

# A Critique of Deep Engagement, the Social Narrative of US Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

This article offers a critical perspective of the discourse of deep engagement that portrays the United States as the world’s necessary or indispensable power. It describes deep engagement as a social narrative that, like literary narratives, has a story, a plot and an argument. This narrative has persisted in a time of waning hegemony because it makes an apparently appealing moral case for American global leadership. Yet deep engagement remains flawed both from a strategic perspective and disregards the history of great-power rise and decline. From a strategic perspective, while hegemons describe their leadership in moral terms, their rhetoric is often betrayed by their actions. From a historical perspective, while hegemons regard their own efforts and values as instrumental to their status, their rise can be credited to a wave of economic and political forces the state cannot control.

## Key Words

hegemony – imperialism – liberalism – narratives – Pax Americana – radicalism – realism

## Introduction

“We are seeking to establish a *Pax Americana* maintained not by arms but by mutual respect and good will and the tranquillizing processes of reason.”

- Charles Evans Hughes, 1924<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, ‘The Centenary of the Monroe Doctrine’, p. 17.

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Those involved in crafting and studying foreign policy from within the United States often recommend an active role for Washington in world affairs. The most prevalent view among scholars and diplomats is in favour something called *deep engagement*, a term for US global leadership in economic relations, the establishment of political order, and the protection of human rights. Supporters of deep engagement contend that the most significant source of American power is its values and not its extraordinary military or economic dominance. They claim that America’s values—loosely defined as the support for political liberties, individual expression, and market freedoms—make US power unique in the world. American stewardship, they argue, makes the world freer, prosperous, peaceful, and, because of its great benefits, ‘indispensable’ for the good of the world. According to deep engagement, Washington’s own reticence is the greatest danger to world peace.<sup>2</sup>

Supporters (and critics) of deep engagement acknowledge that many of Washington’s recent foreign endeavours have been unsuccessful. In fact, the United States has lost influence in almost every part of the world. Among other plans, the Belt and Road Initiative has extended Beijing’s influence beyond Asia to Africa, challenging Washington’s Asian ‘pivot’ in the

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<sup>2</sup> Coined by Joseph Nye in the years following the end of the Cold War, the term *deep engagement* is often preferred by its supporters over the more common term of *primacy*. For advocates of a US-led international order, the latter merely describes the world’s distribution of power rather than America’s grand strategy (which this study engages as a social narrative). According to Stephen Brooks, John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, deep engagement has three parts: US leadership of international institutions and the liberal order more generally; US military bases across the world, and US security obligations to friendly states. These components are not merely reflective of US dominance but rather the foreign policy objectives of the United States. Nye, ‘East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement’; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, ‘Don’t Come Home America: The Case against Retrenchment’.

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process.<sup>3</sup> Formerly loyal allies in Europe and the Middle East—France, Germany, Turkey, and the United Kingdom—have become more reticent in their commitments.<sup>4</sup> Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has challenged US dominance in Eastern Europe. The Arab Spring has exposed US hypocrisy on its seeming commitment to liberal values, most notably the contradiction between arms sales to nondemocratic leaders and America’s rhetoric support for political and economic rights. Even the US military, the most dominant in the history of the modern world, could not achieve its desired outcomes in war. America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, estimated to have cost in the range of four to six trillion dollars,<sup>5</sup> have not yielded more peaceful, prosperous, or secure nations.<sup>6</sup> If power is the ability to get others to do as one wishes, then surely the United States is in decline.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Harper, ‘China’s Eurasia: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Creation of a New Eurasian Power’; Nordin and Weissmann, ‘Will Trump make China great again? The belt and road initiative and international order’; Wang, ‘Offensive for defensive: the belt and road initiative and China’s new grand strategy’.

<sup>4</sup> Layne, ‘It’s Over, Over There: The Coming Crack-up in Transatlantic Relations’.

<sup>5</sup> The \$4T to \$6T total for both Afghanistan and Iraq came from a Harvard Kennedy School analysis. Late in 2019, *The New York Times* calculated a figure of \$2T for Afghanistan that underscored the economic and political instability of the county, and presaged the Taliban takeover of 2021. The report’s title was reminiscent of the paper’s real estate section: Almkhatar and Norland, ‘What Did the United States Get for \$2 Trillion in Afghanistan?’ See also: Bilmes, ‘The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets’.

<sup>6</sup> A December 2019 report by *The Washington Post* found that according to the government’s internal reviews, documents *The Post* has called “The Afghanistan Papers,” the United States misled the public about its nation-building efforts. Frank statements by military officials were omitted in official reports. Whitlock, ‘At War With the Truth’.

<sup>7</sup> The extent of Washington’s global power, that is, questions of conceptualisation and measurement, are the subject of continued debate. This work does not take a position on the amount of American power, merely that its influence on the world stage is in decline. For a

Given America’s foreign policy struggles, why does deep engagement persist? According to its proponents, the problem is Washington’s wavering commitment to allies and declining public support for international engagement. Yet this work takes an alternative perspective by contending that deep engagement remains conceptually flawed. Potent in rhetoric but not in strategy, deep engagement came to prevalence as US hegemony waned.<sup>8</sup>

The first section of this article portrays deep engagement as a social narrative, with a story, plot, and argument. By narrative, one means the tales one hears and tells that can be used to make sense of a complex world.<sup>9</sup> (Social narratives are thus the shared stories of groups of people.) Fundamentally, deep engagement and other arguments about the United States as a moral great power pair notions of liberalism with notions of imperialism (the former is advertised. The latter is not). Such *liberal-imperial states*, defined in the next section, value citizenship and individual freedoms, but also engage in foreign adventures that limit the freedoms of people in other parts of the world.

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review of the concept of power, see: Barnett and Duval, ‘Power in International Politics’; Kim, ‘Measures of National Power’.

<sup>8</sup> It may be necessary to distinguish among *dominance*, *unipolarity*, and *hegemony*. By dominance, one means a condition of great power status on the world stage. Unipolarity is the presence of one great power and several minor powers. Unipolarity is thus different than bipolarity, tripolarity, and multipolarity, which refer to conditions of two, three, and many great powers. Hegemony, described in detail below, is a condition whereby a dominant power becomes a commanding one, and creates the rules for other states to follow. Hegemonic powers are very dominant great powers, and, at least in theory, hegemony can occur under any condition of polarity.

