

World Order: Many-Headed Monster or Noble Pursuit?



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The pursuit of world order has taken many forms in the last 100 years of Anglo-American statecraft, and its terms have been bitterly contested.

There will be no day of days then when a new world order comes into being. Step by step and here and there it will arrive, and even as it comes into being it will develop fresh perspectives, discover unsuspected problems and go on to new adventures. No man, no group of men, will ever be singled out as its father or founder. For its maker will be not this man nor that man nor any man but Man, that being who is in some measure in every one of us. ...The new order will be incessant; things will never stop happening, and so it defies any Utopian description.

H. G. Wells, *The New World Order* (1940)¹

H.G. Wells once said that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. His thought is applicable to hemispheric relations. With common dedication to the highest ideals of mankind, including shared assumptions for a world at peace, freedom and progress, there is no insurmountable impediment to fruitful cooperation, save only insufficiency in mutual understanding.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Radio and Television Report to the American People on the South American Trip, March 8, 1960²

... The President read passages from H.G. Wells ... [He] said nations must have great ideas or they cease to be great. They talked about what happened to England and France [in 1940] and that peoples' greatness has to be extra-dimensional and move beyond themselves. The question is whether we do what we need to both abroad and in the ghettos. If we just go to the ghettos and let go abroad, apart from the destruction that might come from a war, we might destroy ourselves. [Theodore] Roosevelt talked about it as the white man's burden. Both of these people [Wells and Roosevelt] were searching for that same feeling that people need.

Notes of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Henry Kissinger), Washington, November 5, 1969, 7pm³

The pursuit of something called “world order” has been an almost ever-present feature of Western — more specifically, American and British — statecraft for at least 100 years. It is embedded in a discourse about international affairs that can be traced back to the late 19th century, when Britain became increasingly conscious of the fragility of its empire, and the United States began to recognize the full extent of its potential power. Notions of regional or international order date further back than that and have long had a central place in conceptions of European statecraft, since the Treaty of Westphalia at least. But, the pursuit of world order speaks to a higher objective than the pursuit of the national interest or the mere preservation of stability and security in one's neighborhood.

All versions of world order are, to some extent, aspirational and visionary. They express a wish to guide the international future towards a more desirable destination. This is obviously true of more idealized versions of world order, some of which have gone so far as to envisage a future utopia in which humanity is unified under one law, war is abolished, and reason prevails in the governance of man (seen in the work of H.G. Wells, for example). But, it also applies to more avowedly “realist” thinking on world order, which seeks “co-evolution” among nation states or great civilizational blocs as a better means to preserve international harmony, while eschewing “universalism” (in the alternative vision of Henry Kissinger).⁴ Either way, the historical record suggests that one's view of world order is inseparable from one's worldview. It reveals the beholder's hope for how the world *should* or *could* be, rather than simply *how it is*.

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1 H. G. Wells, *The New World Order: Whether It Is Attainable, How It Can Be Attained, and What Sort of World a World at Peace Will Have to Be* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940).

2 *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960-1* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 88.

3 "Notes of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Louis J. Smith and David H. Herschler, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Vol. 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972* (November 5, 1969): 142-3. Available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d43>.

4 This is a central theme of Henry Kissinger's *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

has been used as shorthand for a vast range of potential scenarios: from a unified “world state,” governed by a single supranational institution, to a balance of power in which the strongest prevail. Somewhere between these two poles sits the idea of “liberal international order” — the precise terms of which are much contested today. This essay does not seek to establish a typology between these various definitions, or to place them on an idealist-realist spectrum. The fluidity of the foreign policy debate, and the changing positions of those engaged in it, belies any such attempt. Instead, the essay seeks to identify a number of key inflection points in the evolution and metastization of different Anglo-American ideas of “world order” over the last century. The method adopted is that used by scholars of intellectual history, which has increasingly been applied to the study of international relations in recent years. In the first

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instance, this stresses the context-specific meaning of key political ideas (such as world order), while also opening up an inquiry into their genesis and lineage.⁵ This inquiry begins with an analysis of a particular moment in November 1969, when the fundamental assumptions of American foreign policy were being re-examined, and it expands from there. Simply speaking, it demonstrates the enduring power of ideas.

Specifically, the idea that a better world was achievable — through a combination of vision and human ingenuity — has provided a higher cause and unifying philosophy in Anglo-American statecraft. While conceptual purity has been elusive, the commitment to this endeavor has transcended different historical eras. When viewed over the *longue durée*, the yearning for equilibrium, structure, and order in international affairs provides an explanatory spine to the story of American and British foreign policy over the course of the last century. It also becomes clear that contending ideas of world order have been entwined with existential questions, such as the meaning of history, the survival of Western civilization, and the very future of mankind.

The vagueness and ambiguity surrounding different definitions of world order are apt to infuriate practically-minded strategists, impatient with abstractions or images of an ideal future. The never-ending nature of the search for world order has played its part in foreign policy errors in the past. The current fashion for running down the idea of a “liberal international order” partly derives from the fact that it is regarded as a general good, rather than a clearly defined strategic goal. Yet, when ideas of world order are simply cast out as vapid utopianism, or “globalist” delusion, British and American foreign policy loses form, spirit, purpose, vision, and a sense of direction. A recognition of the historical force of such ideas is more important than ever at a time when the fundamental assumptions of Americans are being re-examined.

The Current “Crisis of World Order” and the Critique of Globalism

Within the last decade, a consensus has emerged in the West that there is a crisis of world order that must be addressed. The idea has proved particularly influential in the United States, as part of a broader debate about America’s status in international affairs. The reasons for this are well-known, from fears about the rising power of China and new concerns about Russia under President Vladimir Putin, to a series of costly engagements in the Middle East. For the outside observer,

5 Some important examples include: Paul Schroeder, “Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 108-148; Jonathan Haslam, *No Virtue like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations Since Machiavelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Lucian M. Ashworth, “Did the Realist-Idealist Great Debate Really Happen? A Revisionist History of International Relations,” *International Relations* 16, no. 33 (2002): 33-51; Duncan Bell, ed., *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: Penguin, 2012); David Milne, *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015); John Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015); Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939-1950* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).

however, what is striking is just how widely shared this consensus is. Remarkably, it also seems to encompass four of the most distinctive influential foreign policy traditions of the United States — those who tend to classify themselves as “realists,” those often described as “liberal internationalists,” “conservative internationalists,” and those presumed to hold something more like a “neo-conservative” perspective on foreign policy.

One of the most influential interjections in this debate was Henry Kissinger’s 2014 book, *World Order*, which examined competing visions of international order, from the peace of Westphalia to the 21st century. As the American-led order established in 1945 begins to come under strain under the force of global historical change, Kissinger wrote that the “reconstruction of the international system is the ultimate challenge of statesmanship in our time.”⁶ But, different iterations of the same concern have emerged across the political spectrum. For example, when she was regarded as the most likely nominee to be the Democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton reviewed Kissinger’s book at length. She spoke of her own efforts, as secretary of state, in “reimagining and reinforcing the global order to meet the demands of an increasingly interdependent age.”⁷ Notwithstanding the criticisms Kissinger made of President Barack Obama’s foreign policy, she suggested that the two nonetheless shared a “belief in the indispensability of continued American leadership in service of a just and liberal order.”⁸

Of course, Kissinger’s thesis was critiqued by others on the liberal internationalist side of the American foreign policy spectrum, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, who regarded it as a classic “realist” account, giving insufficient place to “moral considerations” in foreign policy. At the same time, however, Slaughter concurred on one fundamental point: the urgency of creating some sort of new “global order” for the 21st century, albeit one “acceptable not only to states but also to the vast majority of the world’s people.” In Slaughter’s view, the failure of the United States to do more to prevent bloodshed in the Syrian civil war was a symptom of the crisis in world order, and the outcome of America eschewing pursuit of that higher ideal.⁹ This chimed with a line of

argument made by others such as Vali Nasr, who wrote in his book, *The Dispensable Nation*, that a retreat of American diplomatic leadership on the international stage deprived the existing world order of the very thing that held it together.¹⁰

The criticism of mainstream American foreign policy traditions — and the idea that they rest on the same misguided premise about “world order” — has a heritage on both the left and right.

