

Introduction

Traditions of the Eagle

IT WAS EARLY MARCH 1946. The presidential train rumbled along the Ohio River Valley. President Harry Truman was taking Winston Churchill to Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill would deliver his famous “iron curtain” speech at Westminster College. On the train, Truman showed Churchill the new American presidential seal.

The seal had just been redesigned. Prior to 1945, the American eagle faced toward the left talon holding the arrows symbolizing American arms. In the redesign, ordered by President Franklin Roosevelt, the eagle’s head was moved to face the right talon holding the olive branches symbolizing American diplomacy.

Fraught with political meaning, this change was made for purely technical reasons. According to George Elsey, Truman’s aide assigned to redesign the seal, the chief of heraldry for the U.S. Army suggested the change to comply with heraldic traditions. In a coat of arms, the eagle’s head facing toward the left was “sinister” or an indication of illegitimacy. The correct position of the head was “dexter,” to the right, the direction of honor.¹

Pointing to the new design mounted on the wall of the train car, Truman explained the change to Churchill: “we have just turned the eagle’s head from the talons of war to the olive branch of peace.” Churchill thought for a moment and said: “the head should be on a swivel so that it can turn to the talons of war or the olive branch of peace as the occasion warrants.” Then, mischievously, Churchill added that the berries on the olive branches looked to him like atomic bombs.²

The different positions of the eagle’s head on the presidential seal represent in many ways the various traditions of American foreign policy. Churchill was expressing the archetypical *realist* view that American foreign policy should combine force (arrows) and diplomacy (olive branches), in whatever measure external circumstances require, to ensure national security. He anticipated the realist response to nuclear weapons:

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a diplomacy of deterrence that brandished the threat of atomic bombs to preclude their use (the berries on the olive branches).

The original seal with the eagle facing the arrows and war represented the *nationalist* orientation, the idea that America should remain strong and non-entangled in world affairs, a posture popular in the country's early history and again in the 1930s. The eagle's head fixed on the olive branches in the redesigned seal identified the *liberal internationalist* tradition, America's leadership of world affairs through international institutions like the League of Nations and United Nations.

This is a book about these standing American foreign policy traditions: realism, nationalism, and liberal internationalism. But it is about something much more, a further and until now neglected interpretation of America's foreign policy experience: the *conservative internationalist* tradition. This tradition mixes in different ways America's responsibility to reform world affairs stressed by liberal internationalism, America's power to maintain global stability emphasized by realism, and America's respect for national sovereignty preferred by nationalism. It features three key tenets:

- the liberal internationalist goal of spreading freedom, but disciplined by threat and priorities to spread freedom primarily on the borders of existing freedom, not everywhere in the world at once;
- the realist means of armed diplomacy to counter gains by adversaries *outside* negotiations in order to move freedom forward by timely compromise *inside* negotiations, not just using force *after* negotiations fail; and
- a conservative vision of limited global governance, a decentralized world of democratic civil societies or "sister republics," as Thomas Jefferson called them, not one of centralized international institutions as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt advocated.

The world envisioned is a conservative nirvana. States remain separate and armed; national culture, sovereignty, defense, and patriotism are respected; civic virtue and democracy are widespread; the global economy is mostly private; and global governance is limited. Such a "republican" world will always be more competitive and risky than a "liberal" world of centralized international institutions. Freedom and the availability of force to defend it are in some sense inseparable.

Today in the foreign policy literature and public discourse, conservative internationalism does not exist. Liberal thinking dominates the internationalist tradition, and conservative thinking has been classified historically as either nationalist or realist. More recently, liberal critics

have tried to conflate conservative foreign policy with neoconservatives (neocons) and George W. Bush. But important tenets of conservative internationalism, such as small government, limited priorities, and armed diplomacy to achieve timely compromise, not unconditional surrender, are not synonymous with neoconservatism; and despite his liberal internationalist rhetoric, George W. Bush had the instincts of a nationalist and realist, not a neocon. His freedom agenda did not exist before the 9/11 attacks, and that agenda was undermined after 9/11 chiefly by his nationalist focus on victory and realist aversion to nation-building.

