



Conservative Internationalism Out of Power

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Abstract: Conservative internationalism is an important focus for study because it is a good description of America's de facto grand strategy over time. The United States' deployment patterns, budgetary priorities, and diplomatic initiatives tend, over the long run and across administrations, to be conservative internationalist in effect and in practice. Sometimes this de facto conservative internationalist median is directly observable in the oscillation from one presidential administration to the next. It is also evident in how policymakers find themselves entrapped between budgetary and military realities on the one hand, and liberal rhetoric and public expectations on the other. American statesmen face competing pressures to make soaring commitments to liberal ideals yet govern with a hard-nosed pragmatism that prioritizes American interests. The resulting blend is, often, a rough approximation of conservative internationalism. That is why it is likely to endure as America's preferred approach to the world long past the Trump administration. The mix of American idealism and American strength is too potent for policymakers to ignore

The foreign policy tradition of conservative internationalism is out of power in the White House, and out of favor within its own party. In 2013, a majority of Americans believed the United States should “mind its own business internationally,” which, according to the Pew Research Center, is the first time in nearly 50 years of opinion surveys that this statement has received majority approval.¹ In 2016, the Republican electorate rejected outspoken conservative internationalist candidates, such as Senator Marco Rubio and Governor Jeb Bush, in favor of the stridently nationalist, Jacksonian businessman, Donald J. Trump. It is unclear if conservative internationalism has much of a future.

¹ Pew Research Center, “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World,” May 5, 2016.

In fact, it is debatable whether it had a real past, either. Some scholars have questioned whether a distinct conservative internationalist tradition exists in American foreign policy thinking since Henry Nau first identified one in 2008.² Few American statesmen in history explicitly have embraced the precise mixture of power and principle that Nau identified as the hallmark of conservative internationalism. Ronald Reagan and Harry Truman may be less the exponents of a unique tradition than aberrations, namely, Wilsonians who were slightly more hawkish than average, or realists especially attuned to the American people's need to believe in a higher moral purpose for their nation's role in the world. Nau's extrapolation of an entire tradition from only a few data points—only three or four American presidents fit neatly into the conservative internationalist tradition—raises the question: is conservative internationalism real? And is it significant enough to merit serious study.

Grand Strategy over Time

Yes, international conservatism deserves study. The first reason is that, like all conceptual paradigms, conservative internationalism works better as an ideal type than as an historical description. Few presidents and statesmen fit neatly into *any* category, conservative internationalist or otherwise. Wilson, for example, was sometimes less Wilsonian than his reputation, Henry Kissinger's Kissingerian realism only looked so in comparison to his American context, and the historical Ronald Reagan is only passingly related to his eponymous legend. Intellectual labels are useful precisely insofar as they simplify and organize the otherwise messy historical record—within bounds, of course. The contribution of conservative internationalism as a conceptual category is to rectify a schematic that had grown so simplistic as to be an outright distortion of American diplomatic history.

But the study of conservative internationalism is useful for another reason, one unique to it in contrast to the other traditions of American foreign policy thinking: conservative internationalism is a good description of America's *de facto* or "natural" grand strategy over time. If we examine the record of what the United States has actually done—setting aside its declared policy, the official statements of its officials and bureaucrats, examining only the long-term pattern of American behavior³—it looks remarkably similar to conservative internationalism. To put it another way, the United States' deployment patterns, budgetary priorities, and diplomatic initiatives tend, over the long run and across administrations, to be conservative internationalist in effect and in practice.

Consider the expansion of NATO and the spread of democracy across Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The U.S. policy of fostering "Europe whole and free" was declared by the George H. W. Bush administration and largely implemented by

² Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ See Nina Silove's definition of grand strategy in "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies*, 2017.

the Bill Clinton administration. The former is usually described as moderately realist; the latter, liberal internationalist. But together, they implemented a strikingly conservative internationalist vision. They advanced the U.S. military position in Europe and constrained future Russian revanchism by expanding the NATO military alliance and securing Russian agreement to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. At the same time, both administrations helped encourage liberalism and open market economies in the world's most important strategic geography, as liberal internationalists wanted. Neither administration described their policy in conservative internationalist terms, but the effect of their policy is exactly what a conservative internationalist would have wanted.

