Review of International Studies (2005), 31, 93–107 *Copyright © British International Studies Association*
doi:10.1017/S0260210505006807

The age of liberal wars

LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

Three different types of arguments were used to justify the 2003 Iraq War. The first was based on the requirements of national security. Iraq was believed to be developing deadly weapons which it might use against neighbouring states or hand over to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. A second argument was based on international security. Iraq was supposed to comply with a series of UN Security Council Resolutions and was failing to do so, thereby undermining the credibility of the leading international institutions. The third argument was based on human security. The Iraqi people had suffered too long under a tyrannical regime and this was an opportunity to overthrow it and replace it with something much better.

It was also the case, of course, that these arguments were matched by opponents of the war. The national security argument against war not only questioned the existence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), or their relevance if they did exist, but also argued that the occupation of a Muslim country would provoke support for and the ire of terrorist groups. The international security argument noted the divisions within the Security Council, and the consequent risk to the credibility of the institution should leading states go to war regardless of the majority view. The human security argument questioned whether people could be liberated by means that would in themselves be bound to cost many innocent lives.

These arguments were all in play prior to the war. Afterwards, as it became apparent that there were no WMD to be found, the pro-war case increasingly depended on the human security arguments. This argument could be challenged from all three perspectives. On its own terms the human security case, that the war would be a net gain for the Iraqi people in terms of democracy and human rights, had to be set against the chaos and violence of the aftermath and the apparent unpopularity of the coalition forces. The international security perspective, though sympathetic to the humanitarian claims, worried that uninvited meddling was bound to end in tears and pointed out how such claims could be used to justify all sorts of mischievous interventions. The only way to sort out the weak from the strong cases was to test it for international support, and this could only be achieved through the Security Council. The failure to get a second Security Council Resolution to support military action meant that the test had been failed and so the case must be weak. From the national security perspective, conservatives could argue that Western countries had no business getting involved in the affairs of other countries other than for defensive reasons. Even after the successful elections at the end of January 2005 this argument still enjoyed considerable credibility as the effort to transform Iraq into a liberal democracy faced stiff resistance from a combination of disaffected Sunnis, Ba'athists and Islamic militants.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

My concern in this article is not with the particulars of the Iraqi case or the 'real reasons' why states go to war. I start with the assumption that the cases made for war are not simply surface froth, designed to beguile and bemuse public and wider international opinion. During the debates on Iraq, radicals who found it hard to argue against the idea of removing Saddam Hussein questioned the methods but also charged the coalition with hypocrisy. The invasion of Iraq, they charged, had nothing to do with security at any level, but was 'really about oil' or even about securing contracts for American firms such as Halliburton. This radical critique now looks even less compelling than it did before the war given its economic consequences, and the lack of evidence to support the original propositions on motives. There is a view that in the harsh world of international affairs the structure of the system obliges states, even against their better nature, invariably to give priority to the starkest calculations of interest and power. Certainly governments unable to provide convincing answers to questions of short-term outcomes and long-term benefit will be handicapped when making the case for a military intervention, but they will also wish to demonstrate that they are doing the right thing as well as the safe thing. Justifications for war habitually draw on normative arguments, on expectations about how governments should behave towards their own people, and on how human beings and states should behave towards each other.

From this starting assumption that legitimacy matters in foreign policymaking in Western countries I argue that, at least in Western countries and at least until recently, a vital source of legitimacy is evidence that any force is being used in pursuit of essentially liberal values. Whether or not they meant what they said, coalition leaders felt that they were on firm ground using humanitarian arguments to justify a substantial and potentially hazardous military operation in Iraq. At the very least they believed such arguments had some purchase with the bodies of opinion they were seeking to influence. This tendency in justification is not difficult to explain. Governments no longer enjoy such natural authority with their own publics that claims of raison d'etat can serve as a blanket explanation for the more doubtful aspects of foreign policy. This is in part a consequence of the international system no longer appearing so anarchic, as a remorseless competition between great powers. As a result established methods of evaluating power and interest are under challenge.

Legitimacy has an elusive quality, involving questions of ethics and analysis as well as legality. In terms of definition legitimacy refers to the ability of governments to gain acceptance for their laws. It is about those aspects of compliance with law and policy that turn on respect for authority rather than fear of power, and reflect internalised norms as much as calculated interests. Part of the difficulty with legitimacy is the interaction between these relatively hard coercive and soft consensual sources of support. Authority can represent the successful institutionalisation of power gained through armed force while public debate consists of a continuing attempt to reconcile the demands of doing what is right and what is self-interested.

The potential sources of legitimacy can be summarised by the concepts of national, international and human security. Their individual characters, distinctiveness and mutual interaction are bound to be fuzzy. Because they reflect alternative political priorities and competing analyses of the international environment they may all be supported to a degree within the society. They are not necessarily exclusive and can on occasion reinforce each other in combination. During the course of an intense and polarising debate, as over Iraq, the protagonists will try to show that their preferred

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

course supports all three, even though in practice they may have to be weighed against each other. In each case their definition may be contested. Indeed I would describe them as normative streams, within which values and meaning change over time according to recent experience and current challenge, and in relation to broader cultural changes and debates about public morality. Understanding these normative streams is essential if sense is to be made of contemporary debates about the legitimate use of armed force.

