

## CHAPTER 1

# The Real Liberal Tradition

**I**n moments of conceptual confusion, it's natural to turn to history in search of lessons to learn, and many of liberalism's leading intellectuals have followed this tendency in recent years for some measure of clarity in foreign policy. The most popular analogy drawn thus far has been to the circumstances faced by Harry Truman in the election of 1948: the Democrats chose a middle ground between the Republican proposal of "rolling back" communism and the anti-communism of former vice president Henry Wallace, who mounted a third-party challenge to Truman's Cold War liberalism. Truman's strategy was successful, both politically and substantively, and consequently serves as an appealing model for the present and the future. Furthermore, the main lesson learned from this analogy—that one should avoid unwise extremes and hew to a soundly moderate course of action—has the virtue of being correct.

Unfortunately, this lesson, though backed by the teachings of Aristotle, the Buddha, and Goldilocks alike, offers

little in the way of practical guidance. In a world where one conservative author's proposed response to Islamist violence is to "invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity"<sup>1</sup> and a nontrivial number of people are committed to blanket pacifism, the middle ground turns out to be an extraordinarily broad patch of terrain.

In particular, rather than provide a framework for resolving the dispute, the "What would Harry Truman do?" mode of inquiry has merely recapitulated it. The prominent war supporter Joe Biden became the first recipient of the Democratic Leadership Council's Harry S. Truman Award for his foreign policy leadership<sup>2</sup> even as the war was regarded by the late historian James Chace as a "stunning reversal of the policies practiced by the 'wise men'" of the Truman national security team.<sup>3</sup> Most tellingly of all, in late 2004 Peter Beinart, then the editor of the staunchly pro-war *New Republic*, published a cover story advocating Democratic emulation of the Truman approach and shortly thereafter signed a deal to write a book based on the article. While writing the book, Beinart changed his mind about the Iraq War but was nonetheless able to keep the Truman analogy at the center of his argument.<sup>4</sup>

The essential problem is that the international situation of 1948 simply doesn't *resemble* the current world to any great extent. The Soviets controlled a vast swath of territory inhabited by hundreds of millions of people and an enormous military establishment boasting strategic nuclear weapons. Drawing specific lessons from Truman piles one shaky parallel on top of another until the whole structure creaks: Islam = communism, bin Ladin = Stalin, Syria = Czechoslovakia, France = France. Thus, today's liberals have nothing left to draw on but the morality play of moderation. Indeed, by the time of the Vietnam War, figures who cut their teeth in the Truman years found themselves sharply disagreeing about how to apply the spirit of '48 to the era of decolonization. By the early twenty-first century the application of

Trumanism had grown sufficiently fuzzy that hardened neo-conservatives, along with Bush himself, were claiming George W. Bush as Truman's true heir.<sup>5</sup>

Discerning a more usable history requires recognition that Truman was but one figure in a liberal internationalist tradition that stretches both directions in time and has developed over the years in response to changing events. The policies of any given moment in the past would be inappropriate for today's circumstances, but the legacy as a whole has been applied in various situations, and both can and should be applied today.

Indeed, the internationalist legacy was alive and well and serving the country admirably as recently as the Clinton administration. The sense that September 11, 2001, marked a great discontinuity in world affairs is, in many ways, deeply misleading. Unlike the dawn of the Cold War in the 1940s, the events of the fall of 2001 did not represent the emergence of a novel threat or a genuinely new situation. The new situation arose about a decade earlier, as the Cold War ended and the world entered a period of unchallenged U.S. primacy where the most pressing security problems would be transnational in nature and would not emanate from organized states. The Clinton administration had a reasonably strong grasp on the situation, including the threat of al-Qaeda, and was implementing policies largely appropriate to the new international context that focused on strengthening, expanding, and deepening international institutions in order to foster cooperation against common problems and to bring the globe closer to the long-held liberal ideal of a world governed by a reasonably just, well-enforced set of rules, rather than by the clash of rival armies.<sup>6</sup>

This policy was not an innovation, but merely a coming to fruition of the entire twentieth-century legacy of the Democratic Party, updated for a new situation that opened up new possibilities. But the Clinton era, like any particular moment in history, is open to various interpretations, especially when

viewed out of context. Some Democrats took little away from the 1990s other than that liberals, too, could be enthusiastic about the use of force. Their leadership and their misinterpretations of liberal internationalism helped to drive the party behind Bush down the disastrous road to Baghdad.

