



Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

Recovering the Liberal Foreign Policy Tradition

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Over the course of the seemingly endless 2008 electoral campaign, Barack Obama chose not to formulate a coherent and distinctive foreign policy. Aside from calling for a redeployment of military resources from Iraq to Afghanistan and expressing a greater willingness to open talks with countries like Iran, he never explained to voters exactly how he would manage foreign affairs differently from John McCain or, for that matter, from George W. Bush. Indeed, for all of Obama's talk about "change," he has never articulated a broad conceptual shift in foreign policy.

One reason for Obama's reticence was certainly tactical: he preferred to fight McCain on the grounds of domestic economic policy rather than play to McCain's purported strength in foreign policy and national security. But a second reason, surely, is that the liberal internationalist foreign policy tradition the Democratic Party once owned has been appropriated and distorted by Republican presidents from Richard M. Nixon to George W. Bush—so much so that its once strikingly liberal values are now invisible. Operation Iraqi Freedom, most prominently, has been described often and plausibly as an expression of Wilsonian principles. Bush himself has encouraged this view. But if Bush is Wilsonian and wears the mantel of liberal internationalism, where does that leave the Democrats as they look to articulate a new vision for America's role in the world? How can they distance themselves from the manifold shortcomings of the Bush administration without abandoning the priorities that have constituted their own tradition—recognizing and promoting human rights around the world, encouraging the spread of democracy, and using powerful multilateral institutions to generate public goods on a global scale?

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LIBERALISM of the Conventional Wisdom

To deal with these questions, Obama will have to do more than set a timetable for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. He will have to craft a vision of U.S. foreign policy that is significantly different from that of his conservative predecessors—a task that will require two things of him. First, he will have to recover and renew the distinctively *liberal* principles and values embedded in the liberal internationalist tradition, instead of assuming that these are self-evident and speak for themselves. He must then try to figure out what (if anything) has “gone wrong” with liberal internationalist policies in the past, so he can design new policies effectively—strengthening their resistance to absorption and distortion by conservatives, and bolstering their effectiveness in a changed and changing world.

What’s “Liberal” about Liberal Internationalism?

Barack Obama already seems to be cognizant of the earliest meaning of the word “liberal”—which was “generous.” In the 2004 Democratic Conventions speech that made him famous, he referred more than once to the America he knew as a “generous America.” In the 18th and early-19th centuries, a liberal person was one who gave unstintingly, and his opposite was a person who was “mean”—grasping and slow to give. This distinction shaded into another: “liberal” implied an open stance toward life and a broad-minded, flexible attitude toward other people’s ideas and values, a willingness to see from other points of view, and a disposition to empathize with others. *Meanness*, by contrast, suggested a strict, narrow, close-minded stance that could become mean-spirited—prejudiced, unkind, and even cruel. In everyday speech, then, “liberal” signified a broad disposition, or temperament, characterized by a matrix of values: generosity, tolerance, freedom, and flexibility of thought.

In the United States, the word “liberal” did not begin to have political significance until the latter half of the 19th century, when it was associated mainly with laissez-faire economic policies. These promoted individual freedom from the power of the state, and they were regarded as “liberal” because the free-market itself seemed to embody and require liberal values: hostility to restriction and regulation, easygoing flexibility toward others, and a general faith that personal and cultural differences can be overcome in the mutual pursuit of self-interest.

But even as 19th-century political economists churned out defenses of laissez-faire liberalism, another source of potential tyranny was coming into being: not the state or the government, but the power of concentrated wealth and monopoly capital. A new generation of progressive intellectuals soon concluded that the diffused power of individual citizens was not strong enough to contest the force of this new danger. Now Americans would have to avail themselves of their own source of concentrated power—their democratically elected government; now they would have to pursue what Herbert Croly famously called “Jeffersonian ends” by “Hamiltonian means.” Writers like Croly in the United States and L.T. Hobhouse in Britain seized the word “liberal” and transformed it: now its connotations of empathy, freedom from restriction, and faith in collective action to resolve differences were used to defend and describe government intervention in the free market. And so, within a decade, “liberalism” came to represent the belief that government has a crucial role to play in the organization and nurturance of democratic life.