<sup>9</sup> Our species might even be best identified as one that creates narratives, and thus called label *Homo narrator* or *Homo narrativus*. And scholarly theories more generally are often based on narratives. Shiller, ‘Narrative Economics’, p. 972; Somers, ‘Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation’.

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Next, despite the contradictions of liberalism and imperialism, deep engagement has become the dominant social narrative because it makes an apparently appealing moral case for American hegemonic power. By portraying the United States as a positive force for good, whose leadership comes at the behest of other nations and creates a more peaceful and prosperous world, proponents of deep engagement associate US hegemony with human progress.

Finally, deep engagement is a fundamentally flawed self-portrait of American power, a finding that can be observed in two parts. In the first, this work invokes the traditions of realism and constructivism to show that a state’s strategic interests are often prioritised over values. Here, it is not that *all* realists or *all* constructivists would agree on the motivations of great powers, but that these traditions pose serious problems for the deep engagement narrative, which portrays the United States as motivated by benevolence and propelled to hegemony by its value. Using the lenses of realism and constructivism, one finds a contradiction between the rhetoric of deep engagement and the strategic interests of the United States (and other nations’ strategic interests).

The second part of the critique invokes radicalism to show that hegemony is a cyclical phenomenon on the world stage, connected to patterns of global capitalism and great-power rise and decline. Furthermore, hegemonic powers often describe their leadership in moral terms. Here, too, it is not that *all* radicals agree (even the term “radical” is something of a catchall for a variety of Marxist and world-system approaches to world politics). Still, using the lens of

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radicalism, one finds a contradiction between the assertion of values as the source of American power and the actual circumstances of great power rise and decline.<sup>10</sup>

Together, the parts of the critique draw on very different assumptions about international politics (it is hard to imagine more starkly opposed traditions in IR). Yet they converge on the question of American hegemony. It is a strange world, indeed, when the radical Perry Anderson praises the realism of John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt.<sup>11</sup> Still, as less prevalent traditions among policymakers, realism, constructivism, and radicalism are perhaps better positioned to present uncomfortable truths about American power.

This article begins with an overview of political liberalism and its connection to Washington’s hegemonic power. It then presents a critique of the strategy of US hegemony through the lenses of realism and constructivism. Following this, it presents a second critique based on the historical circumstances of hegemony based on radicalism. Finally, it offers some conclusions on the nature of hegemony based on the insights from these critiques.

### **Social Narratives and the Liberal-Imperial Hegemonic State**

A narrative is a representation of events over time.<sup>12</sup> Unlike personal narratives, narratives about nations are shared, belonging to many individuals at once. Both personal and national narratives

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<sup>10</sup> To be clear, it is not that *all* liberals, *all* realists, or *all* radicals have reached the same conclusions about US power. Rather, the point is that the traditions of realism and radicalism lend themselves to particular critiques of American hegemony.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, ‘Social history from a bird’s eye view: Perry Anderson’s theory of international relations’.

<sup>12</sup> This is a minimalist definition. A maximalist approach adds other attributes, including: causality, or why something happened; coherence, the logical sequence of the story; meaningfulness and structure, which denote a sense of unity to the story (a beginning, middle,

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contribute to the creation of identity, which is a sense of belonging.<sup>13</sup> Yet with scale comes complexity. Public or social narratives are not the sum of individual stories.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they are formed collectively, by people in formal and informal institutions, such as governmental agencies, media organisations, universities, coffee shops, and hunters’ breakfasts. Social narratives become prevalent through what interpretivist studies call multiplicity, which is the act of being repeated, with variation, across contexts. Yet despite their international nature, narratives can create the false impression that societies are like islands, connected only by the shared experience of an anarchic ocean. After all, social narratives are self-narratives, voiced by and for the social group, making the narrator and audience almost indistinguishable.<sup>15</sup> In creating a sense of belonging, narratives about nations rely on exclusion, the Other who is not part of the group. (This may be true even for non-state internationalist groups, such as workers’ organisations, who maintain a distinction with their bosses.)

Narrative analysis may be well-suited for hegemony, a condition reliant on a shared societal story. Hegemony, which as a concept originated in the ancient world, refers to a condition of dominance. The term has both societal and inter-societal applications. Hegemony can describe the power of the ruling strata at home or of a nation on the world stage.

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and end), and effects, or the ways narratives contribute to how others see the world. For Shaul Shenav, maximalist approaches may exclude many non-fictional storylines because not all human behaviour can be explained with such organization. People may act without rationality, tell incoherent stories, or may tell stories that defy patterns commonly found in novels. Shenav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, pp. 11-15.

<sup>13</sup> Andrews, *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change*; Lebow, *The Politics and Ethics of Identity*.

<sup>14</sup> Shenav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Shenav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*, pp. 17-18.

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Remarkably, statesmen and writers across the millennia have characterised hegemony as the pairing of force and consent.<sup>16</sup> They disagree, however, on emphasis. Machiavelli advised his prince to utilise both traits but considered fear more important than love. Other thinkers such as Stuart Hall believed persuasion to be more important than coercion, at least in within societies.<sup>17</sup> For Hall, hegemony involved social subordinates incorporating the beliefs and practices of the ruling bloc into their own lives, and, in so doing, internalising messages of economic and political inferiority. He thought battles to challenge or secure hegemony took place in the cultural sphere.<sup>18</sup>

In the international context, however, most scholars agree that force is more important for hegemony than consent.<sup>19</sup> Economic power fuels state capacity to do harm. Great powers nevertheless work to persuade other nations of their morality and of the benefits resulting from their leadership. Leaders invoke similar arguments at home. For some writers, hegemony of a ruling class is a prerequisite to international hegemony of a nation-state.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony*.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Gramsci, the most significant writer on hegemony the twentieth century, emphasised the cultural power of the ruling bloc. Gramsci’s judgements have in turn achieved a kind of hegemonic status. He drew upon Machiavelli to demonstrate how a ruling bloc could wield power over the masses, especially in cases when its interests were antithetical to the public. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>19</sup> A noteworthy exception is Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, who consider persuasion more significant than coercion. Reich and Lebow, *Goodbye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System*.