While the Goldilocks lesson of the Truman administration is clearly inadequate to resolving the question of when liberals should use force, the internationalist tradition in the United States has, since its founding as part of the Woodrow Wilson administration, genuinely sought a middle ground. When Wilson entered office, the prevailing doctrine in U.S. national security policy had been that the role of the military was to defend and expand the borders of the United States vis-à-vis its immediate neighbors—Native Americans, Mexicans, and so on—while avoiding involvement in the disputes of far-off powers, especially the European ones. On some level, this strategy was principled and deeply considered, as reflected in George Washington's farewell address and its famous injunction against "entangling alliances." On another level, however, it was born of simple incapacity—the early United States was not capable of acting as a major player on the world stage and therefore chose not to try.

In the decades following the Civil War, the United States became increasingly influential. Its newly strengthened national government, vast size, enormous natural resource base, and ceaselessly growing population and economy made it a significant actor in world commerce and a potentially major one in world politics. In turn, an important faction arose arguing that the United States should ape the nations of Europe by seeking to relate to the world through imperial domination of the weak and military competition with the strong. These imperialists (a label they did not shun at the time) were opposed by traditionalists who took the view that simply because the United States *could* intervene in European affairs was no reason to think it *should* do so.

Faced with the increasing risk that Germany might secure dominion over all of Europe, Wilson reached the conclusion that intervention was the best bet. He also accepted, however, the traditional liberal view that imperial competition and militarism were immoral and ultimately self-destructive. Thus, he sought to frame his war aims around securing victory not merely over Germany, but over the whole system of international relations as well. He rejected the shared “realist” premises of isolationism and imperialism and their conclusion that global politics is intrinsically a “brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other, and therefore have little reason to trust each other.”<sup>7</sup> Liberal internationalists accepted that these problems existed (and still do), but they insisted that a better world is possible and that we neither must nor should reconcile ourselves to foreign policy being perpetually dominated by amoral power struggles between heavily armed adversaries.

Wilson envisioned the postwar world as one in which force and threats of force would no longer be the dominant element of politics among nations. Just as the rule of law in the domestic sphere makes it possible for individuals to interact with one another through commerce and friendship rather than theft and extortion, so, too, could the *international* rule of law make trade and tourism, rather than war and conquest, the main components of international relations. War, when civilized nations engaged in it at all, would be authorized by a League of Nations whose purpose was to uphold the liberal international order. If any nation attempted to violate the terms of this order, the others—under the banner of the League—would band together to crush the aggressor. This approach might not abolish war, just as domestic law has failed to abolish crime, but it would certainly mark a decisive change in the structure of world politics and, in Wilson’s famous phrase, make the world safe for democracy.

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Famously, it didn't work.

Wilson's specific effort to meet this aspiration—the League of Nations—was a spectacular failure. The precise problems with Wilson's approach to the end of World War I are almost too numerous to name. Put briefly, however, most of the world's major powers were simply not interested in the sort of just peace that a liberal world order could have defended. While many of Wilson's ideas about national self-determination were immensely popular with the people of Europe, they were far too vague and out of touch with realities on the ground to be rigorously implemented at the Paris Peace Conference where the League was established. What's more, Wilson's views on self-determination were flatly contradicted by his personal racism, which undercut the clear anti-imperialist implications of his views. Further worsening the situation, the newly born Soviet Union was not a member of the League. Soviet absence, in part, reflected a further problem in Wilson's thinking.

In his *Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant, the first major liberal internationalist thinker, envisioned a world not only peacefully managed by a loose international confederation, but one wherein the components of that confederation would all be democratic republics, instead of the autocratic monarchies that were common in his day. Wilson took over this assumption that securing the peace depended crucially on both the League of Nations and the establishment of domestic justice (in particular, fair treatment for ethnic and national minority groups), but he had no real idea of how the latter might be achieved. Finally—the nail in the coffin—Wilson badly mishandled the domestic politics surrounding the League and the peace treaty of which it was a part, ultimately failing to secure congressional approval for U.S. membership.

