

# Why Export Democracy?

*The “hidden grand strategy” of American foreign policy is reemerging into plain view after a long Cold War hibernation.*

*by G. John Ikenberry*

To hear critics tell it, the American preoccupation with promoting democracy around the world is the product of a dangerous idealistic impulse. In his recent book, *Diplomacy* (1995), Henry Kissinger cautions against this neo-Wilsonian impulse, under which American foreign policy is shaped more by values than by interests. He joins a long line of American writers, from Walter Lippmann to George Kennan to Charles Krauthammer, who call on the United States to check its idealism at the water's edge and accept the necessity of a more sober pursuit of American national interests abroad. At best, in their view, the American democratic impulse is a distraction, a nettlesome inconvenience that forces the nation's leaders to dress up needed measures in democratic rhetoric. At worst, it unleashes a dangerous and overweening moralistic zeal, oblivious to or ignorant of how international politics really operates. It fuels periodic American “crusades” to remake the world, which, as President Woodrow Wilson discovered after World War I, can land the country in serious trouble.

This “hardheaded” view, however, is a misreading of both past and present. The American promotion of democracy abroad, particularly as it has been pursued since the end of World War II, reflects a pragmatic, evolving, and sophisticated understanding of how to create a stable and



*In the spring of 1989, the Goddess of Democracy rises over Tiananmen Square.*

relatively peaceful world order. It amounts to what might be called an American “liberal” grand strategy. It is a strategy based on the very realistic view that the political character of other states has an enormous impact on the ability of the United States to ensure its security and economic interests. It is also an orientation that unites factions of the Left and the Right in American politics. Conservatives point to Ronald Reagan as the great Cold War champion of the free world, democracy,

and self-determination—but rarely recognize him as the great Wilsonian of our age. Liberals emphasize the role of human rights, multilateral institutions, and the progressive political effects of economic interdependence. These positions are parts of a whole. Although “realist” critics and others complain about drift and confusion in U.S. foreign policy, it actually has a great deal of coherence.

The American preoccupation with promoting democracy abroad fits into a larger liberal view about the sources of a stable, legitimate, secure, and prosperous international order. This outlook may not always be the chief guiding principle of policy, and it may sometimes lead to error. Still, it is a relatively coherent orientation rooted in the American political experience and American understandings of history, economics, and the sources of political stability. It thus stands apart from more traditional grand strategies that grow out of European experience and the so-called realist tradition in foreign policy, with its emphasis on balances of power, *realpolitik*, and containment.

This distinctively American liberal grand strategy is built around a set of claims and assumptions about how democratic politics, economic interdependence, international institutions, and political identity encourage a stable political order. It is not a single view articulated by a single group of thinkers. It is a composite view built on a variety of arguments by a variety of supporters. Some advocate promoting democratic institutions abroad, some lobby for free trade and economic liberalization, and others aim to erect ambitious new international and regional economic and security institutions. Each group has its own emphases and agendas, each may think of itself as entirely independent of the others (and occasionally even hostile to them), but over the years they have almost inadvertently complemented one another. Together, these efforts have come to constitute a liberal grand strategy.

**I**t has, however, been a largely hidden strategy. After President Wilson’s spectacular failure to create world order through the League of Nations after World War I, liberal internationalism was badly discredited. And the charge that Wilson and his followers were sentimental idealists was not unjustified. “In the conduct of foreign affairs,” writes Wilson biographer Arthur S. Link, Wilson’s “idealism meant for him the subordination of immediate goals and material interests to superior ethical standards and the exaltation of moral and spiritual purposes.” But Wilson overshadowed the more general liberal internationalist tradition that began to flourish in America and Britain at the turn of the century and that was chiefly concerned with the rising com-

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plexities of modern society, the savageness of war, and the need for more systematic forms of international cooperation.

No matter. It was easy to conclude that the liberal doctrine had failed, and in fact a great and single statement of that doctrine was never produced. But in the shadows it remained a strong presence in the practical work of American officials, especially as they sought in the first few years after World War II to reconstruct Europe and open the postwar world economy. This presence was felt not only in the creation of the United Nations, but in the launching of other international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the apparatus of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, all designed to secure what President Harry S. Truman called “economic peace.” American officials laid the foundation of a liberal democratic order on principles of economic openness, political reciprocity, and the management of conflicts in new multinational institutions.