From different angles, then, a growing number of foreign policy commentators joined the chorus of concern about the so-called crisis of world order. Robert Kagan, generally thought of as a neo-conservative thinker, also joined the fray in 2014 with an essay in the *New Republic* entitled, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire.”¹¹ In it, Kagan also bemoaned what he saw as a loss of appetite for international leadership in the United States, feeding into increased global instability. “If a breakdown in the world order that America made is occurring, it is not because America’s power is declining,” he wrote. He posited that the country’s wealth, power, and potential influence remained adequate to meet the present challenges. Nor was it because the world had “become more complex and intractable.” Rather, he said, it was “an intellectual problem, a question of identity and purpose,” originating in the United States itself. Americans hoped for a “return to normalcy.” But, the power and pervasiveness of the United States meant that it could not simply bow out of the world order

6 Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York and London; Penguin, 2014), 371.

7 Hillary Clinton, “Hillary Clinton reviews Henry Kissinger’s *World Order*,” *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2014.

8 Ibid.

9 Anne-Marie Slaughter, “How to Fix America’s Foreign Policy: What Obama should learn from Kissinger’s new book,” *New Republic*, November 18, 2014.

10 Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (Doubleday: New York, 2013).

11 Robert Kagan, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire,” *New Republic*, May 26, 2014.

game and expect not to feel the ramifications.¹²

By the spring of 2016, as the presidential election cycle was fully under way, the linkage between the apparent crisis of world order and this national “question of identity and purpose” became more pronounced. In a March 2016 essay for *The American Interest*, Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry suggested that the foundations of the American-led international order had been a “centrist tradition of American world leadership,” marked by a “strong bipartisan internationalist tradition.” A radical conservative critique was challenging the “foundations of Pax Americana” at home, with potentially grave implications for the world beyond.¹³

When the purveyors of that radical conservative critique coalesced around the figure of Donald Trump during the presidential primary season, it became clear that many mainstream Republicans were similarly uncomfortable with the potential implications for future foreign policy. The same month, March 2016, more than 100 Republican national security leaders signed an open letter in opposition to any future Trump presidency.¹⁴ As Eliot Cohen, one of the most influential Republican critics of Trump, noted in his 2017 book, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force*, it was increasingly difficult to convince the U.S. electorate of the necessary costs involved with America retaining its position as “the guarantor of world order.”¹⁵ Efforts to reinvigorate “conservative internationalism,” seen in the work of Paul D. Miller, for example, reflected the same concerns.¹⁶

To the critics of the Washington foreign policy establishment, impugned in recent times as “the blob,”¹⁷ these concerns about a crisis of world order and a decline in American leadership are but a familiar refrain. The criticism of mainstream American foreign policy traditions — and the idea that they rest on the same misguided premise about “world order” — has a heritage on both the

left and right. Noam Chomsky’s 1994 book, *World Orders Old and New*, characterized the “guidelines of world order,” as also defined by Britain and America since World War II, as follows:

The rich men of the rich societies are to rule the world, competing among themselves for a greater share of the wealth and power and mercilessly suppressing those who stand in their way.¹⁸

In a more nuanced 2015 assessment, *American Foreign Policy and its Thinkers*, another New Left writer, Perry Anderson, also commented on the surprising degree of consensus across these different schools of U.S. foreign policy thinking on this fundamental goal: the desirability of preserving a U.S.-led international order.¹⁹ In a subsequent 2017 work, Anderson noted how, since the end of the Cold War, a growing number of liberal internationalist thinkers — such as Jon Ikenberry, Joseph Nye, and Robert O. Keohane — had argued that the preservation of the liberal international order was the best means for America to exert “soft” power on the world stage. On the one hand, this was seen as an evolution away from outmoded Cold War thinking — which preferred to focus on the raw metrics of economic and military power. The exponents of this position called it a “milieu-based” grand strategy and suggested it was more sustainable than past superpower strategies because it did not aspire to dominance or empire. On the other hand, from the perspective of critics on the New Left, this was just the pursuit of “hegemony” by other means.²⁰

Most recently, this so-called Washington consensus has come under attack from some of those associated with the Trump campaign and presidency. Most obvious, of course, are the views of the president himself. With striking consistency over the previous decades, he has expressed a worldview that is directly hostile to the idea of a

12 Ibid.

13 Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry, “Unraveling America the Great,” *American Interest* 11, no. 5 (March 2016).

14 “Open Letter to Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders,” *War on the Rocks*, March 2, 2016, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders>.

15 Eliot Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* (Basic Books: New York, 2017).

16 Paul D. Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order: A Conservative Internationalist Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

17 The phrase is attributed to President Obama’s advisor Ben Rhodes. David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016.

18 Noam Chomsky, *World Orders: Old and New* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5.

19 Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and its Thinkers* (London: Verso, 2015).

20 Perry Anderson, *The H-Word: The Peripeteia of Hegemony* (London: Verso, 2017).

U.S.-led international order.²¹ Many of these ideas have 19th century antecedents.²² But, the emphasis on “America first” converged with new trends of nationalism in American political discourse to emerge on the right that, according to Iskander Rehman, contains elements of ethno-tribalism, millenarianism, decadentism, and illiberalism. When confronted with a large and influential establishment — which is perceived to be particularly deeply entrenched on issues of foreign policy — the most influential apostles of this worldview, notably former White House advisor and strategist Steve Bannon, have expressed a firm desire “to bring everything crashing down.”²³

Stripping the Altars: World Order as a “Globalist” Aberration

One of the more articulate criticisms of the shared assumptions of the foreign policy establishment has come from Michael Anton, now deputy assistant to the president for strategic communications on the National Security Council. At the time of writing, he is one of the few radical critics of the foreign policy establishment to remain in office (avoiding the fates of Michael Flynn, Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka who have all either been pushed aside or left).²⁴ In an article written before he joined the administration, Anton took aim at the consensus, firmly held on both sides of the aisle, that a Trump presidency would undermine the “liberal international order:”

Nearly all opponents of President Trump’s foreign policy, from conservatives and Republicans to liberals and Democrats, claim to speak up for the “liberal international order.” A word may have been different here or there (e.g., “world order”) but the basic charge was always the same. Whether voiced by Fareed Zakaria and Yascha Mounk on the left, Walter Russell Mead in the center, Eliot Cohen and Robert Zoellick on the right, or Robert Kagan on the once-right-now-left, the

consensus was clear: Trump threatens the international liberal order.²⁵

Anton went on to argue that the foreign policy establishment lining up behind the liberal international order was a kind of “priesthood.” The priesthood had a vested interest in protecting its status “by muddying the simple and clear, and pretending that the complex is clear and obvious — but only to themselves.” They dominated the language and discourse of foreign policy and were instinctively hostile to anything that challenged their worldview. There was even a hint of Chomsky in the argument that the liberal international order was better understood as the “liberal rich-country order.”²⁶

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Whether it comes from Chomsky or Anton, one has to acknowledge elements of truth in this critique. There are indeed certain shared presuppositions within mainstream U.S. foreign policy traditions that have gone unchallenged and unexamined for many years. The same might be said in the British national security debate, which takes its cue from the United States, and

21 Charlie Laderman and Brendan Simms, *Trump: The Making of a Worldview* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

22 Thomas Wright, “Trump’s 19th Century Foreign Policy,” *Politico*, January 20, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/01/donald-trump-foreign-policy-213546>.

23 Iskander Rehman, “Bring Everything Crashing Down: Bannon’s Reactionary Guard and U.S. National Security,” *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/bring-everything-crashing-down-bannons-reactionary-guard-and-u-s-national-security>.

24 James Mann, “The Adults in the Room,” *New York Review of Books*, October 26, 2017.

25 Michael Anton, “America and the Liberal International Order,” *American Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 113-25.