Most of all, while many leaders were prepared to embrace the League, none of the major countries were interested in the sort of policies that could have established a liberal peace.

Americans were by and large not interested in accepting a permanent global role for the nation, preferring to see the war as a singular crisis whose resolution would allow for a return to the traditional policy of dominating the Western Hemisphere and ignoring the rest. England (and, to a lesser extent, France) was primarily concerned with expanding and entrenching its global empire in a manner inconsistent with the equality of nations. France, meanwhile, did not especially have faith in the League's ability to protect it from future German aggression. In place of the League's liberal peace and cooperative world order, the French government sought a punitive peace that would keep Germany weak, a strong military to deter its larger neighbor, and an alliance of viable anti-German states in Central Europe. This last goal seemed to require that the new countries formed to Germany's east be reasonably large, which in practice required Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, among others, to be highly multinational rather than the smaller self-determining entities Wilson had advocated. Partially in response and partially for its own reasons, Germany continued—even before Hitler's rise—to put a primary emphasis on rebuilding military strength and seeking to revise the postwar order, rather than cooperating in stabilizing it.

Underlying all these missteps, however, was a simple hubris about the nature of the task. Wilson's aspirations for global politics were noble and even correct, but skeptics who doubted their feasibility were basically right: fundamental aspects of the human condition simply can't be radically revised overnight. Insofar as the nations of the world were unwilling to abandon imperialism and militarism as policies, formal changes in institutional structure were not going to accomplish anything. But if it was a mistake to try to move forward as boldly as Wilson intended, the arrival of World War II simply confirmed that he was correct in thinking that continuing the old ways was untenable as well. The combination of nationalism, imperialism, and militarism that fueled interwar European policies led to a collision that left everyone far

worse off than they'd been before: England's empire gone, France conquered, Germany destroyed, millions dead, and civilization itself seemingly in tatters. A just peace, acceptable to all, and the creation of peaceful mechanisms to resolve disputes were more necessary than ever.

Since that time, the great goal of liberal foreign policy has been to adhere to Wilson's vision while avoiding the failures of his policy: to see the creation of a liberal world order not as a simple matter that can be accomplished with a snap of the fingers, but as an ongoing process that the United States, as the largest, richest, and strongest of the liberal powers, must consistently push forward. The question, then, that must be asked of any proposed policy is whether it advances or retards that goal; whether it brings us closer to or further from the dream of a peaceful, rule-governed liberal world order.

The attempts to implement this agenda have varied over the years according to circumstances and shifting thinking, but U.S. foreign policy has, when successful, adhered to this basic strategy. Wilson's first successor in this regard was Franklin Roosevelt, who sought to temper the liberal aspiration with a greater dose of pragmatism. His United Nations made important concessions to the realities of great power politics through the structure of the Security Council. He was also able to take advantage of shifts in world opinion. Nationalism remained a strong force, but formal imperialism was clearly on the way out, and militarism's appeal was waning—especially in Europe. The upshot was to shift the international system incrementally toward one governed by liberal ideals, rather than to transform it dramatically. As witnessed by the UN's continued existence decades after its founding, this approach was considerably more successful. But although the UN managed to endure in a way that the League never did, the onset of the Cold War led Harry Truman to recognize that the sort of



cooperation FDR had envisioned between the democratic West and the Soviet Union would not be possible.

Consequently, Truman further tempered Roosevelt's vision, largely accepting that a Security Council permanently hamstrung by Soviet vetoes could not function as the major tool of U.S. foreign policy. Instead of abandoning liberal aspirations in the face of this diplomatic failure, Truman sought to enact them in miniature. He constructed a series of institutions of less-than-global scope—most prominently NATO, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the World Bank (originally, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), and the International Monetary Fund, which was eventually followed by the European Economic Community—so that the “free world” might be governed according to liberal principles while competing as a bloc with Soviet totalitarianism in a traditional manner.