This is the liberalism we associate with Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson. It represents a disposition, or temperament, as much as it signifies particular policy priorities. To balance individual freedom with a sense of collective responsibility for the public good, it values a generous broad-mindedness that encourages citizens to see matters from various points of view, to stand in each other’s shoes, and to govern themselves through reasoned deliberation rather than submission to a set of fixed rules. While conservatives attack this disposition as “relativism” and “weakness,” liberals experience it as strength of character. It takes strength, they argue, to be willing to be flexible, to be generous and open-minded, to listen to others, and to trust others enough to engage in the enterprise of self-governance and mutual problem-solving with them.

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Liberalism's critics (Marxists on the left, conservatives on the right) argue that the liberal synthesis of values is at best a fragile compromise always at risk of coming undone, and at worst a self-contradictory fraud. The value of their critique is that it reminds us that liberalism is a history not of genial consensus but of continuous dialectical struggle: its libertarian freedom-from-restriction side clashes with its broad-minded empathy-with-others side. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin neatly described these two strains of twentieth-century liberalism in terms of "two concepts of liberty," a negative freedom from constraints and a positive freedom to work toward the realization of human dignity for all persons.

The Invention of Liberal Internationalism

Woodrow Wilson was the first president to forge a foreign policy strongly inflected by these liberal values. In contrast both to America's longstanding isolationism and Theodore Roosevelt's imperialism, Wilson's policies after the First World War took the point-of-view of colonized peoples and explicitly asserted their right to seek autonomy and self-determination from European and other imperial nations, just as the American colonies had asserted their rights some 150 years earlier. Implicit in this defense of national self-governance were the liberal ideals of individual rights and freedoms underwritten by faith in the ability of all peoples to govern themselves.

Just as importantly, Wilson urged the United States and its allies to promote such ideals actively, by intervention and through international institutions. The notion that the United States should play a constructive leadership role in a world that had been dominated and grossly mismanaged by monopolistic practices of the Great Powers powerfully resonated with progressive ideas about the role of government in domestic affairs. Finally, the idea of a League of Nations that would seek to resolve national differences before they erupted into armed conflict was also an expression of liberalism's optimistic faith in the possibility of cooperative, rational solutions to human problems.

The second great contribution to liberal internationalism came from Wilson's secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who followed Wilson to the White House by twelve years and was commander-in-chief during the next world war. FDR's ideas, like Wilson's, were forged by postwar necessity to reshape a world altered forever by a global conflagration. FDR answered in much the same spirit as Wilson, but he could also argue from concrete historical example: the allied powers' failure after the First World War to implement fully the liberal principles and policies Wilson had pushed for and their reliance instead on mean-spirited punitive measures toward Germany had clearly had disastrous consequences. This Second World War had to be concluded more successfully than the first.

Roosevelt thus spurred the creation not only of the United Nations, but of the Bretton Woods institutions that would offer a "New Deal for the World." Drawing on Keynesian economics, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were forged in a spirit of generosity and conciliation; they were intended to help reconstruct war-ravaged countries and provide

economic stability worldwide. The New Deal designers of the postwar world also founded key humanitarian agencies such as the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization, creating the means to enact FDR's "freedom from want." Doing so multilaterally, with the significant participation of all the great powers and indeed of every country in the world, ensured both the legitimacy and efficiency of this remarkably ambitious enterprise.

What made Roosevelt's foreign policy liberal was his conviction that the solution to certain problems simply could not be left to the operations of the free market; instead, the power of states, democratically convened, could and should be brought to bear upon them. This reliance on the power of a democratically elected government expressed strong faith also in the wisdom of the people themselves. Finally, Roosevelt's policies were pragmatic and flexible; they embodied a predisposition that was broad-minded not narrow, loose not strict, generous not mean. His multilateralism expressed confidence in the possibility—indeed, the necessity—of a world community based upon such principles and values. His New Deal for the world, like the New Deal at home, was rooted in "love, faith, hope, and charity," in a deep sense of human interdependency that had as much to do with the bonds of affection and reciprocity as with self-interest narrowly construed.