26 *Ibid.*, 114.

which places similar emphasis on a “rules-based international order” as its starting point.²⁷ There is a distance between popular perceptions of the national interest and those prescribed by individuals within the foreign policy establishment. The benefits said to arise from an American-led international order are sometimes presumed rather than explained. Vagueness around the definition of the liberal international order has sometimes led to confusion about the core strategic purpose of American grand strategy, not to mention that of its allies. There are many who would agree with Anton that the attempt, after the end of the Cold War, to enlarge the mission in pursuit of a “new world order” was “a case of American eyes being much bigger than our stomachs (or teeth), a confusion of ideology and interests.” Anton himself suggests that he is not advocating the abandonment of the

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liberal international order, but simply a greater willingness to reform it.²⁸

Yet, the reality is that this assault on the so-called “priesthood” rests on unexamined assumptions of its own. The purported aim of bringing the Washington consensus “crashing down” has created an exaggerated disdain for the “intellectual architecture” of American grand strategy.²⁹ The desire to strip the altars or to rip up the sacred scripts is based on a jaundiced and limited reading

of history. First, it presumes a fundamental “wrong turn” taken by the United States at some point in recent decades (and a concomitant need to press the reset button). Second, and more importantly, the radical conservative obsession with “globalism” has become the right’s equivalent of the left-wing obsession with “neo-liberalism” — that is, a vague and catch-all term, designed to signal disapproval, but offering limited utility.

World Order as a Recurring Vision in the Anglo-American Mind

The idea that the high premium placed upon the idea of world order is some sort of globalist or neo-liberal aberration, tacked on to more traditional foreign policy aims by a complacent and self-interested establishment, is not supported by the historical record. It should be said, as Or Rosenboim has pointed out, that the competing visions of world order that emerged in the mid-20th century did have a significant “globalist” dimension.³⁰ Such ideas were particularly influential when (according to Google’s Ngram tool) popular usage of the phrase “world order” peaked in 1945. But, the ideas of world order discussed in what follows have a longer heritage — one that predates and transcends the unique era of post-war planning from 1939-45.

In fact, the pursuit of world order has provided an extra-dimension to Anglo-American thinking about world affairs for more than 100 years: providing a vision that went beyond the pursuit of narrow self-interest; easily traversing the divide between so-called idealists and realists; and acting as a bridging mechanism between the immediate considerations of the nation-state and a broader concern for the future of Western civilization.

In using the hyphenated form, “Anglo-American,” the intention is not to play down the differences between British and American foreign policy. Over the course of the last 100 years, as Britain’s global power waned and America’s waxed, both nations continued to put their own interests before anything else. Nonetheless, in the most important great power transition of the 20th century, there is a striking degree of interchange about ideas of “world order.” This allowed for a commonality of purpose at a number of critical points in modern history.

27 See, for example, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (London: HM Govt., 2015).

28 Anton, “America and the Liberal International Order,” passim.

29 The phrase “intellectual architecture” is Hal Brands’s in *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

30 Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism*.

In some cases, such as the wake of World War I, a shared commitment to create a new international order was undermined by a failure to define the mission and unwillingness to pursue it to its end. In others, such as the wake of World War II, there was a coalescence of views on world order that had a profound impact on international affairs.³¹

The shared pool of ideals provided a more solid foundation for Anglo-American relations than sentimental appeals to the “special relationship.” Moments of perfect symmetry were fleeting and rare. But, the intellectual synergies ran deep and were transmitted across different eras. Indeed, one reason why the pursuit of world order became so entrenched in Anglo-American thinking was that so many different tributaries flowed into it. It was not the preserve of one party or one intellectual tradition. It is this that explains unlikely connections, such as the fondness of at least three Republican presidents — Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Nixon — for the work of a British socialist writer like H.G. Wells.

Given the broad period under discussion, and the amorphous nature of the concept of world order, the intention here is not to attempt a narrative sweep from the late 19th century through to the modern era. The evolution of American (and Anglo-American) ideas about international order over the last 100 years has been charted expertly by a number of scholars in recent years — notably Mark Mazower in *Governing the World*, David Milne in *Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy* and John Thompson in *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America’s Global Role*.³²

Similarly, it is not my aim to chart the competition between different versions of world order — from the “world state” to the “balance of power.” Instead, I argue that what matters is not so much how world order has been defined, but the sense in which Anglo-American statesmen have continued to regard it as a noble cause. To put it another way, the endpoint may remain vague and contested, but the almost ever-present desire to work towards it is tangible, discernible, and traceable — providing an organizing philosophy and therefore a real driving force in history.

Despite the significant differences between them on foreign policy, both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson can be seen to have dedicated significant portions of their career to a vision of world order. Some of these threads were brought

together by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in the period from 1940-1945. But, the fact that almost all of the post-World War II presidents and prime ministers have paid some sort of homage to an idealized version of world order is a testimony to the enduring influence of the idea.

The challenge, then, is to test this idea on less fertile ground. For that reason, the rest of this essay takes an unorthodox approach by beginning with a freeze frame of American foreign policy thinking at a critical moment in the Cold War, in late 1969. The primary reason for starting with this episode — as opposed to one from the era of Wilson or the Roosevelts, for example — is that it sits far outside the usual idealistic lineage of American thinking about world order. Second, it took place in a period in which the fundamental presuppositions underlying American foreign

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policy were being re-examined, much as they are today. As Henry Kissinger wrote at the time, in a briefing note prepared for President Richard Nixon, it was a “period in which American foreign policy has to be put on a new foundation.” For the first two decades after World War II, America’s approach to the world had been

conducted with the maxims and the inspiration that guided the Marshall Plan, that is, the notion of a predominant United States, as the only stable country, the richest country, the country without whose leadership and physical contribution nothing was possible,

31 For that power transition, and the importance of shared intellectual traditions, see: Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2017); Walter Russell Mead, *God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

32 Mazower, *Governing the World*; Milne, *Worldmaking*; Thompson, *A Sense of Power*.



and which had to make all the difference for defense and progress everywhere in the world. ...Conditions have changed enormously. We are now in a world in which other parties are playing a greater role.³³

Both Kissinger and Nixon were willing to countenance a “revolution” in U.S. foreign policy. But, in doing so, they fell back on some unlikely sources of inspiration. Tellingly, they returned to episodes of Anglo-American foreign policy that predated 1945, and they sought to reinvigorate old ideas about world order from this shared tradition.

The canon Nixon referred to was a somewhat chaotic and unruly one, which darted back and forth across the Atlantic to Anglo-American statesman of different eras. Nonetheless, the variety of influences on his thinking tells a story in its own right. It says something revealing about how the search for world order was viewed — as the continuation of a historical mission, a search for meaning beyond national self-interest, a vehicle for the preservation of Western civilization, and an attempt to wrestle with the future rather than to let fate take its course. Seen in this way, the

pursuit of world order — in the most general sense — appears as a surprisingly ecumenical credo with a long, if somewhat controversial, backstory.

Richard Nixon and H.G. Wells

On the evening of Nov. 5, 1969, a year to the day after his election as president, Richard Nixon was in a reflective mood. At 7 p.m., he picked up the telephone on his Oval Office desk, on which he kept a stack of recently read books, and called Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor.³⁴ Elected with a promise to end the Vietnam War, Nixon was conscious of the weight of historical responsibility on his shoulders. He had been reading a recently published book by the World War II veteran and University of California sinologist, Laurence Thompson, titled *1940: Year of Legend, Year of History*. This book told of Winston Churchill becoming prime minister of Great Britain at its darkest hour, as the remnants of his nation’s army desperately fled the Nazi advance on the beaches of Dunkirk in May.³⁵ The book was on Nixon’s mind as he sought to advise his national security advisor

33 "White House Background Press Briefing by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," Louis J. Smith and David H. Herschler, ed., *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1969-1976, Vol. 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972* (December 18, 1969). Available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d47>.

34 "Notes of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1969-1976, Vol. 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972* (November 5, 1969): 142-3.

35 Laurence Thompson, *1940: Year of Legend, Year of History* (London: Collins: 1966), 12.

on what to say in a forthcoming interview with *Time* magazine.

While the British survived Dunkirk to fight another day, the months that followed evacuation provided little solace. By the end of 1941, the Nazi mission to dominate Europe looked almost complete. The Wehrmacht reached the suburbs of Moscow, and the Soviet Union seemed to be on the brink of defeat. In Asia, meanwhile, Japan was preparing to launch a full-scale assault on the

Nixon feared that if America focused solely on domestic problems, giving up on its leadership of the Western world, it would lose its sense of purpose.

weakening British Empire. As it turned out, Adolf Hitler's decision to invade Russia that winter was to prove disastrous. Even more consequential was the decision by the Japanese to launch a pre-emptive attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, for fear that it would enter the war on the side of the British. In London, as Laurence Thompson has recounted, it was certainly not seen as inevitable that Washington would enter the war until the attack happened. So, Thompson described how, Churchill, on the night of Dec. 7, 1941,

went to bed saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful. That United States, like or not, had been goaded into taking the place left vacant on the world stage by a declining Britain.³⁶

With this global leadership came grave responsibilities. Almost three decades later, Nixon took charge of a country that was locked in a seemingly intractable and energy-sapping conflict in Southeast Asia. The year 1968 had been the

bleakest year yet, with the loss of almost 17,000 American servicemen, adding urgency to his campaign promises to end the war.

