A New Kind of Empire

In July, Cato research fellow Emma Ashford moderated a forum on the history of U.S. hegemony in international affairs, featuring the authors of two important recent books on the subject. **Richard Maass** is associate professor of political science at the University of Evansville and author of *The Picky Eagle: How Democracy and Xenophobia Limited U.S. Territorial Expansion*, which seeks to explain America's historical reluctance to engage in territorial conquest compared with other major powers. **Patrick Porter** is professor of international security and strategy at University of Birmingham and the author of *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion, and the Rise of Trump*, which criticizes the notions at the heart of the 20th-century Wilsonian international order, born directly out of some of the historical and ideological influences Maass explores.

RICHARD MAASS: My book, *The Picky Eagle*, really began with a pretty simple curiosity. And that is, why does the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries look very different from most great powers and hegemons of the past? And in particular, what are we to make of the fact that the United States based its liberal international order on a prohibition of international conquest?

This goes against centuries of international law that recognized conquest as a valid spoil of war. And to answer that question, I looked back a little further in history, at the map that probably most of us are familiar with, of 13 colonies expanding across the continent to the Pacific. But what stood out to me about that map was, why not Canada, Mexico, Cuba, or other territories? Why did the U.S. stop where it did?

I decided to go about this in contrast to many of the conventional accounts, which would look at the profitability of conquest. There is a lot of literature in international relations pointing to great powers basically expanding where conquest pays, and not expanding where it doesn't pay. Instead, I looked at the domestic, political, and normative sides of annexation.

My central argument basically boils down to the idea that U.S. leaders looked at the opportunities that they had and didn't just think of them in material terms. They thought about the domestic, political, and normative consequences of annexing those territories, and sometimes they decided that those territories were simply not desirable.

And the biggest reason they didn't want to pursue some of those territorial opportunities had to do with this interplay between democracy and xenophobia. Essentially, there are two main dynamics here. If you are a U.S. leader, you don't want to annex a territory that's going to reduce your own domestic political influence. If you think that the people in a particular territory are unlikely to vote for you, you wouldn't want to annex that territory.

On the flip side, you also wouldn't want to annex a territory that would make your country worse in your own eyes. Leaders have normative visions for their state. They want to make it closer to some sort of ideal that they hold. If annexing that territory would move it further away from that ideal, then they wouldn't want to do that.

When U.S. leaders confronted the acquisition of densely populated territories and they saw the populations of those territories as fundamentally alien and unfit for U.S. citizenship, they just decided those populations were better left independent. U.S. leaders established a pretty clear dividing line, even very early on, against the annexation of large foreign populations.

As early as the war of 1812, the United States declared war on the United Kingdom in the context of Napoleonic Wars and British maritime restrictions on U.S. trade. That confronted them with this choice: Do we want to annex Canada if possible? But most U.S. leaders didn't actually want to, including the Madison administration and most of Congress. And it had a lot to do with the population of Quebec: Francophone, Catholic, and monarchist.

Fast-forward to the Mexican-American War, and U.S. leaders again are faced with this decision: Do we want to press forward and annex southern Mexico or not? American forces captured Mexico City, which is usually a turning point where the empire would say, "We've won. We claim all the territory of Mexico as ours." And yet, U.S. leaders didn't do that. President Polk was looking to capture Mexico City to end the war as quickly as possible once he got California, which was his primary goal. U.S. leaders very quickly rule out the populous part of Mexico and instead keep California, Texas, and the sparsely populated territory in between. But then America becomes become very content with a stable border with Mexico.

One place that the United States does annex is Hawaii. Politicians openly debate the unfitness of many people living there for U.S. citizenship, but they decided that the population was small enough, and the government was sufficiently in the hands of American businessmen at the time, that it could be essentially Americanized. This

is a very common term. U.S. leaders weighed the "Americanization" possibilities of different territories as they were considering annexing them or not.

In contrast, you see opposition to annexation of Cuba even from someone like Vermont senator Redfield Proctor, who traveled to Cuba, came back, and gave one of the most influential speeches bringing the United States into war against Spain, largely for the purpose of relieving humanitarian suffering and genocide in Cuba under Spanish rule. In that same speech, he said he doesn't favor annexation because there's not enough of an American guiding element there, that it would be annexing too many "people of foreign tongue and training," as he put it. Those were not radical views. They were the conventional, consensus views across majorities in Congress and the general public.

By the end of the 19th century, U.S. leaders essentially look out at the world and say that we don't have any desirable targets left. They had, decades prior, ended their interest in Canada and Mexico. In 1898, they were faced with the ultimate decision on Cuba, as well as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, and pursued an imperial regime in those territories rather than annexing them and putting them on a path to statehood.

Then the imperial experience, especially the protracted guerilla war in the Philippines, shapes American views moving forward about the prospects for long-term imperialism abroad. And all of that, moving into the 20th century, contributes profoundly to a foundation for people like President Woodrow Wilson, who stepped forward onto the world stage and said the United States is no longer interested in conquest. In fact, nobody should be. Conquest should be an illegitimate practice. We should outlaw it under international law.

