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*The Crisis of American Foreign Policy,
Wilsonianism in the 21st Century*

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G. John Ikenberry et al, "**The Crisis of American Foreign Policy, Wilsonianism in the 21st Century**", Princeton University Press, Princeton e Oxford, 2009.

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In this concise and engaging book with contributions by G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Tony Smith and Anne-Marie Slaughter, the authors ask in how far the Bush administration's foreign policy was influenced by Wilsonian liberalism and what this means for liberal internationalism in the 21st century. This important debate – for the United States and emerging powers alike – rests on five fundamental questions.

First of all, was US foreign policy under President Bush truly about spreading freedom and democracy or did it pursue a neoimperial project, using liberalism as a fig leaf to cover other ambitions? Secondly, was Wilsonianism primarily focused on spreading democracy, or was it rather concerned about international law and security? Was multilateralism (symbolized by the League of Nations) merely a means to spread democracy or an end in itself for Wilson? Is spreading democracy (if necessary by force) simply “taking Wilsonianism to its ultimate conclusion”, as the realist Kissinger argued? Thirdly, how did Wilsonian liberalism evolve? The number of institutions has grown strongly since Wilson. The commitments of the international community have grown, weakening state sovereignty as norms of liberal intervention emerged. After the Cold War, the United States found itself in a unipolar order, and US interventions outside of the multilateral framework made some argue the US strategy was not wilsonian but neoimperial. Fourthly, does liberal internationalism contain mechanisms to prevent liberal imperialism? How do liberal internationalists distinguish between ‘enlightened interventions’ and ‘liberal imperialism’? Finally, how will liberal internationalists deal with the crisis the Bush administration has brought upon their school of thought?

The Bush administration's rhetorical embrace of liberal internationalism follows the tradition of many other Presidents such as Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton. In the case of the Bush administration, however, it was paired with a historic shift that positioned the United States as the “unipolar provider of global security and order”, as Ikenberry puts it. By announcing this new world order in which America would fight for democracy, Bush

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discarded the old liberal institutions (which the United States could unilaterally ignore to advance human freedom). At the same time, his strategy echoed many wilsonian ideas, such as the pledge to use American power to create a ‘universal dominion of right.’

Thomas Knock’s chapter shows how Wilsonianism is one of the most consistent themes in US foreign policy – the ideological battle Wilson fought in his time against Theodore Roosevelt continues until this day, although each side adapts to the ever changing circumstances. It is remarkable how even realists such as George Kennan, though late in his career, acknowledged Wilson’s historic intellectual contribution to the way foreign policy makers think about the world.

Tony Smith argues that the disastrous Iraq War threw the liberal internationalist school of thinking into crisis. President Bush’s famous Second Inaugural Address included the strikingly wilsonian argument that “the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands.” Smith argues that the intellectual origins of the Bush Doctrine to democratize the world clearly lie in Wilsonianism. Similar to the Bush administration, imperial adventures marked the Wilson presidency: the US occupied Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, and it intervened in Cuba and Mexico, all engagements with mixed results. Wilson notoriously proclaimed that he would “teach the South American republics to elect good men.” The liberals’ dilemma of internationalism vs. imperialism is thus by no means confined to our times, but the United States’ unipolar moment made it much more visible. Smith asserts that the intellectual trend towards a more assertive foreign policy after the end of the Cold War is a largely liberal construct, giving rise to “neoliberal” policies.

Further complicating matters, many leading liberals supported the Iraq War, even before the Bush administration adopted its wilsonian rhetoric to justify the intervention (which only occurred once no weapon stockpiles were found). Leading liberal thinkers such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, mostly close to the Democratic Party, have attempted to disassociate liberalism from the Bush Doctrine, yet Smith argues that Bush’s “neoconservative” foreign policy mostly emerged out of liberal thinking, even if the neoconservatives later attempted to claim its heritage. More counterintuitively still, Smith says there is no serious alternative to the neoliberal Bush Doctrine that stands any chance of finding broad consensus among foreign policy makers (even though Democrats think differently about multilateralism) – a claim that one cannot easily dismiss considering US foreign policy under Obama.

In sum, Smith's chapter is required reading for all those (particularly non-Americans) who believe the Iraq War was a project supported only by a few neoconservatives with close ties to the oil industry, and who believe that the Bush Doctrine of "new unilateralism" had little impact on US foreign policy today. One may merely consider the ever more widespread use of drones in situation not even officially described as "war" and entirely outside of the legal international framework. The United States continues to engage in "progressive imperialism" and use "anticipatory action" whenever it determines the use of force is necessary, acting entirely in a league of its own.

In the final chapter, Anne-Marie Slaughter seeks to show that there are fundamental differences between neoliberalism (of which she is a leading figure) and neoconservatives, pointing to her preference for multilateralism and her rejection of U.S. military supremacy. Contrasting Smith's argument that Wilson pursued imperial strategies, Slaughter argues that Wilson learned the lessons of his disastrous intervention in Mexico early in his presidency and then became a champion of self-determination. Wilson, she argues, did never mention democracy in his famous Fourteen Points, and sought to defend existing democracies, rather than overthrowing non-democratic regimes. Furthermore, she argues that her multilateralist stance is much more than mere tactics, but sign of a different foreign policy orientation altogether that greatly distinguishes the neoliberals from the Bush Doctrine.

One important question Slaughter only briefly touches upon is how the rise of countries such as China, Brazil and India will affect the future of liberal internationalism. These countries may be committed to strengthening multilateral frameworks if established powers are willing to including new powers – which is a slow and difficult process, as the debate about the next World Bank President shows. As I have written in a recent [article](#), both Brazil and India are ambiguous about openly promoting democracy, and they are eager not to be seen as imperialists in their own regions – yet in some cases they have adopted a more assertive stance. As emerging powers' presence becomes more visible, the United States' space to frame the debate is set to shrink considerably. Slaughter calls for "team leadership", suggesting that the United States will have to work closely with other major powers to promote its wilsonian agenda. This is perhaps one of the United States' greatest challenges in the 21st century.

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