



# REPUBLIC IN PERIL

AMERICAN EMPIRE AND

THE LIBERAL TRADITION

DAVID C. HENDRICKSON

# *Republic in Peril*

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*Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789–1941*

*Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding*

*The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose*

*Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson*

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the Liberal Tradition*



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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress  
ISBN 978-0-19-066038-3

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

*In memory of Whitney deMoraes Hendrickson, 1990–2009.*

*Tender spirit, sparkling wit. Her radiance never ceases.*



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## *Preface*

THIS BOOK ARGUES that American foreign policy needs a return to first principles. Such a renovation in its grand strategy must adapt to new circumstances but should also rest on the philosophical foundations provided by America's Founders and its broader liberal tradition. The argument is similar to one that was made in *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America's Purpose*, a work written with Robert W. Tucker in 1992. That, too, made an appeal from the present to the past, recounted the wise counsel of America's Founders, warned against the bewitchment with force, saw a threat to free institutions and purpose if the belief in force persisted, and invoked William Seward's idea that "all nations must perpetually renovate their virtues and their constitutions, or perish." In 1848, when Seward wrote these words in a eulogy of John Quincy Adams, after the Mexican War had drawn to a close, he saw America "passing from the safe old policy of peace and moderation into a career of conquest and martial renown." That movement was also observable in 1991. It has persisted and even deepened over the past quarter-century.

This book, then, is something of a throwback to *The Imperial Temptation*, but it also functions as a capstone or completion of two earlier studies of mine: *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (2003), and *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941* (2009). These two works, the writing of which rather unexpectedly consumed more than fifteen years, were studies in the intellectual history of American reflection on foreign policy and international affairs. *Republic in Peril* touches their themes in crucial respects. A conclave of Founding Fathers (George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson), together with many other American statesmen in ensuing years (Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, William Seward), are key sources of authority for my argument.

From these esteemed statesmen, along with the European writers on which they drew, do I mainly derive my idea of the liberal tradition. I hope to show that there is merit in this tradition, that we can glean from it the wisdom to seek a better world in the present.

The reason for this focus on the Founders, I have to acknowledge, is partly autobiographical. From graduate school onward, a good part of my scholarly life was spent investigating the life and times of the Founding generation, with a second career as a student of American foreign policy, and I can't quite say where the former left off and the latter began. But such habits undoubtedly matter in forming one's intellectual outlook, settling in like barnacles on the cranium, whether for good or ill the reader may judge.

*Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it?*

GEORGE WASHINGTON, Farewell Address, 1796

*A nation which does not remember what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today, nor what it is trying to do. We are trying to do a futile thing if we do not know where we came from or what we have been about.*

WOODROW WILSON, 1911



# *Republic in Peril*



# *Introduction*

## *Obama Legacy and Trump Prospect*

In disposition and outlook, Barack Obama and George W. Bush could not have been more different. Obama was the consummate pragmatist, coolly weighing the options, always raising difficulties, given to long deliberation; Bush was the crusader, preferring to give subordinates pep talks rather than to pepper them—as Obama did—with questions. Obama’s outlook emphasized limits and was tuned to the strains of liberal realism; Bush rejected that view and seemed to think the only limit was the sky. In his response to 9/11, Bush stretched the ambitions of American power to Olympian heights—proposing unquestioned U.S. military supremacy, a doctrine of preventive war, unilateral prerogatives, a vast expansion of America’s spying apparatus, and the militarized pursuit of democracy with the aim of ending tyranny and terrorism in the world. Obama, by contrast, was the determined opponent of the crusading impulse, by inclination a stout multilateralist, and always attuned to the unintended consequences likely to ensue from rash decisions. On the strength of his early opposition to the Iraq War, he had bested Hillary Clinton for the 2008 Democratic nomination. His supporters saw in his candidacy a promise to end the wars and to bring profound change to the Bush foreign policy.

Eight years later, when his presidency came to an end, the contrast between the hopes of 2009 and the grim realities of 2017 was manifest. Obama did certain things in foreign policy that Bush would never have done, such as reaching an agreement with Iran and beginning to normalize relations with Cuba; in other respects, however, he continued and even advanced the objectives of the previous administration:

- Obama proved no less committed than Bush to a doctrine of U.S. military supremacy. Though Pentagon expenditures declined with the drawdowns

in Iraq and Afghanistan, total military expenditures in Obama's two terms exceeded those under his predecessor.

