



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Wilson, Bush, and the Evolution of Liberal Foreign Policy

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The first subject to discuss in considering the future of the liberal internationalist agenda is the importance of the democratization project to the definition of Wilsonianism. The second is the meaning of multilateralism. In the first case, Thomas Knock and Anne-Marie Slaughter argue in a forthcoming volume that democratization was never an important part of Wilsonianism; that, instead, multilateralism is the key to liberal internationalism. On the basis of this argument, they come to the conclusion that the Bush Doctrine is not in the Wilsonian tradition. In my contribution to this volume,¹ I object to this denigration of the place of democracy in liberal internationalism as being fundamentally illogical. Accordingly, I find the Bush Doctrine easily identifiable as Wilsonian.

I argue for the centrality of democracy to the Wilsonian project because it seems clear that the microfoundations for a regime in society are critical to the ability of those states that participate in multilateral organizations to do so effectively. That is, in order to function effectively, ultimately to provide for a peaceful world order, a multilateral organization needs to be dominated by democratic states, known for their rule-abiding behavior, their transparency, predictability, and accountability. Wilson wanted the League of Nations to be a League under the control of democracies and concerned with expanding this form of government,² but then in late February 1919 at Versailles, he abandoned that idea. From a liberal internationalist perspective, the result of the League's character was that it was undermined not only by the failure of the United States to join, but also by the role played in it by autocratic states. It is worth adding that in his drafts of the Pan American Union some three years earlier, Wilson had also looked forward to a community of American states based on the consent of the governed. In a word, a world of peace was necessarily a world dominated by what today is often called "market democracies," a type of social, economic, and political order that Wilson argued was fundamentally different from and better than any alternative order. In such an order the place of democratic governments was central.

From a liberal perspective it is altogether logical that democratic states would make better partners in multilateral institutions than those that were autocratic (much less “totalitarian,” a term and reality that only became evident after Wilson’s death). That said, Wilson had to work with such material as he had at hand, whence, presumably, his capitulation to the idea that the League would not be dominated by the democracies. Such a compromise could not be satisfactory unless it were seen as a way-station on the road to the expansion of democratic government, a process that a rule-creating and abiding organization like the League might well encourage.

It is therefore altogether Wilsonian for liberal internationalists today to recognize the deficiencies of the United Nations yet at the same time not to sacrifice the notion of the paramount importance of multilateralist cooperation among democratic peoples for the sake of world peace. This is illustrated by Madeleine Albright’s, and now Anne-Marie Slaughter’s, notion of a “Community of Democracies” or a “Concert of Democracies” standing alongside the UN but capable of acting with unity and purpose in a military fashion should such a community deem it necessary.

Albright and Slaughter’s position on the centrality of democratic solidarity is perfectly Wilsonian. This is what makes the Bush Doctrine so clearly Wilsonian as well. From President George W. Bush’s initial speech on the matter to the West Point commencement in June 2002, through what is generally considered the best statement of the doctrine in the National Security Strategy of the United States in September 2002, it is clear that the leading element of his plan to construct a new world order (but not its only aspect) is the replacement of what he repeatedly has called “tyranny” by the spread of democratic government—not only in Iraq but throughout the “Broader Middle East,” if not beyond.

As a result, democratic government, like multilateralism and open markets, may be only one aspect of the Wilsonian project. But of its various aspects, democratic regimes are the most critical.

American Hegemony

Knock and Slaughter also disagree with me on the meaning of “multilateralism” in the Wilsonian agenda. Slaughter argues that such cooperation involves sacrifice of sovereignty, as if such a process will be experienced by all members of such organizations equally. What she never says is that multilateralism is, in effect, a program for American hegemony. I don’t necessarily have anything against American hegemony; it may be good for the world. I don’t necessarily have anything against imperialism; it may be good for those people subjected to it. It’s a matter of debate. She, however, doesn’t buy into the notion that her version of Wilsonianism is hegemonic or imperialistic, and sees rather the U.S. as being no more than first among equals. On this she is on solid ground, for as Knock shows,³ Wilson himself excluded the idea that multilateralism would be a vehicle of American power projection.

But is it realistic to suppose that American “participation” in multilateral institutions among fellow market democracies would not in fact be a “leadership” position that could easily develop into a “hegemonic” relationship? Wilson, Slaughter, and Knock may argue against such a conclusion, but I maintain they would be mistaken.

How do I arrive at the conclusion that “multilateralism” is a code word for “hegemonism”? In my book, *A Pact with the Devil*, I discuss the evolution of Wilsonianism over time, in contrast to others who (like Knock and Slaughter) are interested in an essentialist notion of Wilson, as if such thinking did not evolve in important ways over time. For them, we can find out what Wilsonianism means if we look at Woodrow Wilson. For me, the doctrine changes over time. Thus, I posit a “pre-classical” period of liberal internationalism going back to the American Revolution, which on one hand represented a Christian notion, and on the other secular enlightenment. But liberal internationalism only gets “classical” when we get to Woodrow Wilson, who had a clear project of what he meant, a framework.

It involved democratization, economic interdependence, openness—and that’s why the liberal economic tradition is important—multilateralism, and American participation, indeed, American leadership. Wilsonianism becomes much more ideological when we get into the Cold War period, because it becomes the way in which the United States structures the liberal, democratic world—the “Free World,” as it was called—with containment of communism as a major doctrine, and liberal internationalism as what works within a community of free states. Finally, we get to the period beginning in the 1990s, when liberal internationalism becomes an ideology in any sense of the word you care to describe ideology.

