

good-bye to all that

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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.

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About the Author

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reply to warner and mueller

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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

of transition' have become foundational to academic and policy debates. American international relations (IR) theory and foreign policy conflate power and influence, with damaging consequences that we detail in our book.

Constructivists focus overwhelmingly on social power while rhetorically acknowledging that social and material forms of power are 'fused'. The constructivist research program, with which we are sympathetic, has made significant progress in the last two decades. Yet its vagueness about the sources of, and relationship between, material and social bases of power leaves its proponents unable to explain, in a comprehensive way, large swathes of international relations where material capabilities are important – even if socially mediated in their application.

We attempt to reconcile these approaches, at least in a preliminary fashion, by thinking more systematically about the ways in which material and social power interact: first in the context of American foreign policy and then, more broadly, in global politics. We contrast the prevailing concept of hegemony in American IR theory with that of *hēgemonia*, a Greek formulation in which legitimacy (and not just domination) is an intrinsic component of rulership. Building on that foundation, we distinguish between power and influence, the latter acknowledging the integral relationship between material and social forms of power. A failure to do so, we argue, largely explains the inability of the United States to achieve its policy goals over the course of five decades.

Our second theme follows and builds on the first. We demonstrate the growing disjuncture between the conventional formulations of hegemony and America's role for much of the post-war period, going back at least to the Korean War. We disentangle the three key aspects of hegemony: agenda setting, economic

management or stabilization (that we characterize as 'custodianship') and the material, and often militarized, 'sponsorship' of global initiatives. We argue that these three distinct functions integrate material and social power in different ways. States and many non-state actors have chosen to emphasize contrasting functions based on their cultural proclivities, their conceptions of their interests and their material capabilities. European states (individually and through the European Union) have focused on agenda setting, which predominantly relies on social power supplemented by limited forms of material power. Although still embryonic, China increasingly uses its growing economic power in aid, trade and finance to assume a custodial role, a process that accelerated during the Great Recession. The United States, despite its reliance on a rhetoric that emphasizes 'leadership', has increasingly sponsored policies that sustain the global security architecture in accordance with global protocols in the last decade.

We demonstrate the theoretical limitations of research programs that conflate these three functions. We question their key substantive assumption that these functions can only be performed by hegemons, and that in their absence there is a high risk of global instability. Such formulations serve to validate American exceptionalism and the entitlements that Americans insist they have earned by underwriting the system. The disaggregation of these three functions, we contend, is not a recipe for instability but could actually enhance global security and prosperity.

We illustrate the irresponsible, counterproductive policies that theories of hegemony justify. These include nation building through military intervention (in Afghanistan and Iraq) and transgressing the economic principles that the US advocates (by excessive borrowing and the imposition of unilateral steel tariffs). In case studies, we illustrate the limitations of

conventional realist and liberal approaches and the systematic advantages of sponsorship. The latter brings reduced costs in blood and treasure, greater legitimacy and influence and less need to engage in complex and costly disengagements.

We do not expect mainstream realists and liberals to embrace our arguments and formulation of sponsorship. Nor do we assume that policymakers will abandon a culturally embedded propensity for asserting America's global leadership in favor of a more modest conception that, paradoxically, expands its influence. However, academics and policymakers are in the midst of a debate about the virtues of 'deep engagement' – essentially a continuation of traditional multilateral policy leadership – or retrenchment. We offer a third option. We recognize that any nuanced formulation risks marginalization. That risk, from our perspective, does not justify our silence.

Danny Warner buys our diagnosis but neither our prognosis nor indeed the intellectual purpose of our endeavor. He has three objections. The first is that books like ours are spitting into the wind. Nobody in power will listen to a couple of disaffected academics, let alone restructure their security and foreign policies. This may well be the case, but should not deter scholars from writing critiques and proposing alternatives. We must work on the assumption that change is possible and prepare the intellectual foundations for it. Toward this end, we frame our project in the language of American IR theory because that is the audience – faculty and students – we hope to reach. One need not speak the language of the Prince, but at least one that he or she can understand.

Danny's second objection is even more curious. He asks why should 'the rest of the world listen to North American academics? ... Why should someone in New Delhi, Beijing or Rio be reading Keohane, Nye, Mersheimer, Ikenberry or

Doyle or similar authors cited in most of the footnotes?' We are not writing about India, China or Brazil and the world but about the United States and its changing role in a dynamic global system. Furthermore, people in these countries *do* avidly read the work of these authors. It seems senseless to us that these should be the only voices that non-Americans encounter, a view that can only encourage the perception of American intellectual debate as uncritical, lacking introspection.

Danny accuses us of encouraging hegemony by reconceptualizing the nature of American influence. This is a stretch: This is like saying someone is sexist because he supports programs to reduce campus sexual assault. Our suggestion that policymakers reconceptualize how best to attain policy goals is not a prescription for hegemony, especially when it involves supporting globally sanctioned initiatives. Finally, he asks: 'Is their critique of policies towards China fundamentally different from the liberals/realists with a multipolar twist?' Of course it is, because we interpret Chinese goals differently, highlight economic behavior that seeks to sustain the *status quo* in conflict with prevailing views of China, and, as a result, advocate different responses toward the Chinese. Acknowledging the rise of China and the way it behaves does not buy into polarity or any particular framework, just the extraordinary economic growth and significance of the world's most populous country.

In sum, Danny suggests that we should have written a different book: about issues such as what 'the world will look like after the dollar is no longer the world's currency' as seen from the BRICS' perspective. It is a valid issue, one that would play well in many countries, but not – for better or for worse – in Washington. We encourage him to write such a volume.

John Mueller is more sympathetic to our project and offers additional evidence in support of our claims about the

dysfunctional nature of US foreign policy. He criticizes our somewhat plastic conceptualization of hegemony and suggests that describing the early post-war years as a kind of limited hegemony is an oxymoron, something akin to modified honesty. In our view, the United States did possess extraordinary influence in the immediate aftermath of World War II, which is part of the current problem. Subsequent American leaders and foreign policy intellectuals failed to recognize how extraordinary and temporary this condition was, became addicted to the view that they could run the world the way one would a Monopoly board –

not that they ever actually did – and could not accustom themselves to living in a more mature and pluralist world. Current American leaders are still in thrall to this legacy, which has been conceptualized as hegemony.

John concludes by suggesting that after putting nails in the coffin of hegemony ‘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’. Our goal, in writing this book, is to contribute to that process.

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Richard Ned Lebow is Professor of International Political Theory at King’s College London, Bye-Fellow of Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, and James O. Freedman Presidential Professor Emeritus at Dartmouth College. His two most recent books are *Archduke Franz Ferdinand Lives! A World Without World War I* (Palgrave) and *Constructing Cause in International Relations* (Cambridge University Press).

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