- Obama continued and even expanded the policies of unlimited surveillance that Bush had introduced, drawing back in only a few celebrated instances. (He pledged, after the Snowden revelations, to stop tapping the cellphones of allied leaders, but would not make a similar pledge for their staffs or their larger governmental apparatus.)
- Obama adopted a more strident posture in East Asia, vigorously contesting China's strategic policies, a change symbolized by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2011 bid for the leadership of an anti-Chinese coalition, followed by the "pivot to Asia" and the Trans Pacific Partnership.
- Obama presided over a renewed Cold War with Russia over Ukraine, in which the U.S. State Department, led by Assistant Secretary Victoria Nuland, worked to facilitate the overthrow of the elected government of Viktor Yanukovich, provoking civil war, Russian intervention, and the return of overt hostility between old Cold War rivals.
- Obama promised steps to rid the world of nuclear weapons, but he acquiesced in plans to modernize the U.S. strategic arsenal, at an expected cost of \$1 trillion over thirty years, and bowed to the stout opposition of the national security complex in refusing to endorse a "no-first-use" policy toward nuclear weapons.
- Obama greatly expanded the use of drones in targeted assassinations against radical Islamists in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya.
- Obama greatly expanded arms sales, especially in the Middle East, authorizing \$115 billion to Saudi Arabia alone, and supported the Saudis in their illegal intervention in Yemen.
- Most remarkably of all, Obama continued Bush's strategy devoted to the armed overthrow of autocratic governments in the Middle East. Bush had done this in the name of ending terrorism and spreading democracy; Obama did it in the name of humanitarianism and preventing atrocities. His administration intervened in Libya's civil war and smashed its state apparatus in 2011, throwing Libya (and North Africa generally) into chaos and opening a vast new front in the war on terror. From the beginning of the Syrian rebellion, the United States called for Bashar al-Assad's removal and gave diplomatic cover—and considerable military aid—to so-called moderates seeking the overthrow of Assad. Secretary of State Clinton gave the green light to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey to send arms to the Sunni jihadists fighting Assad, much of which ended up in the hands of ISIS and the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. After the rise of

ISIS and its seizure in 2014 of vast territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq, Obama committed to a war to destroy the Islamic State, making the removal of Assad a secondary objective, but the policy of overthrow contributed very much to the grim outcome, as the anarchy unleashed by Syrian rebellion provided the circumstances in which apocalyptic groups like ISIS would thrive. Syria fell into the worst of all human conditions, civil war.

In nearly all these actions, Obama was criticized by most Republicans for doing too little; undoubtedly, John McCain or Mitt Romney, his Republican opponents in 2008 and 2012, would have done more. And there is a real sense in which Obama was expansive about U.S. ends but cautious about U.S. means. He signed on to a strategy of overthrow in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, but then proved reluctant to get more fully involved, somehow managing at most points along the arc of crisis to be both engaged and detached. But the larger pattern is clear. Despite the promises of 2008, there was more continuity than change in the Obama administration's approach to foreign policy. He departed from the Bush policy in some respects, especially toward Iran and Cuba, but in most respects he confirmed the precedents that Bush had set.

Obama was philosophically disposed to resist this tendency toward greater U.S. intervention abroad. In the main, however, he did not resist it. Why this is so is a question that will doubtless occupy historians for many years. Though Obama was a conscientious objector to what he called "the Washington playbook," whereby increased toughness and the hegemonic presumption are the solution to international conflict, he conformed to rather than strayed from the playbook in many of his administration's most consequential actions.<sup>1</sup>

That Obama failed in crucial respects to reorient U.S. foreign policy, despite having at the outset an intention of doing so, is dispiriting. It suggests the power of the machine over the man. John F. Kennedy liked to tell the story about how he discovered the limits of presidential power, after learning that an explicit order he had given had been ignored. The bureaucracy, he realized, is adept at subverting pronounced challenges to its way of doing things. The president is figurehead, mascot, and sometime decision maker, but the great wheels of state are not easy to divert from their accustomed course. As Obama too would learn, vested interests and familiar ideologies have a way of proving more consequential.

This book is a study of those vested interests and familiar ideologies. Its centerpiece is not so much the outlook of a Bush or an Obama but of "the

official mind”—one that is determined to live on even as these presidents fade into the mist.<sup>2</sup> Obama was certainly right in identifying a “Washington playbook,” a way of interpreting the world and America’s role in it that has exerted profound importance over foreign policy. Its central proposition is that it is impossible to have a liberal world order without having hostile relations with Russia, China, and Iran. In her gut instincts and core beliefs, Hillary Clinton was the perfect embodiment of this consensus. Even Donald Trump will be greatly constrained by it, may even be swallowed by it. Whoever occupies the Oval Office, the playbook’s customary rules constitute the milieu and structure of political forces within which the president must think and act. Individual presidents may matter greatly for good or ill in particular circumstances, but the permanent government and its supporting array of institutions—think tanks, news media, and corporate interests—remain crucial in understanding the American approach to the world. To change this official mind—and change it must—we must first better understand its origins and character.