<sup>20</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After*.



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Washington has cultivated domestic consent through political liberalism. Perhaps because of its centrality in the modern world, liberalism, much like hegemony, has come to mean many things. But unlike hegemony, liberalism’s essential core is contested.<sup>21</sup> Some descriptions of liberalism prioritise personal freedoms apart from states, whereas others emphasise the democratic nature of institutions that guarantee personal freedoms. Still others point to key ideas, such as tolerance, rationality, and a commitment to liberation.<sup>22</sup> Divergent meanings may be unavoidable, given political liberalism’s commitment to incrementalism. Whereas conservatism is about slowing the pace of social change, and radicalism is about rapid social change, liberalism is focused on a generational pace of social change. The liberal state’s promise is of a better life for citizens over the long term (realised as expanded political rights and material well-being). Devoted to neither the old order nor revolutionary upheaval, liberalism’s reformist perspective serves as a testament to its endurance.<sup>23</sup>

For the US foreign policy establishment, political liberalism is an ideology of personal freedom and political liberty that is best secured by democratic governments.<sup>24</sup> On the world

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<sup>21</sup> Bell, ‘What Is Liberalism?’.

<sup>22</sup> For a brief but insightful overview, consult Raymond Williams’s entry on liberalism in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, pp. 179-181. See also: Waldron, ‘Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism’.

<sup>23</sup> Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant*.

<sup>24</sup> Critically and semi-affectionately called “the Blob,” the foreign policy establishment includes diplomats, intelligence analysts, military leaders, the president and White House advisors, and members of Congress who serve in a foreign policy capacity.

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stage, this vision of liberalism emphasises international institutions and economic interdependence, a euphemism for free market capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

Foreign policymakers’ descriptions of US power are new versions of enduring explanations. When they become great powers, democracies feel the need to explain their anti-democratic actions in the world. From the founding to the present, the United States has been committed to both liberalism and imperialism, first expanding its power to the continent, then the hemisphere, and finally the globe. Yet this paradoxical *liberal-imperial* state, however surprising, should not be unexpected. Great powers tend to be expansionist whether they are democratic or non-democratic. They also craft narrative justifications for how their imperial actions are consistent with liberal values.

Typically, liberal-imperial states use three claims to account for their foreign adventures:

1. Expansionism is an attempt to align the colonised area with principles of reason and morality.<sup>26</sup>
2. Expansionism is an act of salvation, an attempt to prevent innocents from suffering at the hands of unjust rulers. Here, liberal states appeal to their citizens’ support for universal rights and their desire to see suffering diminished.<sup>27</sup>
3. Expansionism ensures stability. Liberal states shall defend their republics against chaos-prone illiberal Others.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*; Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Liberalism’s universalist aspirations’, David Williams explains, ‘based on some account of human nature or what a properly exercised human reason would conclude, can clearly lead to justifications for conquest and colonial rule where practices and institutions fall short of these exacting standards.’ Williams, ‘Liberalism, Colonialism and Liberal Imperialism’, p. 98.

<sup>27</sup> Wallerstein, *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power*.

<sup>28</sup> Desch, ‘Benevolent Cant? Kant’s Liberal Imperialism’.

With these claims, the US liberal-imperial state invoked rhetoric reminiscent of British hegemony.<sup>29</sup> In both cases, the state attempted to tap into public understandings about how the world worked and how it ought to function. It appealed both to democratic values and a sense of national prestige. Liberal-imperial states attempt to shape (and, logically, are also shaped by) what are called the *social imaginaries* of their citizens, a term that refers to the ways people envisage social existence. Social imaginaries are those background elements of worldviews, not quite ideologies and not quite theories, but rather organising ideas about society.<sup>30</sup> British imperialists claimed their actions brought commerce, Christianity, and civilization to peoples in need, as if colonial possessions were an act of national self-sacrifice. Social narratives are thus projections of social imaginaries (that is, how we convey social imaginaries to others).

Like other non-fiction narratives, chronicles about liberal-imperial states have a *story*, a *plot*, and an *argument*.<sup>31</sup> By story or storyline, one means the events of the narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Stories provide a sequence of events.<sup>32</sup> Unlike a timeline, a story grabs the reader’s attention, leading one to think about why events unfolded as they did. Stories convey facts as well as a sense of opening and closure, even if they jump around in time

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<sup>29</sup> On the connection between liberalism and the British empire, see Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist*.

<sup>30</sup> Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire*, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> White, ‘The Structure of Historical Narrative’.

<sup>32</sup> Narratives are thus different from other things, such as laws, scientific equations, and recipes. Still, those involved in non-narrative activities—such as reading laws, studying chemical reactions, or following recipes—nonetheless rely on narratives, as shown by Supreme Court opinions, many Noble Prize speeches, and cooking shows.

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(as is often the case with national narratives).<sup>33</sup> The same historical event, such as the death of Stalin or the fall of the Berlin Wall, may be used as an opening or closing of a story. In the case of US dominance, some writers believe US hegemony began with the close of World War II, while others contend it began with the end of the Cold War.

The plot and argument give meaning to the story. The plot helps readers (and listeners and viewers too) to understand the story’s events, to allow them to stop wondering about what happens next and to make connections.<sup>34</sup> For this study, the plot refers to the actors’ actions or historical forces that led to America’s rise or threatened its decline. The notion of causality, significant for non-fiction narratives, is found in the plot and refers to those elements that move the story along. In the context of US power, narratives attribute causality to divergent factors, including values, unipolarity, bipolarity, economic supremacy, and military might.

The argument performs a similar task, albeit on a larger scale in the form of conclusions or theories. Such arguments are formed based on the stories and plots narrators have imagined.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Andrews, *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*.

<sup>34</sup> Though they are closely related, Hayden White considered stories distinct from plots, especially in non-fiction narratives. In effect, the story leads readers to ask questions and the plot provides answers. White conceived of plots as the specific type of story, such as comic, ironic, or tragic. Still, these labels may be applied to public narratives with more difficulty. White’s examples were usually individual authors, not collectives of people who may be individually unaware of their narrations. White, ‘The Structure of Historical Narrative’; *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*.