Yet, the bleak news from Vietnam was partially alleviated by another event in Nixon's first year in office. Just a few months prior, on July 20, 1969, two American astronauts had become the first human beings to walk on the surface of the moon. As Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin disembarked Apollo II for their moonwalk, they had been greeted by the voice of the president, channelled through a crackling line into their earpieces. "Because of what you have done the heavens have become a part of man's world," said Nixon, "and as you talk to us from the Sea of Tranquillity, it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquillity to earth."³⁷

Three months later, Nixon considered how previous generations would have viewed these remarkable achievements. Back in 1901, it had been left to English science fiction writer H.G. Wells, in one of his most fantastical stories, to envisage such a mission in his novel, *The First Men in the Moon*, which had been made into a feature film in 1964.³⁸ Such achievements were enough to spur anyone into deeper reflection about the purpose of mankind and the advance of civilization.

Reflecting on this modern day "crusade," Nixon also quoted from Wells's famous 1920 work, *The Outline of History*, an ambitious attempt to tell the story of human civilization from the Neolithic era to the modern era. In the book, Wells noted a recurrent tension between the nomadic cultures that emerged in the north and the settled peoples who were more common in the south. In the tension between them, one could see, at the core of the human spirit, a desire to strive for "a new and better sort of civilization." Wells described a series of civilizational missions over the course of history, such as the Christian crusades or nomadic conquerors — Alexander the Great, Muhammed, Napoleon, and Woodrow Wilson — which had attempted to unify humanity. Although they had failed, Wells believed that mankind would never forego the goal of unity, and that the march of science and technology made the prospect of success ever more likely.³⁹

By Nov. 5, 1969, as the sun was setting on first year of Nixon's presidency, the United States faced a combination of challenges at home — manifested in a surge of student radicalism and inner-city riots

36 Ibid.

37 "Telephone Conversation with the Apollo 11 Astronauts on the Moon," July 20, 1969, available at <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/forkids/speeches-forkids/moonlanding/moonlandingcall.pdf>.

38 H.G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon* (London: Penguin, 2005), xxiii.

39 H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History: The Whole Story of Man* (London: George Newnes, 1920).

By evoking Wells, Kipling, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Armstrong in the space of a short phone call, Nixon clearly sought historical justification for the change of direction in American foreign policy that he was considering.

throughout the summer — and overseas, where it was unclear how America could extricate itself without a humiliating defeat. The words of Wells weighed upon the president, as he considered the challenge ahead. “In terms of history, when we talk about the crusades that H.G. Wells talked about, for example the moon thing,” he said to Kissinger,

[They] had the effect of bringing to Western Europe not just the discovery in the East but the fact that Western Europe at that time devoted itself to a great cause beyond itself. It changed Western Europe. ...The President said nations must have great ideas or they cease to be great.⁴⁰

More than that, Nixon feared that if America focused solely on domestic problems, giving up on its leadership of the Western world, it would lose its sense of purpose:

The question is whether we do what we need to both abroad and in the ghettos. If we just go to the ghettos and let go abroad, apart from the destruction that might come from a war, we might destroy ourselves.⁴¹

In addition to this unlikely fondness for H.G. Wells, Nixon also sought inspiration from one of his predecessors in the White House, Theodore Roosevelt, who had been president from 1901-1908. “Roosevelt talked about it as the white man’s burden,” explained Nixon as he ended the phone

call. “Both of these people were searching for that same feeling that people need.”⁴² Nixon’s presidency was to become one of the most controversial in American history. Yet, in its infancy, and despite his reputation for cold-hearted realpolitik, he was eager to associate himself with a cause that went beyond the narrow national interest and spoke to “great ideas” and a civilizational crusade. With the moon having been conquered already, this was to be pursued in the field of foreign affairs.

The Pursuit of World Order as a “Civilizational Mission”

For many, then and now, the notion of a “white man’s burden” represented the ultimate stain on the historical record of the West — the pretense to stand for a higher cause was but a thin veneer, masking racial prejudice and the grasping self-interest. There was, without question, a highly racialized component to some early Anglo-American thinking about world order.⁴³ So if Nixon had uttered these words in public in 1969, it would most likely have provoked an overwhelmingly negative response. In fact, the infamous phrase was not Roosevelt’s creation. It was coined by the English poet Rudyard Kipling and first used in the title of a poem written for the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897, marking her 60 years on the throne.

The Diamond Jubilee was to not only symbolize the pinnacle of British imperial power, but also the growing recognition of its fragility, and the loosening of the binds that held it together. As the 19th century drew to a close, Kipling understood that the enemies of the Empire were growing in power and number. As the 20th century loomed on the horizon, he also had come to the conclusion that the “white man’s burden” would be too much for Britain to bear alone for another century. It was thus, at the time of the Spanish-American War

40 “Notes of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and His Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger),” November 5, 1969.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Duncan Bell, “The Project for a New Anglo Century: Race, Space and Global Order,” Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Anglo-America and Its Discontents: Civilizational Identities Beyond West and East* (London: Routledge, 2012): 33-56.

in 1898, that Kipling began to look to the United States to share in Britain's burden, to preserve and spread "civilisation" in the world.⁴⁴

The American people were undecided as to the merits of assuming such a responsibility. When the United States took possession of the Philippine Islands from Spain — and assumed responsibility for its governance — it sparked a fierce national debate as to whether a country founded on rebellion against the British Empire should itself take part in the imperial game. Conscious of the way this debate was finely poised, in late November 1898, Kipling offered his verse to Roosevelt, who had just been elected Governor of New York and was a staunch supporter of expansionism. "Now, go in and put all the weight of your influence into hanging on, permanently, to the whole Philippines," he begged Roosevelt in the letter that he sent to accompany the poem. "America has gone and stuck a pick-axe into the foundations of a rotten house, and she is morally bound to build the house over, again, from the foundations, or have it fall about her ears." Forwarding Kipling's poem to Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt commented that it was "poor poetry," but that it made "good sense from the expansion standpoint."⁴⁵

By evoking Wells, Kipling, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Armstrong in the space of a short phone call, Nixon clearly sought historical justification for the change of direction in American foreign policy that he was considering. It would be easy to conclude that the president, who was not a natural intellectual, was confused by these conflicting ideas from across the political spectrum. Yet, he was not amiss in seeing the connections.

For one, there was an unlikely connection between the thinking of Wells and the writing of Kipling. Even a socialist like Wells, who rejected Kipling's imperialism in favor of his dream of a "world state" — a vision captured in his 1940 book, *New World Order* — acknowledged that the poet of Empire had influenced him in his early years.⁴⁶ As Wells wrote in *The New Machiavelli*, the "prevailing force" of his worldview as a young man was "Kiplingism ... we were all, you must understand, very distinctly Imperialists also, and professed a vivid sense of the 'White Man's Burden.'" Kipling helped to

broaden his "geographical sense," he recalled, while inspiring in him a "desire for discipline and devotion" that seemed to be sorely missing in the chaotic affairs of men.⁴⁷

To be clear, as Wells moved away from the views of his youth, he distanced himself from Kipling and any whiff of sentimentality about the Empire. In fact, *The First Men in the Moon* can be partly interpreted as a critique of British imperialism, published against the backdrop of the Second Boer War.⁴⁸ At the onset of World War II, Wells's vision of a "new world order" was one in which the empires would melt away. More specifically, he believed that the British Empire was the greatest obstacle to the unity of the English-speaking peoples in pursuit of that higher ideal. He wrote:

I dislike calling myself "British" and I like to think of myself as a member of a great English-speaking community, which spreads irrespective of race and colour round and about the world.