Though both vested interests and regnant ideologies are vital in arriving at a satisfactory explanation of America’s role in the world, it is not easy to judge accurately the relative weight of the two. John Maynard Keynes famously struggled with that difficulty in his *General Theory*, and what he said about the power of economic ideas is just as true of ideas concerning security. “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.”<sup>3</sup> Keynes wanted to show the power of ideas as against the “vested interests”; the sway of the latter he thought “vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas.” His discussion is very pertinent to U.S. foreign policy today, where powerful domestic interests are vested in the conflicts the United States prosecutes abroad. The importance of this national security interest, I will be arguing, deserves far more attention than it has received, but in the end one cannot deny the thrust of Keynes’ observation affirming the importance of ideas. The ideas of the security establishment do reflect a sort of “distilled frenzy”—incubated in the laboratories of the 1930s, synthesized and mass-produced during the Cold War, then set free in the post-Cold War era of unipolarity and the war on terror—that continues to exert profound influence.

That larger consensus, formed in a bygone age, needs a thorough interrogation. America’s foreign policy and national security strategy of the last twenty-five years—the template by which it has managed the international

order—became badly out of kilter over time. Its purposes and methods require a fundamental reordering. The present work tries to describe how the nation arrived at that awful pass, and proposes ways of getting out. Because this book is critical of the pretensions and objectives of the U.S. national security state, it will doubtless be perceived as anti-American in some quarters. To this I say, the nation is a compact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn. I suggest further that the dead have something of great value to offer us today. The change in policy I recommend draws greatly from American precedents and can be seen as a distillation of what was once termed “Americanism” (evoking a nation that tries to live by the creed).

I should like to emphasize, however, that recalling the old American tradition is not an exercise in nostalgia, but in philosophy; its objective is to inform contemporary debates with the strains of the liberal Enlightenment, not to wallow in nativism. The Founders’ science of international politics, a blend of what are known today as liberalism and realism, reveals truths often forgotten by today’s policymakers and academicians. Among other insights, they saw the dangers military power posed to a regime devoted to republican liberty, understood the need for balance in both domestic and foreign affairs, and embraced a pluralist conception of the society of states. They saw the law of nations as authoritative, but shrewdly advanced the interests of their country, and knew that one could do that through law and not in defiance of it. Holding their own state to its obligations, they believed, was just as important as holding other states to theirs.

The ideas of the Founding generation about the purposes of foreign policy and the nature of international order are not irrelevant at all, but more often incisive and bracing in their challenge to contemporary predilections and orthodoxies. Despite the enormous difference in circumstances between their day and ours, most commentators would acknowledge that the essentials of the American Creed were laid out by the Founders; it should not seem incongruous or hidebound to turn to them in hours of perplexity, as these undoubtedly are. Ultimately, the great questions of foreign policy are philosophical in character, concerning the right ordering of the commanding values of American civilization in confrontation with the problem of insecurity. In this important inquiry into the fundamentals of the American purpose and the bases of American security, the progenitors of our civil religion may surely lend a hand.

The Americanism I seek to recover, alas, is worlds apart from the “Americanism” that Donald Trump has touted. Trump is undoubtedly a work in progress, and an inevitable theme of his presidency will be the ease

with which he breaks his promises. But which ones? No one can be sure of that. Whereas Hillary Clinton adopted a campaign rhetoric almost indistinguishable on national security questions from the second George W. Bush administration, Trump threw riotously into question basic elements of the foreign policy consensus, one held tenaciously by the security elites hitherto dominant in both political parties. Though unique in manifold respects, his electoral victory was weirdly symbolic of a worldwide trend toward aggressive and populist nationalism. In Poland and Hungary, in China and Russia, in India and the Philippines, in little 'ole England and the U.S. of A.—just about everywhere, in fact—nationalism has rekindled its old appeal, breathing fire against a malign outside world.

In his life before the presidency, Trump was all about the abolition of traditional limits; he had risen upward by defying convention in the name of celebrity. His campaign for the presidency violated many elementary decencies, as if inhabiting a world in which the appropriate and the ethical had ceased to be relevant categories, and only a tawdry instrumentalism remained. Equally disappointing, though admittedly less shocking, was his inability to articulate a coherent alternative to America's globalist policies. That such an alternative is needed is a key assumption of the present work.

