

G. John Ikenberry. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. xvii+372pp.

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Scholars of international relations who trumpeted unchecked American dominance just after the Cold War look a little forlorn, if not despondent, these days. After the various foreign-policy bumbles of the Bush administration, a possibly endless war on terrorism, and the 2008 worldwide economic collapse, which may still grow worse, who can blame them? The U.S. lead role on the world stage seems destined to share the spotlight with China and other non-western states with greater populations and fewer liberal democratic traditions. So-called “realists” see U.S. power and prestige in inevitable decline.

However, such pessimism is by no means universal in international studies circles. In his solid and convincing *Liberal Leviathan*, G. John Ikenberry, a much respected professor at Princeton, offers an optimistic alternative for the changing world order. He admits that Washington will have to renegotiate longstanding agreements, perhaps on less favourable terms, but that it “can still be at the center of a one-world system defined in terms of open markets, democratic community, cooperative security, and rule-based order” (32). These liberal attributes have combined with Hobbesian authority (individuals’

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submission to the state for security and other benefits) but on a global scale, with the United States acting as Leviathan for weaker states for over sixty years.

Ikenberry traces what he calls time and again a “liberal hegemonic order” from the end of WWII, when the United States landed in a unique position to shape an order of states outside the emerging Soviet sphere, to its present quandaries. He has covered much of the same ground in his 2001 book *After Victory*, which contends more on pragmatic grounds than moral principle that the United States, just as in 1945, stands to benefit by showing restraint in international affairs through institution building rather than through imperialistic bullying. The earlier book also suggests that, despite some election-year sabre-rattling, no U.S. president would seriously hope to uproot the multilateral system of order that the country has been so carefully constructing for decades. Suffice it to say that no uncertain events in the past ten years have pushed the author to amend this thesis—or provide, as he calls the new book, a “sequel”.

Mixing international relations theory with history, Ikenberry explains the larger logic of U.S. behaviour in world affairs rather than the deliberate intentions of presidents, foreign policy intellectuals, and lobbyists. In this wider view of the nature of global relations, he recalls the multipolar balance of power, which dates back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and its eventual shift to bipolarity with the Cold War. During and after WWII, the United States first became a “liberal Leviathan”, guiding its Western allies through consensual declarations and agreements—the Atlantic Charter, the Bretton Woods economic agreements, the UN Charter, the Marshall Plan, and the North Atlantic Treaty. Instead of pushing American dominance to its limits and risk alienating potential allies, the country sought a “milieu grand strategy”, whereby it exchanged concessions

for the predictable behaviour of client states. (Ikenberry readily admits that many cases of U.S. overextension do not fit his model, particularly in Latin America and the Middle East.) Unipolarity reigned after the erosion of Soviet power, and the United States, with its unrivalled military might but also its self-restraint, stood as unchallenged leader of an increasingly capitalist, democratic world. With today's challenges to U.S. global authority, Ikenberry believes that the country "will need to return to the great tasks of liberal order building" (349). Indeed, he highlights the many incentives to do so.

Yet, there are a few drawbacks in terms of the book's readability. Individuals hardly have any roles at all in Ikenberry's broad contours of international relations, which casts an air of abstraction to his argument throughout. This approach helps identify the costs and benefits of one category of dilemmas over another, but the reader will beg the author to come down to earth on occasion. Even the institutions he mentions seem to operate in mysterious fashion. For instance, the clearest description of NATO—"a multilateral body with formal and informal rules and norms of operation that both accommodate the most powerful state and provide roles and rights for others" (355)—is none too clear. Because both the argument and the language, often cluttered with buzz words, repeat themselves so often, there would be plenty of space for a little flesh and blood without such redundancies. This is only a minor caveat, though. Students of foreign affairs and professionals alike will find an invaluable source in this endeavour that Ikenberry pulls off with such undeniable reason and thoroughness.