What he hoped for was "the realisation of a common purpose and a common cultural inheritance may spread throughout all the English-speaking communities." Foreshadowing Franklin D. Roosevelt's position, he suggested that only the dissolution of the British Empire "may inaugurate this great synthesis."⁴⁹ Such was the predictive power of Wells that many came to regard him as something of a prophet of the future.⁵⁰

Yet, as Nixon's reference to the "white man's burden" confirmed, Kipling also cast a longer shadow over the 20th century than is often presumed. In the view of George Orwell, for example, Wells's optimistic faith in the eventual triumph of science, rationalism and reason left him ill-equipped to understand the atavistic forces that had come to define the 20th century. In his fear of a clash of civilizations, savagery, ethnic bloodlust, and the breakdown of order, Orwell even suggested that Kipling had been a better prophet for the modern era. Wells was "too sane to understand the modern world." Kipling, by contrast, "was not deaf to the evil voices of power and military 'glory.'" Had he lived to see the 1930s, suggested Orwell,

44 Gretchen Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man's Burden: U.S. Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 36.

45 Patrick Brantlinger, "Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' and Its Afterlives," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 50, no. 2 (2007): 172-191.

46 H. G. Wells, *The New World Order*.

47 George Orwell, "Rudyard Kipling," *New English Weekly* (January 23, 1936). Available at <http://theorwellprize.co.uk/george-orwell/by-orwell/essays-and-other-works/rudyard-kipling>.

48 H.G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon* (London: Penguin, 2005), xxiii.

49 Wells, *The New World Order*.

50 See Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History* (London: Penguin, 2017).

Kipling would have better understood “the appeal of Hitler, or for that matter of Stalin, whatever his attitude towards them might be.”⁵¹

Without stretching the point, one can see both these instincts — the Wellsian yearning for international order and the belief that it was attainable by human endeavor and Kipling’s fear of the fragility of Western civilization — in the minds of Nixon and Kissinger, as they contemplated a new course in American foreign policy. There is, perhaps, another clue here in Nixon’s admiration for Winston Churchill. The British statesman often testified to the influence that both Wells and Kipling had upon him. Some of Churchill’s most famous wartime phrases — including his appeals to the unity of the “English-speaking peoples” and “gathering storm” — could be traced back to Wells. Most important, in this respect, was the “broad sunlit uplands” that envisaged a better future world after war.⁵²

Nor was the link between Wells and Roosevelt that Nixon made at the end of his first year in office — referring to this “feeling that people need” — the product of a confused imagination. It is unclear whether Nixon knew the story or whether he had an intuitive sense of the intellectual connection between them. But the writer and the statesman had in fact met many years before, when Wells visited the White House in 1907. On that occasion, Roosevelt had revealed to Wells a fondness for

one of his earlier novels, *The Time Machine*, first published in 1895.⁵³

Influenced by the work of Charles Darwin, Wells had envisioned a future in which civilization had not evolved uniformly, but had led to the creation of a two-tiered world. On the surface of the earth lived the Eloi, peaceful, childlike creatures who had lost their evolutionary edge. With no apparent threat to their existence, and having triumphed over nature, they were smaller, weaker, and less motivated by the quest for survival than the humans from whom they had evolved. Then, the time travelling narrator catches sight of something called a Morlock, a “queer little ape-like figure,” disappearing into a subterranean network of tunnels that was once the London underground. It dawns upon him

that Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals: that my graceful children of the Upper World were not the sole descendants of our generation, but that this bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all the ages.⁵⁴

At the end of *The Time Machine*, the time traveller rushes forward in time once more to escape the Morlocks who have captured him. In a final scene, he finds a world in which all remnants of mankind are extinct, only the simplest vegetation remains and monstrous crab-like creatures slowly scuttle across blood-red beaches in search of giant butterflies to eat.⁵⁵

For many readers of the book, this dystopian vision suggested a deep anxiety about the future of the world, a view verging on fatalistic despair. Yet, this was not the case for Roosevelt, who claimed to be inspired by it. As Wells recalled, the president “became gesticulatory” when the discussion turned to *The Time Machine*, gripping the back of a garden chair with his left hand and stabbing the air with his right as if he was speaking on

Kipling and Wells had different fears and hopes about the international future. What they shared, from vastly different perspectives, was the growing conviction that the United States was the best guarantor of salvation and civilization.

51 George Orwell, “Rudyard Kipling,” *Horizon*, February 1942, available at <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-prize/orwell/essays-and-other-works/rudyard-kipling-1936>.

52 Richard Toye, “H.G. Wells and Winston Churchill: a reassessment,” S. McClean, ed., *H.G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

53 Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H.G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 70.

54 Wells, *The Time Machine*.

55 *Ibid.*

a platform, “his straining voice a note higher in denying the pessimism of that book...”⁵⁶ Roosevelt, crouching down on the White House lawn that afternoon in 1907, as if over a battlefield, said, “Suppose, after all that you should be right, and it ends with your butterflies and Morlocks. *That doesn't matter now!* The effort's real. It's worth going on with it — even then.”⁵⁷

The president joked, “Morlocks! Everywhere Morlocks!” as he looked out across the lawn and pretended to shoot the imaginary creatures, as if he were holding a rifle in his hand. The two men laughed. The novelist was flattered and agreed that

For a fleeting moment, America's entry into the Great War and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points re-energized the idea that such a Western-led world order could be built.

he had not intended his book to be an expression of despair so much as a call to action.⁵⁸

The point here was not that Wells (nor Kipling, for that matter) had some sort of decisive influence on Roosevelt or the formation of his worldview. This would be to look at the formation of an Anglo-American worldview the wrong way around, as some sort of process of British influencing America as the latter reached superpower consciousness. The president was an enthusiastic Anglophile, but he had already made his own mind up about what was in America's best interests. Kipling and Wells had different fears and hopes about the international future. What they shared, from vastly different perspectives, was the growing conviction that the United States was the best guarantor of salvation and civilization. Like many Englishmen after them, they were not manipulating the

American consciousness so much as pinning their hopes upon American leadership.

“Never did a President so reflect the quality of his time,” Wells wrote after the meeting with Roosevelt. He was “a very symbol of the creative will in man, in its limitations, its doubtful adequacy, its valiant persistence, amidst complexities and confusions.” At the outset of the 20th century, Wells was pleased to report that Roosevelt embodied a new political trend in the Anglo-American world that was “altogether away from the anarchistic individualism of the nineteenth century ... towards some constructive scheme.”⁵⁹ At the domestic level, elements of this new approach could be seen in the policies of the Progressive era. The real “constructive scheme” that Wells had in mind, however, was the building of a new world order.

The Elusiveness of Pax-Anglo-Saxonica

While it says something about the tangled roots of Anglo-American worldview, this vignette — an account of a brief telephone conversation in 1969 — can only get us so far. It was clear that Nixon sought inspiration from this sense that he was resuming a long-term historical cause, but this did not provide him with a new blueprint for Cold War foreign policy. Meanwhile, it was one thing to see Roosevelt — as Wells did — as the harbinger of a “constructive scheme” in world affairs and a reversal of the trend towards anarchic individualism. It was quite another, as countless exponents of world order were to learn, to articulate how such a vague idea could ever be materialized. Indeed, the lack of clarity about concrete goals meant that the pursuit of world order nearly always ended in frustrated ambition.

The failures of Anglo-American internationalism in the era preceding and following World War I can, to a great extent, be explained by this confusion. On the one hand, the idea that Britain and the United States might have had a shared interest in what might be (anachronistically) called a “liberal international order” had gathered some traction among elites by the turn of the 20th century. On the other hand, divergent national interests and significant cultural differences still held sway. First, British foreign policy in this era paid great homage to certain liberal international ideals while being primarily concerned with the preservation

56 H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 648-9.

57 Norman Ian MacKenzie and Jeanne MacKenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 202-3.

58 Ibid.

59 Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future*, 70.

of Empire. Second, it soon became clear that — whatever the personal views of Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson after him — the U.S. Congress, and ergo the American people, was unwilling to assume the burden that the construction of a new international order demanded.