Trump styled his movement as an insurgent American nationalism that would always put America First, as Pat Buchanan did in his presidential bids in 1992 and 1996. Trump, however, did not counsel a reduction in military spending or a withdrawal from America's alliances, as did Buchanan, but rather saw the alliances as arrangements between a superpower protector and deadbeat dependents, who should pay up or shove off. In one respect, Trump's proclaimed desire to extract rents from "allies" is directly contrary to the ethos of the "liberal world order," but in another respect it simply intensifies an existing trend (lately taking the form of the U.S. Congress legislating for the world, because the world has a dollar-based financial system). Clearly, however, Trump's attitude was worlds apart from "isolationists" and the "America Firsters" of yore, all of whom would have recoiled from an empire of tribute.<sup>4</sup>

Trump's campaign message was most contradictory in its approach to the Greater Middle East, the overwhelming destination for the use of U.S. military power over the last generation. An ostensible critic of the 2003 Iraq War and the 2011 intervention in Libya to overthrow Muammar el-Qaddafi—of regime change and nation-building—he also called for a war to eradicate "radical Islamic terrorism," in which cause he seemed to include not only the Islamic State and its widespread franchise but also, at a minimum, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. Trump rightly labeled the 2003 Iraq

War as a disaster, but then added the thought that, having mistakenly done the deed, the United States ought to have seized Iraqi oil fields as compensation for the misadventure (which would have united Sunni and Shia and Kurd, really the entirety of the Muslim world and the free world, against us, which is no mean feat). From the beginning of his electoral campaign, he lambasted the Iran nuclear agreement as “one of the worst deals ever made,” placing himself in alignment with the neoconservatives he otherwise denounced, but he bad-mouthed the Saudis, too. He argued more broadly to remove restraints on U.S. airpower in targeting terrorists and their families, intimating that the real flaw in U.S. strategy in the region was insufficient zeal in the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force. Trump called it a scandal that trillions of dollars were squandered in Middle Eastern wars, consuming resources that might have been used to rebuild America’s crumbling infrastructure, but his stated aspirations in the region pointed toward a similar calamity. In the age-old conflict between internationalism and isolationism, engagement and withdrawal, maximalism and minimalism, Trump thus cut a wildly erratic figure in his campaign. A critic of globalism and neoliberalism, he presented himself not as a non-interventionist but as an assertive nationalist, not an isolationist but a unilateralist. Against anything like universalism, he wanted even more from the world than did Hillary Clinton, who so well reflected establishment thinking.

When Trump was elected, the shocking result was widely seen as potentially revolutionary, upending America’s role in the “liberal world order.” A few months of his presidency, however, indicated that no revolution in policy was impending. Trump being Trump, no one could be sure, but what was on offer in the domain of national security were mostly ideas that Republicans had championed for two decades. If Obama represented continuity with George W. Bush’s second administration, Trump’s initial forays represented continuity with Bush’s first administration. The belligerent posture toward North Korea and the menacing language toward Iran featured in Trump’s first months in 2017 were replays of Bush’s first months in early 2001. Twenty years ago, the Republicans were working to sabotage the Agreed Framework that Clinton achieved in 1994 with North Korea; in the early 2000s, they proceeded to tear it up for good, making far more likely North Korea’s march to a bomb. The general attitude—that anything that works for North Korea is *ipso facto* bad for us—is nothing new at all. In the Republican Party, the same attitude toward Russia, China, and Iran has been dominant for a generation. Having them (but not only them) as enemies has long been the first article of Republican faith.

Trump's reversals of position on foreign policy became legendary in his first 100 days, but the flip-flops had in common a movement toward traditional Republican verities. In his first acts as president, Trump brought into his national security coterie many men and women of a decidedly militaristic outlook. He then attached his belligerent nationalism to highly ambitious objectives across Eurasia. Obama had been weak; he would be strong. NATO, previously obsolete, became vital again. While Trump continued intermittent gestures of conciliation toward Russia (provoking frenzied opposition from the Washington establishment), his responsible officials adopted a Russia policy even tougher than Obama's; they, at least, seemed to understand that a hawkish stance toward Russia might be a bludgeon against Trump's Democratic adversaries, forcing his enemies to applaud him. In the Greater Middle East, Obama's supposed timidity was replaced by escalation in numerous theaters (Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq), with Iran re-emerging as the focus of evil against which U.S. policy was directed. At the beginning of Trump's administration, China made for a while a curious journey from foremost adversary to dragooned partner, but the prevailing U.S. tone in East Asia—do as we say, or else—was identical with his Republican predecessor's first months.