In the next section I suggest that the normative streams associated with national and international security, at least as reflected in traditional international relations theory, take familiar forms while that within the area of human security has yet to be established, because they focus on the structures of power within states rather than between states. In recent years, out of the normative stream of human security the strongest theme to emerge, for purposes of international relations, is the need to protect the weak and the vulnerable, especially in the face of great violence. The wars that are conducted for this purpose I call liberal wars. While this is consistent with classic liberalism, I address in subsequent sections the objections that such an approach is now being encouraged by American neo-conservatives while resisted by many associated with European liberalism. Certainly mainstream politics during the Cold War gave priority to international security because of the dangers of pursuing egoistical national security policies regardless of the consequences. The neo-conservatives (and the label initially had an ironic quality) demonstrated a moral unease with a policy of détente, that sought to reduce the risk of further Soviet expansionism by tolerating repression in the territories already under Moscow's domination. The West was intimidated because it had allowed the Soviet Union to gain an advantage in the military balance. In Europe this line of argument was weaker, because the local stakes were higher and it was assumed that in an age of mutually assured destruction traditional notions of the balance of power had become meaningless. With the end of the Cold War, more traditional liberal concerns reasserted themselves and led to a number of examples of humanitarian intervention. The problem with the notion of liberal wars, I argue, lies less with the ends than the means. Wars are inherently illiberal in their effects and their consequences. Against this must be posed the illiberal consequences of inaction and the possibilities of mitigation, but this explains the discretionary aspect of humanitarian interventions. The concluding section considers whether events since September 2001 have transformed the debate. While noting that they have thrust the issue of war back into the realms of national and international security, it is argued that the philosophy behind the campaigns of al-Qaeda and associated groups is profoundly illiberal while mass casualty terrorism in itself is an affront to liberal values. At the same time, the stress on the liberal dimension to current struggles has important implications for Western conduct.

The human security agenda

Traditionally international relations theory has assumed that for states national security is the prime value because it deals with threats to their very existence. This renders them self-reliant and encourages a wary view of other states. If attacked (or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sure that they are about to be attacked) states have a right to defend themselves. Giving priority to national security therefore encourages military provisions to ensure that direct aggression can be resisted. One risk is that the military provision will prove to be insufficiently substantial to act as a deterrent; another is that it will be excessive and so appear to threaten other states. These two types of risk have argued for a more enlightened form of self-interest which seeks to reduce exaggerated senses of threat and deal with disputes between states before they turn into violent conflict. A stable international order is the goal of international security. This value underpins foreign policies based on cooperation with other states, which could involve international institutions and law, but might also depend on more informal contacts and transactions. Simply put, a good solution to the problem of major war is to ensure that strong states get along. It may of course be the case that some disputes between states are too fundamental to be readily resolved and that perceptions of threat are accurate. In such cases attempting to get on well with a radical state may just mean a lowering of the guard. The values of national and international security are not necessarily opposed: it is possible to cooperate while keeping guard. The costs and benefits of the competing approaches have, however, been the stuff of much foreign policy debate, often presented as a contest between realists and idealists.

This contest, reflecting a dominant fear of major war, concerns the best way of securing the rights of states. From neither perspective do the rights of individuals or of groups count for much. From the national perspective these rights must be subservient to those of the state, especially at time of national emergency. From the international perspective it is essential that all states recognise each others' rights. Order depends on prohibiting aggression and, critically, upholding the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

So far so familiar. Yet a national security agenda must be about more than external enemies. States are not only threatened from within but they often deem internal threats to be the most serious, whether in the form of insurrection, subversion, civil war or secessionism. The relationship between the requirements of internal order and those of external order is complex. States facing such problems regularly blame the meddling of outsiders, sometimes correctly. In principle international security requires that the temptation to meddle in the problems of others should be prohibited. Yet in practice the consequences of a state's internal problems can have repercussions beyond its borders, for example flows of refugees, or the methods of dealing with opponents become so obnoxious that they can no longer be spoken of as a purely internal matter. At this point the needs of international and human security can clash. Meanwhile, from the national perspective intervention in the name of justice risks creating security problems where none existed and, at the very least, putting one's own troops at risk in another's civil wars.