The realities of the Cold War soon overpowered the thinking of American officials, however, and after 1947 the doctrine of containment—with its rousing urgency and clarity of purpose—soon cast liberal internationalism into shadow again. But the principles and practices of Western order came earlier and survived longer. Today, in the aftermath of the Cold War, the five chief elements of liberal grand strategy are again re-emerging in a clearer light.

*The Amity of Democracies:* Woodrow Wilson was probably the purest believer in the proposition that democracies maintain more peaceful relations, and his great optimism about the prospects for democracy around the globe after World War I accounts for his exaggerated hopes for world peace. “A steadfast concert of peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants,” he declared in 1917.

Wilson’s claim was only the most emphatic statement of a long tradition in American diplomacy holding that the United States will be able to trust and get along best with democracies. This was the view, for example, that largely inspired the U.S. effort to remake Japan and Germany along more democratic lines after World War II. In the minds of the era’s American leaders, including President Truman, the fundamental cause of both world wars was the rise of illiberal, autocratic states.

Scholars have identified a number of reasons for the general amity of democracies. They point out that elected legislatures and other democratic structures often limit the ability of leaders to mobilize societies for war, that the norms of peaceful conflict resolution that democracies develop at home carry over into foreign dealings, and that democratic institutions generate more honest and reliable information about government intentions than nondemocracies do. And because democracies

are built on shared social purposes and a congruence of interests, these scholars add, such societies generally limit the rise of conflicts strong enough to lead to war.

Out of the postwar experience has come another layer of understanding about the importance of democracy. These new insights are not woolly-headed notions about the brotherhood of all democracies but hard observations about the mechanics and principles that govern the affairs of nations. Not only are democracies more peaceably inclined toward one another, they are also better suited to making international agreements and international institutions work. Why? Their success is not just a product of some ineffable trust. It occurs because they are accustomed to relations based on the rule of law rather than on political expediency, and because their openness provides their potential international partners with a set of something like verification tools. The partners can see their internal workings and judge for themselves whether promises and commitments are being kept. They can even hope to influence the other's policies. And they can be assured that the complicated political life of a democracy makes abrupt and unwelcome changes of policy unlikely.

This conviction about the value of democracy runs through much American foreign policy thinking in the 20th century. In 1995, Anthony Lake, then director of the National Security Council, declared:

We led the struggle for democracy because the larger the pool of democracies, the greater our own security and prosperity. Democracies, we know, are less likely to make war on us or on other nations. They tend not to abuse the rights of their people. They make for more reliable trading partners. And each new democracy is a potential ally in the struggle against the challenges of our time—containing ethnic and religious conflict; reducing the nuclear threat; combating terrorism and organized crime; overcoming environmental degradation.

***Free Trade, Free Countries:*** Liberals see trade and open markets as a kind of democratic solvent, dissolving the political supports of autocratic and authoritarian governments.

Trade fosters economic growth, the argument goes, which encourages democratic institutions. Hardly anybody doubts that the first part of this proposition is correct. Even the opponents of free trade rarely argue that it doesn't promote growth. Instead, they say that it disproportionately hurts certain groups, or causes social disruptions, or poses a threat to national security.

But does economic growth encourage democracy? The classic case that it does was made by political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1950s. Lipset argued that economic development tends to increase the general level of education, which promotes changes in political culture and political attitudes. These, in turn, encourage democracy. Most important, economic development creates a rising middle class, with a

far greater degree of immunity to the appeal of class struggle and anti-democratic parties and ideologies.

There are many other reasons to accept the prosperity-democracy connection, not least that experience tends to bear it out. Not all democracies enjoy high levels of prosperity, but there is a strong correlation. Political scientists Thomas J. Bolgy and John E. Schwarz offer another reason why this is true: “only under conditions of prosperity and capitalism” are leaders likely to “accept defeat peacefully at the polls, secure in the knowledge that they will have fair opportunities to regain political power, and opportunities for economic benefit when they are out of power.”

The liberal emphasis on trade takes a very materialist view: economics shape politics. It is a far cry from starry-eyed idealism. It has a long history in official American foreign policy thinking, showing up as early as the 1890s as part of the rationale for the American Open Door policy, which declared this country’s opposition to economic spheres of influence in Asia and around the world.

More recently, the trade emphasis has been at the heart of American efforts at “engagement” with politically unpopular regimes—whether South Africa during the 1970s and ’80s, the Soviet Union, or lately China. Trade and market openings are only the tip of a liberalizing wedge—often to the surprise of the antidemocratic leaders who eagerly grasp the opportunity to trade with the United States and its partners.