The example of U.S. policy towards Eastern Europe in the 1990s is an example of how conservative internationalism is the mean to which American diplomacy regresses after oscillating to one or the other extreme. It is the midpoint between overly-idealistic Wilsonianism and overly-cynical realism. As such, it is often the foreign policy that the United States ends up actually implementing when policymakers and voters moderate the foolishness of one tradition with a dose of the other. Social scientists often treat an observed long-term pattern of behavior as a person's "revealed preference," a record of action that shows what they truly prioritize.⁴ Conservative internationalism is the revealed preference of American diplomacy. Put another way, it is the implicit operational code that structures policymakers' decision making.

Finding a Median Position

Sometimes this de facto conservative internationalist median is directly observable in the oscillation from one presidential administration to the next. For example, the United States moved from the idealism of Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter towards the more hard-nosed realism of the Dwight Eisenhower administration. However, en route, America passed through the conservative internationalism of Harry Truman. Truman combined a tempered Wilsonian idealism, as reflected in both the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, together with a less utopian approach to America's power position. His more pragmatic leaning can be seen in the founding of NATO and his response to the outbreak of war in Korea. He was able to give heft and teeth to his predecessor's Wilsonianism by hedging it within realistic bounds while simultaneously reinforcing the moral aspirations to which his successor's policies would be bound.

After Eisenhower, the nation once again returned to idealism with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. John F. Kennedy promised to "pay any price" to defend freedom, and Lyndon Johnson waged war in Vietnam to prove the point. The failure there led the nation to lurch swiftly back towards realism with

⁴ Marcel K. Richter, "Revealed preference theory," *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society*, 1966, pp. 635-645.

Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Kissinger. The entire era from 1961 to 1977 was a setback for the United States: neither America's material power nor its ideals were appreciably strengthened or expanded. To the extent that the conservative internationalist tradition was in evidence, it can perhaps be seen in the emerging U.S.-Israel partnership, founded both on shared ideals and on Cold War calculations. It can also be seen in the Nixon and Ford Defense Departments, where Deputy Secretary Bill Clements began laying the groundwork for America's rearmament through the research, development, and procurement of a new generation of weapons technology. His famous aphorism, "Let us never send the President of the United States to the conference table as the head of the second strongest nation in the world," perfectly captures the strategy of armed diplomacy that is one of the hallmarks of conservative internationalism.

The pendulum swung again. America experienced another failed experiment in idealism with Jimmy Carter, and another tack back towards realism with George H. W. Bush. In between, of course, was Ronald Reagan, the conservative internationalist president *par excellence*. Reagan's unequivocal moral vision and uncompromising rhetoric was matched with an unprecedented peacetime military buildup, ensuring his words were backed by hard power. But Reagan leavened his approach with pragmatic diplomacy and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances. His commitment to championing freedom was not a rigid or utopian crusade. In retrospect, his deeds were often less hawkish and his diplomacy less militarized than his rhetoric and reputation might suggest.

A Blended Approach

But the natural oscillation in and out of power of presidential administrations and political parties is not the only way conservative internationalism has had a periodic impact on American diplomacy. It is also evident in how policymakers find themselves entrapped between budgetary and military realities on the one hand, and liberal rhetoric and public expectations on the other. In navigating these competing realities, American statesmen end up implementing a blended approach: using American power for American purposes, but also, incrementally, for liberal ideals, when possible. That is precisely the conservative internationalist's prescription.