The debate between the demands of national and of international security has some continuity because these normative streams are not difficult to follow. This is not the case with questions of human security. These focus on the structures of power within states rather than those between states. Class, religion, ethnicity, language can serve as the basis of alternative power structures. Democracy may be advocated as a means of sorting out these alternatives, yet in Western societies at least the concept of human rights is taken to be antithetical to attempts to establish an internal political

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

order based on the dominance of one section of society, even if the majority. This is a reflection of an attachment to classical liberalism with its commitment to free markets and human rights. Yet within the normative stream of human security, free markets are often blamed, for example by 'anti-globalisation' activists, for economic injustice. Human rights can be posed in terms of essential needs (food, shelter, basic amenities, and a degree of personal safety) rather than the political terms of freedom of expression, movement and ideas and a degree of self-determination. These are areas of considerable analytical and even ideological controversy. Accepting all these problems, the general impact of concerns about human security as a foreign policy issue has been to encourage attempts to rebalance political structures in other countries, in favour of the weak and the vulnerable, while encouraging, as an underlying theme, more open political systems, with improved governance, popular participation and respect for civil liberties.

This tendency has been at work since the end of the Cold War. Iraq was hardly unusual in this respect. Comparable arguments were an essential ingredient for the rationales of the 'humanitarian interventions' of the 1990s. During this decade the Clinton Administration was clearly attracted by the notion, adduced by some international relations theorists, that increased global democratisation would mean increased peace. The Bush Administration has committed itself, if anything with even greater vigour, to the same path. More seriously, a number of members of the non-governmental humanitarian community bought into these arguments in ways that they would have been loath to do during earlier decades. Even with Iraq, a number of commentators who were clearly unhappy about many aspects of this war were enthusiastic about the end of the Saddam regime. Buoyed by important elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine, as well as Iraq, all of which could be said to set these countries on a new course, President Bush made what could be described as a 'war on tyranny' the core theme of his second term. Such a 'war' does not necessarily require military operations. Bush has insisted armed force is not the only and not necessarily the best means to achieve democratic breakthroughs. Events in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and Lebanon in 2005 were eloquent testimonies to 'people power' when challenging corrupt elites who were trying to hold on to power. The very fact that a President, and particularly one from the Republican Party, has taken such an avowedly interventionist stance in itself indicates an important shift in American foreign policy. The support coming from a Labour Prime Minister in Britain suggests that this approach cuts across traditional political lines of left and right, and certainly the campaigns for and against the Iraq war produced some political coalitions that would have seemed curious in the past. Robert Cooper, now a major influence on European foreign policy, has spoken approvingly of the robust adoption of democratic norms as 'liberal imperialism'.

A challenge had been mounted to the consensus behind the old core principle that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of other states, and that, even if confined to non-military means, and violation of this principle was detrimental to international order. In the conditions of the Cold War this restraint had a national as well as an international security rationale. External intervention from one direction risked prompting an equal and opposing external reaction from another. The end of the Cold War, bringing with it a marked increase in comity, and even amity, among the great powers, has reduced this more prudential concern. A general Western confidence with regard to the universality of their political values, especially

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

after their triumph in the confrontation with state socialism, has discouraged attempts to justify the privileged position of the state in all circumstances, especially in conditions of civil war, repression, or genocide, and encouraged account being taken of the fate of individuals or minority groups.

To what extent might this lead to the use of force? Scepticism about state power was at the heart of classical liberalism, which was anti-militarist. Military expenditure was considered to be as wasteful as military elites were reactionary. Liberalism challenged the mercantilist assumption that military power was essential to the growth and consolidation of economic power. With no territory left for conquering, the old empires dismantled, and great-power antagonism much reduced, classic liberalism therefore would expect the potential role of armed forces to have shrunk considerably. While the 'victory' in the Cold War, which was at root an ideological triumph, may have turned the erstwhile status quo Western powers into radicals, simply by living successfully according to their core values. Through this example, they undermine disagreeable regimes and encourage changes in inefficient economic practices, without any question of employing force.

Even classical liberals recognised that force might be required to protect the weak against the strong in circumstances where violence is already being used on a substantial scale. Such violence is not unknown within Western societies but it is most likely to be found in states marked by social cleavages, fragile economies and non-consensual political systems. The processes of decolonisation have resulted in the proliferation of states that either have fallen into this category in the past or might do so in the future. In this context the shift from a focus on preparations for great-power conflict to humanitarian intervention is a natural one. The states that prompt such intervention are unlikely to be liberal capitalist in character, but Western interventions, even when they are largely economic in character, tend to encourage a move in that direction.

Wars conducted in pursuit of a humanitarian agenda, and which are likely to lead to pressures for domestic political reform and reconstruction, I call liberal wars. The ideal type for a liberal war is that it is altruistic in inspiration and execution. Such a war would focus on the balance of power within a state rather than between states, and can be presented as rescuing whole populations, or particularly vulnerable sections, from tyrannical governments or social breakdown. It addresses and rectifies some abuse of human rights but does not act as the cause of abuse. It is liberating and empowering while involving as few casualties as possible.

