



Conservative Internationalism Out of Power

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Abstract: Conservative internationalism is an important focus for study because it is a good description of America's de facto grand strategy over time. The United States' deployment patterns, budgetary priorities, and diplomatic initiatives tend, over the long run and across administrations, to be conservative internationalist in effect and in practice. Sometimes this de facto conservative internationalist median is directly observable in the oscillation from one presidential administration to the next. It is also evident in how policymakers find themselves entrapped between budgetary and military realities on the one hand, and liberal rhetoric and public expectations on the other. American statesmen face competing pressures to make soaring commitments to liberal ideals yet govern with a hard-nosed pragmatism that prioritizes American interests. The resulting blend is, often, a rough approximation of conservative internationalism. That is why it is likely to endure as America's preferred approach to the world long past the Trump administration. The mix of American idealism and American strength is too potent for policymakers to ignore

The foreign policy tradition of conservative internationalism is out of power in the White House, and out of favor within its own party. In 2013, a majority of Americans believed the United States should “mind its own business internationally,” which, according to the Pew Research Center, is the first time in nearly 50 years of opinion surveys that this statement has received majority approval.¹ In 2016, the Republican electorate rejected outspoken conservative internationalist candidates, such as Senator Marco Rubio and Governor Jeb Bush, in favor of the stridently nationalist, Jacksonian businessman, Donald J. Trump. It is unclear if conservative internationalism has much of a future.

¹ Pew Research Center, “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World,” May 5, 2016.

In fact, it is debatable whether it had a real past, either. Some scholars have questioned whether a distinct conservative internationalist tradition exists in American foreign policy thinking since Henry Nau first identified one in 2008.² Few American statesmen in history explicitly have embraced the precise mixture of power and principle that Nau identified as the hallmark of conservative internationalism. Ronald Reagan and Harry Truman may be less the exponents of a unique tradition than aberrations, namely, Wilsonians who were slightly more hawkish than average, or realists especially attuned to the American people's need to believe in a higher moral purpose for their nation's role in the world. Nau's extrapolation of an entire tradition from only a few data points—only three or four American presidents fit neatly into the conservative internationalist tradition—raises the question: is conservative internationalism real? And is it significant enough to merit serious study.

Grand Strategy over Time

Yes, international conservatism deserves study. The first reason is that, like all conceptual paradigms, conservative internationalism works better as an ideal type than as an historical description. Few presidents and statesmen fit neatly into *any* category, conservative internationalist or otherwise. Wilson, for example, was sometimes less Wilsonian than his reputation, Henry Kissinger's Kissingerian realism only looked so in comparison to his American context, and the historical Ronald Reagan is only passingly related to his eponymous legend. Intellectual labels are useful precisely insofar as they simplify and organize the otherwise messy historical record—within bounds, of course. The contribution of conservative internationalism as a conceptual category is to rectify a schematic that had grown so simplistic as to be an outright distortion of American diplomatic history.

But the study of conservative internationalism is useful for another reason, one unique to it in contrast to the other traditions of American foreign policy thinking: conservative internationalism is a good description of America's *de facto* or "natural" grand strategy over time. If we examine the record of what the United States has actually done—setting aside its declared policy, the official statements of its officials and bureaucrats, examining only the long-term pattern of American behavior³—it looks remarkably similar to conservative internationalism. To put it another way, the United States' deployment patterns, budgetary priorities, and diplomatic initiatives tend, over the long run and across administrations, to be conservative internationalist in effect and in practice.

Consider the expansion of NATO and the spread of democracy across Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The U.S. policy of fostering "Europe whole and free" was declared by the George H. W. Bush administration and largely implemented by

² Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ See Nina Silove's definition of grand strategy in "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies*, 2017.

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