For those who hoped that the “Americanization of the world” would lessen the load on the British Empire, there was much frustration at the course taken by the United States. Following Roosevelt, the presidency of William Howard Taft was regarded as particularly disappointing. In 1911, the British writer Sydney Brooks — whose pieces often appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* — complained that the United States did not understand the urgency of the civilizational threat to the West because of its relative security and its near-impenetrability from foreign invasion. It had become clear that Americans lived “in an atmosphere of extraordinary simplicity, spaciousness, and self-absorption,” he wrote. Foreign policy was never a priority in American politics and the implications of American expansionism had yet to be grasped. After expansion into Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, Americans had strewn the Pacific with stepping stones from Hawaii to Manila, just as the British had done in the Mediterranean. In effect, America had an empire, but Americans had “not yet become Imperial.” As Brooks complained in 1911, “The white man’s burden, so far as Americans are concerned, has become the white man’s boredom.”⁶⁰

For a fleeting moment, America’s entry into the Great War and Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points re-energized the idea that such a Western-led world order could be built.⁶¹ While some of the supporters of the Anglo-American alliance in Britain were imperial survivalists, there were also genuine internationalists in the mould of Wells. The failure of the United States to join the League of Nations in 1920 was a bitter disappointment to the advocates of this new world order. At the same time, quite justifiably, some of the most forthright advocates of American internationalism believed that the project had been corrupted in inception by the failure of the European powers — Britain foremost among them — to abandon their imperial ambitions.⁶²

No sooner, then, had the concept of “world order” been transferred from theorists to statesmen that it became associated with failure. Tellingly, one of the earliest mentions of “world order” in the State

Department archives appeared in the resignation letter of an idealistic young Wilsonian diplomat, William Bullitt, who felt that the post-war peace settlement was unduly harsh on Bolshevik Russia and that America should refuse to cooperate with Britain and France in pursuing their familiar imperialist great games. He told Wilson,

I was one of the millions who trusted confidently and implicitly in your leadership and believed that you would take nothing less than “a permanent peace” based upon “unselfish and unbiased justice.” But our Government has consented now to deliver the suffering peoples of the world to new oppressions, subjections and dismemberments — a new century of war. And I can convince myself no longer that effective labor for “a new world order” is possible as a servant of this Government.⁶³

Ironically, outside the Anglo-American world, some observers took the view that the English-speaking peoples had missed an incredible opportunity to establish a dominant Anglo-American world order. Friedrich Meinecke, the foremost German theorist of “realpolitik,” addressed these questions in his classic text, *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison D’État and Its Place in Modern History* (1924). Meinecke refused to believe that a true League of Nations could ever be realized and had little time for Wilsonian idealism. Instead of the League, however, he believed that the shared strategic culture of America and Britain might eventually point to a different type of international order. While the moment had passed in 1920, he speculated four years later,

that the era of ... international conflict ... may be brought to an end not by a genuine League of Nations, but by the world-hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon powers, in whose hands the strongest physical powers of the globe are already concentrated.

Meinecke did not welcome the prospect of such a “pax anglo-saxonica.” But, he did recognize that, through the lighter touch of liberal capitalism, it would “be more endurable for the individual life

60 Sydney Brooks, “American Foreign Policy,” *The English Review* (November 1911): 682-95.

61 Mazower, *Governing the World*, 116-153.

62 John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 123-134.

63 “Mr. William C. Bullitt to the Secretary General of the Commission to Negotiate Peace (Grew) [Paris,],” May 17, 1919, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919, Vol. XI, Paris Peace Conf*, 184.1.

of ... [other] nations” than dominance by other great powers.⁶⁴

While there were those in the Anglo-American world who held on to such a vision in the 1920s, they grew increasingly forlorn. By November 1928, ten years after the Entente’s victory in World War I, an official at the British Foreign Office sat down to compose a stark assessment of the new global order that was taking shape. Russia, Germany, France, Japan, Italy, and China were all locked in spirals of revolution and repression while being crippled by successive financial crises. One country stood supreme above all the others. In the United States, the official wrote, Great Britain was faced

with a phenomenon for which there is no parallel in our modern history — a state twenty-five times as large, five times as wealthy, three times as populous, twice as ambitious, almost invulnerable, and at least our equal in prosperity, vital energy, technical equipment and industrial strength.

The problem, as it was to be for much of the next century, was that “in almost every field, the advantages to be derived from mutual co-operation are greater for us than for them.”⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, British imaginings of the future took on a darker form once again. It was in 1933 — the year that Adolf Hitler became Germany’s chancellor — that H.G. Wells returned to his musings on the idea of world order, once again through the lens of futurology, with *The Shape of Things to Come*. A science fiction novel purporting to be a “history” of the future, it told the story of how humanity would develop from 1930 to the year 2106. The world that Wells depicted was one in which Franklin D. Roosevelt fails to implement the New Deal, causing a global economic crisis that lasts 30 years. This is punctuated by a “second world war” that, with eerie accuracy, Wells predicted would begin in January 1940, sparked by a clash between Germany and Poland over Danzig. There would be no clear victor. Instead, the leading powers would emerge exhausted. Worse would follow in 1956 with the outbreak of a plague — spread by a group of enraged baboons having

escaped from the London Zoo — that wipes out much of the world population.⁶⁶

The saving of humanity would take drastic measures over many years. Wells envisaged the emergence of a benevolent “dictatorship of the air,” formed by the global elite at an international conference convened in Basra in 1965. Through their control of the world’s aircraft, they would begin by eradicating the world’s religions, dropping bombs on Mecca, and waging a long war against Catholicism. Eventually, the dictatorship would melt away, making way for a peaceful humanitarian utopia in which the struggle for material existence has ended, meaning that “reason” could finally triumph. The last recorded event in the book takes place on New Year’s Day 2106, when there is a levelling of the last skyscrapers that once dominated the New York skyline.⁶⁷

Piece by piece, the theoretical fragments of this vague world order were assembled for use

[I]t was in the second half of the 1930s that American strategists began to spend more time considering what sort of international order best served national goals.

at some future date. The following year, in 1934, the English historian Arnold Toynbee published the first volume of his 12-volume work, *A Study of History*, which traced the rise and fall of 23 major civilizations.⁶⁸ It was, in part, a response to Oswald Spengler’s two-volume masterpiece, *The Decline of the West*, which was produced at the end of World

64 Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in Modern History*, Werner Stark, ed., Douglas Scott, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1957), 424-33.

65 Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (New York: Viking, 2014), 463-4.

66 H.G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (London, 1933).

67 Ibid.

68 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History, Vol I: Introduction: The Geneses of Civilizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 397.

War I and warned that Western civilization was approaching its twilight.⁶⁹ Spengler questioned what he saw as a Eurocentric view of history, which presumed a linear development towards modernity

There are many reasons why the world order that emerged out of World War II proved far more enduring than that which followed the previous world war.

and progress. Toynbee rejected this fatalism about the decline of the West. At the same time, he stressed the urgent need to formulate a vision for how the different civilizations of the world could co-exist and share the globe among them. “The challenge of being called upon to create a political world-order ... now confronts our Modern Western society,” he warned.⁷⁰

Coming Back Together: Anglo-American Conceptions of World Order

It was one thing to build castles in the sky, in the manner of Toynbee and Wells, or to speak in such broad civilizational terms. But the interwar era proved just how difficult it was to translate such vague aspirations about world order into tangible goals of foreign policy. The meteor-like phenomenon of Wilsonian internationalism, blazing brightly before fading out, illustrated the challenge.

The phrase “world order” had first made a debut in U.S. State Department archives in the period from 1917-1919, yet it had all but evaporated from American diplomatic parlance thereafter. It did not appear in State Department cables again for another

12 years, until 1931 and then only five times until 1935. The watershed moment, from which point “world order” began to be used with ever greater frequency, was the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. For many contemporary observers, this was the final death blow to the authority of the League of Nations, which had already been steadily undermined since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.

