I "appear" to believe that "all" of the decision-makers I discuss "are and have been since the end of World War II guided by liberal, and not realist, ideas." I'll leave it to readers to decide, in a book that explicitly discusses earlier achievements of wise *Realpolitik*, like President Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972, whether I assume anything of the sort.

Drieschova claims it is contradictory to say, as I do, that an anarchic world is prone to violence and insecurity, yet that grandiose liberal projects promote excessive violence and insecurity. It is not clear why. Strife can have multiple causes. Avoiding self-defeating behaviour and needless waste is surely a decent start in picking our way through the chaos. Not distinguishing between realist traditions and crude *Machtpolitik*, Drieschova writes off realism merely as a handmaiden to the status quo that does little more than "enhance the power of the powerful." This too is simplistic. Successful insurgent and revisionist actors, and rising states, have also shown a keen appreciation for alliances, material capabilities, and the balance of power. General François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture and President Nelson Mandela did not successfully overthrow repressive orders by abandoning ruthless power politics.

The alternative Drieschova proposes seems to be a pacifistic transformation of some kind. "An approach which assumes that violence in the international system is inevitable," she writes, "justifies unethical behavior, serves to maintain existing power structures, rejects the possibility of learning from other theoretical perspectives, and objects to the prospect of change in

Liberalism in the Post-war Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 380; Robert O. Keohane, "Twenty Years of Institutional Liberalism," *International Relations* 26:2 (2012): 125-138; Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51:4 (1997): 513-553.

⁸² Paul D. Miller, "Critics Should Stop Declaring Defeat in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy* 12 April 2019, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/12/critics-should-stop-declaring-defeat-in-afghanistan/>.

international politics.” We might ask how well different, more utopian, approaches – ones that see the potential for violence as something the international system can leave behind or renounce – have fared historically, from the monastery at Lindisfarne to the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Or is the alternative something more radical, like revolution? We have been there before too, leading to the concentration camp, the gulag and more war.

Drieschova argues that a liberal, rules-based order exists despite the obvious problem that great powers transgress rules when they are inconvenient. Allegedly, liberal norms define the system because violations of rules and norms cause dominant powers reputational harm abroad. No doubt norms exist and can have an effect. But norm-driven punishment of great power misbehaviour is hardly the predominant pattern in history. The U.S. used napalm in Vietnam, assisted the great bloodletting in Indonesia, and hosted the School of the Americas, yet no allies defected or cut off trade. Alarmed commentators warned that abandoning Afghanistan to the Taliban would destroy America’s credibility abroad, shortly before Washington’s allies signed the AUKUS arms deal.⁸³ Some warned that the illegal, imprudent invasion of Iraq in 2003 would rupture relations with liberal European democracies, which would never be the same again. Yet France gave intelligence assistance behind the scenes and soon afterwards integrated its military command into NATO, while Germany continued to allow extraordinary rendition flights from its soil. With regard to normative questions, the world remains predominantly a place of impunity for the strongest states. China’s ongoing genocide, or its oppression of Hong Kong, did not prevent liberal states from hedging in their direction. When balancing happens, it tends to be about the protection of narrower and harder interests. Even in the case of postwar trials for crimes against humanity, the victors’ ensured justice was selective, protecting guilty parties from Emperor Hirohito to Nazi scientists and officers. Drieschova’s discussion is uncluttered by such awkward cases.

The ugly fact is that the international arena is populated not predominantly by humanists and liberal moralists, but by calculating regimes and actors. Drieschova points to the case of ancient Melos, the island that refused to submit to the Athenian empire, as a demonstration that normative ideas about justice prevail over coercive power politics, and that the Melians who defied the Athenian empire were willing to die rather than submit. Recall, however, that in Thucydides’s account, the Melians trusted that their ancestral allies, given ties of blood and honour and the fear of shame, would turn up and rescue them. To use the language of modern Responsibility to Protect (R2P) advocates, they placed their trust in ‘solidarist’ norms. They were killed and enslaved. They did what Drieschova recommends, and resisted the temptation of self-fulfilling realist cynicism, and paid the price.