***The Importance of Interdependence:*** “Prosperous neighbors are the best neighbors,” an FDR-era Treasury official once declared. This aphorism expressed another constant in American thinking about international relations. Free trade and open markets don’t just promote economic advancement and democracy. They also promote a stable world political order. An open economic order would discourage the ruinous economic competition, trading blocs, and protectionism that had been a source of depression and war during the 1930s. Reviewing that tortured decade in his 1948 memoir, Franklin Roosevelt’s secretary of state, Cordell Hull, put it simply: “Unhindered trade dovetailed with peace; high tariffs, trade barriers, and unfair economic competition, with war.”

**J**ust as important as promoting peace, the American vision of openness—a sort of economic one-worldism—would lead to an international order in which the need for American hands-on management would be modest. The system would, in effect, govern itself.

The “prosperous neighbor” formula conveys only one of the reasons for believing that trade promotes peace. Again, there are some very realistic arguments behind the proposition. As countries engage in more and more trade, their economies evolve. Industries and sectors that enjoy a competitive advantage in foreign markets thrive, while those that cannot withstand foreign competition wither. The economy grows

more specialized, carving out a niche in the larger international marketplace. It also grows more dependent, needing both foreign markets and foreign goods. In the language of political science, trade creates “mutual dependencies.” No longer can the state easily determine and act upon narrow nationalistic economic interests. Now it has a stake in the stability and functioning of the larger international order.

**A**t the same time, economic change creates new vested interests with a stake in economic openness and a supportive international political order. Studies of Japan and other industrial countries show that corporations that invest overseas not only develop an interest in international conditions that support those investments but also become a new voice back home advocating the opening of the domestic market.

In the traditional American view, trade also helps “socialize” other nations. Nowhere has this been more explicit than in the Clinton administration’s approach toward China. In 1997, President Bill Clinton explained:

China’s economic growth has made it more and more dependent on the outside world for investment, markets, and energy. Last year it was the second largest recipient of foreign direct investment in the world. These linkages bring with them powerful forces for change. Computers and the Internet, fax machines and photo-copiers, modems and satellites all increase the exposure to people, ideas, and the world beyond China’s borders. The effect is only just beginning to be felt.

Apart from the litany of glittering new technologies, these are the very words a Wilson, a Roosevelt, or a Truman might have spoken.

***International Institutions:*** Institutions matter. American policymakers in the 20th century have generally assumed that international institutions limit the scope and severity of conflicts. States that agree to participate in such institutions are, in effect, joining a political process that shapes, constrains, and channels their actions.

It should come as no surprise that Americans believe in institutions. At the heart of the American political tradition, after all, is the view that institutions can help overcome and integrate diverse and competing interests—states, regions, classes, and religious and ethnic groups. Separation of powers, checks and balances, and other constitutional devices were created as ways to limit power.

It is this deeply held belief that has made American officials so eager to build and operate international institutions, from the League of Nations to the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and a host other post-World War II organizations. Identify a new international problem, and it won’t be long before American policymakers have imagined an institution to deal with it.

Multilateral institutions have been one of the most important innovations in the postwar world: they concentrate resources, create continuity in American leadership, and avert the political backlash that would otherwise be triggered by heavy-handed American foreign policy unilateralism.

*The Value of Community:* A final liberal claim is that a common identity among states—not just power and interests—is important as a source of order. It's not only that politically similar states are more likely to understand each other, but that their values are liberal and democratic, which creates common norms about how to resolve conflicts.

American foreign policy thinkers have been attracted to this liberal view, but the specific ways they have sought to identify and develop common identity and community have varied. Emerging from World War I, Woodrow Wilson believed that the world stood on the brink of a great democratic revolution, and so it seemed obvious to build order around the idea of a universal democratic community. But the democratic revolution never came, as Russia



A 1919 cartoon from *the American Economist*

lapsed into totalitarianism and even Continental Europe failed to develop the democratic qualities Wilson expected.

The lesson that Wilson's successor took from this experience was not that Wilson was wrong about the importance of democracy, but that universalism was a bridge too far. Democracy was not as easily spread or as deeply rooted as Wilson had assumed. Building order around like-minded democracies was still a goal of Roosevelt's and Truman's, but the realm of world politics that would fit within this order and the way the order would be institutionalized differed after World War II. The community would exist primarily within the Atlantic world, and its institutional foundations would be more complex and layered.