Liberal wars are not pursued in the name of strategic imperatives but because values are being affronted. Interests might be involved at the margins, but these are unlikely to count as 'vital', except in the most enlightened terms. For this reason liberal wars have acquired a discretionary aspect, to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. On this basis they have been described as 'wars of choice' to be contrasted with those of the past, which were 'wars of necessity' or 'of survival'. These involved great-power competition and direct threats to security, often prompted by the rise of radical but strong states. Wars of choice, of course, appear as wars of necessity for the local belligerents, who may well consider their most vital interests to be at stake, including their right to persist with their illiberalism. Questions of choice arise only for those whose survival is not threatened. I shall return to this question of choice in the conclusion of this essay: for the moment suffice it to note that this issue took on a different complexion after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Liberalism and neo-conservatism

Describing such interventions as liberal wars raises a number of objections. These objections tend in one direction to accusations of hypocrisy, of bad intentions masquerading as good, and in the other to accusations of naivety, of bad consequences flowing from good intentions. I do not intend to cover those objections which claim that the altruism is a guise, and that there are other, more traditionally 'imperialistic' motives behind these wars, including the desire to control oil supplies, or to make the world safe for multinational companies. The question of 'real' motives may be interesting, and a degree of cynicism may be warranted, but the validity of the rationales can and should be assessed on their own terms.

A more serious objection is that a 'liberal war' is a misnomer. It assumes a concept of liberalism that does not reflect its actual use in contemporary politics, particularly in the United States where the urge to war is associated with neo-conservatives and is largely opposed by liberals. Yet it has often been noted that many of the views now associated with neo-conservatism derive from the liberal President Woodrow Wilson who believed that American power could be used to promote justice and democracy abroad. Conservatives would tend towards a much more cautious approach, more in the sceptical mould of President John Quincy Adams. While it is the case that the meanings of conservatism and liberalism in the American context have changed, they also remain fluid, at least in the area of foreign policy. There are certainly many American conservatives who reject the interventionism of the neo-conservatives, while many American liberals are drawn towards it in principle even if they recoil from the way it has been implemented.

Furthermore, the origins of neo-conservatism in the United States are truly liberal. They lie in the response to a section of the Democratic – not Republican – Party to the foreign policy debates of the early 1970s. On the one hand the neo-conservatives opposed the McGovernite tendency in the Party which questioned the need for defence expenditure and doubted the role of force in international affairs. This they thought was naïve. In this they were exactly in the tradition of the liberal realists of the mid-century, who insisted on the need to fight for the good life when dealing with totalitarianism, whether Nazi or Communist. Where they diverged was in resisting the logic of containment, originally promoted by the liberal realists to demonstrate the recklessness of the right. This manifested itself in opposition to the foreign policy of détente as practiced by both the US and European governments during the Nixon/Ford periods. This they also thought to be naïve because it assumed that the Soviet Union could be a status quo, conservative power, prepared to follow the same norms as the United States, for example in honouring arms control treaties, or in accepting the logic of mutual assured destruction in the nuclear field. But the human security agenda was very strong as well – reflected in the support for the right of Jews to leave Russia for Israel – the 'refuseniks'. This led to the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 US trade bill that would only allow Most Favoured Nation status to be granted to the Soviet Union in return for concessions on emigration. Another example was the objection to President Ford's refusal to meet notable dissident Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. There was a continued undercurrent of opposition to accepting repressive rule in East Europe as a price worth paying for regional order and dismay at the ease with which deals were done with authoritarian governments, from China to Saudi Arabia.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The propensity to exaggerate threats to national security, and to insist on high levels of defence preparedness, may be an enduring characteristic of neo-conservatism, which gives it a natural point of contact with more traditional conservatism, but it flowed in the 1970s from a view that the rottenness of the Soviet system was apt to make its leaders lash out as much externally as internally. Traditional conservatives, such as Nixon and Kissinger, assumed that there was no necessary correlation between beastliness towards one's own population and a propensity to external aggression. Regimes anxious about their own survival tended to be cautious in their assessments of power balances.

In this both Kissinger and, for that matter, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev missed the full significance of the human rights provisions contained in 'Basket Three' of the 1975 'Final Act' of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which they saw as a collection of platitudes of minor importance because they lacked legal force. Brezhnev saw the purpose of CSCE as confirming Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe, without appreciating the extent to which this minor concession would undermine this hegemony by providing dissident elements with the basis upon which to make their voices heard and make common cause with Western opponents of the Soviet system. President Gerald Ford's maladroit attempts to defend a pragmatic and therefore weak approach to change in the Eastern bloc was one reason he was so badly skewered in the 1976 election. The cause of human rights was still clearly a liberal one in the US as Jimmy Carter became President. The neo-conservatives were happy with that but unhappy over Carter's caution on military matters and readiness to engage in arms control negotiations. His perceived softness on national security issues proved to be Carter's undoing, and it was on that basis that a number of neo-conservatives joined the Reagan Administration. Their views influenced its rhetoric, particularly with regard to the Soviet Union. It is fair to say, however, that in a clash between anti-communism and anti-repression, the former tended to win. This was evident in both Latin America and the Middle East. The first President Bush was a traditional conservative, concerned more with stability and order than with justice – hence his slow response to the stirrings in Eastern Europe that marked the end of the Cold War and his reluctance to continue with military operations to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein, although he had an opportunity to do so. During the 1990s it was President Clinton who embraced the humanitarian agenda, although, like Carter, he combined this with a cautious approach to armed force.