Kjølvs Egeland offers a compelling response, and I am grateful for his close reading and his suggestion of further fields where scholarship demonstrates the way nostalgic delusion functions to distort policy debate. His main objections to the book are threefold: that I give too little credit to the agency of other major powers in shaping the international system, that my proposals and recommendations are insufficiently radical compared to the argument, and that we should be more optimistic about the progressive reduction in organized violence.

First, again I plead guilty to the objection that *False Promise* should have stressed more that the system was co-created. In retrospect, my argument’s focus falls too much on the U.S. case, and there is a tension between my emphasis on the hegemon striving to order the planet and the warning that we live in a world of resistance. I did discuss in passing that it was also an “empire by invitation” (p.100), and that there is an international security class that plays back the rhetoric of liberal order, but it deserved stronger billing.

Second, Egeland suggests that there is a disconnect between my root-and-branch critique of the theology of the liberal order and my milder policy recommendations. A decent test of this proposition would be how the foreign policy establishment would react to those recommendations. While containing China’s bid for hegemony in Asia does indeed have broad

⁸³ Richard Haass, “America’s Withdrawal of Choice,” *Project Syndicate* 15 August 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/americas-withdrawal-of-choice-by-richard-haass-2021-08>; Steve Erlanger, “Afghanistan’s Unravelling May Strike another Blow to America’s Credibility,” *New York Times* 13 August 2021.

support, the other proposals would be more divisive – a burden shift in Europe and withdrawal from the Middle East. A drawdown in the Middle East, an end to patronage of client regimes amongst the Saudi bloc and the containment of Iran, and a disentangling from embroilment in the Israel-Palestine conflict would not be greeted as mild fare by those who argue that a global U.S. military presence is a precondition for America to be secure and for civilisation to survive. David Blagden and I have subsequently spelt this out, that the U.S. should abandon the region as a wasteful set of commitments.⁸⁴

To encourage a split between Russia from China, again, would draw the ire of large parts of the foreign policy establishment, especially since they regard President Vladimir Putin's Russia not just as a sinister despotism and "spoiler" but as a mainspring of America's problems. Along with acute observers such as Timothy Crawford, Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press, I would advocate détente and bilateral negotiations including some serious concessions to Moscow, such as the abandonment of the Bucharest Declaration on NATO enlargement, unwinding military ties to Georgia and Ukraine, putting arms control and deterrence above sanctions for human rights abuses and, in general, a bargain offering non-expansion in return for non-interference.⁸⁵ This would aim to bring power and commitments more into balance, by encouraging the natural historical friction between Russia and China to return, reverse the growing convergence between the two Eurasian powers, and make conflict on two simultaneous fronts less likely. Right or wrong, such arguments when made are often not treated as legitimate. D.C.-based foreign policy experts such as Matthew Rojansky, Emma Ashford, and Matthew Burrows, who advocate compromise in this relationship, all met with punishment in Washington, a campaign to block an appointment to the National Security Council in the former, and a campaign of anonymous hostile briefing by Atlantic Council colleagues in the latter.⁸⁶ Two leading proponents of the 'liberal order,' Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, now accuse those who advocate "restraint" of being crypto-Trumpians, a claim so manifestly wrong on its face that it need not detain us further.⁸⁷ Suffice it to say, these are measures of how the foreign policy ecosystem reacts to even middling dissent. On recent experience, while the alternative policies advocated in *False Promise* might appear mild "on paper," in fact these suggestions if pursued would be contentious enough to provoke intense debate and political struggle.

Egeland suggests that given a "widespread agreement in peace and conflict studies" that the world has seen what Nils Petter Gleditsch describes as "a clear, albeit erratic, decline of organized violence," this suggests the world can be domesticated to liberal values after all.⁸⁸ Yet this Whiggish thesis of a decline of organized violence, one that is unlikely to reverse, has met with significant challenge. As Tanisha Fazal demonstrates, it is based too much on the anachronistic measure of fatal casualties, ignoring non-fatal casualties and the profound impact of the medical revolution in shifting the ratio of dead to wounded.⁸⁹ War's lethality is less and less a reliable measure of its frequency. From another direction, Bear Braumoller shows that rates of initiation and escalation have not changed much over two centuries, and that larger political units ruling larger

⁸⁴ David Blagden and Patrick Porter, "Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East." *Security Studies* 30:1 (2021): 5-48.