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Herein lies the dynamic of the self-assurance that led to hegemonism and then imperialism on the part of the United States operating under the flag of liberal internationalism. Previously, liberalism had always suffered relative to Marxism/Leninism, by lacking the kind of theoretical rigor that Marxism/Leninism had during the Cold War. In the 1990s, however, a new bundle of concepts appeared that elevated the theoretical coherence of Wilsonianism. Of these concepts, the most important argument was Democratic Peace Theory (DPT). DPT was sponsored by a variety of well-known intellectuals at Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and Harvard. It was the notion that since democracies don't fight one another, the spread of democracy internationally would contribute to, or create, world peace. In other words, Kant was trumping Hobbes.

The problem for DPT, though, was that while it thought it desirable that democratic governance be expanded, it wasn't sure that expansion was actually feasible. Accordingly, a number of comparative political scientists began to argue against the warnings of an earlier generation that the transition to democracy was inherently difficult. These reservations could be waved off by the apparent evidence of the historic moment we were at in the 1990s. Great men—the Pope, Nelson Mandela, Kim Dae-jung, Vaclav Havel among others—plus the democracy idea, plus a little help from your friends at AID or NED—would be enough to bring about the democratic transition. We should relax, therefore, all the notions of “preconditions” and “sequence” that the comparative political studies of the 1960s to 1980s had said existed.

In other words, what was desirable was also feasible. It was an intoxicating time: what was hoped for from the point of view of DPT was now seen as doable by liberal comparative political analysts.

Enter the group of liberal international jurists, like Thomas M. Frank or Anne-Marie Slaughter, who declared that sovereignty should be redefined to apply only to those states that rested on the consent of the governed. Governments that were non-democratic and that were either involved in gross human rights abuses or amassing weapons of mass destruction could legitimately be attacked. A new doctrine of “just war” was born.

Once you had this volatile mix, you have a Wilsonian argument for imperialism. Consider the stance of John Rawls, in his last book, *The Law of Peoples*, in which he explicitly rests his argument on DPT; he writes about Kant, and says in effect that life is not worth living if you don't think this democratization project is actually feasible, in what he calls a “realistic utopia.” I am not saying that Rawls would have approved of the invasion of Iraq; I'm sure he would have been horrified by many of the things that happened there. But I think that Rawls can be correctly cited as an antecedent to the liberal imperialist democratization agenda.

The Bush Doctrine

What we have, then, is an evolution of Wilsonianism as a doctrine in the direction of progressive liberal imperialism, although it took the Bush administration and the enunciation of the Bush Doctrine to bring it about. Neoconservatives have shouldered far more responsibility than is their due for the consensus on the ideas behind the Bush Doctrine. With the exception of Francis Fukuyama, there was not a neoconservative who contributed to these ideas. Instead, these ideas, for the most part, belonged to individuals who were prominent within the Democratic Party. And here, I would cite particularly the Democratic Leadership Council, Progressive Policy Institute, headed by Will Marshall,

and such people as Anne-Marie Slaughter, Larry Diamond, and Kenneth Pollack.

What we find in the current political cycle is that in fact the ideas of the Bush Doctrine, which might have met their death on the battlefields of Iraq, have migrated from the Republican into the Democratic Party. The neoconservatives are less welcome than they have been in the Republican Party (although their reemergence around John McCain in the spring of 2008 may show this announcement of their demise to be premature), but these “neoliberals,” as I like to call them, are still alive and ready to provide intellectual framework of a Wilsonian type to a new Democratic administration. Consider as an example the book, *With All our Might*, edited by Will Marshall and including chapters by Pollack, Slaughter, Diamond, Michael McFaul, and a number of others, which was praised by the *Weekly Standard*. There are also self-styled liberals at Brookings and the Rand Corporation and the Carnegie Endowment, who subscribe to these ideas as well.

In this vein is the Princeton Project, “Forging a World of Liberty Under Law,” which struck me as quite exceptional in what it had to say when it was published late in 2006. The Project's co-directors were John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter. Its leading concepts were essentially three. First, that the United States should have military primacy in the world. Secondly, that there should be a “global Concert of Democracies,” led, of course, by the United States, which would act in unison and outside the United Nations, which itself cannot be counted on to organize effective collective action. And thirdly, that this Concert would back—by military means if necessary—something called PAR (“Popular, Accountable and Rights-regarding” governments), thus providing a rationale for remaking governments that are recalcitrant to American hegemony. All of this adds up to a version of the Bush Doctrine, only now with unilateralism replaced by multilateralism, which itself will be hegemonism.

So, if we ask ourselves whether the Bush Doctrine represents modern Wilsonianism, my answer is unequivocally “yes.” I would like to still be considered a liberal internationalist. But I'm a liberal internationalist of the Cold War period—a person who is selective about where democracy should be pushed, a person who thinks that American imperialism in the name of democracy promotion is a counterproductive action. The fostering of human rights and democratic government may be good counsel where the U.S. and its democratic allies have leverage and local circumstances favorable to such a process. But the United States should tread lightly in the Muslim world, sub-Saharan Africa, China, and Russia. It should be prepared where necessary and possible to cooperate with governments whose character it finds objectionable. And it should avoid the self-confident, self-righteous, and self-defeating conceit that it represents freedom and peace in all it does. As the Bush Doctrine has demonstrated, the notion that the United States is “the last, best hope of earth” (Abraham Lincoln) is a belief from which we need to seek relief.

article footnotes

1 John Ikenberry, ed., *The Crisis in American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the 21st Century* (Princeton University Press, October 2008).

2 See the first three drafts of his Covenant for the League.

3 See his essay in Ikenberry, op.cit.



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