Truman and his advisers, most famously George Kennan, believed that this struggle could be won through containment—the Soviets would not need to be defeated but merely denied victory until the communist empire collapsed by virtue of its own inherent instability. The key to making this work was preserving peaceful relations among the leading Western countries, and this task fell to the Cold War-era institutions. In this respect, their responsibilities were similar to what Wilson had envisioned for the League of Nations, which was supposed to maintain peace all around the world. In essence, Truman had devised a more reasonably scaled version of Wilson's goal—even if peace and collective security couldn't manage the whole globe, they could be made to work throughout the smaller North Atlantic community.

Critics of the liberal approach to world affairs tend to portray the role of international institutions in the Cold War years as purely incidental. According to this theory, the alliance existed because peace existed, and peace in turn existed merely because the Soviet threat provided the impetus to unite. This thinking is superficially plausible in light of the long history of

nations forming coalitions to fight common threats, from the Habsburgs to Napoleon to Hitler. The salient fact about these coalitions, however, is that they were all short-lived and subject to intense instability. Even when the incentives to cooperate are strong, temptations to defect from coalitions still exist. Western unity would have needed to crack only once or twice over a period of decades for much of Europe to have gone the route of non-NATO Finland, which found itself coerced into adopting a pro-Soviet foreign policy. Grounding the anticommunist coalition in formal, rule-based institutions created the levels of trust and confidence necessary to allow the governments of Europe to choose peace rather than competition.

The pivotal test of these competing interpretations of Cold War institutions came only after the conflict ended. If the institutions played no causal role in generating unity, then the collapse of the Soviet Union should have led to the collapse of the institutions and a return to a Europe characterized by conflict between the major powers. Indeed, many observers, such as the noted “realist” international relations scholar John Mearsheimer, predicted this course of events in the early 1990s. They were, of course, proved incorrect. The institutions had a life of their own, and such conflicts between, say, France and Germany that now exist are handled through the formal mechanisms of the European Union in Brussels rather than through arms races. Truman’s Wilsonian instinct that enduring peace could best be found through constructing political institutions was thus retrospectively vindicated in just the manner that liberal theory would predict. His framework established a Cold War status quo that roughly held for the next forty-five years and eight presidencies until, just as Kennan had argued, the USSR did itself in.

The United Nations could not act as the main force in world affairs in light of the realities of superpower conflict. Instead, it

developed a number of useful programs as an organizer and a facilitator of what amounts to global charity work—pooling resources to pursue uncontroversial humanitarian goals like famine relief and fighting disease, scoring such notable successes as the total eradication of smallpox. Turtle Bay also developed one noteworthy contribution to international security, consensual peacekeeping, in which parties wishing to end a conflict call on third-party troops to enforce the terms of an agreement that simple distrust might otherwise render unworkable. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait just as the Cold War was winding down, however, finally gave the UN an opportunity to perform its main intended function: preventing aggressive warfare.

The first Bush administration, acting within the internationalist tradition, chose to seize the opportunity. By waging war on Iraq through the mechanism of the UN, and by fighting for the limited objectives of expelling Iraq from Kuwait and forcing it to abandon the research and development of illegal weapons, the Bush administration did more than preserve Kuwait's independence. It established a new, long-dreamed-of norm—the principle that aggressive war, long notionally banned by various treaties, would actually be repulsed by concerted international action. This achievement was—and is—fairly remarkable and, though it's seldom commented on, has held up shockingly well in the intervening years. The UN's success in the first Gulf War generated high hopes that it could become an effective enforcement mechanism for other international norms that had long existed on paper, notably in areas of human rights, unconventional weapons proliferation, and genocide. The results of these efforts were decidedly mixed, as we will see, but for now the important point is that the new world order made these hopes plausible in a way they hadn't been during the organization's first several decades of existence.

Thus, when Bill Clinton entered office as the first post-Cold War president, he and his administration inherited a world in which it was possible to raise liberal aspirations once

again. Rather than attempting a renewed push for a big-bang transformation of world affairs, Clinton worked toward the basic goal along a number of tracks, including a fresh emphasis on the UN built on the precedent set by his predecessor.