At the close of the Bretton Woods Conference, Hans Morgenthau summed up the administration's position in unequivocally multilateralist terms: "We have come to recognize that the wisest and most effective way to protect our national interests is through international cooperation—that is to say, through united effort for the attainment of common goals." This emphasis on "cooperation" and "common goals" strongly implied another value—fairness, or justice, understood as an equitable distribution of wealth and goods. As historian Elizabeth Borgwardt has written, Roosevelt's was "a vision of the individual as the ultimate object of protection by the international community, with individuals in turn having responsibilities to that community." That is the liberal synthesis, and paradox, in a nutshell.

How Well Have Liberal Policies Performed?

If these are the broad *liberal* values and commitments that underlie the liberal internationalist foreign policy tradition, liberals still have to ask why some of their policies have fallen short, and how they can design new policies that more effectively further their liberal principles. We will briefly examine just two policy areas—human rights and economic equity—which are illustrative of the challenges Obama will face.

The liberal tradition promoting political rights has a weak pedigree with respect to performance. While liberals formally adopted self-government and democratic rights as legitimate for all, and embraced the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, it took civil society organizations, notably Amnesty International, to make human rights the hot button issue it has been for the last four decades. Why?

Democratic rights have been difficult to implant because shifts in the form of political power, typically necessary to enact human rights broadly, involve losses by the currently powerful in any given state. The human rights agenda—political freedoms, in the American idiom, but for many throughout the world, economic rights as well—has also met with resistance on cultural grounds. But the multilateral institutions designed by FDR were not given the powers to interfere in the domestic affairs of individual states, much less in their belief systems. Consequently, liberal human rights advocates have richly articulated their values, but they have lacked the muscle to back them up. Liberal human rights policies have been normatively robust but institutionally weak.

Liberals should take note that the outcome of FDR's multilateralism also has been mixed. It has worked reasonably well in the less visible agencies responsible for health, standard setting, and other areas, but the powerful multilateral agencies spawned by the Bretton Woods agreements have significantly failed to live up to their implied liberal principles. As development agencies, and following their immediate postwar successes, the World Bank and IMF did well when they allowed Third World countries to innovate with a mix of markets and government intervention in national economies, often with loans or other kinds of assistance. But this success ran afoul of ideology: liberalism's fragile balance of positive and negative liberties was all-too-easily overcome by Margaret Thatcher's and Ronald Reagan's narrow commitment to negative liberty only. The New Dealers' goal of state-led economic development, for example, has been abandoned in favor of Friedmanite policies to abolish government subsidies and constraints on free economic activity, whether through taxation, trade tariffs or quotas, state-run industries, or full employment policies. These free-market schemes not only failed to produce the results the earlier, mixed model achieved, but have stirred emigration, more corruption, widespread impoverishment, and social and ethnic conflict. The "New Deal for the World" became simply a good deal for transnational corporations.

This sharp departure from the New Dealers' intentions, we believe, stems from the irony that the institutions they created were normatively much too weak to manage their own strength. FDR's planners succeeded in vesting them with enormous powers—money to lend or grant, markets to open, technical expertise, and other financial inducements—but they did not endow them with an articulated, principled vision to guide them once their post-war reconstruction mission was largely achieved.

Their failure to provide such a vision may be traced to two sources: First, in the moment these institutions were created, the case for multilateralism was almost too easy to make. New Dealers had only to point the failures of Versailles that had led to the global Depression and to the rise of fascism. But there was a second reason as well, and one with particular significance for liberal Democrats today. New Dealers tended to justify these new institutions almost exclusively in terms of their new understanding of self-interest: what was good for the world was good for America. At no time did FDR or any of his top advisers step forward with the kind of powerful, values-laden explanation for

these institutions that FDR had provided earlier (in his second inaugural address, for example) to explain the domestic New Deal agenda. Ever since, with the possible exception of John F. Kennedy, liberal Democrats have been far more willing to articulate the values of their domestic programs than of their foreign policies. This is why their liberal internationalism so easily slid into conservative internationalism.