<sup>35</sup> Imagination is what lends meaning to our memories. Molly Andrews writes: ‘Even when our memories are accurate...the meaning which we attribute to those experiences, in other words the reason they are important to us, is highly influenced by the imaginary world we weave around them’ (*Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*, p. 4).

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In international relations, the argument, in recommending a course of action, is usually more significant than the story or plot.

This section has stressed the importance of political liberalism in social narratives that, much like literary narratives, have a story, a plot, and an argument. It has shown how liberal-imperial states turn to a variety of explanations for their expansionist foreign policies. The next section describes deep engagement narrative that portrays US hegemony as necessary for global stability and prosperity.

### **Deep Engagement: The United States as a Necessary Power**

The narrative heard most frequently by the American public portrays Washington’s power as friendly, virtuous, and essential for creating a peaceful and prosperous world. Out of the chaos and violence of war (or the sustained threat of war), according to the narrative, the United States reluctantly embraced a leading role to secure world order. In the process, it selflessly promoted democracy, created international institutions, and spread free market capitalism. The result, its proponents say, was the creation of an unprecedented era of decreased violence and increased living standards across the globe. Thus, American hegemony is defined more by leadership than military or economic force. In the deep engagement narrative, the United States is necessary because it guarantees a benevolent kind of order. Without Washington’s guidance, the world would devolve to an earlier state, a Hobbesian condition of chaos.

Deep engagement rhetoricians see America’s liberal hegemony as minimising the problems of a self-help world. Under a liberal international order (LIO), one state ensures a sense of global civility: anarchy remains, but its vicious traits are dulled by liberal virtues. Rather than

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a chaotic system, or an ordered but despotic system (a kind of global tyranny), here, one member secures order via liberal principles. In short, the LIO is political liberalism on a world-scale.

This narrative has two storylines, one following World War II, and the other following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first expresses American power in terms of the creation and maintenance of international regimes, providing global public goods. In the postwar years, the United States’ presence in western Europe was not that of a conquering power, but rather an “empire by invitation.”<sup>36</sup> The United States spent much of the nineteenth century perfecting liberal principles at home, replacing Hobbesian insecurity with Lockean cooperation. As Britain declined, America saw that the world needed a powerful nation to provide a sense of calm and stability. For Gideon Rose, Washington saw it could serve the world by teaching the benefits of liberalism, that is, to “apply lessons from the country’s domestic founding to its foreign policy, taking the logic of the social contract to the next level.”<sup>37</sup> Attempted by Wilson, accomplished by Roosevelt, the United States as a hegemonic power taught other nations the benefits of liberal cooperation. Rose thought the logic was straightforward:

If autonomous individuals in the state of nature could find ways to cooperate for mutual benefit, why couldn’t autonomous countries? They didn’t have to love one another or act saintly; they just need to have some common interests and understand the concept of a positive-sum game.... And gradually, interactions could turn into relationships and then communities—first functional, eventually institutional, maybe one day even heartfelt.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Geir Lundestad, ‘Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952’; ‘Empire by Invitation’ in the American Century’.

<sup>37</sup> Rose, ‘The Fourth Founding: The United States and the Liberal Order’, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Rose ‘The Fourth Founding’, p. 11.

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In Rose’s account, Washington teaches lessons about cooperation and beneficial relationships. Through American leadership, states could learn—evidently for the first time since the birth of the modern international system—how to cooperate for common goals. Such cooperation, Rose believed, meant that American ideals (about democracy and international cooperation) could be achieved at the same time as American interests (about security and commerce).

Other writers concede that great powers such as the United States routinely prioritise their interests over their ideals or values. Such thinkers are also usually quick to underline the ways that America’s grand strategy provides benefits to the international community. In the years following World War II, according to Robert Keohane, US diplomats convinced other nations of how American-based regimes could be mutually beneficial on at least three fronts: monetary stability; open markets, and access to oil.<sup>39</sup> Once established, regimes have the potential to self-perpetuate because participants realise the benefits of membership.<sup>40</sup>

*Table One: Deep Engagement Narrative*

<b>Story</b>	US Liberal International Order (LIO) provides stability, rules for world (1945 or 1989).
<b>Plot</b>	LIO made world safe for democracy and capitalism. The US is an "empire by invitation," now threatened by its own reticence/ domestic opposition. Heroic plot structure: rise-rise.
<b>Argument</b>	To restore stability/ values, US must reclaim its global leadership.

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<sup>39</sup> Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Keohane, ‘The Demand for International Regimes’.

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In the 1980s, Keohane thought American economic hegemony was on the decline, a view he later considered to be misguided. He, Rose, and others saw the post-Cold War world as something of a continued or second phase of US global dominance.<sup>41</sup> For the deep engagement narrative (shown in Table One), the downfall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) provided a way to restart the story of American hegemony. It gained a second life in the writings of Keohane’s occasional writing partner Joseph Nye, who believed that the United States only became hegemonic following Moscow’s decline.<sup>42</sup> The year 1989 was a fine substitute for 1945, but the plot remained the same.

The second storyline sounded much like the first: the United States came to realise its dominance and the need to guarantee a sense of stability in the world. Yet this account was different in its association of capitalism and democracy, concepts that became nearly indistinguishable in many writings.<sup>43</sup> This trend continued even as the connection was found to be spurious.<sup>44</sup>

In the 1990s, advocates of deep engagement tried to drum up domestic support. The journalist Charles Krauthammer wrote in 1990 (before the term was coined) that this new age was America’s ‘unipolar moment.’ It was in America’s security and economic interests, he

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<sup>41</sup> Keohane, *After Hegemony*, pp. ix-x; Rose ‘The Fourth Founding’, p. 16; Ikenberry, ‘The Myth of Postwar Chaos; Ikenberry, ‘The end of the liberal international order?’.

<sup>42</sup> Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*.

<sup>43</sup> Mousseau, ‘The End of War: How a Robust Marketplace and Liberal Hegemony Are Leading to Perpetual Peace’.

<sup>44</sup> Boggs, ‘Democracy, Free Markets, and Other Grand Illusions’; Gallas, Scherrer, and Williams, ‘Inequality—the Achilles heel of free market democracy’; Reich, ‘How Capitalism Is Killing Democracy’; Shaanan, *America’s Free Market Myths: Debunking Market Fundamentalism*; Weeks, ‘Free Markets and the Decline of Democracy’.