Getting back to the foundations of this liberal international order, what this history shows in one very prominent way is that one of the central foundations of that order, the prohibition of conquest, is not really based on liberal ideals.

Instead, it was based on something very selfish and very biased, and that was the simple old-fashioned bigotry that was pervasive throughout U.S. society and leadership across the 1800s. Moving forward we can see shadows of it in the enduring impact of these biases in U.S. society, ultimately influencing what has become modern nationalism. Which, even though it is kind of tempered in its racism or religious intolerance, still has the fundamental priority of saying these people belong in this country and these other people belong outside of this country. Those kinds of identities can very profoundly shape foreign policy.


RICHARD MAASS

> "The United States has always been a picky eater."

U.S. leaders looked out at the world and knew that, as a country, you are what you eat. And the United States has always been a picky eater.

PATRICK PORTER: I want to talk about one thing that connects our two books. And that is this notion of hegemony, and the quite complicated relationship between territory and rule, which is what Richard so brilliantly explores in his book.

My book is an attack on the idea of a liberal international order. It's not primarily a complaint about American foreign policy. It's more of an observation, or an argument about the tragic ways of international life itself. And in a nutshell, I say that liberal order is a contradiction in terms. That ordering, creating hierarchies on your terms abroad, is rough work. It's brutal and involves illiberal compromises because the world is an illiberal place.

I particularly want to talk about the idea that America's international primacy was unique because it was nonimperial. That is, one of the claims that's made by some admirers of American foreign policy is that America did not have an empire, it had hegemony, or leadership that is nonimperial.

This is actually an older idea that we can trace back at least to George Grote, the British liberal historian of the 19th century, who drew a sharp distinction from the differences between hegemony, a sort of consensual rule over a coalition or an alliance, and arche, meaning a much more dominating power.

But in fact, looking at those texts, you see that these things are much more interchangeable, and much more on a continuum. And as Richard was talking, I was thinking about an incident that happened earlier this year, where the Iraqi parliament passed a resolution requesting that the U.S. forces leave the country. And the U.S. State Department issued a response saying that America is a force for good in the Middle East and at this time any delegation sent to Iraq will be dedicated to discussing how to best recommit to our strategic partnership, not to discuss troop withdrawal. But we want to be a friend and partner to

a sovereign prosperous and stable Iraq.

So we have this quite stark contradiction between claiming to liberate and be a benign partner of a sovereign people, and yet refusing even to talk about whether you're going to keep your garrisons there against the explicit request of the nation's supposedly sovereign legislature. This is, I think, a theme that runs through much of the American foreign policy tradition. There is that desire, genuinely, to liberate. But there is also a real desire to exert control.

It's partly, as Richard says, from this self-image of being a virtuous republic and being averse to conquest and annexation. And yet, we still very much want to project power and behave in ways that can be fairly called imperial. What do I mean by behaving imperially? I mean exerting a final veto, or control, or very substantive say over another sovereign state's autonomous decisionmaking.

One of the things that's happened in the formation of America's identity as a superpower is the idea that, because we don't do formal annexation, therefore it isn't really imperialism. But of course, you can have empire without formal annexation. Empire can operate in a number of ways. And it doesn't necessarily have to be about land hunger.

Why do I say that we can't easily have liberal order? For three reasons. First, we're talking about leadership, which is often a euphemism for dominance. But the problem with that is that it requires followership. It requires acquiescence. Even in a world with the least-bad hegemon we've ever had, the United States, that still meets resistance.

When American leadership meets resistance, it typically responds with something resembling the smack of government and imperial authority or, in other words, coercion. One of the problems with a lot of Trump-era nostalgia for a better liberal order is it writes out a lot of the sheer violence in history: the violence in South America, the violence across the wars of the Cold War in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. But it also erases much of the coercion that has happened in the so-called heartlands of the liberal order in western Europe. A lot of threats and worse have gone into building and maintaining that.

The second problem is one of rules and regularity. You often hear the phrase "rules-based liberal international order." But one of the difficulties here is that we're also talking about power and ascendancy. In order

PATRICK PORTER

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to retain one's preponderance, that means reserving the right to step outside rules, to route around rules, to reinvent them, even to break them.

And so we have an order in which the superpower does design institutions and rules with which it wants to bind other states, but it also reserves a special privilege against submitting itself to those same institutions and rules, like most hegemons do.

On Monday it can be about sovereign autonomy, but on Tuesday it can be about a benevolent regime change. On Wednesday it can be about bombing countries without a UN Security Council resolution. Or take the International Criminal Court and all the exemptions and carveouts the United States got in order to not be subject to it, including exerting pressure on other countries in ways that no other nation could.

