

Liberalism Goes Abroad

THE PREVIOUS TWO CHAPTERS FOCUSED ON describing and analyzing political liberalism as it applies to politics at home. It is time to shift gears and address the question at the heart of this book: what happens when a powerful state adopts a liberal foreign policy? In other words, what happens when a country that is deeply committed to individual rights and doing social engineering to promote those rights employs that template in the wider world?

That formidable state will end up embracing liberal hegemony, a highly interventionist foreign policy that involves fighting wars and doing significant social engineering in countries throughout the world. Its main aim will be to spread liberal democracy, toppling authoritarian regimes in the process, with the ultimate goal of creating a world populated solely by liberal democracies. In effect, a state pursuing liberal hegemony aims to remake the international system in its own image. It will also work to foster an open world economy and build international institutions to deal with both economic and security issues.

When a liberal country finds itself in a position to pursue this ambitious policy, it will almost always do so, in large part because the perceived benefits are so great. Not only does this policy hold out the promise of protecting the rights of people all around the world, it is also said to make the world more peaceful and protect liberalism at home from its enemies. Moreover, liberal hegemony provides the foreign policy elite with many attractive career opportunities, since trying to dominate the globe is a labor-intensive enterprise. Finally, that elite is likely to think it has the know-how to inter-

fere effectively in the politics of other countries. This combination of perceived benefits and faith in the ability to realize them invariably leads powerful liberal states to pursue liberal hegemony.

The prominence that liberalism accords to the notion of inalienable or universal rights means that a foreign policy based on liberal principles requires careful monitoring of other countries' human rights performance. When the rights of foreigners are threatened, a powerful state pursuing liberal hegemony will likely feel compelled to intervene to protect the rights of those individuals. That state is apt to conclude that the best way to ameliorate, even eliminate, the threat to individual rights is to make sure that as many people as possible live in a liberal democracy, where respect for individual rights is of great importance. This logic leads straight to an active policy of regime change aimed at toppling autocracies and replacing them with liberal democracies.

Liberals believe there is another important reason to promote the spread of liberal democracy: it facilitates peace. Liberalism, goes the argument, helps foster a deep commitment to individual rights that transcends state borders, and this in turn fosters tolerance among peoples living in different countries and also inspires them to settle their conflicts peacefully. States come to see themselves as part of an international community based on transnational respect for rights, and that powerful sense of community limits the pernicious effects of nationalism and helps states transcend balance-of-power politics. All of this makes for a more pacific world in which problems like nuclear proliferation and terrorism are effectively taken off the table. Some liberals argue that liberalism also helps further peace by enhancing economic prosperity, which of course is an end in itself.¹

The final incentive for liberal democracies to move toward a world populated by like-minded states is that this would effectively eliminate their principal ideological competitors, who might at some point threaten their survival. To use Woodrow Wilson's famous words, it would "make the world safe for democracy." While there is no question that spreading democracy around the world is an exceptionally ambitious undertaking, liberals believe it is doable. In their story, people are hardwired to prize individual rights, and most liberals are confident about their ability to do social engineering at home as well as abroad.

I take issue with this story on two counts. First, liberal great powers are seldom in a position to pursue liberal hegemony. They normally have little choice but to act according to realist principles, because they are usually in competition with one or more other great powers. This argument is consistent with basic liberal logic, which effectively says that in the absence of a world state, states bent on survival have little choice but to compete for power. Liberalism has to have a night watchman if it is to work: it demands a hierarchic political system such as exists inside the state itself. But the international system is anarchic, not hierarchic. As long as liberal states operate in either bipolarity or multipolarity, they have no choice but to act toward each other according to realist logic.

Second, circumstances sometimes arise where the balance of power is so favorable to a liberal state that it is free to pursue liberal hegemony. This situation is most likely to occur in unipolarity, which is defined as the presence of only one great power in the system, thus rendering great-power security competition impossible. The United States found itself in this position when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, and unsurprisingly, it embraced liberal hegemony.² As the American case shows, this policy invariably goes badly awry, and the aspiring liberal hegemon usually ends up paying a big price for having pursued it.

Turning a country into a liberal democracy is extremely difficult, not only because foreign cultures have deep roots and are hard to manipulate, but also because many people around the world do not privilege individual rights. Moreover, nationalism, which is all about self-determination, leads countries to resist foreign interference in their domestic affairs. Finally, even if one country is pursuing liberal hegemony, others are likely to act according to balance-of-power logic, which means the liberalizer will meet stiff resistance from them. In short, liberalism as foreign policy is a source of trouble.

When it comes to politics among states, liberalism is no match for nationalism and realism. Those two isms together have played the leading role in shaping the modern international system, and their influence is likely to continue. Of course, the appearance of a world state, which would turn the state system hierarchic, would make liberalism a much more potent force in international politics. But there is hardly any chance that will happen.