Beyond the UN, efforts were made to intensify and deepen several other international organizations, often symbolized by changes in name. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was redubbed the World Trade Organization, the European Economic Community was renamed the European Union, and NATO expanded to the Russian border.

Conceptual fuzziness around the precise purpose and intended scope of these groups bothered the overly fastidious. *National Review*'s Ramesh Ponnuru complained in a 1998 retrospective on the Clinton administration that "the genuine accomplishment of NATO expansion was marred by the organization's partial transformation from an alliance to a rickety collective-security arrangement."<sup>8</sup> Such critiques ignore the large intrinsic value of stable institutions. Even if it were true—which it isn't—that NATO accomplished absolutely nothing outside its borders, the set of institutions in which it is embedded would still be valuable.

The success of internationalism on these varying levels led to a novel situation in which the defining feature of international politics was no longer rivalry between great powers. Rather, the major countries of the world achieved a sufficient degree of consensus and peaceful cooperation that U.S. policymakers developed two new concepts—"rogue states" and "failed states." The former referred to a handful of small-to-middling countries like Serbia, North Korea, Iran, and Iraq that refused to play by the rules. The latter were states, mostly in Africa, that lacked the capacity to meaningfully control events inside their own borders. These problems proved real, but the very fact that such concerns could achieve a high level of salience indicated that the basic liberal agenda was enjoying a large degree of success.

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In its early years, the Clinton administration hewed very strictly to its understanding of the first Bush administration's practices during the Gulf War, actively engaging with the world but seeking to act almost exclusively through the UN. And, on one level, the UN's surprising post-Cold War efficacy at defending the sovereignty of Kuwait stood as a great liberal victory. On another level, however, defense of the sovereignty principle proved problematic. Most liberals had been initially skeptical of the Gulf War, and it was backed by only a minority of congressional Democrats. The impetus for their opposition, by and large, was a post-Vietnam skepticism about the efficacy of U.S. arms. The swift and low-cost victory in the desert, however, proved that such fears were misguided. At least under the right circumstances, the United States could effectively project power around the world. What's more, the country had done so through the auspices of the United Nations, just as liberal pioneers had envisioned.

Superficially, this revelation made the question of national security policy after the Cold War look remarkably easy. When problems arose, the United States would go to the United Nations, secure authorization to make things right, and then use its overwhelming military power to do so. What's more, the same approach the Bush administration used to prevent Iraq from dominating the Persian Gulf's oil reserves could be applied to a wide range of circumstances, including humanitarian and human rights emergencies that were more in line with liberal instincts.

Reality proved more complicated. Soon after the Gulf War, a humanitarian crisis in Somalia eventually led to the deployment of a U.S. military force to subdue local warlords who were interfering with the distribution of aid supplies. An attempted raid on a leading warlord went badly, and several U.S. soldiers (along with huge numbers of Somalis) were

killed. Gruesome images of U.S. troops being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu shocked the country. The Clinton administration decided that the public's appetite for an extended deployment in East Africa would be sharply limited, and he withdrew U.S. troops. The use of force, it turned out, was still risky and complicated.

Even worse, there turned out to be a bit of a contradiction at the heart of liberalism between a desire for a rule-governed world and a desire for the rules governing the world to be good ones.

Wilson, Kant, and other pioneering liberal internationalists had envisioned a just international order as securing and defending a block of liberal states that would themselves be domestically just. In the United Nations, the world had a rudimentary form of an organization that was prepared to prevent international wars, much as the first internationalists had envisioned. But many of the UN's member states were internally illiberal and undemocratic. Such states, including veto-wielding China, though often willing—or even eager—to embrace some aspects of the idea of a liberal international order, were loathe to countenance efforts to use the UN in ways that would undermine their sovereignty and might someday be turned against their own internal repression of their citizens. Further complicating the situation, such nations tend to be less than forthright about their stance on human rights abuses. Thus, it proves relatively easy to secure widespread international agreement on abstract treaties concerning human rights, the prevention of genocide, or the spread of weapons of mass destruction, but consistently difficult in practice to secure UN approval to take meaningful action on these fronts. The result was a dilemma pitting one set of rules—the nominal prohibitions on various abuses—against the idea of a rule-governed UN enforcement process.