The second President Bush's theme of using power to end tyranny around the globe would traditionally, therefore, have been seen as a liberal theme. It is true that those who would describe themselves as liberals tend to be firm opponents of President Bush, but more because of the other themes in foreign policy, and the execution of specific initiatives, including the ineptitude in the diplomacy prior to the Iraq War, and the mismanagement of the occupation after it. As was evident from the circumlocutions adopted by Senator Kerry during his failed bid for the presidency, liberals were loath either to reject the Wilsonian tradition or to disavow the human security agenda.

Liberalism and European moderation

A further objection is that in Europe liberalism has been more associated with the international security than the human security agenda. Not surprisingly, in view of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

twentieth century history, European liberalism has been designed to solve the problem of war rather than the problem of injustice and has, in consequence, stressed the potential role of international organisations and law. The experience of the nineteenth century would, however, have led to a different conclusion, with liberalism less uneasy with the occasional interference in the internal affairs of others and always celebrating the erosion of authoritarian governments.

The point of the realist critique of liberal internationalism was that the maintenance of order, and the protection of the weak against the strong, could not be sensibly considered as a matter of the rule of law and the support for institutions, but also had to consider matters of power and interest. The realists, however, were vulnerable to the charge of being too cynical in assuming that power and interest were all that mattered. Contrary to the view that the domestic politics of the great powers were largely an irrelevance, and that the individual units related to each other on the basis of a straightforward calculus of relative strength, varied by means of alliances and the occasional war, the ideological battle was always central to prevailing concepts of international order. The system was sensitive not only to acts of external aggression but also internal subversion, and the boundary between the two was never as clear-cut as the classic 'realist' texts would have it. If threats to international order do not simply take the form of criminal, aggressor states who disregard the rules, but a challenge to the philosophical basis upon which power *within* individual states rests, then great powers cannot duck issues of ideological hegemony.

So the occasions when the rights and duties of the Great Powers were established, such as the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the League of Nations in 1919 and the United Nations in 1945, each followed the defeat of a threatening ideology – revolutionary republicanism, anti-democratic authoritarianism, racist nationalism. Each time the hope was that a new consensus could be based on a set of shared principles. They failed when new ideological fault lines opened up. In practice, therefore, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs was always conditional. Disinterest in each others' internal affairs was only possible for states when their respective ideologies did not threaten each other. The Napoleonic Wars left Europe dominated by essentially conservative states. They shared hostility towards any revolutionary ideology which might provide not only a motor for the accumulation of power and territory but also contest their very legitimacy. The radical ideologies of socialism and anarchism posed the most direct threat to internal order yet it was the rise of liberalism that was most influential. Liberalism if taken seriously is inherently disorderly. It promotes the right to liberty at the individual level and self-determination at the national, and also poses a free market challenge to mercantilism. Demands for self-determination were particularly subversive. A sense of nationhood could lead to new aggregations of states, as with Italy and Germany, as well fragmentation, as in the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires.

By the twentieth century, liberalism was the ascendant ideology, even amongst the status quo powers. It therefore became associated with the maintenance of a stable international order. The attempts to establish the rule of international law, and even move towards world government, assumed that the core principles of liberalism could provide the foundation. If there was mutual respect for individual and group rights there would be no basis for conflict. The problem for European liberalism therefore lay in the potential disconnect between the requirements of international security and human security. When political movements challenged basic rights, the issue for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

international order, as with domestic order, was to ensure that the community as a whole protected them. This required a theory of political obligation, always a difficult area for liberalism in that it qualified the basic freedom to ignore the problems of others. Once key states in the system were led by illiberal regimes, then prioritising international security meant overcoming distaste for these regimes in order to achieve war-avoiding accommodations.

During the Cold War there was an impasse between liberal democracy and state socialism. This meant that any attempt by either to roll back the boundaries of the other carried a risk of major, and possibly nuclear, war. Common prudence suggested caution, however distasteful the accommodation. This was confirmed in the détente of the 1970s, which began with the 'Ostpolitik' of the German social democrats in the late 1960s. This was a deliberate decision to ease tensions between East and West Germany, and by extension the two halves of Europe, by ignoring the aspirations of those in the satellite states of Eastern Europe. Although this was picked up and taken forward by the Nixon/Kissinger team, Europeans always had the greatest stake in its continuation, and they became alarmed when, under the early influence of the neo-conservatives, détente was subjected to a severe American challenge. It was easy enough to dismiss the paranoid tendency in neo-conservatism, which could be criticised for exaggerating the military prowess and inherent strength of the Warsaw Pact. The moral critique was much more difficult, reflected in the ambivalent attitudes shown towards President Carter's preoccupation with human rights and then the rise of Solidarity in Poland. Even during the 1980s, many European 'moderates' saw progress being made through détente and arms control, arranged at grand summits, rather than through the ideological subversion of communism, although that is how the Cold War in fact ended. They had assumed that communism would continue indefinitely.