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argued, to maintain its position of leadership on the world stage. ‘The world does not sort itself out on its own,’ he wrote.<sup>45</sup> It was up to the United States to ensure the kind of order it wanted: ‘Foreign entanglements are indeed a burden. But they are also a necessity. The cost of ensuring an open and safe world for American commerce...is hardly exorbitant.’<sup>46</sup> His sentiment represented the prevailing view among America’s policymakers and intellectuals.<sup>47</sup> President Bill Clinton agreed. In a 1996 speech, Clinton declared: ‘America truly is the world’s indispensable nation. There are times when only America can make the difference between war and peace, between freedom and repression, between hope and fear.’<sup>48</sup> It was up to the United States, he elaborated, to support markets and to ‘advance the cause of peace and freedom around the world.’<sup>49</sup>

Scholarly champions of deep engagement, such as those mentioned above, acknowledged that which logic demanded: that the United States’ apparently superior values were buttressed by real material power. Yet political actors such as presidents and diplomats occasionally emphasised values in such a way that power was an afterthought. Presidents since Eisenhower, for example, have invoked an association between US moral goodness and US international greatness. They used some version of Eisenhower’s line: ‘America is great because America is

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<sup>45</sup> Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Krauthammer ‘The Unipolar Moment’, p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> One area of division was on international institutions: Krauthammer was sceptical, while most policymakers supported expanding institutions like NATO.

<sup>48</sup> Bill Clinton, celebrating NATO’s fiftieth anniversary. ‘Transcript of the Remarks by President W. J. Clinton To People of Detroit’.

<sup>49</sup> Clinton remarks.

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good. And if she ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great’.<sup>50</sup> Following the Cold War, arguments about goodness causing greatness were paired with rhetoric about the United States standing on the ‘right side of history’, a phrase which also suggests a unity of power and morality. According to one study, Clinton used this phrase on twenty-five occasions, and Barack Obama on thirty-two.<sup>51</sup>

Confronted with foreign policy frustrations, proponents of deep engagement in the twenty-first century worried about a reluctant public. Decline could only happen, the logic went, if Washington relinquished its role on the world stage.<sup>52</sup> They were not afraid of rising state powers or of corporations. Rather, they remained bothered that an apathetic citizenry and the ‘America First’ foreign policy of President Trump that, they claim, has eroded US hegemony and its liberal order.<sup>53</sup> The great danger of being the world’s hegemonic power, according to G. John

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<sup>50</sup> As Michael J. Sandel notes, Eisenhower wrongly attributed this line to Tocqueville. See Sandel’s critique of “great because good” in his chapter of the same name. *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, pp. 33-58, especially p. 50.

<sup>51</sup> Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, ‘Don’t Come Home America’; Ikenberry, ‘The end of the liberal international order?’; Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’; Larry Diamond, *Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*; Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition*; Ikenberry, ‘Reflections on *After Victory*’; Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*; and, Zakaria, ‘The Self-Destruction of American Power: Washington Squandered the Unipolar Moment’.

<sup>53</sup> Trump is often seen as an isolationist who, unlike his internationalist predecessors, desired to give up on US deep engagement. Yet Trump’s foreign policy choices were inconsistent and did not align with any particular worldview beyond general slogans about greatness and strength. On Trump as undercutting US deep engagement, see Haas, ‘The Isolationist Temptation’; Elving, ‘Generations after its heyday, isolationism is alive and kicking up controversy’; Leonhardt, ‘China, Russia, and Trump: What Beijing and Moscow hope to gain from a second Trump term’; Lynch, ‘Trump’s VP pick spells “disaster” for Europe and Ukraine’; and, Wertheim, ‘Internationalism/Isolationism: Concepts of American Global Power’.

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Ikenberry, was that US policymakers are ambivalent and hesitate to exert American influence.

Throughout the post-Cold War period, he wrote, America was ‘deeply ambivalent about making institutional commitments and binding itself to other states’.<sup>54</sup> For the journalist Robert Kagan, Americans had unlearned the positive lessons of US hegemony, a position summarised by the title of his 2014 essay: ‘Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire’.<sup>55</sup>

If one follows the logic of deep engagement, the US hegemonic order seemed to originate from outside the interstate system. Once it rose to power, the United States imparted its unique democratic virtues onto the international system. Today, supporters of deep engagement use the same rationale: if US hegemony was the product of internal developments, then its twenty-first century setbacks must also be the product of internal developments. Therefore, proponents blame hegemonic decline on domestic dissent and advocate against Washington giving up its important role in the world.

Deep engagement is defined by its storyline, plot, and argument. Its story, split between 1945 and 1989 origins, is that the United States established the virtues of political liberalism on the world stage through international institutions, security cooperation, and free markets. The plot is that capitalist democracy provides benefits to all nations, and, thus, has the potential to endure. Its imagery, of a chaotic world brought into order by a benevolent and generous power, was most appealing during times of outsized dominance. Its argument is for a return to hegemonic status for the good of the world, a view that associates an expansionist foreign policy with moral purity.

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<sup>54</sup> Ikenberry, *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition*, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Kagan, ‘Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire’.

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## **Hegemony as Strategy: A Critique in the Modes of Realism and Constructivism**

Other accounts portray American power in less messianic terms. In particular, the divergent IR traditions of realism, constructivism, and radicalism demonstrate that deep engagement may be unpersuasive as a social narrative. This section discusses international security using realism and constructivism. The next section covers radicalism and hegemony as a cyclical phenomenon.

In realism, hegemony is the outcome of states pursuing their national interests, not commonly held values. Across its many iterations—classical, structural, offensive, defensive, and neo-classical—realism envisions a world of nation-states operating under conditions of anarchy. In realism, the inherently competitive and conflictual nature of world politics, one in which states must fend for themselves, has not changed with technological developments, nor with economic interdependence, nor with the advent of international institutions, whose founders envisioned a more peaceful world. Hegemony occurs when a great power amasses a combination of coercive power and diplomatic clout; concurrently, other nations find it in their interests to agree to the hegemon’s rule-making authority. This element of consent results in a symbiotic relationship (at least for most participants): the hegemonic power gets to set the rules and minor powers occasionally benefit from its world order. The dangers of anarchy are partially limited. Then, the hegemonic power declines as it loses the confidence of nation-states or as another great power ascends.