Bush, to be fair, did appoint as secretary of state a skilled and experienced diplomat in Colin Powell; Trump seems to lack such a balance wheel. And the Bush people understood the value of constancy, of meaning what you say and saying what you mean, whereas Trump has appeared as a sort of boneless wonder defined by his erraticism. Unfortunately, it surely matters that Trump knows he has a reputation to live down in that regard. In all probability, he believes that the steely use of force will help repair it. In overall cast of thinking, Trump seems more of a militarist than any previous U.S. president; his illiberal policies for large-scale deportations and incarceration at home are of a piece with that trait. Though he could be a force for foreign policy restraint in some respects (an outcome desired by the Rust Belt constituency that put him over the top), the greater likelihood is that the non-interventionists among his supporters will end up feeling swindled.

Even during his 2016 campaign, Trump gave plenty of warning that his inclinations ran more toward domination than reciprocity, more toward imperialism than isolationism, more toward militarism than pacifism. Toward both domestic and foreign rivals, bullying rather than sweet reason quickly emerged as the dominant calling card—that, and an uncanny knack for saying (or tweeting) things that were unseemly, unfitting, and unbecoming.<sup>5</sup>

Gung-ho for additional military spending and nuclear modernization in his campaign, he went further once in office, proposing a “hard-power” budget that bolstered armaments across the board and ruthlessly excised anything suggestive of a humanitarian purpose or that sought preparedness against non-military dangers. It was obvious from Trump’s campaign that he had little regard for diplomacy, the first principles of which he seemed to have discarded, but not apparent that he would seek once in office to discombobulate and marginalize the State Department. (Trump seems not to have realized that the military officers he lionizes are in their strategic outlook nearly identical with the civilian diplomats he despises. “Who knew?” he may ask one day.)

John Adams, in one of his early missives on American foreign policy, called for a posture in which it would be the duty and interest of the United States to be friends of all the powers of Europe, and enemies to none, whereas Trump’s vision, with its omnidirectional abuse against foreign nations, has seemed perilously close to “enemies to all, friends to none.” Also alarming for his conduct of foreign policy is that Trump, like academic “neo-sovereignists” and nativists of the Tea Party, seems hostile to the very idea of international law, suggestive as it is of restraints on national self-assertion. The Founders, by contrast, believed that a central purpose of America, in James Madison’s words, was to seek “by appeals to reason and by its liberal examples to infuse into the law which governs the civilized world a spirit which may diminish the frequency or circumscribe the calamities of war, and meliorate the social and beneficent relations of peace.”<sup>6</sup>

Trump’s presidency highlights the Madisonian hypothesis that political institutions must be judged by their capacity to protect the people against the most problematic rulers. Institutions should be commodious for good times, but built to survive the bad times, on the theory that enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. So far as “national security” is concerned, this may prove to be a case of the blind checking the blind, with reason hardly in a position to prevail, but the Trump phenomenon undoubtedly poses a severe test for American political institutions and world order. That a man with his notorious personal failings should hold the most powerful office in the world suggests the peril of accumulating so much power in that office. Executive discretion, pronounced on many fronts, exists most completely in the use of force and in the conduct of the nation’s foreign policy. The imperial presidency, now entrusted to Trump, may turn out to be the most profound legacy of the “liberal world order.”<sup>7</sup>

### *America, Liberalism, and Empire*

Among the master symbols of American civilization, none are more important than empire and liberty. From George Washington's journey to the Monongahela River in 1754 to George W. Bush's conquests in Mesopotamia in 2003, observers have puzzled over the relationship between our thirst for dominion and our attachment to freedom. When Patrick Henry argued in 1788 against the "great and splendid empire" he espied in the vision of the Constitution's architects, he set that in opposition to the liberty that was America's original resolution: "If we admit this Consolidated Government it will be because we like a great splendid one. Some way or other we must be a great and mighty empire; we must have an army, and a navy, and a number of things: When the American spirit was in its youth, the language of America was different: Liberty, Sir, was then the primary object."<sup>8</sup>

Some variation on Henry's theme has been played on every subsequent occasion in which the use of force figured—1798, 1812, 1818, 1830, 1846, 1861, 1898, and on to the wars of the American Century.<sup>9</sup> As much as these debates might be dismissed as belonging to another age, without relevance to our globalized world, they express views that go to the core of the nation's purposes and convictions today. The relation America bears to liberalism and imperialism, to use the modern terminology, is of intense interest in the contemporary world, but in a fundamental sense it has always been such.