Conservative internationalism is a separate and distinct foreign policy tradition. It goes back to the earliest days of the republic and was revived most recently by Ronald Reagan. Reagan startled all of the standing American traditions as well as much of the world when he pursued an unabashed agenda of freedom, through a very risky foreign policy of military and economic rearmament, that brought the Cold War to an end and spread liberty across Europe and a good part of the rest of the world without firing a single shot or relying on centralized international institutions.

This study develops this conservative internationalist tradition. It distinguishes clearly between conservative and liberal thinking, identifies multiple types of conservatives—social, libertarian, economic, and reform conservatives, including neoconservatives—and shows how conservatives, too, are internationalists, not just realists and nationalists, but differ significantly in the kind of internationalism they envision. The study develops more enduring distinctions among the foreign policy traditions, rooted in history and logic, not in quotidian political passions stirred by recent wars, and investigates in depth the foreign policies of four American presidents—Thomas Jefferson, James Polk, Harry Truman, and Ronald Reagan—who pioneered the conservative internationalist tradition. The study fills a gaping hole in the foreign policy literature, where there is currently no tradition that emphasizes the spread of freedom, armed diplomacy, and a world republic without big government.

To understand this revived tradition, the presidential seal needs further redesign. The head of the eagle would be turned to face outward, not inward left or right, peering toward the rest of the world, not just toward America's military and diplomatic assets. Peering outward would signify the hope of freedom for the rest of the world, not just for America. Since its inception, even during the era of slavery, America has been the world's leading constitutional or liberal republic. It offered more freedom—a wider franchise, initially to white males but eventually to people of all colors and genders—and more economic opportunity—initially land-ownership and later entrepreneurial opportunity—to more people than any other country in the world.³ In this sense all Americans today, both

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liberal and conservative, are “classical liberals.” They accept the idea that individual human beings, regardless of race, religion, or gender, are free and equal and that America offers a political and economic model of society that, however imperfect, is special, indeed *exceptionalist*, which the rest of the world wants and needs.⁴

Exceptionalist does not mean perfect. At inception, America was a racist society, religiously Protestant and anti-Catholic and ethnically British and monocultural. The “classical liberal” consensus that launched the American experiment excluded slaves, women, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and native Americans. But that consensus also included determined abolitionists, courageous suffragettes, defiant native Americans, and a haunted white male elite, including Presidents Jefferson, Polk, and Abraham Lincoln, who could not reconcile prejudice with commitments to self-government and the Declaration of Independence. These elites, split from the beginning between conservatives favoring local government and liberals favoring national government, spawned struggles that progressively widened the consensus. The Civil War ended slavery and ignited “a new birth of freedom.” Jim Crow, segregation, gender, and religious bias persisted. But the consensus widened again in the twentieth century as women’s suffrage, the civil rights revolution, and religious diversity broadened American freedom.

A further foreign policy tradition, the radical or revisionist tradition, rejects American exceptionalism. It argues that America remains a racist, militarist, and imperialist society, aggressive and lacking in self-restraint, morally equivalent to other great powers, and therefore not exceptionalist. This radical critique makes an important statement and is in one sense enduring. America falls short of its promise and probably always will. But if America’s model for the world is bad, a model that has enabled widening freedom at home and expanding democracy and prosperity abroad, what model is better? Until revisionists come up with another alternative, other than counseling America to come home and hoping that other countries will do no worse and possibly better, the mainstream traditions promise more progress, and they disagree enough among themselves to hold America accountable.

The debate among mainstream foreign policy traditions, like that between conservatives and liberals, is part of the exceptionalist American system. Each tradition emphasizes different aspects of American freedom and tracks different dimensions of real-world events. Each has a logic and historical record of its own. If American foreign policy is to succeed, all traditions have to be involved in the debate. Thus the argument in this book does not seek to discredit liberal thinking or the established foreign policy traditions—nationalism, realism, and liberal internationalism. Just the opposite; it argues that liberals and conservatives and the four main-

stream traditions, with conservative internationalism now added, need each other to continue to widen the consensus of freedom at home and around the world.

The mainstream traditions disagree about *how* not whether to make wider freedom and economic opportunity a reality. Nationalists and realists prefer to keep the focus inward, balancing commitments and resources and letting each country or alliance worry about its own freedom and growth. They believe that defending and stabilizing the international status quo—in short, peace—will do more to nurture freedom than any foreign policy that explicitly seeks to export freedom.