By using realism, one sees that unipolarity enabled the misguided implementation of the LIO. For John Mearsheimer, US hegemonic overreach was due to a to a strategic miscalculation. Post-Cold War unipolarity meant that Washington could act without restriction. It chose,

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wrongly, to promote political liberalism on a world scale.<sup>56</sup> Under normal circumstances, by which he meant conditions of bipolarity or multipolarity, a great power would find it impossible to apply a liberal logic in a self-help system. Other states, operating under the complementary ideologies of realism and nationalism would force a change in behaviour. Their priorities, maximising state power or protecting national identity, outweigh the desire to advance human rights.<sup>57</sup> In times of unipolarity, however, it becomes possible for the hegemon to act as it wishes on the world stage. The United States chose to operate under the ideology of political liberalism. But in the long run, this logic clashed with the traditional geopolitical considerations of other states. In an anarchic and self-help system (in which states must provide for their own security), an otherwise benign policy may be perceived as malignant. According to Mearsheimer, ‘[w]hen a powerful country pursues liberal hegemony, it runs the risk that other states will follow the dictates of realpolitik.’<sup>58</sup>

The underlying question, however, is to what extent is liberal hegemony benign? Mearsheimer accepted nations’ stated intentions as genuine. In places, however, his examples undermine his conclusions. Take the deterioration of United States-Russia relations in the twenty-first century that, for Mearsheimer, illustrates clashing modes of thought. According to him, American policymakers, in pursuit of liberal principles, have recently run up against Russian grand strategy. ‘Putin and his compatriots have been thinking and acting like realists’,

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<sup>56</sup> Mearsheimer called the post-Cold War liberal international order to be an *ideological* order, something rather different than the *realist* world order implemented after World War II. ‘Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order’.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, and *The Great Delusion*.

<sup>58</sup> Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to Fail’, p. 171.

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Mearsheimer writes, ‘while Western leaders have adhered to textbook liberal ideas about international politics’.<sup>59</sup> Curiously, his critical review of liberal hegemony actually accepts its major premise: that American policymakers earnestly promote political liberalism. He does not suggest that Washington used liberal rhetoric to cover up its pursuit of other goals, merely that its intentions were misunderstood. Mearsheimer’s forgiving tone runs counter to his criticism of the United States and its European allies, which, he claims, threatened Russia after the Cold War by expanding their influence into Eastern Europe. He thus saw benign intentions leading to malignant effects.

Mearsheimer’s occasional writing partner Stephen Walt, by contrast, saw malignant intentions and malignant effects. Walt attributed strategy of liberal hegemony to the personal interests of Washington’s foreign policy elite. He showed how it became politically unfeasible for bureaucrats and military planners to question the efficacy of American hegemony; they knew that failing to toe the line would undermine their own careers and draw scrutiny from sceptical citizens. Elite hubris contributed to a bureaucratic culture hostile to dissent. According to Walt, policymakers sell liberal hegemony ‘in plain sight’: on television, in newspapers, on the pages of popular political magazines, during congressional testimony, and across the internet.<sup>60</sup>

In an article with Mearsheimer, Walt sought a new comprehensive strategic plan.<sup>61</sup> They recommended a trimmed-down US foreign policy called ‘offshore balancing’. In this vision,

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>60</sup> Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, p. 179.

<sup>61</sup> Walt was not immune to national cheerleading. He wrote that with the Soviet Union’s collapse ‘Americans could have taken a well-earned victory lap’ and forged a new strategic grand strategy (Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, p. 21).

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instead of maintaining global supremacy, Washington should focus on objectives in important security regions, including Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.<sup>62</sup>

By using constructivism, one reaches a similar conclusion through a different logic. Like realism, constructivism sees a world of great power agency, which is to say that great powers can choose whether to be hegemonic. Yet the tradition gives greater weight to identity and relationships among states than does realism (which emphasises centres of power and security interests). In constructivism, the foundation of hegemony is built more on persuasion than coercion. Consequently, US hegemony ultimately failed because the hegemon could no longer convince other nations of the benefits of its leadership.

For constructivists such as Richard Ned Lebow and Simon Reich, American hegemony occurred only for brief period after World War II. In the early postwar years, Washington found itself with a preponderance of goodwill. It had material capabilities, of course, but the real source of its power was influence. Then, beginning in the 1970s, Washington’s influence declined as its self-confidence grew. Fooled by their own rhetoric, American policymakers lost touch with reality. The foreign policy establishment today seems to believe that American power is still welcomed around the world. For Reich and Lebow, policymakers are rather like the old woman in the film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003), who, living in East Berlin, loved the *ancien régime* and whose children went to great lengths to protect her personal reality, a fictitious world where the wall had not been destroyed.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy’.

<sup>63</sup> Reich and Lebow, *Goodbye Hegemony!*, pp. 1-2.

To show the importance of international consent, Reich and Lebow describe three pillars of hegemonic power. One, the hegemon, exercising leadership, invokes shared international norms to set an agenda for the world. The hegemon provides guidance for multilateral political programs. Next, it possesses custodianship over the global economy. And last, the hegemon uses its military, economic, and knowledge resources to sponsor initiatives. Material power enables the hegemon to act, they note, but the true exercise of hegemonic power stems from the hegemon’s ability to negotiate competing interests before deploying its might for the benefit of the international community.<sup>64</sup> For Reich and Lebow, the United States has declined in all three areas. In addition to abdicating its hegemonic responsibilities, America has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of other nations.

Instead of offshore balancing, however, Reich and Lebow recommend Washington move from *leadership* to *sponsorship*. In the latter, great powers (hegemonic or otherwise) work to shape and enforce global norms, rules, and agreements.<sup>65</sup> Such actions, they write, will help preserve Washington’s prestige on the world stage.<sup>66</sup>

By using either realism or constructivism, one sees Washington would be better off if it recognised its declining position on the world stage. Realism highlights the need for new strategic foreign policy priorities, whereas constructivism highlights the need to regain the trust of other nations. Interestingly, both traditions accept that that US power is misunderstood. Other nations either misperceive America’s project of global liberalism, or, perhaps through hubris,

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<sup>64</sup> Reich and Lebow, *Goodbye Hegemony!*, pp. 3-8, 37-47.