⁸⁵ T.W. Crawford, "How to Distance Russia from China" *The Washington Quarterly* 44:3 (2021): 175-194; Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, "Reality Check: American Power in an age of Constraints" 99:2 (March/April 2020): 41-48.

⁸⁶ Katrina vanden Heuvel, "The Successful Campaign to Block Matthew Rojansky's Appointment is Ominous for Biden's Russia Policy," *The Washington Post* 27 April 2021; Daniel W. Drezner, "Three Ways of Looking at a Think Tank Kerfuffle" *The Washington Post* 15 March 2021.

⁸⁷ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Misplaced Restraint: The Quincy Coalition Versus Liberal Internationalism" *Survival* 63:4 (2021): 7-32.

⁸⁸ Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Toward a Social-Democratic Peace?" *Ethics & International Affairs* 34:1 (2020): 67-75.

⁸⁹ Tanisha Fazal, "Dead Wrong? Battle Deaths, Military Medicine, and Exaggerated Reports of War's Demise." *International Security* 39:1 (2014): 95-125.

populations send (relatively) fewer people to fight, telling us more about demographics than about belligerence.⁹⁰ And as recent scholarship demonstrates and attempts to correct, much of the historical record has left marginalized the casualties and killings suffered in colonial wars, portraying a false image of progress.⁹¹ To be sure, there has been some reduction in some places. But it is attributable less to some civilizing normative or economic process, and more to patterns of political order that can change. This is, then, not nearly enough to constitute evidence of a lasting paradigm shift in international relations, and not enough to rule out a regression to high intensity or even major war. The proposition that war is increasingly obsolete may not only be wrong, but dangerous if those who exercise power believe it.

William Wohlforth offers a substantive and challenging critique. His review lodges many complaints. I will address the most fundamental. He argues that I am attacking a world view so “silly” and “milquetoast” that those who utter it surely do not really believe it, and that scholars are aware of the realities of the superpower’s illiberal behaviour. “One can easily pull quotations from their works that make them look like naïfs or apologists,” he charges, “but that does not mean some of their core scholarly arguments are without merit.” He suggests that *False Promise* “makes no allowance for the difference between punditry and peer reviewed research.” He also notes that realism cannot account for institutionalization, the creation of organizations and patterns of behavior along liberal lines that advanced U.S. interests. Why did America bother creating all these things, if order-building is such a brutal, illiberal affair? He further suggests that the argument suffers from its lack of sustained comparative or counterfactual analysis, making it hard to test the causal connection between liberal ideas and the hegemon’s behaviour. He concludes that my recommendation, that how we discuss foreign policy can change it, is too idealistic.

To respond in order: this is not just directed at scholars, as Wohlforth notes, but at a penumbra of people both within, outside and moving in and out of the academy, who share a common overarching view of the world and speak a common *lingua franca*. I take the point that it would have been useful to distinguish more between the outpourings of think tanks and peer-reviewed academic publications. But the fact is that in the United States as we find it, most of those whose works I criticize do not confine themselves to any one lane. There is nothing wrong with this. But many do stints in government, in academia, in foundations and think tanks, and in the era of Trump, many of them signed petitions calling on the U.S. to keep faith with its postwar international dispensation. Academic institutions are pleased to employ them and enjoy their reflected status. This is part of an overlapping, intertwined struggle about the past and future of US foreign policy. In that sense, *False Promise* is not intended just to be an intervention in a scholarly debate.