Despite its centrality, the relation between empire and liberty is not easy to characterize. It is certainly complex. The debate over it can rise to great heights of eloquence; it can fall into the labyrinths of obscurity. Both imperialism and liberalism (and their cognates) have a multiplicity of meanings, employed in a multiplicity of contexts. Liberty, instantiated in "the American system," referred to "written constitutions, representative government, religious toleration, freedom of opinion, of speech and of the press," as a Kentucky ally of Henry Clay put it in 1822.<sup>10</sup> But it has also signified collective freedom, especially independence from foreign rule, and the freedom reflected in the integrity of the nation's political institutions.

Empire is an especially slippery concept, tending toward domination in theory but in practice displaying relaxations that concede much freedom to the periphery. While empire is typically defined in terms of alien control and domination, nearly all successful empires relied on indirect means of control. They usually required the co-optation of local elites. They were often patchwork and incoherent affairs, with no clear delineation of the lines of authority. As Edmund Burke famously said, describing a world in which "seas roll, and

months pass, between the order and the execution,” the first rule of empire was that it couldn’t control everything. “The Sultan gets such obedience as he can. He governs with a loose rein that he may govern at all; and the whole of the force and vigour of his authority in his centre is derived from a prudent relaxation in all his borders. Spain, in her provinces, is, perhaps, not so well obeyed as you are in yours. She complies too, she submits, she watches time. This is the immutable condition, the eternal law, of extensive and detached empire.”<sup>11</sup>

Burke reminds us that political structures have been called empires, and figured long in the mind as such, that do not comport with any simple portrait of sheer domination. Burke is one of a handful of great theorists of the empire of liberty, and his admonitions on how to run the British Empire, c. 1775, are not irrelevant to the administration of American Empire today.<sup>12</sup> Describing the relation England should bear to its American colonists, he wanted “to keep the sovereign authority of this country as the sanctuary of liberty, the sacred temple consecrated to our common faith.” As long as England did this, the more friends among the colonists it would have. “The more ardently they love liberty, the more perfect will be their obedience. Slavery they can have anywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil. They may have it from Spain; they may have it from Prussia; but, until you become lost to all feeling of your true interest and your natural dignity, freedom they can have from none but you.”<sup>13</sup> Burke’s grand solution to the colonial crisis—keeping Parliament’s sovereignty but conceding the particular issues in the dispute, in the name of peace—fell on deaf ears in 1775, but something of its spirit lived on in the “union of the empire” Americans built for themselves. George Washington spoke with pride of the “stubendous *fabrick* of *Freedom* and *Empire*” created by the American Revolution, one that would be an asylum for the oppressed peoples of Europe.<sup>14</sup> Jefferson wrote of an “empire of liberty” and an “empire for liberty,” neither of them having in their minds’ eye a system of domination. These expressions evoke themes that stubbornly resonate to this day.

But empire had a more sinister meaning, even at the time, signifying an apparatus of power and arbitrary rule that had gone beyond its just limits, and this darker side has been its more usual connotation in political speech over the last two centuries. As John Adams put it on the eve of the American Revolution, in the course of arguing that the British Empire was not an empire at all, but a limited monarchy: an empire is “a despotism, and an emperor a despot, bound by no law or limitation but his own will: it is a stretch of tyranny beyond absolute monarchy.”<sup>15</sup>

Historians have increasingly recognized that American rule, as it played out over time, meant the dispossession of and domination over disparate peoples, a key attribute of the move from continental to hemispheric to global empire. Judging the overall record, it might fairly be said that the United States was most imperial with respect to the peoples of color on its progressively expanding continental and oceanic frontiers (e.g., Indians, Africans, Mexicans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Iraqis); it was least imperial in its approach to the European system and in its own internal organization (which accorded equality and internal autonomy to the new states of the expanding union). That there is an internal as well as external aspect of the question, however, complicates any easy summation. There might be domination within, as well as domination without, an imperial relation not only to other peoples, but also to one's own people. The federal union, as perfected in 1787 by the Constitution, was intended by its framers to operate as an antidote to the ills of the European state system, widely seen as having given an unconditional surrender to the theology of force. The new federative system created at Philadelphia, truly a new order of the ages, was anti-imperial in vital respects, and dedicated to peace. But it also as the price of union consolidated domestic slavery in the Southern states—a system of domination, wrote Frederick Douglass, “one hour of which was worse than ages of the oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose.”<sup>16</sup> The Southern states, in the years before the Civil War, were no less inveterate in describing schemes to interfere in their “domestic institutions” as an imperial project par excellence. “Call it imperialism, if you please,” Northern abolitionists answered; “it is simply the imperialism of the Declaration of Independence, with all its promises fulfilled.”<sup>17</sup>