Once communism collapsed, the focus of European foreign policy was, in the first instance, to work out how to put an institutional lock on the new European constellation. Enlargement of the European Community (as it was then) initially came up against the preference for 'deepening rather than widening'. It was the Clinton Administration more than the governments of what became the European Union that appreciated that the logic of the new situation was to support rather than resist the aspirations of the former Communist states to join the Western world, however destabilising that might appear (especially in Moscow). This is why the post-communist states have been more supportive of American foreign policy.

As a liberal hegemony was steadily being established in Europe the human security agenda moved into the rest of the world. If 'failed' and 'rogue' states were menaces to their own people and also their neighbours, sovereignty came to be seen to be increasingly conditional. The foreign policy debate in Europe as in the United States struggled with how to identify the point at which states were no longer allowed to mismanage their internal affairs without interference, when their behaviour becomes so offensive as to demand action. During the 1990s the trend was towards acceptance of the need to intervene and that this might require resolute and robust force. The consequences of passivity in Rwanda in 1994 and Srebrenica the next year weighed heavily on liberal consciences. The high point of this approach came in the 1999 operation in Kosovo. Here legitimacy won over legality (at least in so far as not requiring any Security Council vote, which Russia and China would have vetoed). European governments could take comfort in a sense that they were riding the tide

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of history. The international consensus was moving in this direction, reflected in the assertion of a 'responsibility to protect', in a report commissioned by the Canadian government and the increasing embrace of this norm by international organisations, most recently by the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.

Unnatural wars

Before considering the impact of events since 11 September 2001 on such thinking, a further and potentially more substantial objection to the notion of a liberal war must be addressed. Wars are inherently illiberal in their effects and their consequences and so a liberal war constitutes an unnatural act. War appeals to the baser human instincts and requires the suppression of individuality in pursuit of the collective good. Large-scale violence, whatever the motives which prompt its use or the precision with which it is applied, is bound to put people and property at risk, threatening the most fundamental human right of all – the right to life. They are violent and unpredictable and can develop a ferocious dynamic which can lead to consequences which in their human cost appear to contradict the claims made on their behalf.

In principle this can be countered by fighting in the just war tradition, not only in terms of just cause but also with a methodology that distinguishes between combatants and non-combatants and achieves a degree of proportionality in the force used, sufficient to right the original wrong but not so much as to make matters worse. Wars fought with excessive force and indifference to all casualties, but particularly civilian, will be drained of legitimacy. One of the claims made for modern military technologies that it allows lethal firepower to be directed with extraordinary and discriminating precision, thereby mitigating this risk to legitimacy. If civilians suffer it will not be because they are deliberate targets but because of 'collateral damage', and so the suffering will be far less than in past wars.

Yet despite the possibilities of the new technologies, summed in the notion of the 'revolution in military affairs', it remains difficult in war to relate means to ends in a reliably proportionate manner. Military methods must be geared not only to the political stakes but also to the capacities and methods of the adversary. The political pressures may be towards minimum force but the military pressures may point in the opposite direction. While the stakes for the intervening powers may be limited those for the local parties are likely to be total. The intervention will be unlikely to have occurred were it not for illiberal actions against civilians. The strategies adopted to counter or deter external intervention will play on the determination of the intervener to keep the war limited by challenging attempts to separate the civilian from the military in targeting, and threaten considerable casualties all round over a prolonged period. If the costs of the commitment can be made to rise then a choice to enter can soon be overtaken by a determination to exit. Except that exit also carries a political cost: a reputation for reneging on commitments and vulnerability to pressure. Western governments soon become well aware of the reputational risks, as could be seen with NATO deciding that it had to continue with the Kosovo War or the US concluding that it had to accept an unexpectedly high level of casualties among its own troops in Iraq.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lastly, there may be an underlying cultural arrogance, not only in the belief that such wars can be undertaken without causing major casualties but also that they might improve conditions in troubled parts of the world where conflicts have multiple and deep-seated causes. It is one thing to enter a broken country to relieve immediate suffering, but it is quite another to mend the country. If the suffering is not to return then it is not enough to deal with the immediate problem and then leave, but experience suggests that the effort required to turn a country round, especially if it remains internally divided, can be substantial and prolonged.

There are therefore both principled and prudential reasons to object to war as a means of achieving supposedly liberal goals. This leads to a view that it is best if the Western world leaves the weak and failed states of the world alone. The bombast of petty dictators, the sufferings they inflict and the fear they engender should all be deplored, but we need do no more because in the end they are irrelevant to our own prosperity and security. There are a number of problems with this alternative view. In a world of permeable borders and easy movement across continents, the conflicts of one region are soon imported by others. It is not so easy to avoid the impact of events elsewhere. Such a view also overstates the ease with which governments can note the pain of others and move on, especially once the international media have taken an interest. As things stand there are good reasons for the current levels of discomfort at the international responses to the plague of HIV/Aids or the terrible carnage of some of the civil wars in Africa.