These various tensions eventually came to a head, somewhat ironically, in Yugoslavia, the portion of the world whose problems were proximately responsible for the outbreak

of World War I; a nation whose very existence was inextricably bound up with Woodrow Wilson's initial efforts to create a liberal peace.

The end of the Cold War set the stage for the nation's total collapse, with Croatia and Slovenia declaring independence in June 1991. Bosnia and Herzegovina—the most diverse republic, 44 percent Muslim but with large Serbian and Croatian minorities—seceded in 1992 and almost immediately became the scene of bloody three-way warfare.

The United Nations, primarily at the behest of several European nations, attempted to step into the breach. It imposed a ban on arms sales throughout the region and dispatched troops under a UN mandate—the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR)—to safeguard selected sites and to ensure the flow of humanitarian aid. These steps slowed the pace of the fighting somewhat but didn't stop it. Meanwhile, images of Serb atrocities against Bosnia's Muslim population poured west on CNN and other news outlets. Clinton found himself inclined to favor more robust measures, but he was tied in knots by his internationalist commitments. NATO and the UN took different positions, and the United States siding with one would weaken the other.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, a UN-approved NATO bombing campaign against Serbian targets in late August 1995 (along with diplomatic initiatives aimed at forging a Croatian-Muslim coalition) brought the Serbs to the bargaining table. There they agreed to the United States-brokered Dayton Accords, which ended the war and provided for the creation of a classic peacekeeping force for Bosnia, operated by NATO, authorized by the UN, and with a substantial U.S. military presence on the ground.

The years-long delay was not, of course, merely a temporal issue—many people died as the somewhat clumsy diplomatic gears turned. To many people, the UN and similar structures began to look like obstacles to effective action at best, and cynical pretexts for avoiding action at worst. The purpose of international law's restraints on the use of

force were to guard against imperialism and aggressive wars of conquest, not to prevent benevolent powers from coming to the aid of the beleaguered and the oppressed. Surely, this line of thought went, liberals both could and should in good conscience leave the rules of the international order behind when doing so provided an expedient means of advancing substantive liberal goals.

Such sentiments came closer to the fore when the United States found itself further embroiled in the Balkans, after a crisis broke out in the Serbian province of Kosovo, populated primarily by Albanian Muslims.

The Clinton administration took three lessons away from its earlier dealings with Milosevic over the Bosnia crisis: (1) Milosevic was not to be trusted; (2) measures short of military force were less effective in changing his behavior than many had hoped; (3) air strikes were more effective than had been widely believed before their actual use. The implication seemed clear—once again, only bombing could force Milosevic's hand and bring an end to a genocidal military campaign.

The difficulty from a liberal point of view was that this time around, UN authorization was not forthcoming. A majority of Security Council members seemed willing to support intervention, but, at a minimum, China and Russia were prepared to veto any authorizing resolution.

Instead of going to the UN, NATO—using primarily U.S. forces—simply commenced the bombing campaign in late March 1999, citing previous resolutions on Kosovo and the existence of an “international humanitarian emergency” as a sufficient basis for action. Russia countered with a resolution demanding “an immediate cessation of the use of force against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.” When put to a vote, the resolution failed 12–3, with Russia joined by Namibia and China.

Despite the lack of UN authorization, the Kosovo War fit reasonably well into the liberal framework. As we have seen,



in addition to their aspirations for the UN, U.S. policymakers in the 1990s had a more robust agenda for preserving the tighter institutional web of Western Europe and expanding this web eastward. The persistent instability in the Balkans, mostly provoked by Milosevic, was a substantial challenge to this agenda. Western leaders of the period were, and are, often accused of a selective approach to humanitarianism, acting forcefully in Kosovo, while being less concerned with more serious humanitarian problems in Africa and elsewhere. The charge is essentially accurate but largely misses the point: that Kosovo presented a mixture of humanitarian and interest-based reasons for intervention was precisely what strengthened the case for playing fast and loose with the UN rules, making intervention a reasonable option.