Internationalists, by contrast, prefer to focus outward. They want to change the status quo in favor of free countries, not just defend or stabilize it in cooperation with despots. They see the eagle of freedom gathering the rest of the world slowly under its wings. It won't be exactly American freedom that uplifts other nations, but it will be the freedom of individual independence and self-government, which believes that "all" not just American "men [people] are created equal." As Ronald Reagan once put it, "what sets America apart [is] not to remake the world in our own image, but to inspire people everywhere with a sense of their boundless possibilities."⁵ And once the eagle "slips the surly bonds" of global tyranny, it tames the use of military force in world affairs, subjects it to the reciprocal constraint of democratic societies, and ushers in the democratic peace. Liberal internationalists have long dominated this tradition, clutching the olive branches of diplomacy while holding the arrows of war in reserve if diplomacy fails.

Conservative internationalists also believe that freedom is spreading. But they are more doubtful that it can spread primarily by diplomacy and international institutions while limiting the use of force to a last resort after diplomacy fails. Conservative internationalists see a world in which despots persist. Despots use force daily to stay in power at home, and they use it readily to gain power abroad. Indeed, they use force not just *after* negotiations fail but also *before* and *during* negotiations. And if they know that democracies will use force only after negotiations fail, they negotiate until they have achieved their objectives by force *outside* negotiations. Thus diplomacy without the use of force does not reduce the role of arms in world affairs; it simply enables the use of arms by despots. Despots are the source of repeated violence in world affairs, not anarchy as realists believe or diplomatic misunderstandings as liberal internationalists assume. The road to freedom is bumpy, conservatives warn. Despots do not go peacefully.

To counter the greater force field created by despots, conservative internationalists see the likelihood that military force will be needed sooner and more often than liberal internationalists expect. It will be needed

during negotiations and *before* an attack when it is a choice, not just *after* negotiations and *in retaliation* to an attack when it is a necessity. Thus conservative internationalists are more reluctant to restrict the use of force prematurely by disarmament or by commitments to global organizations that include despots. They arm their diplomacy from the beginning, believing that the threat or use of force does not disrupt negotiations but gives them the best chance to succeed. A position of military strength influences the agenda, timing, and bargaining chips associated with negotiations, *and*, most important, shuts off aggressive alternatives that opponents might pursue outside negotiations.

The purpose of armed diplomacy, however, is not to defeat adversaries in some conventional military showdown, as some neoconservatives may envision, or to coexist with them indefinitely in some morally ambivalent status quo, as realists accept. It is rather to succeed in negotiations that move freedom forward. When armed diplomacy works best, no force is actually used. But it is a mistake to assume therefore that the arms were not necessary. Ronald Reagan's risky arms race was essential to raise the cost to the Soviet Union of options outside negotiations and make Soviet leaders pay attention to the peaceful future Reagan was offering inside negotiations—the elimination of offensive nuclear weapons and the chance to join the information age and globalized world economy. If you read what the Soviets said at the time, not even the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev believed that Reagan's arms buildup did not matter.

To write a book about the use of military force in world affairs is not appealing. It would be easier and certainly more popular to write a book about eliminating the use of military force in world affairs, especially nuclear weapons, and solving all the world's contentious issues by economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and at most selective strikes from over the horizon, like stealth raids and drone attacks, that kill only bad guys, such as Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki. To think about the use of force is not only distasteful; for some people it is equivalent to advocating the use of force.

If that is the reaction to this book, so be it. It might be easier to ignore the topic of armed diplomacy but it would not be wiser—especially now. America is passing through another historical cycle in which it is pulling back from world responsibilities. Having overextended under George W. Bush, it is now coming home under Barack Obama. If, as some argue, America lacks self-restraint, it also, on occasion, indulges in it. And in each cycle of retreat, it leaves the world at its own peril. When it left Europe in 1919, World War II followed. When it left Europe again in 1945, the Cold War followed. And when it retreated from Vietnam, the Soviet Union established naval bases in Cam Ranh Bay, invaded Afghanistan, and projected Soviet military power for the first time into Africa.