On the question of whether it is worthwhile to attack claims that are ahistorical and overblown about the liberal order, the fact is that these arguments are regularly made, as the book illustrates. Whether authors who propagate these claims really believe it is beside the point. *False Promise* does not propose to explain the inner complex inner life of these writers. Rather, it attacks their claims because they are ahistorical and consequential. The current U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, deploys precisely the same rhetoric to justify US policies and set out its choices. These arguments do intellectual harm to the effort to make US foreign policy more coherent, more solvent and more prudent by distorting the nature of the choices that an anarchic world presents the troubled republic. In the famous fable, some of the courtiers who insisted that everyone praise the naked emperor’s garments were aware of falsehood. Their insistence on maintaining the illusion had consequences. In particular, continually repeating the catechism of rules-based, liberal order functions to separate the present from the past, exceptionalize Donald Trump, and alleviate a set of policies pursued over decades for helping create conditions that made possible the current impasse, and helped bring about a reckless, demagogic presidency. While there is always, as Wohlforth says, a measure of hypocrisy and double-speak in international relations, we all surely have an interest in the quality of public discussion, to give our countries a better chance of understanding and navigating a hostile world. This appears to be a losing struggle, to be sure, and in that sense, idealistic. But then, the realist tradition at its best looks to

⁹⁰ Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁹¹ For instance, see Brian Urlacher, “Introducing Native American Conflict History (NACH) data” *Journal of Peace Research* 58:5 (2021):1117-1125.

the preservation of republican liberty at home as the ultimate purpose of power politics abroad, so a realist world view and a sense of civic purpose are not mutually exclusive.

On institutionalisation, to the contrary, realism can help explain the institution-building and behaviour that Wohlforth emphasises, and the book does indeed address this area where the arguments of liberal internationalism are most sophisticated. To be sure, institutions did facilitate cooperation – there is merit in that insight – but not in the binding, internationalist way that the theology on offer recalls, and it was not the rules but the privilege of exemption that defined the system. Ask an Australian farmer about the seventy-year commitment to agricultural free trade, and see if it passes the laugh test. The U.S. wanted to prize open foreign markets for itself, on its terms, which is neither shocking nor unique. But what we are persistently told is that the US *bound itself* by the constraining vision of liberal international order. A central realist objection to the liberal order thesis is that we cannot have it both ways. Institutions cannot have been both tools for hegemonic power and mechanisms of self-restraint that check its exercise of power. As Randall Schweller notes, Washington repeatedly went against those supposedly constraining institutions as it acted unilaterally, from the repudiation of the International Trade Organization (ITO) Treaty in 1947 to the adoption of flexible response nuclear posture to the termination of the Bretton Woods financial system.⁹² The U.S. as hegemon reserved the right to exempt itself from the constraints and rules that it prescribed for others, and it did not run those institutions on consistently liberal lines. Neither is it clear that NATO reflected a desire to bind the hegemon to and with liberal constraints, given that it contained (and still contains) dictatorships, or that the institutionalised quality of the alliance had an independent effect on behaviour. When the heat was turned up, as it was in the days after the 9/11 atrocity, the U.S. was not very interested in the multilateral, consultative ways of NATO. From the establishment of the United Nations, which President Franklin Roosevelt praised as a device to help lesser powers “blow off steam,” to the creation of institutions or conventions that the U.S. wanted to exist but not commit to, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the pursuit of an institutionalised world did not supplant but mostly reflected *Realpolitik*.

Finally, to answer the criticism that only a comparative study can truly substantiate the link between fanciful ideas and foreign policy overreach. I am grateful for this response in particular, as the book should have made clearer that liberal ideology is not *uniquely* prone to drive hubris, miscalculation, or error. Rather, the liberal order became one permutation of a more generic type of vision that afflicts the most powerful states. Though America is the case in question, the book is ultimately an argument about the world that any great power or hegemon has to live in. Ming China, imperial Rome and ancient Persia were not exactly liberal states, but could find their own intellectual sources of hubris. The book is more a response to the most recent eruption of an ancient problem, namely an exceptionalist theology of power that can lead to ruin, and it seeks to demonstrate that order-building inherently works differently to the way recent panegyrics claim. The most successful, unipolar states are, at times, prone to think they are special, that they have transcended anarchic pressures that bear down on others, that history is running in their direction, and that they can remake the world in their image. I take Wohlforth’s point that further work that is broader in time and space is needed to isolate and establish these causal linkages more closely. Stimulated partly by this point, this author is planning a sequel.

⁹² Randall L. Schweller, “The Problem of International Order Revisited,” *International Security* 26:1 (2001): 161-186, here 179.