It would of course be better to use non-military means to achieve the same goals. The most successful instruments of liberal (or potentially liberal) change in recent years have been popular movements. This was evident in the 1989 collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe, then in the later undermining of many post-Soviet regimes. Popular movements work best against regimes which are one step away from being completely ruthless and, crucially, cannot rely on the support of the police or army. Alternative forms of external pressure to armed force, and in particular economic sanctions, can have an influence over time, but, as the Iraqi case demonstrates, they raise their own problems. The net result of sanctions can be to strengthen a regime, by giving it greater control over residual trade flows, including smuggling, thereby allowing it to look after its own needs first and put those of the populace second, while blaming the international community for any hardships. Even when forceful methods are contemplated, it may still be the case that sometimes these problems appear too great to handle, even when states work in concert together or through the UN.

So the inherent illiberality of war may at times have to be set against the even more illiberal consequences of inaction. Sometimes the consequences of passivity may be too awful and the military options credible; at other times the case for intervention may be strong but the military options poor or the economic requirements too large. Political leaders in democratic societies dare not take on too many external problems. The needs of a particular country – for example Sierra Leone – might be addressed, but when the cases are multiplied and become so diverse and geographically spread, then it is not surprising that even the most committed governments from the more stable and prosperous states tend to pick and choose, dealing only with the problems with which they can cope. There are therefore a number of opportunities to engage in liberal wars, but only a few are likely to be taken up. This is why these wars have been presented as discretionary.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A liberal war on terror?

I have argued that liberal attitudes to war reflect the combined impact of the ideological currents at play at different stages in the history of the international system as well as the contemporary configurations of power. There is a traditional dislike of the primacy given to the rights of states in the international system. In the absence of a utopian world government, a moral foreign policy requires that at least stronger states think beyond their narrow self-interest and accept a responsibility to promote and enforce essential values, and, when necessary, protect the weak. Historically the focus was on defending weak states against larger, predatory, aggressive states. More recently there has been a shift towards what is happening within states, particularly those which are either being torn apart through civil war or whose ruling elites can only achieve security for themselves through the systematic oppression of their own people or the victimisation of vulnerable groups.

Defending weak states against aggressors meant upholding the rights of states to conduct their own affairs as they wish. The new focus poses the question of the extent to which the sovereignty of states can be compromised or qualified or just ignored because of the impact of their weakness on others, or because of their treatment of their own people. The need to prevent great human suffering must limit the rights of states to conduct their own affairs without external interference. Because there is a reluctance to jettison the old principle of non-interference, deemed essential for international security, much contemporary diplomatic discourse takes the form of establishing the conditions in which it is legitimate to set it aside. One relevant example might be Prime Minister Blair's speech in Chicago of April 1999, clearly delivered with the ongoing Kosovo war in mind, which was one of the first by a senior Western leader to address this problem directly, and set out a series of tests, which taken together were potentially restrictive, including the quality of the case, the exhaustion of diplomatic remedies and the feasibility of military remedies, the readiness to commit for the long-term and some conformity with national interests. Others have put a greater focus on process, for example only engaging in interventions sanctioned by the United Nations, or on consequences, ensuring that at the very least more harm is avoided than caused. Most recently, the Secretary-General's high-level panel came up with seriousness of threat, proper primary purpose, last resort, proportional means and a favourable balance of likely consequences. Going back to Caspar Weinberger, after the fiasco of the Beirut intervention of 1982–4, whose unhappy conclusion reflected a clash between initial, liberal humanitarian motives and grander strategic ambitions, American policymakers when considering any non-essential operation have paid particular attention to their ability to sustain public support. This has involved considerations of likely casualties, the ability to apply overwhelming force and appropriate command structures.

Few of these tests could be considered objective, in many cases because they involve anticipating the outcomes of inherently unpredictable events, and there is always the problem with such lists as to what should be done when most but not all of the tests can be passed. All assume military engagements out of choice rather than necessity, so they are particularly relevant to contingencies connected to human security. As my starting example of Iraq illustrates, however, in rationalising war political leaders will seek to address the international and national security dimensions as well as the human. Indeed, when the non-interference principle ruled

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

supreme, the core rationales were normally national, and the evident humanitarian benefits were if anything played down, for example during the 1970s with India into Pakistan, Tanzania into Uganda and Vietnam into Cambodia.

An important feature of the 2000s is the insistence by the United States that the two major military interventions it has led, into Afghanistan and Iraq, have been wars of necessity as much as choice, with a primary purpose of national security although clear benefits for international and human security. The case for war was based on the need to prevent further, and even more devastating, terrorist attacks, following the outrage of September 2001. They came under the umbrella heading of a 'global war on terror' as declared by President Bush. Liberal critics have objected to casting this struggle as a war rather than as a multi-faceted problem with social, cultural, economic and political aspects, thereby encouraging a search for military solutions, which can make these other aspects worse, and a disregard of civil liberties.