It is necessary to examine the debates over the Balkans to understand liberal internationalist views about the appropriate use of force, since that was the most recent venue in which they have been developed. Contemporary national security debates, however, quite properly focus not on Europe's south-eastern corner, which has returned to its customary obscurity, but on Islamist terrorism and related issues. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are the central event of the contemporary politics of national security, and the sense that traditional internationalism is somehow inadequate to the challenges in this area has been the crux of its eclipse.

Nevertheless, this perception, no matter how widely held, is essentially false. Indeed, the national security policies of the Clinton administration's final years were dominated by concern about the rise of al-Qaeda, something similar to, but rather different from, traditional terrorist groups—a genuinely transnational movement appealing to a universalistic Islamist identity that transcended state borders. The organization itself is part of a broader trend toward what French scholar Olivier

Roy calls “globalized Islam,” a set of identities and attitudes that, crucially, extends far beyond the traditional national conflicts of the Middle East and that in many ways has its population base among Muslim communities located in—or at least highly exposed to—the West: “The new generations of radicalized Western Muslims do not go to Palestine to fight the infidels; they went to Afghanistan, Chechnya, Bosnia, and Kashmir; they go to New York, Paris, and London.”<sup>10</sup>

What’s more, despite the popular belief that “9/11 changed everything,” the emergence of this phenomenon was well-understood by the relatively small number of people who concerned themselves with foreign policy during the 1990s. Two of that decade’s most popular books on world affairs—Thomas Friedman’s *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld*—portrayed the emergence of Islamist movements as the foremost symbol of resistance to the burgeoning globalized culture. A third book, Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations*, worried that an overly aggressive pursuit of liberal globalism would provoke a major conflict between the West and a resurgent Islamic traditionalism.

As an ideology uniquely committed to the process of global integration, liberal internationalism was well-suited to an early appreciation of the nature and significance of Muslim radicalism. What’s more, internationalists, committed to the view that relationships between states can and should be fundamentally cooperative, were naturally predisposed to focus on a problem that does much more to unite the interests of governments than it does to divide them.

Obviously, in light of the events of September 11, 2001, one cannot avoid wishing that more had been done against al-Qaeda sooner. But that critique, though oft-leveled at the Clinton administration, flies in the face of the reality that the Bush administration, too, had the opportunity to do more. Simply put, the sort of campaign that was eventually mounted

against the Taliban in October 2001 was not realistic earlier, as a matter of either domestic or international politics. The Clinton administration did manage to foil several plots organized inside the United States, to mount a successful effort to get all but three world governments to deny diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime in Kabul, and to launch some (admittedly, not especially effective) air strikes against al-Qaeda targets.<sup>11</sup>

As the bipartisan *9/11 Commission Report* notes, by late 1999 combating al-Qaeda had become a top administration priority:<sup>12</sup>

The CIA worked hard with foreign security services to detain or at least keep an eye on suspected Bin Ladin associates. Tenet spoke to 20 of his foreign counterparts. Disruption and arrest operations were mounted against terrorists in eight countries. In mid-December, President Clinton signed a Memorandum of Notification (MON) giving the CIA broader authority to use foreign proxies to detain Bin Ladin lieutenants, without having to transfer them to U.S. custody. The authority was to capture, not kill, though lethal force might be used if necessary. Tenet would later send a message to all CIA personnel overseas, saying, "The threat could not be more real. . . . Do whatever is necessary to disrupt UBL's plans. . . . The American people are counting on you and me to take every appropriate step to protect them during this period." The State Department issued a worldwide threat advisory to its posts overseas.

