

Reviews

Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World

Order, G. John Ikenberry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 392 pp., \$35 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

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Liberal Leviathan is a monumental work of political science that will stand for many years as a canonical statement on a topic—U.S. foreign policy and the liberal international order—that has been, and will continue to be, on the short list of the large topics of international history and politics. The book masterfully draws on history, advances international relations theory, and illuminates foreign policy choices of the past, present, and future. It also makes important contributions to the general theory of international orders (the circumstances, forces, and processes that shape their rise and fall), and of how the liberal international order differs from previous international orders and from the orders advanced by its rivals in the course of its rise. Henceforth, no serious student of American foreign policy and of international theory will be able to proceed without engaging Ikenberry's powerful and carefully formulated arguments.

No brief summary can adequately convey the richness and nuances of the arguments in *Liberal Leviathan*, but the book's essential claim is both clear and persuasive. Across the twentieth century, and particularly after World War II, the

United States pursued a foreign policy that played a central role in the creation of an international order based on rules, the consent of the governed, and capitalist economic expansion. While certainly not encompassing all the states of the global international system, this liberal international order has been immensely successful in advancing peace, prosperity, and freedom, to the great benefit of much of humankind. Ikenberry argues that the United States undertook this endeavor on the basis of its national interest, and often successfully used its power to build this order. Unlike many previous paramount states, the United States as hegemon accepted some significant restraints on its own actions through international institutions, and in doing so it advanced not only the interests of others but also its own. Ikenberry's lines of argument are particularly valuable because they dispel the widely repeated claims of "realists" about the intractable constraints of anarchic international systems, the dim prospects for interstate cooperation, and the irrelevance of domestic political forms.

A signal feature of Ikenberry's masterly argument is its in-depth exploration of

the ways in which this order has evolved as it dealt with crises, challenges, and changing circumstances. While Ikenberry's account gives due weight to the impressive accomplishments of this order, it is not triumphalist in either tone or substance. It is clear that the liberal order-building project is incomplete, and that it has been subject to many disappointments. It is continuously challenged, both by new and unexpected developments, and by numerous critics and opponents. What emerges is not a picture of either the liberal order's continual rise or of a spectacularly successful founding followed by slow decline, but rather one of a more complex pattern—of starts and stops, of experiments and adjustments, and of progress in some areas accompanied by reversals and impasses in others.

Ikenberry's analysis is particularly valuable and innovative in that it grapples directly with the post-9/11 unilateral policies of the George W. Bush administration, which loom so large in perceptions that liberal internationalism is either dead, a sham, or even a menace to liberal values and the liberal order. He details the ways in which the Bush-Cheney administration openly challenged, even disparaged, rule-based approaches to solving international problems. But this turn, Ikenberry argues convincingly, ended in rather spectacular failure, and the United States has returned during the Obama years to a more moderate foreign policy and new global order-building initiatives.

This book is not, however, entirely a retrospective on the recent past. Ikenberry spends considerable effort looking ahead at the emerging world in which power is no longer so concentrated in American hands, and in which rising states, most notably China, are likely to play a more important role. He argues that the preservation and even expansion of the liberal

rule-based international order is in the interest of rising states. He points out that the liberal order is likely to endure despite American relative decline because this order is so easy and beneficial to join, and because it is so large as to be very difficult to challenge or overthrow. If the United States is willing to accommodate emerging powers' interests and expand their roles and "voices" in decision-making about international rules, then the liberal international order is likely to remain the valued means by which states address the many global problems they face in common.

A book of this scope and insight is also valuable for the many additional important questions that its arguments evoke. Will the liberal international order expand, persist, or decline? Ikenberry convincingly shows that the success of liberal order-building has always rested in large measure on its ability to contribute to solving some of the most important problems that many states and peoples face. Its future prospects are also likely to hinge on its ability to innovate in solving important problems, four of which appear to be particularly important, and potentially challenging.

One set of questions concerns Marxism. Would the American order have been so successful had it not been challenged by a militant global ideological alternative that made economic elites willing to make concessions and support policies that were aimed at solving many of the problems and grievances that Marxists claimed to be able to address? Are the rising inequalities plaguing democracies, including the United States, likely to be solved without some functional equivalent of the international proletarian movement? Or can the democracies, now largely freed of the need to combat a full-spectrum systemic challenger, move directly and effectively

to realize the goals set forth in liberal democratic ideology?

A second set of questions concerns the environment, a topic that receives limited treatment in *Liberal Leviathan*. Although the liberal world order has built many regimes for the regulation of environmental destruction, the net effect of these efforts has fallen short of a full solution, and the recent record in addressing the paramount environmental challenge, climate change, has been particularly dismal. Economic growth has been one of the greatest successes of the American world order across the second half of the twentieth century, and it is unlikely liberal democracy would be as widely appealing, or as effective in generating power resources, without being connected to the productivity and growth of capitalist economic arrangements. Does the problem of environmental sustainability call into question the capitalist system of industrialism? Or do liberal democratic capitalist polities have the tools and approaches to lighten the human ecological footprint without diminishing wealth and human well-being? Unless the latter question can be answered affirmatively, the spectacular capitalist economic boom of the “advanced industrial democracies” in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is likely to be followed by a comparably spectacular ecological bust in the twenty-first century.

A third set of questions concerns the legacies of European and Western imperialism. The liberal international order analyzed so effectively in *Liberal Leviathan* is in some ways a global order, as virtually every country is a member of some of its flagship organizations and regimes, most notably the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. But in other ways this order is essentially regional, mainly concentrated in Europe, North

America, and islands scattered across the globe. For much of the rest of humankind, in South America, Africa, and Asia, the rise of the United States and the growth of its international liberal order have been less positive, or at least they are widely perceived to be so. In large parts of the world it is the long and deep imperialism and colonialism of “the West” and its legacies of poverty and political weakness that loom largest. Can these legacies be overcome through development? Or are the states of the postcolonial world likely to remain or become essentially passive (at best) or hostile (at worst) to international order-building along liberal lines?

Finally, what of the United States itself? With its power in relative decline, facing a host of difficult domestic problems, and with a changing demographic, America is evolving in ways that call into question both its ability and its willingness to lead and bear the costs to expand, or even sustain, the project of liberal international order-building. Ikenberry’s account reminds us that liberal internationalism has never been all of American foreign policy, and that it has been vigorously contested even during its periods of greatest influence. He also reminds us that the liberal internationalist program owes much of its domestic political success to its ability to evolve and innovate. The rising chorus of voices from both the Left and Right against the American state and its extended international activities points to the growing difficulties for American liberal order-building.

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