The vision of an Atlantic union can be traced to the turn of the century and a few British and American statesmen and thinkers, such as Lord Bryce, who was the British ambassador to Washington, Admiral

Alfred T. Mahan, and Henry Adams. Their ideas remained very much in the air over the following decades. Writing in 1943, Walter Lippmann declared that the “Atlantic Ocean is not the frontier between Europe and the Americas. It is the inland sea of a community of nations allied with one another by geography, history, and vital necessity.”

In recent years, American officials have returned to this theme. During the Cold War, it was relatively easy to talk about the unity of the “free world,” whose chief membership requirement was a commitment to anticommunism. But after the collapse of communism, the Bush administration was quick to remind America’s allies that theirs was more than a defensive alliance against communism—it also embodied shared values and a sense of community. President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker both delivered major speeches evoking the Euro-Atlantic community and the “zone of democratic peace.” The Clinton administration mounted a similar appeal in making the case for expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The question now is how spacious the definition of democratic community should be. Samuel Huntington, a Harvard University political scientist, has famously warned of a coming “clash of civilizations” that will pit “the West against the rest.” His notion of democratic community is rather narrow, restricted chiefly to the Atlantic world. Others suggest more generous interpretations, seeing democracy as something that runs along a gradient and is not confined to the West. Durable democratic institutions do require a congenial democratic culture and civil society, but these are not confined to only a few national, religious, and ethnic settings.

**T**he five principle elements of liberal grand strategy I have outlined are compatible, even synchronous. They have rarely been thought of or championed as a single package, but they did come together in the 1940s. Today, with the end of the Cold War, they appear again as the elements of a distinctive American grand strategy.

Those who equate grand strategy only with “containment” and “managing the balance of power” will not recognize these characteristic qualities of U.S. foreign policy as parts of a liberal strategy. They will only acknowledge the arrival of a new American grand strategy when a new threat emerges to refocus attention on the balance of power. But this is an intellectually and historically impoverished view, and it misses huge foreign policy opportunities. If grand strategy is defined as a coherent set of foreign policies aimed at the overall strengthening of the country’s position in the world, then the promotion of democracy and the other liberal order-building impulses constitute such a grand strategy. It doesn’t have the simple appeal of containment, but it is a grand strategy nonetheless.

What is striking about American foreign policy is how deeply

bipartisan liberal internationalism has been. Reagan and Bush pursued policies that reflected a strong commitment to the expansion of democracy, markets, and the rule of law. The Reagan administration's involvements in El Salvador, the Philippines, Chile, and elsewhere all reflected this orientation. So did its shift from the Nixon-Kissinger embrace of "permanent coexistence" with the Soviet Union toward a more active promotion of human rights and democracy. Reagan and his allies (with a few notable exceptions, such as UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick) embraced the traditional liberal internationalist creed: more democracies means fewer threats to the United States.

**T**oday, Republican and Democratic leaders alike favor a foreign policy agenda organized around business internationalism, multilateral economic and security organizations, and democratic community building. It is a coalition not unlike the one that formed in the 1940s when the United States was contemplating the shape of the postwar world. Its members don't all have the same motives or interests. Some pursue democracy, the rule of law, and human rights as ends in themselves; others see them as a way to expand and safeguard business and markets; still others see indirect payoffs for national security. But this is nothing new. Out of the mix of motives and policies still comes a meaningful whole.

The United States may be predestined to pursue a liberal grand strategy. There is something in the character of the American system that supports a general liberal strategic orientation. Behind it stand an array of backers, from U.S. corporations that trade and invest overseas to human rights groups to partisans of democracy to believers in multilateral organizations. Democracies—particularly big and rich ones such as the United States—seem to have an inherent sociability. They are biased, by their very makeup, in favor of engagement, enlargement, interdependence, and institutionalization, and they are biased against containment, separation, balance, and exclusion.

It may be, as some critics argue, that Americans have been too optimistic about the possibilities of promoting democracy abroad. But this sober consideration does not diminish the overall coherence of liberal grand strategy. The last British governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patton, captured this truth about America's role in the promotion of democracy: "American power and leadership have been more responsible than most other factors in rescuing freedom in the second half of this century. America has been prepared to support the values that have shaped its own liberalism and prosperity with generosity, might, and determination. Sometimes this may have been done maladroitly; what is important is that it has been done." America has not just been spreading its values, it has been securing its interests. This is America's hidden grand strategy, and there is at least some evidence that it has been rather successful.