As America leaves Iraq and Afghanistan, different but equally dangerous events are likely to follow. America is ending its involvements in wars, but wars themselves are not ending. Indeed, they are getting worse—witness Syria, Lebanon, and Pakistan. The country enjoys a brief and false respite of peace, but when it returns to the fight, as history predicts it will, the costs will be much higher and more blood will be shed because the United States failed to arm its diplomacy throughout.

Conservative internationalism does not advocate the use of *more* or *unrestrained* force. It advocates the *earlier* and perhaps more frequent use of *smaller* force to deter, preempt, and prevent the *later* use of much *greater* force. As George Shultz, Reagan's secretary of state, once noted, it is "better to use force when you *should* rather than when you *must*; *last* [resort] means no *other*, and by that time the level of force and the risk involved may have multiplied many times over."⁶ In a world where tyrants use force congenitally, using force too late can be just as costly as using it too soon. Iraq in 2003 is thought to be a case of using force too soon. But dealing with Nazi Germany in the 1930s is a clear case of using it too late. And the failure to unseat Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs invasion in the early 1960s brought the world closer to the brink of nuclear Armageddon in the Cuban Missile Crisis than it has ever been before or since. Using force too soon risks unnecessary wars because preemption can never be perfectly clairvoyant. But using it too late risks bigger and more costly wars because the stakes compound in the meantime. Conservative internationalism may be a more *risky* strategy in the short run, but liberal internationalism may be the more *costly* strategy in the long run.

The presidents studied in this volume pursued foreign policies that are better explained by conservative internationalism than by any of the other traditions. They succeeded by championing the three central pillars of conservative internationalism: spread freedom disciplined by threat, always integrate the use of force and diplomacy, and be ready to compromise to respect the will of the people both at home and abroad.

Jefferson and Polk were ardent advocates of self-government, even though they were slave masters. They wanted more citizens to vote, even as they were haunted by the people to whom they denied the vote (non-whites and women). They knew that America did not have to be perfect to be exceptionalist. Nor did it have to be preeminent. They led when America was both flawed and weak. Today America is more free and strong, but many still counsel it to hold back. They say others will do more as America does less. Perhaps, but imagine what the world might be like today if America had led "from behind." How might the Cold War have ended or terrorism after 9/11 fared? The question is not just rhetorical. After World War II, the United States deliberately created a world in which it not only accepted other powers but assisted them to

become relatively stronger and wealthier. It continues to do so today—consider China. So as America grows relatively smaller, by its own choice, when will it share and to whom will it pass the baton to lead a world that remains both free and prosperous? Britain passed the baton to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Who will pick it up from America at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

The obvious candidate is the European Union. Helped by the United States, particularly under the leadership of Truman and Reagan, Europe is now whole and free. It supported America in Afghanistan, was there in the case of Britain in Iraq, and took the lead under France and Britain in Libya. But Europe has no independent security arm. And its history makes it hesitate to speak out confidently for freedom. So if Europe demurs, authoritarian rivals may step up. They did so before, when free nations stepped back—Wilhelmine Germany and imperial Japan. If they do so again, America remains the only champion freedom has to stay oppression in Russia, China, Venezuela, the Arab Spring, and elsewhere around the world.

The four presidents studied in this book also armed their diplomacy. They never used force without follow-up diplomacy or diplomacy without backup force. Polk escalated the threat or use of force four times against Mexico, and each time he offered Mexico a diplomatic way out. Reagan never opposed negotiations with Moscow, as some supporters believed; he opposed negotiations with Moscow from weakness. Force was essential to his diplomacy, but diplomacy in turn disciplined his use of force. Reagan knew where he wanted to go with the Soviet Union without having to defeat them militarily.

The four presidents also disciplined their use of force by prioritizing freedom where it was most consequential and likely to succeed: on the borders of existing freedom. If freedom fails there, the threat looms nearer. On the other hand, because freedom is difficult to achieve, it has the best chance to succeed in areas next to strong existing free societies. Jefferson and Polk secured self-government first on the American continent, not in Europe or Latin America. And Truman and Reagan secured freedom in Europe and East Asia (Japan and South Korea), not in Indochina or the Middle East.