But there have been evident tensions within liberal opinion. There are often links to situations which prompted past humanitarian interventions, such as Kosovo or East Timor, or might have done had not prudence dictated otherwise, such as Chechnya or Sudan, as well as to other long-standing struggles, such as those over Afghanistan, Kashmir or Palestine. But the stakes go well beyond ethnic cleansing or repression to the propagation of particular worldviews, and to direct threat to homelands as much as to innocents abroad. The ideological roots of the jihadist terrorism, of which al-Qaeda is the most notable exponent, are profoundly illiberal, in stressing theocracy and intolerance of diversity and dissent above democracy, as well as being socially homophobic and misogynist. The enemy is not a rogue regime or faction, which though nasty might be isolated, but rather a movement that seeks to draw upon a sense of grievance, humiliation and outrage throughout the Islamic world, connecting a range of conflicts in a global struggle. In many Western cities this ideological struggle is evident, as extreme Islamist groups are seen to challenge the prevailing secular, liberal consensus.

This ideological threat to liberal values is not at the same level as Nazism or Communism, because it is not backed by a powerful state, and within the normative streams that make up Islam it is controversial and contested. It appears dangerous because of the violence at its centre, often described in a somewhat apocalyptical and vengeful form. So while it has been observed correctly that it is odd to declare war against a particular tactic, often defined carelessly to include any irregular action against a repressive state, mass casualty terrorism has a particular quality, which can readily be framed as an issue of human security. As with the acts that prompt humanitarian intervention, the victims are most likely to be defenceless civilians. The moral objection lies in the use of violent means against non-combatants for political objectives. Over the past century we moved from a situation where 90 per cent of the casualties of war were combatants to one where 90 per cent were civilians. To stress the importance of protecting civilians, is to reinforce the trend in Western military thinking that emphasises capabilities to deal with enemy armed forces, and to stress the importance of restraint in situations where innocent civilians may get harmed.

There is an important difference between vicious domestic persecution or ethnic cleansing as measures used by the strong against the weak, and the desperate measures to which the weak may resort to find redress, which may tend towards the terroristic. So while the victims of ethnic cleansing and other human rights abuses have by definition already been marginalised, the victims of terrorism are more likely

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to be found in the cities of the strong. This is why terrorism is more likely to prompt a response by the strong, and why a war to ease humanitarian distress may well be against the established regime yet a war against terrorism may well be in its support. Hence concerns that authoritarian regimes will label all dissident groups as terroristic as a means of avoiding addressing legitimate grievances.

The greatest concern is that the readiness to inflict mass casualties will be facilitated by access to weapons that would hitherto have been only available to the more powerful states. We now call these capabilities weapons of mass destruction, but perhaps that is the wrong term. Our concern is weapons of civil destruction. The problem lies in the intent rather than the method. In sufficient quantities machetes and handguns can have the effects of large bombs while a few knives can turn airliners into lethal missiles, just as chemical and biological weapons can be used on quite small scales.

So although concerns about terrorism and weapons of civil destruction appear to put Western security interests to the fore, they link back to the concerns that might prompt liberal wars in two critical respects. First terrorism feeds off the conflicts of the troubled regions of the world. The more these can be calmed the less scope there will be for the terrorists to find sanctuary and recruits. Second, there is an underlying theme that attacks on those unable to defend themselves, whether in a Western skyscraper or an African village, must always be condemned and those who perpetrate such crimes against humanity must be restrained and if possible brought to justice. The ideological dimension adds a third linkage, because of the profound illiberalism of the jihadist movement.

The tense turn in international politics since 2001 does not therefore take Western considerations of the use of force away from liberal norms but adds a further dimension. It is important to be clear that this is not an argument for additional militancy in foreign policy. The stress on democracy and human rights that has now become a feature of the pronouncements of Western governments and international organisations will make itself felt in many ways. Change will often come about through popular movements or authoritarian governments attempting to adjust to the new normative environment. Nor should this be taken to suggest that because liberal values may be involved, all Western military actions are thereby vindicated. The advantage of stressing the importance of the liberal dimension is that it sets standards for Western governments, against which they should be judged when putting civilians at risk or in their treatment of prisoners. It reinforces the argument that the values at stake must be reflected in the conduct of wars and the struggle against terrorist groups. In addition, because interventions risk lives, cost money, and can last a long time they must always require special justification, and in practice will normally be viewed with reluctance rather than enthusiasm. My point is only that we may now be entering a stage where all wars in which the major Western powers get involved will take on aspects of liberal wars, designed to provide relief to the displaced and the dispossessed and prevent mass murder. In sum, the legitimate use of armed force will be in support of liberal values, and in particular against those preparing for, supporting or engaging in acts of civil destruction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006807 Published online by Cambridge University Press