If empire is about domination, liberalism is about resistance to domination, in the name of right. Within every liberal, resistance to unjust domination runs deep, and just about all Americans are liberals in this sense. It should come as no surprise that there is a long tradition of anti-imperialism in American political thought. Walter Lippmann could write, in 1944, that “the American antipathy to imperialism . . . is organic in the American character, and is transmitted on American soil to all whose minds are molded by the American tradition.”<sup>18</sup> The appeal to anti-imperialism, however, does not resolve the problem, but rather restates it, as nominal opposition to imperialism has been part of the justification *for* every major American war, just as it has figured in all the dissents *against* them. Faithful to an anti-imperialist ethos, one set of Americans have wanted to stay away from war; another set of Americans, those who urged war or the threat of war, insisted they were being

faithful to that same ethos. In this curious interplay of rival anti-imperialisms, the relation between empire and liberty is central—and is so for both sides of the argument. The anti-imperial thread in American political thought bespeaks enduring (though clashing) commitments that go to the core of the national purpose.<sup>19</sup>

In U.S. foreign policy and the theory of international relations, this argument among nominal anti-imperialists—some in favor, other opposed, to force or the threat of force—is the most important and enduring antagonism. Unfortunately, the opposition is very inadequately captured by conventional categories in international relations and indeed of political thought more generally, since the two key schools, realism and liberalism, have thinkers on either side of the question. The colloquial terminology of “hawks” and “doves,” who differ mightily in their estimations of the utility and morality of force, gets to the central antagonism better than these conventional categories. Though hawks and doves differ strongly over the use of force, they are invariably, in their own rhetoric and self-imaginings, fierce anti-imperialists themselves. One side says you need empire to preserve or promote liberty; the other warns that the embrace of empire and force is in crucial respects a bargain with the devil, with liberty imperiled in the pursuit.

I am of the latter school. The argument in these pages is that America’s zeal for anti-imperialist projects abroad has created a new imperialism of its own that is expansive and provocative of conflict. America’s role over the last 70 years is often justified as building an “anti-imperial” world, that is, a liberal world order that is “rule-based” and in which American dominance is critical to avoid the predations of opposing despotic empires.<sup>20</sup> This widely accepted account ignores the degree to which the United States got in the habit of violating the rules, rather than upholding them. It fails to appreciate that the “liberal order” has itself undergone great change, significantly expanding its geographical reach and abandoning rules (like non-intervention and sovereignty) that were once central to it. The pluralist conception of the society of states, once closely identified with liberalism, became over the last generation a shadow of its former self, displaced by doctrines of indispensability and exceptionalism and revolutionary overthrow that have given the United States a wide remit to intervene in the affairs of other nations. The pattern of rule-breaking and support for revolutionary upheaval abroad, especially marked in the last fifteen years, raises a question about America’s fidelity to liberal ideals. It also raises a question about its provision of “world public goods”—that is, systemic benefits to the global order from which all states profit, an advantage often touted on its behalf.

Those who emphasize the anti-imperialism of the U.S. record in foreign policy especially fail to take adequate account of the phenomenon whereby the United States not only defeated and dismantled adversary empires but also acquired, in the act of defeating them, many of the characteristics once deemed obnoxious in these enemies—powerful standing military establishments, a pervasive apparatus for spying and surveillance, a propensity to rely on force as a preferred instrument of policy, and a disdain for popular opinion or legislative control in matters of war. The institutions of the U.S. national security state are essentially problematic from the standpoint of liberal traditions. As George Washington observed in his Farewell Address, “overgrown military establishments” are “inauspicious to liberty” under any form of government and “are to be regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty.”<sup>21</sup> Over the past quarter century, the overgrown military establishment and national security apparatus maintained by the United States have become threatening to domestic liberty and international freedom—that is, to both the “liberties of individuals” and “the liberties of states.”<sup>22</sup>

Among both critics and supporters, American foreign policy has been indelibly identified with the maintenance of a liberal world order. The customary practice has been to accept whatever the United States has done, or whatever rule it has promoted, as “liberal.” If the American vision of world order has had flaws, it has then followed that these flaws must be ascribed to liberalism. In fact, however, liberalism’s abundant resources are better deployed in a critique of the U.S. vision of world order. The most cogent critique of the U.S. role arises from within the liberal tradition, not outside of it.