Reasserting Liberal Internationalism in 2009

It should now be clear that the Bush agenda has been Wilsonian only in a superficial and highly misleading sense: it has adopted policy objectives shared by liberal internationalism—"democratization" in particular—but it has done so without adopting the liberal principles and values that would justify those objectives. The Bush unilateral agenda is driven by fear, not a sense of trust in others; by a conviction that the American way is the only way, not a broad-minded respect for varying values; by a narrow faith that individual freedom can be promoted only when individuals pursue their self-interest in a free market, not when they collectively deliberate on the public good.

To take full advantage of Bush—and conservatism's—poor performance, Obama and his team should offer Americans a compelling foreign policy vision of their own. This means articulating in persuasive terms the liberal values they would have their policies further. It also means learning from the success, and the failures, of the liberal internationalist tradition as a whole. Consider again the two policy areas of liberalism's approach to human rights and its commitment to economic equity as a means of promoting global economic stability.

Liberalism's democratic rights agenda (including human rights, as embodied in the 1948 U.N. Declaration) was, as noted, powerful as a set of normative ideas, but it has been weakly institutionalized. Conversely, liberalism's economic equity agenda—the "New Deal for the World"—has enjoyed extraordinary institutional power, but it was normatively stunted. A reasonable yet exciting agenda for Obama, then, would be to address these flaws and regenerate the best of the liberal tradition.

A reinvigorated liberal approach to human rights, for example, would strengthen non-coercive and consensual mechanisms to realize those rights. With Bush's unilateralism bogged down in Iraq, Americans are poised to appreciate anew the virtues of multilateralism, diplomacy, negotiation, flexibility, open-minded dialogue with hostile states and other expressions of the liberal temperament in foreign affairs. Americans are also ready to embrace, as a primary objective of U.S. foreign policy, the universal recognition of human rights—among Saudis and Chinese as well as Iranians and Cubans. This willingness would extend to enforcement by multilateral means—notably, through the International Criminal Court (ICC), created in 1998 and joined by 105 countries, but not the United States. The ICC is gradually proving its mettle as an important symbol of global justice and as an institution that can enforce a multilaterally conceived human rights agenda.

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

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

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Obama could also advance human rights by supporting “substate” cooperation—such as associations of jurists who convene to share ideas and practice. Another approach is to encourage “human security” through rule of law policies in foreign assistance, multilateral loan making, and the like, which gives more weight to the protection of human rights, for example, and obsesses a bit less about property rights. And, needless to say, Obama must follow through on his pledge to end the U.S. practices that are outright violations of basic rights—Guantanamo detainees, renditions, torture, and the like.

Obama should also pursue a reinvigorated liberal approach to global economic stability, reminding Americans that freedom from want is just as important as freedom from fear. He could urge the Bretton Woods institutions to return to the relatively successful “mixed” development models of the 1950s-70s which, as numerous economists point out, is what the “Asian tigers” have done all along, with remarkable success, improvising with markets *and* government interventions. Relatively inexpensive support for health care and education in poorer countries would pay enormous dividends, as would development strategies and trade policies that protect rather than plunder the environment.

Above all, Obama must insist to the American people that daunting challenges—which these appear to be—are also exciting opportunities. Globally, there is a renewed need to work with civil society organizations to nourish and grow the rights revolution that gave birth to the United States, and which is still unfinished—politically, socially, and economically. Globally, there is an urgent need for *sustainable* economic development, which would enable the Third World to escape poverty, disease, and social disintegration without provoking disastrous environmental consequences. As Obama and the Democrats call Americans to this vision of future possibilities, they must explicitly affirm that their policies are preferable not merely because they “work” or fulfill some smarter version of the “national interest,” but because they are consonant with the deepest values of liberal democracy and American liberal culture. That was the appeal in the days of Wilson and FDR and Kennedy, and it remains a bracing vision of American globalism, wrought anew, for the coming century.

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