

Book Review: After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars by G. John Ikenberry

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Ikenberry, G. John, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. xiii + 293 pages. Paperback, \$45.00.

After Victory explores how winners of major wars since 1648 have sought to restore order and perpetuate their control. John Ikenberry, professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, finds that, paradoxically, winners in these great historical moments had the most success when limiting their exercise of power through binding international institutions. He believes we must move beyond realist theories of balance-of-power or hegemonic control to understand how institutions help allay fears of domination and abandonment by weaker states. The work focuses on how a super powerful, yet reluctant, U.S. willingly restrained itself after 1945 in a dense web of institutions to gain long-term peace. The strategy has worked because it is applied by mature, accessible, liberal industrial democracies, and thus American policy has sought to spread democracy worldwide.

Ikenberry maintains that the basic problem of order formation is how to cope with "asymmetries of power." When victors have attempted to create a balance-of-power, weaker states attempt to counter-balance against the hegemon, which leads to competing blocs and another war. Where the hegemon attempts to dominate and reap short-term gains, weaker states have nothing to lose by resisting, and the order fails upon the inevitable exhaustion of the dominant state. He argues that orders constructed of mutually dependent institutions tend to be more "sticky" because long-term commitments increase the "costs of exist." Institutional orders also afford the weaker states "voice opportunities" to influence policy, thus they are willing to resolve conflicts by negotiation instead of war (p. 60-63).

By 1945, the U.S. was in a far more favorable position than the victors of 1648, 1713, 1815, and 1919 to establish a liberal hegemony; and the desire for binding security ties from its

allies increased after 1950 due to the Korean War and Soviet development of atomic weapons. A Truman Doctrine began to take shape designed to contain the Soviets and guarantee open markets, which he saw as central to preventing future wars. Truman believed that the closed autarkic blocs, created by Germany, Japan, and the British Empire, with their depression causing ideas of spheres of influence and economic nationalism must be replaced by an open system. America's planners had also warned that the U.S. could not remain a great industrial power capable of keeping worldwide peace within the confines of the Western hemisphere; it must also have the raw materials and markets of at least the rim-lands of Europe and Asia. The massive aid of the Marshall Plan purchased European unity and included a rearmed Germany in the Atlantic world's NATO as a buffer against Russia; thus, neither could dominate the Eurasian land mass. Germany and Japan, U.S. occupied "semi-sovereign powers," as capitalist democracies became key allies in the order governed by the Bretton Woods institutions: the United Nations, NATO, and the alliances in Asia, especially that with Japan (p. 9, 250-53).

Ikenberry points out that many observers expected the American hegemony to disappear after the Cold War and a return to great-power balancing; but the liberal international order has grown stronger in spite of the increased asymmetries of power. Because the American system was so open and non-confrontational, the Soviets gave up control of Eastern Europe and accepted a unified Germany within a growing NATO. Other security and economic institutions such as APEC, the WTO, and NAFTA demonstrated American commitment to help states that are transitioning to market democracy. The U.S. traded domestic reforms for trade/security partnerships that result in a "layer-cake" of hundreds of intergovernmental institutions, which include the IMF and the G-7 and G-10 groups, extending from the US across the Atlantic and

Pacific to perpetuate an open, multilateral system. These interlocking institutions provide access to American markets and lessen the importance of temporary power shifts (p. 254-56).

This work attempts to warn contemporary American foreign policy makers against a unilateral exercise of power. To maintain its preeminent position in a rapidly changing world, Ikenberry believes America must continue to show restraint and lead a stable, multilateral political order with "low returns to power" (p. 267). His theories have been challenged for being too optimistic concerning the power of institutions in preserving order. Critics have pointed to the many instances of American unilateral actions since 1945: Eisenhower's actions during the Suez Crisis of 1956, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, Kennedy's doctrine of flexible response for Europe, Nixon's shocks to the economic features of the Bretton Woods agreement, Reagan's pressuring of the Soviet Union, and the recent expansion of NATO to Russia's door, to name more than a few; and have offered reasons outside of the liberal international order for the maintenance of U.S. dominance, such as the impact of nuclear weapons, nationalism, and the inordinate military power of America vis-à-vis its potential rivals. The U.S., like all previous hegemons, leads because of its strength, not because of institutions that limit its strength, and thus must alter the system periodically as the geopolitical realities change.

Of course there have been a number of developments since 2001 that offer challenges to Ikenberry's theory: the fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Ukraine, and Syria, immigration issues, Brexit, U.S. President Trump's foreign policy shifts, and the rise of China; the author attempts to explain these with a more plausible or "weak" version of his thesis in "Reflections on After Victory," a 2019 article in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (Volume 21, Issue 1). It argues that America's liberal hegemonic order is hierarchical, the U.S. can make

and break rules, but it pays a price in legitimacy. A series of worthwhile and thought-provoking articles that offer realist critiques and defense of *After Victory* can be found in the same issue.

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