What, then, is the relation between American Empire and the liberal tradition? The national security elite sees them in a tight alliance; I see them as standing increasingly in mortal contradiction. The empire, I contend, threatens liberty, despite having been built on its foundation, recalling the history and predicament of Republican Rome. “The history of Roman historiography,” notes J. G. A. Pocock, is the history of “the problem of *libertas et imperium*, in which liberty is perceived as accumulating an empire by which it is itself threatened.”<sup>23</sup> My argument, in a nutshell, is that this has become the central problem of American history, if not yet perhaps of American historiography. This was so even before the age of Trump; it is a clear and present danger now.<sup>24</sup>

Returning to older conceptions of liberalism—a renovation in foreign policy that looks back to first principles—is key to escaping the contradictions of America’s current role. Measured by contemporary understandings, these conclusions will doubtless appear radical, but they are in their essence a

conservative defense of America's first and greatest tradition, the liberal tradition consecrated by the Founders and still worthy of our esteem and affection. This grand tradition gives us the light to see a better future, if we will but follow it.

### *Plan of Work*

On the death of Hugh Trevor-Roper, the great British historian, his ten commandments on writing were presented at his memorial service, having previously circulated "in *samizdat*." First among his commandments was the following: "Thou shalt know thine own argument and cleave fast to it, and shalt not digress nor deviate from it without the knowledge and consent of the reader, whom at all times thou shalt lead at a pace which he can follow and by a route which is made clear to him as he goeth."<sup>25</sup> In that spirit, I offer the following guide to the questions taken up in and conclusions reached in the following chapters. Many surprises remain in store, *Mesdames et Messieurs*, but this is the gist.

Chapter 1 ("Liberal Hegemony") analyzes America's relationships with its allies and dependents, those states within its system. Its main purpose is to understand what this "free world complex" has become, describing its justification and contours in preparation for a critique of its claims. We examine, especially, the often repeated claim of officialdom and its supporters: that the United States has been distinguished among other Great Powers in its commitment to following the rules, that it has enforced the rules to which it voluntarily adheres, making its role unique and exceptional in the history of statecraft. I subsequently show that the United States has rather consistently violated the rules. By way of example, official U.S. attitudes toward the Ukraine crisis, the right of secession, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the surveillance state—together with its history of illegal military interventions—throw into grave question the conception of the U.S. role as that of honest broker and "umpire" of the system. Rather than operating as a rule-based system, the great alliances rest on the distinction between friends and enemies. That aspect gives to the (strong) protector and the (weak) protected a relationship that cannot be adequately understood in terms of the neutral application of principle. Who benefits most from that arrangement? Who is using whom?

Chapter 2 ("Universal Empire and Westphalian Ruins") argues that the American idea of world order now predominant, and repeatedly called liberal, has in signal respects displaced an older view, also once called liberal, that embraced a pluralist conception of the society of states. The unipolar or

supremacist conception that gained paramouncy in the twenty-first century, resting on “the most powerful military in the history of the world,” routed the older understandings of international law, as reflected in both the public law of the old European system and the “revised Westphalianism” of the United Nations Charter. I argue that on the issue that liberalism most cared about in the past—how to tame the war system?—the norms of the older pluralism reflect an understanding of the route to international peace superior to the global interventionism that displaced it.

To understand the stakes of this controversy, we need to go back to the Enlightenment’s critique of Rome, for the modern law of nations, as it was termed in the eighteenth century, arose in conscious opposition to Roman precedents. In signal respects, American ideas for mastering the state system have strongly recalled these Roman ambitions. What Machiavelli called “the Roman method” of expansion bears a striking resemblance to what we can call “the American method” of expansion. Both are distinguished by their search for enemies to fight, peoples to liberate, and protectorates to create. The eighteenth-century publicists of the law of nature and of nations—who, as Patrick Henry said, “held up the torch of science to a benighted world”—projected a different system, undertaken in conscious opposition to Roman precedents.<sup>26</sup> Balance rather than dominance; independence rather than uniformity; plurality rather than the universal state—such was the normative order of the European society of states as it was described by publicists and statesmen, and as it was defended against would-be aspirants to universal dominion—themes especially pronounced in the Anglo-American tradition of foreign affairs.<sup>27</sup> However different the United States may be from Republican Rome in certain particulars, the Westphalian and Enlightenment critique of Roman aspirations serves nicely as a critique of contemporary American policy. The “Westphalian peace” or “Westphalian principles,” so named after Europe’s Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that ended the religious wars, are not defined entirely consistently by scholars, but the central conception, as Henry Kissinger has noted, relied “on a system of independent states refraining from interference in each other’s domestic affairs and checking each other’s ambitions through a general equilibrium of power.”<sup>28</sup> In neither respect has the United States, in its essential strategic and foreign policy doctrines, conformed to these requirements. It has rejected the balance of power in the name of “full spectrum dominance.” It has rejected the non-intervention norm in the name of democracy, human rights, and counterterrorism.

The merits of a pluralist order, embraced by the American Founders, were once understood in the United States, even among earlier liberal