In response, as shown by British and American diplomatic archives, the idea of “world order” was swiftly revived. In this case, however, it was shorn of some of the more ambitious connotations associated with the Wilson era. Instead, the restoration of world order was seen in more of a palliative than a visionary sense — the only possible antidote to the coming anarchy. In their shared diagnosis of the problem, there was, once again, the beginnings of a reconvergence between the American and British worldviews. Typical of this, in 1935, the American minister resident in Addis Ababa reported back on the growing sense, in conversations with the British, that the existing “world order” was under assault from the dictators or neo-imperialists in Italy, Germany, and Japan.⁷¹ An obstacle remained in that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the architect of appeasement, had an almost undisguised contempt for the United States.⁷²

Meanwhile, it was in the second half of the 1930s that American strategists began to spend more time considering what sort of international order best served national goals. More importantly, these ideas developed a more solid form, in a way that could be translated into political and diplomatic action. That Franklin D. Roosevelt began to talk about the important “will for peace on the part of peace-loving nation” was of critical importance. It was “international lawlessness” that threatened “the very foundations of civilisation.”⁷³ Another crucial figure in this process was then Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles, who saw the challenge to world order in three ways: The first was in the unravelling of “norms” and existing laws governing international conduct. The second, arising out of the first, was the prospect of “anarchy.” The third was the dividing line that had opened up between “civilized” and “uncivilized” nations in the conduct of international affairs. As

69 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, edited by Arthur Helps and Helmut Werner, Charles F. Atkinson, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

70 Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History, Vol III: The Growths of Civilizations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 364.

71 “The Minister Resident in Ethiopia (Engert) to the Secretary of State, Addis Ababa Telegram,” June 27, 1936, *Foreign Relations of The United States Diplomatic Papers, The Near East and Africa*, Vol. III, 765.84/4737.

72 Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War* (London: Biteback, 2016), 21.

73 John Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press: 2015), 146, 280.

Welles put it in October 1937,

No one can today affirm that such a thing as international law exists or that there is any common agreement on the part of the so-called civilized nations of the world upon the fundamental standards which should and must govern the relations between nations if world order is to be restored.⁷⁴

Having agreed on the remedy — the restoration of world order — so a greater sense of common purpose fed into U.S. and U.K. relations. Thus, a month later, in November 1937, Secretary of State Cordell Hull discussed the international crisis at length with the British ambassador in Washington, holding out improved Anglo-American relations — and constructive diplomatic engagement on issues such as trade — as “the basis upon which a restored world order could rest.”⁷⁵ Simultaneously, the United States began to impart these warnings about the dangers of anarchy to those who seemed to have veered into “uncivilized” conduct. In conversations with the Italian ambassador, Hull also expressed the hope — in reality, a thinly veiled warning — that

sooner or later nations undertaking to live by the sword, with non-observance of the principles of world order to large extent, will decide on a permanent policy of either the sword or a course of peace and order under law such as many of our countries are pursuing.⁷⁶

Ultimately, of course, it was only in the heat of another world war that these threads of common analysis began to coalesce into a new vision of a future world order after the end of conflict. In 1940, for example, a young John F. Kennedy wrote that the United States “ought to take our part in setting up a world order that will prevent the rise

of a militaristic dictatorship.”⁷⁷ Or, as Churchill put it in a speech at Harvard University in September 1943, in which he quoted Kipling, “It must be world order or anarchy.”⁷⁸

There are many reasons why the world order that emerged out of World War II proved far more enduring than that which followed the previous world war. One reason that is sometimes overlooked, however, is that it set tighter definitional bounds on the concept. More specifically, the architects of the post-1945 order sought to strike a judicious and stable balance between the utopian idea of the “world state” and a more prosaic attempt to build a structure around the existing “balance of power.” The aspirations of the advocates of the “world state” were knocked down, above all, by the lack of any enthusiasm for a global “police force” that would be required to give such a body legitimacy. “Whatever its theoretical merits,” noted a British Foreign Office memorandum shared with the Americans in July 1944, “this postulates a greater advance in international co-operation than States are yet prepared to make, as it implies the existence of a world State.”⁷⁹

At the founding United Nations Organization in conference in San Francisco the following year, senior American delegates were particularly allergic to anything that assumed this broader form. Sen. Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, a Republican internationalist, indicated that he would resist any measure that allowed the new organization to be presented as an embryonic world state.⁸⁰ For the same reason, just as the proposal of a “world police” made no ground, the idea of pooling nuclear weapons technology under U.N. control was similarly abortive. As a 1946 memorandum by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded, the only scenario in which disarmament was possible was the “creation of a world state in which all nations surrender sufficient of their sovereignty to assure the rule of law and the prevention, if not of war itself, of illicit means of waging war.”⁸¹

74 “Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Welles),” October 6, 1937, Pres. Speech Oct. 5, 1937/3½, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1937, General I*, 711.00. Available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1937v01/d685>.

75 “Memorandum by the Secretary of State,” November 29, 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1937, The Far East III*, 693.002/407.

76 “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State,” July 26, 1938, *Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers, 1938, The British Commonwealth, Europe, Near East, and Africa II*, 865.4016/36.

77 J. Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1940), 232-233.

78 Renwick, *Fighting with Allies*, 67-8.

79 “Tentative Proposals by the United Kingdom for a General International Organization,” July 22, 1944, D.O./Conv.A/Doc. 2, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1944, General, Vol. I*, Lot 60—D 224, Box 57.

80 “Minutes of the Fourteenth Meeting of the United States Delegation, Held at San Francisco, Tuesday, April 24, 1945, 9:30 a.m., San Francisco,” April 24, 1945, U.S. Cr. Min. 14, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1945, General: The United Nations, Vol. I*, April 24, 1945, Lot 60—D 224, Box 96.

81 “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the State—War—Navy Coordinating Committee,” January 23, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, General; The United Nations, Vol. I*, 811.2423/2—146.

This, of course, had never been the intention of the wartime planners. As the State Department later elaborated, the United Nations was a “means to an end rather than an end in itself.” It was in America’s interest to preserve the means. But the “real end” was

progressive development toward a stable world order where law and orderly processes, rather than violence and anarchy, can govern the conduct of nations in their relations with each other.

As means must come before ends, the United Nations was to be understood as “an association of independent states ... based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members, rather than as a single world state.” It was not designed to “terminate national sovereignty,” but rather to “facilitate the joint exercise of it by separate nations acting in friendly cooperation.”⁸²

On the one hand, then, the idea that a “world state” could eventually emerge out of World War II was consciously counteracted by British and American officials, who set clear bounds on the functioning of the United Nations, in order to smother any such expectations at birth. Yet, the need to invest the idea of world order with some higher sense of purpose, to make good on visionary war aims and to provide that “feeling that people need” also was understood.

The case of Gladwyn Jebb (later, Lord Gladwyn), the senior British diplomat who served as the first acting secretary general of the United Nations, is particularly instructive here. Jebb, who became friends with Henry Kissinger in the mid-1960s, was known within the British foreign office establishment as the advocate of a world order based on a balance of power. In the mid-1930s, Jebb had come to the conclusion that the League of Nations had been fatally weakened by the desire to see it as a staging post towards a possible world state. “The Dictators are right in one thing at least: perpetual peace is a dream, and what is more a bad and essentially unprofitable dream,” he wrote. “For it is based on the fallacy that the Kingdom of Heaven is realisable in this world, instead of in the next — or possibly ‘within oneself.’”⁸³

Nothing that Jebb saw in the maneuvers of the great powers during the course of the war

disabused him of this belief in the paramountcy of the balance of power. As he told an audience in Oxford in February 1944, the balance of power lay “at the root of any settlement designed to provide for a long period of peace.”⁸⁴ It should be

The relative success of the world order built out of 1945 was that it accepted, as its premise, the limits of perfectibility.

said that Jebb was prepared to believe that a world state was a possibility in some distant future. “It may ultimately come about, and indeed I think it probably will,” he said. It could be argued,

with some force, that the whole tendency of modern science and modern inventions lies in the direction of world unity. Radio communications, broadcasting, civil aviation and so on are linking up the various communities and disseminating ideas to an extent never achieved before; and certainly this process will develop and continue.

For the moment, however, he did not believe that any of the great powers would agree to any version of world order that “effectively limits their own ability to look after what they regard, rightly or wrongly, as their ‘vital interests.’”⁸⁵

Having arrived back in Britain from San Francisco after the foundation of the United Nations, Jebb became concerned with what he saw as a worrying apathy among his fellow Briton about the new organization. Some of this, he felt, could be explained by the fact that the British government had not been trumpeting its own role in setting up the organization. He felt that the United Kingdom had “played a very great, perhaps even a preponderating part” in what had been agreed at San Francisco. The essential features of the original British papers circulated before Dumbarton Oaks

82 “Department of State Policy Statement Regarding the United Nations, Washington DC,” September 18, 1950, *Executive Secretariat Files, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, The United Nations; The Western Hemisphere, Vol. II*, Lot 57 D 649.

