The title for Good-Bye Hegemony!, the engaging and insightful book by Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, is a play on that of the engaging and insightful 2003 film, Good-Bye Lenin! about well-meaning efforts to delude a dedicated Communist in post-Cold War East Germany into thinking that Communism still exists there. However, Communist East Germany (and Lenin) did once exist. ‘Hegemony’, by contrast, is, and always has been, a useless and damagingly misdirecting international relations concept to which no one should ever have said Hello!

Sorting through various definitions at the beginning of the book, Reich and Lebow array several that seem to capture the essence of hegemony: controlling leadership, domination, or the ability to shape international rules according to the hegemon’s own interests. ‘Hegemony’, then, is an extreme word suggesting supremacy, mastery, preponderant influence, and full control. Hegemons force others to bend to their will whether they like it or not. The authors do include a designation by John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan about how a hegemon has the ability ‘to establish a set of norms that others willingly embrace’ (2). But this, it seems to me, represents an extreme watering-down of the word and suggests opinion leadership or entrepreneurship and success at persuasion, not hegemony.

To a degree, Reich and Lebow fall into this same trap by suggesting that the United States exercised ‘limited’ or ‘partial’ hegemony in the early years after the Second World War. But hegemony cannot be limited any more than rapture can be modified – the phrase ‘modified rapture’ in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Mikado emerged out of a fortuitous rehearsal misunderstanding, and it is of course intended, and received, as a joke.

The United States can certainly take credit in those years for being an important influence in establishing a Western order in which the losers of the Second World War came to view the world in much the same way as those who had bombed Dresden and Hiroshima, emerging as key contributors to that order in the process. This was one of the most impressive instances of enlightened self-interest in history. However, the United States hardly forced that to happen due to its hegemonic (or limited hegemonic) status. It may have nudged, persuaded, and encouraged the process to move along, but it had a highly responsive audience in devastated peoples who were most ready to embrace the message. It seems entirely possible that much the same thing would have happened if the United States had never existed or if it had retreated into truculent isolationism.

Over the course of the decades, the United States has provided added value to the international order at various points. But, as Reich and Lebow forcefully point out, it has also routinely embraced error and engaged in fiasco. For example, it


‘grossly exaggerated’ the threat presented by the Soviet Union; promulgated and then wallowed mindlessly and parochially in messianism and in such self-infatuated characterizations as ‘exceptionalism’ and ‘indispensability’; bullied other countries self-defeatingly; reneged on its own liberal trading rules; and has often been ‘unable to impose solutions consistent with hegemony’ (2, 134, 168, 23) – even, it might be added, as it remain studiously distant from genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda and from catastrophic civil war in Congo.

Indeed, it is impressive that the ‘hegemon’, endowed by definition by what Reich and Lebow aptly call a ‘grossly disproportionate’ military capacity (16), has won no wars since 1945 except where enemy forces essentially did not exist: Grenada, Panama, and, as it turned out, the Gulf War of 1991. And in the last of these ventures, American hegemonic mastery consisted mainly of begging the international community, which already agreed that Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was unacceptable, to please, please, please let it launch a war to repel the invaders, taking all the casualties itself. That the bemused observers allowed themselves to be persuaded scarcely constitutes a supreme exercise in domination.

Reich and Lebow also point out that American efforts to manage the Middle East, as with Vietnam in the 1960s, have been ‘a primary source of disorder’ (xi), noting particularly that ‘since 9/11, the United States is arguably in the grip of the same kind of paranoia as in the early years of the Cold War’ (133).

In fact, during the current century American foreign policy has, in its most dynamic aspects, been an abject, and highly destructive, failure. The hegemon has launched two misguided and failed wars of aggression and occupation in which trillions of dollars have been squandered and well over a hundred thousand people have perished, including more than twice as many Americans as were killed on 9/11. And there has also been a third war – the spillover one in Pakistan, which the United States avidly promoted. Even though Pakistan receives US$2–3 billion in American aid each year, large majorities of Pakistanis (74 per cent in the most recent tally) have come to view the United States as an enemy (Pew Research Center, 2012). As negative achievements go, that foreign policy development is a strong gold medal contender.

The closest to success was the intervention in Libya (which Reich and Lebow largely approve of). However, Americans have now been advised to leave that country because it has become too dangerous for its liberators.

In the wake of foreign policy debacle in the Middle East, there are signs suggesting the hegemonic delusion may have been played out. Although fully two-thirds of Americans continue to favour greater US involvement in the global economy, only 46 per cent deem it ‘very desirable’ for the United States to exert strong leadership in world affairs – the lowest level. In the same poll, only 11 per cent of Europeans said they felt that way: the ‘dominated’, it would appear, do not seem to have gotten the message (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2013).

The American people do not want to be disconnected, but they are fully able to contain their enthusiasm for being drawn into costly foreign disasters by a foreign policy establishment deluded with visions of hegemony and determined to look like it is exerting strong leadership in world affairs, while remaining blissfully incapable of frankly examining the full scope of the disasters it has already perpetrated. In a speech at West Point on 28 May 2014, President Barack Obama contended that the question we face ‘is not whether America will lead but how we will lead’. Perhaps the American (and European) people can be forgiven for worrying about the results.
Reich and Lebow conclude their discussion of hegemony by urging that 'it is incumbent on IR scholars to cut themselves loose from this concept' (183). It seems even more important for the foreign policy establishment to do so. After that, maybe we can say good-bye to other scholarly concepts that are often vacuous, usually misdirecting, and singularly unhelpful: concepts like 'polarity', 'primacy', 'balancing', 'system', 'power transition', and, eventually perhaps, 'power' itself.

References


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reply to warner and mueller

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doi: 10.1057/eps.2014.26; published online 12 September 2014

Our book Good-Bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System has two central themes. The first is an interrogation of the relationship between material and social power. Realists focus exclusively on the former and discount the latter. Liberals rhetorically acknowledge the latter but ignore it in their formal models and heavily discount it in their historical analyses. These tendencies are reflected in the two approaches’ working definitions of hegemony (domination versus leadership) and a series of theoretical research programs – such as power transition theory – that these definitions have inspired. Although debates about hegemonic stability theory has long been out of vogue in the United States, many of its assumptions about dominance, potential challengers and 'wars