Virtually every major American statesman since at least the War of 1898 has talked like a liberal internationalist. Liberal internationalism is the default rhetoric or the quasi-official ideology of the American foreign policy establishment. Wilson did not invent Wilsonianism; he codified it at a moment of great global crisis. Theodore Roosevelt, in this as in so many other areas, preceded and anticipated Wilson's ideas by speaking of the United States' duty to serve as a civilizing influence and bring the values of republicanism and self-government to the world. After Wilson, everything from the Atlantic Charter to the Truman Doctrine, Kennedy's inaugural, the Helsinki Final Act, as well as Reagan's 1983 address to the British Parliament, captured the American government's rhetorical commitment to liberal ideals around the world. George W. Bush's declaration, in his second inaugural, that "it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and

institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world,” is solidly within this tradition.

Barack Obama, while departing from Bush in much else, nonetheless spoke eloquently in his 2009 address in Cairo of the freedom of conscience, equality under law, and “the freedom to live as you choose.” And he acknowledged that advocacy for these ideas is a legitimate part of U.S. foreign policy. “Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.”⁵

One reason U.S. presidents speak of these ideals is because voters want them to. Americans want to believe that their nation is on the “right side of history,” that the United States is a force for good in the world, and that America is living up to its role as an exceptional, indispensable nation. Another reason is that many policymakers sincerely believe these ideas are true. One scholar tentatively suggested that policymakers “may actually share” the beliefs and “cultural preferences” of their constituents, and that “to a greater extent than is generally recognized by international relations theorists, the cultural assumptions voiced by elite foreign policy officials may be internalized and genuine.”⁶ That this rather obvious insight is at all contested speaks volumes about the gap that still separates most scholars from the White House Situation Room.

Whether uttered out of sincere belief or political pressure, the rhetoric of liberal ideals and internationalist commitments entrap policymakers. Once the president or his secretary of state give voice to such ideas in a major speech, or sign an international commitment reflecting those ideals, they have created a public expectation and bureaucratic inertia to do *something* towards those goals. It is very hard to do absolutely nothing, to completely and baldly abandon such ideals. Even the most cynical and realist administrations are compelled to take some action in the service of liberalism: it was the Ford administration that, under the guidance of Secretary Kissinger, signed the Helsinki Final Act. And these expectations are compounded by over a century of precedent and reaffirmation. The U.S. government has dug a deep and well-worn groove of path-dependence in the direction of liberal ideals. Even President Donald Trump, perhaps the most hostile president towards the liberal international order in over a century, spoke stirringly of freedom in his speech in Warsaw in July 2017. “Above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are,” he said.⁷

At the same time, it is equally true that no administration has possessed the limitless resources required to carry out a utopian global crusade for liberal ideals. Given finite resources, U.S. statesmen (appropriately) prioritize American interests first. The realities of budgetary constraints, great power politics, military opposition,

⁵ Barack Obama, “The President’s Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning,” June 4, 2009.

⁶ Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) p. 19.

⁷ Donald Trump, “Remarks by the President to the People of Poland,” July 6, 2017.

and the tides of history have compelled every statesman to temper aspirations, bend to reality, and compromise ideals. And many of these statesmen were perhaps only partly committed (if at all) to liberal ideals in the first place, having voiced them only in response to the public expectation that they do so. Those who fought hardest against the limitations of history and circumstance—Wilson in Europe, Johnson in Vietnam—were responsible for some of the worst failures in American arms and diplomacy. Similarly, the gap between aspiration and implementation was the major failing of George W. Bush’s efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. “The administration never devised a coherent course of action that squared the resource levels it was willing to commit with the strategic ends it sought to achieve,” according to Hal Brands. “After 9/11, the president and his advisors overestimated how much American power could achieve, and they underestimated the costs, risks, and uncertainties that inhered in their endeavors.”⁸

Consequently, American diplomacy is rife with pragmatic compromise, complicity with anti-democratic forces, and outright hypocrisy and cynicism. The United States allied with the totalitarian Soviet Union to defeat Nazi Germany. It allied with a rogue’s gallery of right-wing military dictatorships during the Cold War to contain the Soviets. It overthrew governments, sponsored guerillas, and only selectively enforced its soaring commitment to freedom and democracy around the world.⁹ Its foreign aid budget, after the Marshall Plan, was never more than a fraction of what it should have been if the United States were serious about investing in free societies abroad. The liberal international order has always been thinner and more fragile than its boosters may care to admit; and critics’ accusation that the liberal order is skewed in favor of American interests is often close to the truth.