The third problem is one of security dilemma. And that is that, even if you did have a hegemon that really did consistently, sincerely want to have a rules-based liberal international order in which it was itself subject to those rules, it would still involve the accumulation of what would look like overwhelming and threatening levels of power over its rivals and its adversaries.

It would be indistinguishable from acquiring a threatening preponderance of power, and no responsible official in Beijing or Moscow or Tehran or Pyongyang could afford to take that on trust. Because even if you have good, liberal intentions today, they might change tomorrow, or 10 years down the track.

So we're left with a paradox. America's foreign policy since 1945 has been, I think, a very mixed bag. There have been some great achievements and some avoidable errors and self-harm and disasters. One of the things I argue is that the United States has actually done best when it's tried to accept the reality of illiberal forces. Such as the opening to China, which is based on a lot of very, very hard compromises and betrayals, when you consider Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The silence about the Bengal genocide in 1971. The Dayton Accords in Bosnia, which made peace with genocidaires and authoritarians. Even rebuilding Germany and Japan was a darker business than people like to remember: it involved collaboration with fascists of the old order and the imposition of a lot of starkly illiberal policies ranging from censorship to collective guilt.

It's when overreaching, overambitious utopian ideas about liberalizing the world

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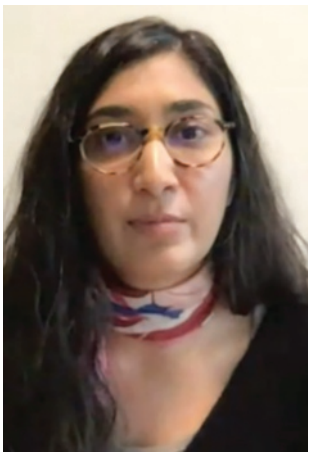


(Left to right): Cato trade scholars **Daniel Ikenson**, **Inu Manak**, and **Simon Lester** participated in a July policy forum on the future of the World Trade Organization (WTO), along with Cato adjunct scholar and former WTO chief judge James Bacchus (not pictured), who participated by audio.

JUNE 3: Harm Reduction as a Public Health Strategy for Pandemics

JUNE 4: Building a Modern Military

JUNE 5: Coronavirus and the Constitution III: Shutdown Lawsuits, Testing, and Contact Tracing

JUNE 8: COVID-19 and the Right to Test

JUNE 12: Terrible Twos? Taking Stock of U.S.–North Korea Relations Two Years after Singapore

JUNE 15: Homeschooling: Protecting Freedom, Protecting Children

JUNE 17: Build Up or Build Out? Solving the Housing Crisis

JUNE 25: A Fed for Next Time: Ideas for a Crisis-Ready Central Bank

JULY 6: *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*

JULY 9: Supreme Court Balks, but Congress Should Act to Restore Its Authority over Trade Policy

JULY 16: The Future of the World Trade Organization

JULY 23: *Fewer, Richer, Greener: Prospects for Humanity in an Age of Abundance*

JULY 28: Does the Affordable Care Act Discriminate against the Sick?

JULY 30: Hegemon: American Territorial Expansion and the Creation of the Liberal International Order

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Cato Calendar

DIGITAL CURRENCY: RISK OR PROMISE?
38th Annual Monetary Conference
Online • November 19, 2020
Speakers include Phil Gramm, Jeb Hensarling, Caitlin Long, Lawrence H. White, Eswar Prasad, Jill Carlson, Jesús Fernández-Villaverde, and Charles Calomiris.

CATO INSTITUTE POLICY PERSPECTIVES 2020
Naples, FL • Ritz-Carlton, Naples
January 25, 2021

MILTON FRIEDMAN PRIZE PRESENTATION DINNER
New York • Cipriani
May 26, 2021

32ND ANNUAL BENEFACTOR SUMMIT
New York City • May 27, 2021

CATO CLUB 200 RETREAT
Washington • Cato Institute
September 30–October 3, 2021

33RD ANNUAL BENEFACTOR SUMMIT
Carlsbad, CA
Park Hyatt Aviara Resort
February 24–27, 2022

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have taken hold, when they've run on unchecked, that some of the biggest disasters happen. An example would be the overnight capitalist shock therapy in post-Soviet Russia and the dismemberment of Russia's centuries-old sphere of cultural, political, and economic influence. That same utopian impulse also led to the war on terror and the campaigns to transform the Middle East to reorder the world. It has also led to prying open poor countries to force one-sided free trade agreements.

The very moments when Washington became most intoxicated with an ideology of a crusader state, as Walter McDougall would call it, were when disaster most beckoned. The more prudent thing, instead of the nostalgia for a liberal order that really wasn't, is that we need to think about the actual real choices that are before us, if we're to think of an alternative to the era of frequent American interventions as well as the renewed rise of oligarchy and militarism abroad.

That means thinking directly about a more restrained, more focused foreign policy, in which the U.S. aims to try to do what it can to protect its citizens' democratic liberty in an illiberal world. Because striving too hard to convert that world will not succeed. ■