



Why “Conservative,” Not Liberal, Internationalism?

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Abstract: There is no broad literature defining conservative internationalism as there is for liberal internationalism and realism. Yet conservative internationalism differs from liberal internationalism and realism in four important ways. First, it seeks a world of limited government or separate sovereign nations not big international institutions. Second, it believes that national security is a function of ideological differences not just relative power or diplomatic misunderstandings. The democratic peace is a much safer world for America than the balance of power or United Nations. Third, it recognizes the need to use force during negotiations, not just after negotiations fail, because authoritarian states will not take negotiations seriously if they can achieve their objectives outside negotiations. And fourth, it advances democracy conservatively by prioritizing regions where strong democracies exist nearby (today Ukraine and Korea) and by using military leverage to reach timely compromises that weaken authoritarian states.

As John Maynard Keynes famously wrote, “practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some academic scribbler of a few years back.” That surely is the case for presidents and foreign policy. Republican presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon generally have employed a realist theory of world affairs, attempting to maintain a balance of power in order to preserve peace. Democratic presidents such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt have preferred a liberal internationalist approach, intended to strengthen multilateral institutions in an attempt to replace the balance of power. A few presidents, like Andrew Jackson and perhaps Donald Trump today, practice what might be called a minimal realist or nationalist approach. And some presidents, like Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan, are claimed to be liberal internationalists even though they rejected the strengthening of centralized institutions, either domestic or international.

For some reason (perhaps because most academics are liberals), academics have seldom written about a “conservative” internationalist tradition. There is no broad literature to define this tradition as there is for realism, liberal internationalism,

and nationalism. For 50 years, I wondered why this was so, even after Ronald Reagan fashioned a foreign policy strategy that explicitly deviated from both realism and liberal internationalism and produced an outcome, the end of the Cold War, that rivaled the achievements of Nixon or Wilson. My book, *Conservative Internationalism*, sets out to fill this gap.¹

What is Conservative Internationalism?

First, conservative internationalism is “conservative,” favoring limited central government and a robust private sector or civil society. In foreign affairs, that idea translates into a world of strong states not universal global institutions, and of independent national defenses and competitive markets not expert-dominated collective security and globalization. Thomas Jefferson’s view of the world rivals Woodrow Wilson’s vision. Wilson foresaw global institutions eventually replacing national sovereignty. Thomas Jefferson, when contemplating the new states that might emerge in the Louisiana Territory, called them “sister republics” and said, “keep them in the union, if it be for their good, but separate them, if it be better.”² For Jefferson, the priority was republicanism not union. Nations remain separate and sovereign, especially when it comes to defense, but share republican virtues of self-government and commerce. Wilson envisioned the League of Nations, Jefferson the democratic peace.

Second, conservative internationalism is “internationalist” internationalist in the sense that national security is not only about territorial defense and geopolitical balances, but also about the kind of “political” or “ideological” world in which defense is executed. Defending America is much easier in a world in which democracies proliferate than in one dominated by authoritarian powers. This fact is often overlooked by realists and nationalists who take the world “as it is,” and warn against ideological aims which pursue the world as “we wish it to be.” Yet, consider how much more difficult American defense would be if the world today was like the world in 1914 or 1941. In short, regime type matters, and increasing the number of democracies in the world—however slowly or incrementally—is a fundamental tenet of national security. As my colleague, Mike Barnett, once put it felicitously: “a

¹ Henry R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, paperback with new preface 2015). An internationalist literature that is more conservative and places greater emphasis on ideologies than power (realism) or institutions (liberal internationalism) is growing in recent years. See John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2016); and Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

² Jefferson to Breckenridge, Aug. 12, 1803, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VIII, pp. 243-244.

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