American statesmen, then, face competing pressures to make soaring commitments to liberal ideals yet govern with a hard-nosed pragmatism that prioritizes American interests. The resulting blend is, often, a rough approximation of conservative internationalism. The United States continues to champion liberal ideals, but actively advances them only selectively, when it most serves American interests. The United States works to maximize and advance its power, yet defines the purpose and direction of its power with reference to liberal ideals. And the strategy is astonishingly successful: both American power and liberal ideals have grown spectacularly over the past century—the post-Cold War era is the high point of liberalism in all recorded history, and the United States graduated from great power to superpower to unipolar hyperpower. Notably, however, the spread of liberalism seems to have come most often as the result of broad changes in the international environment favorable to liberalism, like the Allied victory in World War II and the end of the Cold War. Instances of deliberate, orchestrated regime change and democratization, as in the occupation of West Germany or Japan, are relatively rare.

⁸ Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 170, 145.

⁹ See especially, Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

A Deterministic Understanding?

Is this a deterministic understanding of American diplomatic history? How does it account for policymakers' individual agency, bureaucratic politics, and structural factors in explaining U.S. foreign policy? If conservative internationalism is the de facto grand strategy of the United States, regardless of what policymakers actually say or try to do, why bother advocating for it? Might not conservative internationalist scholars relax and enjoy the vindication of history?

My interpretation of the past century of U.S. foreign policy is not deterministic. I have observed American policymakers' long-term pattern of behavior that seems to hold across parties, administrations, and time periods. I have suggested a complex array of causal mechanisms in domestic politics, ideology, bureaucratic inertia, budgetary considerations, and great power politics. In arguing that conservative internationalism is America's de facto grand strategy, I obviously am not contending that every choice and policy has been an organic outgrowth of a conservative internationalist mindset or an optimal foreign policy. Ideas matter, but they are not straightforwardly the sole independent variable that drives history. American foreign policy has displayed vast internal variance over the past century. Conservative internationalism is not the best description for each movement of this variance; rather, it appears to describe the average of the variances taken together. In other words, it describes the resulting synthesis, not the thesis or antithesis—and it makes no prediction about when, where, or how the synthesis might happen. That leaves plenty of room for individual policymakers' differences, including their disagreements with conservative internationalism, their conscious efforts to work in a different intellectual vein, and their errors and follies. And it recognizes the operation of all the other factors that shape the outcome of U.S. foreign policy.

This synthesis also leaves room for advocates to explain why a more conscious and consistent conservative internationalist approach would be superior to the alternatives. The United States pays a steep price for its strategic oscillation between realism and liberalism. For example, U.S. policymakers' soaring liberal rhetoric often leads to disillusionment and cynicism when compromise becomes necessary. Such disillusionment subsequently contributes to America's periodic lurches towards retrenchment and realism. More transparency about the need to compromise and humility about America's limits (while not abandoning liberal ideals altogether) would help avoid charges of hypocrisy, preserve America's reputation and soft power, and guard against the siren song of realism. It would also simply be more honest.

Similarly, military planners have long lamented the inefficiency of military build-ups followed by cut-backs. America has a maddening tendency to slash the military too deeply in the aftermath of every conflict, leading to under-preparedness in the run-up to the next (and which, in fact, may encourage conflict). A steadier military budget based on a longer-term vision of America's role would be a more effective use of taxpayer dollars and enable more realistic military planning.