<sup>65</sup> Reich and Lebow, *Goodbye Hegemony!*, pp. 181-183, and 43-44.

<sup>66</sup> Reich and Lebow also believe that global interconnections may have made hegemony outdated.



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American policymakers have failed to convince the world of their benevolence. The strategic critique of deep engagement blames policymakers for failing to effectively lead other nations, but, except for Walt, the thinkers explored here stop short of challenging the sincerity of Washington’s proclaimed liberal values.

### **Hegemony as Historical Circumstance: A Critique in the Mode of Radicalism**

Given the potency of the deep engagement narrative, it may be necessary to challenge its claims from another direction, one that addresses the agency and values of the US liberal-imperial state. Radicalism offers a critical perspective on both counts. This section defines radicalism, and, from its vantage point, assesses US hegemony.

The family of radical traditions, like realism and constructivism, contains diverse occasionally opposing perspectives on US hegemony. Some theorists contend that US power is not in decline at all. But by and large radical IR (which includes critical theory, dependency, Marxism, and world-systems analysis) sees American hegemony in decline. Radicalism is different than other traditions in the weight it gives to the long-term historical forces behind contemporary power imbalances. In place of great power agency, radicalism sees a world of structural forces that constrain or enable great power behaviour. Whereas the deep engagement narrative portrays state leaders as mostly self-directing, radicalism portrays state leaders as mostly constrained by the long-term forces of world history (though the difference is a matter of balance rather than a denial of structures or agents in any tradition).

Radicals understand hegemony to be rare and brief, neither the natural condition of world politics, nor something craved by a disordered world. Great powers rise to hegemony on a wave of economic and political forces they cannot determine. Then, those same circumstantial forces

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fade away over time, leading to hegemonic decline. A great power does not become hegemonic through passive means, say, as merely an instrument of capitalism; but the great power cannot control the opportunities presented to it. Circumstances limit the opportunity for, and duration of, hegemony.

For many radicals, America’s hegemonic phase lasted for less than three decades following World War II.<sup>67</sup> Some accounts claim that the United States always desired hegemony,<sup>68</sup> whereas others portray America’s decision to seek supremacy to the debates among elites in the early 1940s.<sup>69</sup> However achieved, hegemony was fragile. Washington found it difficult to maintain its position even at the height of its global influence.<sup>70</sup> Most radicals agree that US hegemony has been in decline since the 1970s, even though it remains the most powerful nation in the world.

According to Immanuel Wallerstein, the United States was only the third hegemonic power in 500 years. The three modern examples included: the United Provinces, 1625-72; United Kingdom, 1815-73, and United States, 1945-67.<sup>71</sup> He saw a pattern. First, hegemony was the confluence of three economic forces, acquired and lost in the following sequence: agro-industry,

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<sup>67</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*; Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times*; Arrighi and Silver, *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System*; and, Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s-1840s*.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*.

<sup>70</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*.

<sup>71</sup> Wallerstein, ‘The Three Instances of Hegemony in the History of the Capitalist World-Economy’, p. 102.

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commerce, and finance. Next, hegemony was preceded by a roughly thirty-year war over a principal rival. And, finally, hegemonic power was secured by an international restructuring (as shown in Table Two).<sup>72</sup> With each wave, the eventual hegemonic power relies on the declining power as its junior partner.

*Table Two: Hegemonic Sequence in World-Historical Perspective*

<b>Conflict</b>	<b>Rivalry</b>	<b>Ordering Institutions</b>
Thirty Years' War, 1618-48	Dutch over Hapsburgs	Peace of Westphalia
Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815	British over French	Concert of Europe
Euroasian wars, 1914-45	American over German	UN and Bretton Woods

Radicalism remains suspicious of the moral pronouncements of the hegemonic power. Take, for example, the notion of ‘free trade’ that, combined with democracy and international institutions, comprised the troika of liberal hegemony. From the perspective of the *longue durée*, America’s foreign policy rhetoric hardly seemed different from what Dutch and British powers once said to justify their international adventures. The rhetoric of economic liberalism provided continuity from one hegemonic era to the next, even though such ideas were mostly tools to get other states to fall in line. Hegemonic states have resisted attempts by smaller powers to adopt mercantilism, to become more assertive over the economic activity within their boundaries. At home, however, mercantilism historically guided the decisions of great powers (and, in fact led elites to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

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consolidate power and build large bureaucracies).<sup>73</sup> Often, great powers interpreted free trade to mean limited merchant freedoms within a network controlled by the state.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, liberal notions of free trade helped garner consent at home. Thus, for radicals, the peak of US power really meant two things: Washington’s hegemonic power on the world stage, and elite hegemonic power in the domestic sphere. From the postwar age to the present, America’s capitalist class and its corporate leaders have effectively influenced domestic policy. A smaller portion of this group has shaped foreign policy. Washington’s foreign policy elite is comprised of bureaucrats and what Thomas McCormick called ‘ins-and-outers’, by which he meant those figures who move between private corporations and public service.<sup>75</sup> By pairing free trade with patriotic Cold War objectives, the elite in the early days of American hegemony could pacify the Left as well as the Right, groups that favoured some measure of trade protectionism.<sup>76</sup>

The balance of forces that made hegemony possible also permanently erode, exposing contradictions of the hegemonic order. Economic transformation, caused by dominance, eventually undermines the hegemonic power’s superiority. Political leaders fail to invest at home and exhaust good will abroad. In the long run, however, their efforts are always futile because, whatever the hegemonic power chooses to do, world-historical forces move in another direction. Though hegemonic rise is far from inevitable, its fall is assured. Leaders may only choose

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<sup>73</sup> Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, p. 51.

<sup>74</sup> Wallerstein, ‘The Congress of Vienna from 1763 to 1833: Europe and the Americas’, especially pp. 3-4.

<sup>75</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>76</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, pp. 69-71.

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whether the nation declines gracefully or inelegantly, the outcome of which may affect the speed and scale of descent.