By the Clinton administration's waning days, Richard Clarke, the National Security Council's point person for terrorism, was developing a comprehensive strategy for rolling back al-Qaeda.<sup>13</sup> Among other things, the plan called for "massive support to anti-Taliban groups such as the Northern

Alliance” and “to continue and expand the predator UAV [unarmed aerial vehicle] program . . . and introduce armed UAVs into Afghanistan in the Spring.”<sup>14</sup>

These proposals were developed too late for the Clinton administration to implement, and the incoming Bush administration chose to downplay counterterrorism in favor of a focus on national missile defense and Iraq, not taking the time to review the proposal until shortly before 9/11. All indications are that even if the program had been implemented, this would not have prevented the attacks. The point, however, is simply that Bush’s internationalist predecessors were already developing the substance of his response to 9/11—overthrowing the Taliban in cooperation with the Northern Alliance—*before* the events themselves occurred. Internationalists were able, moreover, to make counterterrorism a high-level security policy without making a “war on terror” the organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy. Rather, the main goal remained what it long had been: to continue to extend the effort launched by Roosevelt and Truman to bring Wilson’s vision of a liberal world order closer and closer to reality.

In such a world, citizens of different countries would meet each other through commerce, tourism, and the global communications network, not as soldiers on the fields of battle. Governments would interact through diplomacy, arbitration, and international institutions, rather than through threats of force. Fighting terrorism, the visible and immediately deadly threat to this vision, was a necessary and vital task but not, itself, the animating idea of national policy.

At the same time, however, something of a new threat to internationalism began to arise, essentially from within the internationalist camp itself and including several of the architects of Clinton-era internationalism. To many liberals, and to many members of the administration, Kosovo became not an

awkward case of internationalism in action—an outlier defining the limits of when liberals would endorse the use of aggressive force absent UN authorization—but a baseline for an ill-defined new era of humanitarian militarism. Michael O’Hanlon, a Brookings Institution scholar who was thought to have been in line for a top post in a hypothetical Kerry administration, penned a 1999 article advocating military intervention “whenever the rate of killing in a country or region greatly exceeds the U.S. murder rate, whether the killing is genocidal in nature or not,” utterly without reference to the UN or any other sort of multilateral authority. He listed ten countries—Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Angola, Bosnia, Chechnya, North Korea, and Kosovo—where interventions would have been warranted by this standard during the Clinton administration alone. Mercifully, he conceded that fighting the Russian army in Chechnya was not a very pragmatic option (as he said, it “would have risked a major-power war between nuclear-weapons states with the potential to kill far more people than the intervention could have saved”<sup>15</sup>), but he gave no consideration to the possibility that launching unprovoked unilateral military strikes at the rate of one every nine months or so would destabilize the entire international system. Indeed, despite O’Hanlon’s demurral on the Russia front, later that year the *New Republic* was lamenting that “Milosevic-like deeds by Milosevic’s allies will provoke only scolding followed by winking,” rather than some unspecified more robust action.<sup>16</sup>

The actual architects of the two Balkan interventions did not implement anything resembling this grandiose agenda, doubtless in part because they were blessed with the sensible caution that is bestowed by the need to actually run policy. But, significantly, a refusal to admit to any mixed feelings whatsoever about Kosovo or to delineate meaningful limits to the legitimate scope of humanitarian warfare eventually proved crippling in the twenty-first century, as many policymakers

and intellectuals came to wish that something along these lines had been done. This vision of an internationalist liberalism defined by its willingness to use military force to prevent human rights violations was a significant distortion of what internationalist policymaking had looked like in practice, and it had an overwhelmingly pernicious effect on the country, the world, and progressive politics. To act in the manner suggested by the most committed interventionists would require the United States to essentially proclaim itself above the rules of the international system—free to attack any country that we deemed unworthy. The advocates of such policies fancied their commitment to humanitarian ends a crucial distinguishing factor from the unilateral nationalists of the right, but from a structural perspective their claims were essentially identical. In both cases, the key element of the international order was to be a two-tiered system of sovereignty. No country could attack or threaten to attack the United States, while we would reserve the right to use military coercion to cause other nations to alter domestic policies with which U.S. political leaders disagreed. The goal was to usher in a noble new world order, enforced not by the easily hamstrung UN Security Council, but by U.S. might. The effect was to render many liberals sympathetic to the right's view of international institutions as a kind of shackle, from which the United States needed to be freed in order to achieve its destiny. The timing of this undermining of liberal internationalism in Democratic circles at the close of the twentieth century, just as the country was about to be put under new management and suffer a dramatic new kind of threat, could not have been worse.