Explicitly adopting a conservative internationalist mindset should also help policymakers set clearer priorities and avoid unnecessary interventions. The danger of universal liberal rhetoric is that it implies the United States will support democracy everywhere, all the time, in all circumstances—that it will literally “pay any price” to “end tyranny in this world.” Of course, the United States cannot, and has never tried to, launch a global crusade for liberalism, but the universal rhetoric can create unrealistic expectations and public pressure to undertake strategically questionable interventions. A conservative internationalist has stronger grounds to explain why the United States will *not* always intervene, and why husbanding its strength is sometimes the more effective long-term strategy for expanding freedom.

Finally, these advantages will also help the United States in its relationships with its allies and adversaries. The pared-down pragmatism of conservative internationalism puts America in a better bargaining position vis-à-vis its allies than the universalistic pretenses of liberal internationalism. America’s allies have long underinvested in their national defense—most NATO partners persistently have failed to spend even the minimum target of two percent of GDP in their military budgets—on the entirely justified belief that they can free ride on the American hegemon. A more honest and transparent appraisal of America’s priorities would prompt allies to recognize where they will have to take the lead, as perhaps should have been the case in Libya in 2011. If American policymakers were more forthright that the United States participates in the international liberal order selfishly, from a belief that internationalism is the most effective means to secure American interests, it will be easier to persuade allies that America will not foot the bill for every institution, participate in every treaty, and uphold every norm. By the same logic, the emphasis in conservative internationalism on hard power and armed diplomacy should also give added weight to America’s military diplomacy with its rivals and enemies.

Considering the Trump Administration

Finally, how does the Trump administration’s foreign policy fit into this schematic, and what is its impact on the future of conservative internationalism? Trump is unorthodox by any measure, his foreign policy included. He campaigned on decidedly nationalist themes, including economic nationalism, tighter border and immigration controls, and a pledge to put “America First” in his foreign policy. He explicitly has rejected the notion of spreading American values. Trump claimed in his 2016 foreign policy address that American foreign policy began to go wrong “with the dangerous idea that we could make Western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a Western Democracy.” He called for “getting out of the nation-building business.”¹⁰

Indeed, he appears to reject the idea of a moral direction to foreign policy at all. In February 2017, a journalist challenged Trump on his admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. “He’s a killer,” the journalist claimed. Trump replied,

¹⁰ Donald Trump, Address on Foreign Policy, April 27, 2016.

“There are a lot of killers. You think our country’s so innocent?”¹¹ Two British historians, Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, studied Trump’s interviews and foreign policy comments dating back to 1980. They concluded, “by contrast with every single Democratic and Republican president since the Second World War, including George W. Bush, Trump rejects the international liberal order.”¹² The Trump administration thus poses a stark challenge to internationalist ideas, conservative and liberal alike.

The core of conservative internationalism is the belief that the spread of freedom around the world is to America’s advantage and that the liberal international order constitutes the outer perimeter of American security. Trump’s nationalism seems to pay little attention to the outer perimeter in favor of much greater emphasis on the inner perimeter: on borders, symbols of sovereignty, and homeland security. Every school of thought understands the importance of the inner perimeter, but nationalists tend to see larger, more dangerous, and more immediate threats to America. Thus, nationalists believe the United States cannot afford expensive and possibly pointless projects tending the outer perimeter. Internationalists tend to argue the opposite: the United States’ territorial integrity and political independence are not under serious threat, but the liberal order is, and thus the latter requires far more attention. In this sense, Trump’s nationalism overlaps with certain versions of realism, like Stephen Walt’s call for offshore balancing, Barry Posen’s “restraint,” and Christopher Layne’s dismissal of liberal-order-building as an “illusion.”¹³

Despite the obvious differences, there is a small area of overlap between Trump’s nationalism and conservative internationalism. Both are more comfortable with military force than realists or liberal internationalists, and they both understand that armed force is a normal and necessary part of diplomacy with rivals and enemies. Both are forthright and unembarrassed about prioritizing American interests, understanding that to be the *raison d’être* of the American government. And both are suspicious of the utopian temptations inherent in universalistic liberal rhetoric.