Today the borders of existing freedom stretch in Europe from Turkey through Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland to the Baltic states and in Asia from India through Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan to South Korea. The greatest threats along these borders come from the major authoritarian states of Russia and China, not from rogue states and terrorists. Rogue states and terrorists pose dangers, to be sure, especially the possibility that they might collude to acquire and proliferate weapons of mass destruction. But they do

not rise to the level of existential threats to the United States and the free world unless they are used, directly or indirectly, by Russia and China to undermine Western democracy and markets.

Hence the United States should think twice before it fights rogue states and terrorism in remote regions such as the Middle East and southwest Asia while it ignores or placates efforts by Russia and China to extend their influence along the central borders of free Europe and Asia. Instead it must counter Russian and Chinese efforts to expand in border regions *outside* negotiations—Russia’s sphere of privileged interest in the former Soviet area and China’s backstop of North Korea and claim to island territories in the Pacific—if it hopes to convince these countries to fight terrorism and proliferation in more remote regions *through* negotiations.

That does not mean that the United States does not respond vigorously to threats from whatever regions they may come. It means simply that the United States does not prioritize democracy promotion in remote regions. When threats come from areas that do not border on existing democracies, the United States defeats the threat and gets in and out as quickly as possible. It employs what I call a *ratchet strategy* to replace governments, if necessary, but not to install democracy and build nations. Then, if another attack comes, it does the same thing again, “ratcheting” local institutions toward greater openness and stability. Such a strategy retains public support, whereas the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan exhausted public patience and preclude any return to those countries under almost any circumstances (as the long war in Vietnam did after the United States left).

It is not that nations in remote regions are unfit for democracy; it is just that they are not first in line for democracy. First in line are countries that border on existing democracies—Egypt and Jordan next to Israel more than Libya, Turkey next to European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) more than Iraq, Ukraine next to Poland more than Georgia, Pakistan next to India more than Afghanistan, and Taiwan and South Korea next to Japan more than China or Southeast Asia. In these cases, an *inkblot strategy* applies—spread freedom by proximity. If circumstances allow, in Ukraine and Turkey for example, mobilize powerful trade and investment resources as well as people exchanges of all sorts to draw these countries inexorably toward existing freedom that flourishes nearby, as the European Union did to secure democracy and markets in Eastern Europe.

Without such priorities, any policy to spread freedom is Pollyannaish and quickly exceeds the limits of the public will. Conservative internationalist presidents always acted within the constraints of what the public would tolerate. Despite embargoes and wars, Jefferson and Polk left office as popular as they entered. Reagan did, too. And Truman won a

smashing electoral victory in 1948 when he rallied America to defend Europe, although he lost public confidence later in Korea when he allowed General MacArthur to ignite a wider and unending war in Asia.

So what will the American public bear today? It is unlikely to support another invasion like Iraq to prevent nuclear weapons in Iran. Under present circumstances, that threat is simply not credible, especially at a time when the United States is downsizing its military to fight only one war at a time and is simultaneously pivoting its forces from the Middle East to Asia. So unless America is attacked again, its presence around the world steadily recedes. It is not just the defense pullbacks; it is also the weak American recovery and beleaguered global economy. The European Union and NATO no longer beckon to Ukraine, Turkey, and Georgia the way they did two decades ago, and Russia and China face a much less impressive America than the Soviet Union did in the 1980s. Decline of a leading power, however well-meaning, has never augured well for global peace and well-being. The declining power has less to offer in negotiations, and rising powers have more space to roam outside negotiations.

After ten years of war, America yearns for another false retreat. Can it be dissuaded before it is attacked again? Conservative internationalism says yes. It offers a middle way between a realist retreat to offshore defense, which spurns the advance of freedom, and a liberal internationalist commitment to open-ended diplomacy, which spurns the assertive use of force. It rearms American diplomacy to pursue the goals of American exceptionalism at a cost that the American public can bear. Which threats take priority and where on existing borders is freedom advanced at least cost? What are the smaller uses of force today that might prevent the larger uses of force tomorrow? And what peaceful outcomes can the United States accept by compromise inside negotiations once the adversary is precluded from achieving its objectives by force outside negotiations? These are the questions this study seeks to understand. Until now, conservative internationalism has not been treated as a distinct and deeply rooted tradition separate from that of liberal internationalism and realism. Perhaps, after this book, that will no longer be the case.