83 Gladwyn Jebb, “Defence of the West,” April 25, 1936, UK National Archives, FCO 73/257, Def/38/1/A.

84 *Ibid.*

85 Gladwyn Jebb, “Balance of Power lecture, Canning Club, Oxford,” February 21, 1944, FCO 73/263, Mis/44/1, UK National Archives.

had all been incorporated in the final Charter of the United Nations. The very basis of the scheme, continued cooperation between the Big Three, “had its origin in this country and was imparted by devious means to our two great Allies.” For this reason, he understood why British diplomats did wish to “emphasise our achievements in public, but rather to allow the Americans to claim the principal credit for the production of the Charter as a whole.” It was far better, in the long-run, “to regard the World Organisation as their special interest in order that they should play their full part in its operation.”⁸⁶

Crucially, however, Jebb felt that undue cynicism about what had been achieved was in danger of undermining the very purpose of the endeavour. Given his previous views, he was not shy to admit that there was “a great deal of truth” that the United Nations might turn out to be a new great power alliance. But he also felt this approach was

negative rather than positive and ignores the hopeful features of the Charter and notably the very fact that a machine will now be constituted whereby the Great Powers can attempt to settle their own difficulties as well as those of other people.

Jebb still saw the building of world organization in instrumental terms — as a “machine” for the management of international relations. And yet, he also felt the aspiration and hope that it held out was a force in its own right, providing that linear sense of direction and higher purpose to foreign policy, in a way that had been absent before 1938. Thus, this arch advocate of the balance of power, quoted the Biblical Proverb: “Where there is no vision the people perish.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

Unlikely as it might seem, there were indeed common threads that linked together figures as diverse as Kipling, Wells, both Roosevelts, Orwell, Churchill, Jebb, Nixon, and Kissinger and shaped their collective worldviews. The first was a yearning for some form of order, equilibrium and stability in international affairs — or at the very least, the prevention of “anarchy.” The second

was a consciousness about the fragility of Western civilization, caught between so-called revanchists or savages who would upset the “natural order” and an uncertain future in which the West’s privileged position would no longer be guaranteed. Within the vague and unbounded aspiration to build international order were oscillations between utopian prophesying and doom-laden visions of barbarism and anarchy.

Even after 1945, similar themes of civilizational angst and a desire to derive meaning from the march of history were never far below the surface when the question of world order was discussed. This essay began with a discussion of Henry Kissinger’s 2014 book. As a prelude to any of his work on foreign policy, however, Kissinger’s Harvard undergraduate thesis of 1951 wrestled with “The Meaning of History,” a study of Toynbee, Spengler and Kant. He wrote:

Even though our contemplation of history may yield as its deepest meaning a feeling of limits as the basis of the ultimate moral personality of man we are still faced with the fact that no civilization has yet been permanent, no longing completely fulfilled, no answer ever gone unchallenged.

On the one hand, the work revealed the suspicion of “universalism” that shaped Kissinger’s later statecraft. On the other, he could not deny the irreducible human feeling that there was always “a task to be achieved” as “an expression of the soul.”⁸⁸

The relative success of the world order built out of 1945 was that it accepted, as its premise, the limits of perfectibility. But the human urge for perfection could never be wished away. The quest for world order could never be truly complete. In June 1965, both Lord Gladwyn and Henry Kissinger were at the Serbellino Conference on Conditions of World Order, organized by the French political scientist, journalist, and philosopher, Raymond Aron. The meeting brought together a select group of theorists and former practitioners, and the proceedings were recorded by Stanley Hoffman, one of Kissinger’s colleagues at Harvard. Hoffman’s record of the event underscores one of the arguments of this essay — that world order could be the vaguest of aspirations, but that the

⁸⁶ Gladwyn Jebb, “Reflections on San Francisco,” July 25, 1945 U 5998/12/70, *Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series 1, Vol. 1: The Conference at Potsdam July — August 1945*, Item 407, 893-897.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Henry Kissinger, *The Meaning of History (Reflections on Toynbee, Spengler and Kant)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University undergraduate honors thesis, 1951), 21-22; 24-26.

pursuit of world order was an almost irresistible urge, because it spoke to the most fundamental philosophical and existential questions, from the future of humanity to the purpose of politics.

It was clear from the earliest proceedings that “world order” meant something different to almost every participant. Some definitions were “purely descriptive” — that is, a diagnosis of the existing state of international affairs and an assessment of the relationship among the different parts. Some participants defined world order in more expansive terms, as “minimum conditions for existence ... [or] coexistence.” Others defined it in normative, or visionary terms, “as the conditions for the good life.”

As Hoffman described, Aron struggled to control the discussion or keep it within bounds, urging the speakers to avoid “platitudes” or simply resort to “an acrimonious reproduction of the conflicts of values that exist in the world.” He ventured his own definition of world order as the conditions that would help mankind “not merely ... avoid destruction, but to live together relatively well in one planet.” For the most part, however, the conference attendees could not get past these first principles to move to the actual foreign policy challenges facing of the era. In the end, Hoffman observed a fatal split between the “builders and the critics.” The builders were those whose minds were “primarily devoted to the creation of a system or the advocacy of a method or the proselytizing of an idea.” The critics were those who were mostly concerned with “the analysis of reality, with the dissection (or vivisection) of systems, utopias and theories.”⁸⁹

Yet, to return to the fundamental point of this essay, the definition of world order matters much less than the sense in which it has been held out as the ultimate goal of Western statecraft. A month before the 1968 presidential election, which brought Nixon into office, the Policy Planning Council noted that attempts to define world order had proved extremely challenging in previous years. It remained crucial, however, that the “sense of direction” in foreign policy was still maintained:

“World order” is not a goal that can be defined with any precision. The time is clearly not ripe for detailed blueprints. But that is not what is needed. People are

surfeited with oratory and have come to distrust grand designs. What they basically want is a sense of direction with which they can identify, and a clearer understanding of the kind of international relationships toward which we can reasonably hope to progress in the next decade.⁹⁰

As H.G. Wells wrote in 1940, what was really important was not the identity of the people who pursued world order, the timeline on which it was to be achieved or the nature of the utopia they envisaged. He explained:

No man, no group of men, will ever be singled out as its father or founder. For its maker will be not this man nor that man nor any man but Man, that being who is in some measure in every one of us.

Instead, world order would be like most great civilizational achievements, “a social product” and “collective achievement” of many lives. What really mattered was that people in a century scourged by human destruction were now engaged in this collective effort:

A growing miscellany of people are saying — it is getting about — that “World Pax is possible,” a World Pax in which men will be both united and free and creative. It is of no importance at all that nearly every man of fifty and over receives the idea with a pitying smile. Its chief dangers are the dogmatist and the would-be “leader” who will try to suppress every collateral line of work which does not minister to his supremacy. This movement must be, and it must remain, many-headed. ... The new order will be incessant; things will never stop happening. ...⁹¹

The pursuit of world order may indeed be a many-headed monster or the vaguest of aspirations. It is a work of abstract art never complete. It has been associated with some false dawns and great disappointments and no few misadventures. As John Thompson has written, the link between the pursuit of world order and American security and prosperity has always been “hard to sustain when

89 Stanley Hoffman, “Report of the Conference on Conditions of World Order: June 12-19, 1965, Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy,” *Daedalus* 95, no. 2 (Spring 1966): 455-478.

90 “U.S. Foreign Policy: Current Issues in a Longer-Term Perspective”, Policy Planning Council, December 1968, Papers of Lyndon Baines Johnson, LBJ Archive, University of Texas, National Security File, Box 50.

91 Wells, *The New World Order*.

subjected to sceptical questioning.”⁹² The lack of concrete definition is at the heart of repeated failures of conception and strategy in the history of Anglo-American statecraft. But it has also provided a sense of continuity, direction, and mission and acted as an antidote to excessive cynicism, fatalism, and short-termism in the making of Anglo-American foreign policy.

It is right to question the assumptions behind ideas of world order, test their philosophical foundations and internal logic, as well as the policy recommendations that arise out of them. But it would be ahistorical and self-immolating to mistake incoherence for purposelessness and abandon the venture entirely. Stripping the altars will not do. [▲](#)

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