It is too early to say with certainty what the Trump administration’s foreign policy will look like in action. But, given his campaign rhetoric and his first moves in office, what might we expect? As with a conservative internationalist administration, conflict and war are more likely with Trump because of his avowed preference for hard power and armed diplomacy (as, for example, his saber rattling towards North Korea during his first months in office). This is not necessarily bad, as some wars must be fought, and delay is not always to America’s advantage. However, Trump’s selection of which wars to fight or which militarized crises to initiate is unlikely to be

¹¹ Sophie Tatum, “Trump Defends Putin,” CNN.com, Feb. 6, 2017.

¹² Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Donald Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (Endeavor Press, 2017), p. 198.

¹³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2016, p. 70; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American grand strategy from 1940 to the present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A new foundation for U.S. grand strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

guided by a long-term estimation of how to create a more favorable international environment, and more likely to be driven by short-term considerations. For example, conservative internationalists have warned that the conflict in Ukraine carries far more significance, over the long run, for American interests because of its impact on European security and U.S.-Russian relations. Yet, the Trump administration is more likely to involve itself in Syria out of concern for terrorism, refugees, and homeland security, despite the long-term decline in the Middle East's geostrategic importance.

Worse, the Trump administration almost certainly will neglect the important work of reconstruction and stabilization in the aftermath of any conflict, or attempt to outsource it to the UN. Conservative internationalists understand the importance (and difficulty) of using the aftermath of a conflict as an opportunity to invest in America's long-term interests and build up the liberal international order. But the Trump administration has disavowed the work of "nation building" (and the Obama administration dismantled much of the institutional capacity for stabilization operations that had been built up over the previous decade), all but guaranteeing that the United States will be unprepared for a post-conflict environment. Such unpreparedness, in a post-conflict Syria or North Korea, could leave those countries worse off after a conflict than before. When NATO adopted a similar approach to Libya in 2011—removing its leader from power but neglecting the work of post-conflict stabilization afterwards—it only helped turn Libya into a failed state and terrorist safe haven. A conservative internationalist would be more inclined not to have intervened in Libya in the first place, but, having intervened, understood the importance of not leaving it in a state of perpetual chaos.

The legacy of a consistently nationalist Trump administration is likely to be a diminished role for the United States on the world stage. America's soft power will ebb from disuse and counterexample. The United States' non-participation in key international initiatives—a new climate treaty, for example, or a multilateral effort to rebuild a postwar North Korea—will allow others to step into the lead. Liberalism around the world, already in decline since its peak around 2005, may recede further without encouragement from the world's superpower (particularly dissident movements who often look to the U.S. for foreign aid and technical assistance). And a significant danger looms: American withdrawal will invite challengers to bid for regional or even global leadership—above all from China and Russia. Trump, who routinely expresses admiration for strongmen and autocrats and disagrees with the conventional view among foreign policy analysts about Russia's threat to American interests, is unlikely to see Russian or Chinese assertiveness in their neighborhoods as anything to worry about.

The future of conservative internationalism is tied to how the American people will respond to these challenges. If, as seems likely, voters turn out to dislike the world of embryonic Chinese leadership, they may well seek a course correction over the next several elections. If they turn out to be less comfortable with an expanding Russian sphere of influence in Europe than the Trump administration is, they will gravitate towards more hawkish statesmen on both sides of the aisle. Worse, if the Trump administration's preoccupations at home allow chaos and tyranny to expand in the Middle East and South Asia and if, as a consequence,

jihadist-inspired terrorists succeed in one or more large-scale terrorist attacks in the United States, voters are likely to return America to the world stage with a vengeance. Insofar as the world faces a grim future, conservative internationalism faces a bright one. Its role as America's de facto grand strategy will probably survive the Trump administration. The mix of American idealism and American strength is too potent for policymakers to ignore.