By the late 1960s, American hegemony had been undermined in two ways: by increased dissent at home, symbolised by the year 1968; and, by declining economic productivity and profitability.<sup>77</sup> Both developments incentivised a reduced role for Washington on the world stage. Yet leaders knew relinquishing leadership also meant relinquishing power, which would come at a high cost.<sup>78</sup> Washington thus tried to shore up its global position. But it could no longer maintain its status on the world stage and its domestic standard of living. Overinvestment to maintain global commitments led to underinvestment at home.

In the 1980s, the United States increased spending in the military sector, pouring money into missile defence and other programs. At the same time, aware of trouble in the civilian sector, Washington pushed for greater international privileges by economic and military force. These steps only further eroded America’s global image.<sup>79</sup> ‘Hegemony necessarily rests upon both military and economic power’, McCormick explained, ‘and the dilemma facing a maturing hegemon is that it cannot sustain both’.<sup>80</sup>

A look a history also suggests that Washington should confront a hard truth: all hegemonic phases end. The choice facing policymakers is between declining slowly, protecting

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<sup>77</sup> In a widespread rejection of the existing social order, the year saw protests across the globe. Gerd-Rainer Horn, ‘1968: A Social Movement *Sui Generis*’, in *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective*, Stefan Berger and Holder Nehring, eds. London: Palgrave, 2017, 515-541.

<sup>78</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, pp. 155-162.

<sup>79</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, pp. 7, 216-236.

<sup>80</sup> McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, p. 216.

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US interests, or precipitously via imperial overextension. The choices seemed more obvious to elites in the 1970s and 1980s, the first decades of US decline. Henry Kissinger said as much in 1988. Out of power, he was candid on the role of the United States in the world: ‘Peace requires hegemony or balance of power. We have neither the resources nor the stomach for the former. The only question is how much we have to suffer before we realize this’.<sup>81</sup>

Without consent, there is only force, not hegemony. Radicalism shows that US hegemony is in decline and cannot regain its power. In the decades since its peak, Washington has only further eroded its global position by continuing its global police force role while also seeking to extract further concessions from the developing world. If a hegemonic power believes it must demonstrate its superiority, then it is no longer hegemonic.

## **Conclusion**

This article has presented deep engagement as a social narrative, which promoters have used to explain the exceptional nature of American hegemony. It has also shown that the narrative may be stronger in rhetoric than in practice, given that divergent perspectives expose fundamental problems related to strategy, values, and agency.

As a matter of strategy, deep engagement has not led to its promised foreign policy victories. If one sets aside the question of Washington’s good intentions, its actions have not secured global peace. Proponents of deep engagement have doubled down, arguing that: *if only citizens at home could get behind the foreign policy elite’s plans, then the United States would not be quite so routinely frustrated in achieving its global ambitions.* Yet a more successful

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<sup>81</sup> Qtd. in McCormick, *America’s Half-Century*, p. 216.

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strategy would have better conveyed US intentions and worked to gain the consent of other nations. One must also consider the possibility that Washington’s statements about democracy and human rights did not align with its real objectives.

Deep engagement’s appeal to values is hardly different than other great powers in the modern world. America’s foreign policy rhetoric hardly seems different from what Spanish, Dutch, and British powers once said to justify their international adventures. Interventions have long been based on the concepts of salvation and self-sacrifice.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in 1550, theologians debated the morality of Spanish imperialism before the crown.

America’s invocation of political liberalism demonstrates the domestic appeal of deep engagement. But the question of liberal values (that is, whether the hegemon believes its rhetoric) does not need to be resolved. History shows that all hegemonic powers decline, a fact not lost on supporters of US hegemony. Robert Keohane’s *After Hegemony* was first published in 1984. The original storyline of the deep engagement narrative, which began at the end of World War II, was replaced with a new storyline that began at the end of the Cold War. The plot and argument remained unchanged.

Furthermore, proponents of deep engagement tend to frame US foreign policy as a binary choice between an active, *internationalist*, United States, connected with the rest of the world, and a United States in retreat from the world stage, committed only to *isolationism*.<sup>83</sup> Yet these are contemporary meanings of terms that originated in foreign policy debates of the 1930s. At

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<sup>82</sup> Wallerstein, *European Universalism*, pp. 5-11.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Elving, ‘Generations after its heyday, isolationism is alive and kicking up controversy’; Haas, ‘The Isolationist Temptation’; Leonhardt, ‘China, Russia, and Trump’; Lynch, ‘Trump’s VP pick spells “disaster” for Europe and Ukraine’.

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the time, internationalism was associated with interaction and peace, and against the isms of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. Engagement with the world only later came to be seen as dominance. In historical context, isolationism may be better understood as non-interventionism or anti-imperialism (or, in a literal sense of being isolated from the politics of Europe). It was certainly not the case that Washington in the 1930s had to come to terms with its isolationist past (at least as the term is understood in the twenty-first century). As Stephen Wertheim put it: “If the early United States was steeped in isolationism, hardly anyone thought so for the first century and a half of the republic.”<sup>84</sup>

Sceptical readers of this article may argue that it begins with an oppositional stance to US power and looks for any sign of hegemonic erosion. This is Perry Anderson’s criticism of fellow radicals who continually announce that Washington is past its hegemonic peak.<sup>85</sup> But one need not be an opponent of US hegemony to find statements of its demise. Today, even deep engagement’s champions consider US hegemony to be, at a minimum, seriously threatened. Almost all theorists begin from the premise that US hegemony is in, or in very real danger of, decline. They disagree on charting a course.

In 1941, Henry Luce called his time the “American century.”<sup>86</sup> Unlike other nations, he wrote, the United States “cannot truly endure unless there courses strongly through its veins from Maine to California the blood of purpose and enterprise and high resolve.”<sup>87</sup> From the vantage of the twenty-first century, Washington’s hegemonic period has passed. To draw on old social

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<sup>84</sup> Wertheim, ‘Internationalism/Isolationism’, p. 58; and, *Tomorrow, the World*.

<sup>85</sup> Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*, p. vii.

<sup>86</sup> Luce, ‘The American Century’.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.



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narratives only makes US foreign policy more out of touch. Washington can try to reclaim lost greatness, or, following the model of other declining powers, it can adapt to a new reality.

Regardless of its priorities, the United States will need to recognize the limits of its power.

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