



# RACE AND RIVALRY: NEOIMPERIALISM, INTERVENTION AND THE CIVILISING MISSION POST-1991

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The Western world have long insisted on the morality of liberal democratic capitalism as *the* model to be emulated. We speak of democratisation, liberalisation, secularisation of states at a time when rivalries are pushing America to show that it remains the sole global power. Over the past two decades, rhetoric of humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect and anticipatory self-defence have been used to justify military intervention in sovereign states. The construction of the 'invadee' as uncivilised, primitive, and undemocratic compared with the morality and freedom-bringing invader has had a significant impact on international law. These interventions are linked with neoimperialism, as the West enforces its views upon those unable to effectively resist.

Rather than examining the formation of the UN and its institutions, this paper will discuss the more recent interventions in Kosovo and Libya, and the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Georgia, arguing that they are examples of neoimperialism. In particular, the rhetoric of the 'Long War'<sup>1</sup> on terror is influenced by this doctrine, as seemingly incompatible liberalism and conflict converge with neorealism to form the neoconservative foreign policy of the Bush and Obama administrations. America and exceptionalism remain crucial to examine in light of the 'war on terror', as does the continued Manichean construction of the East/West into good and evil, heavily influenced by American Christian and liberal rhetoric.

The power of the US remains key to understanding Western influence over international law. American exceptionalism, as Nabers and Patman write, is the belief in 'the uniqueness of [America's] founding liberal principles...and the conviction that the US has a special destiny among nations'.<sup>2</sup> Thus the aim of the US becomes '[transforming] an anarchic, conflict prone world into an open, international community under the rule of law'.<sup>3</sup> Through maintaining influence over international law, the US can shape this system around Western values, even without direct involvement. This is

**OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, RHETORIC OF HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION, THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT AND ANTICIPATORY SELF-DEFENCE HAVE BEEN USED TO JUSTIFY MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SOVEREIGN STATES.**

the institutional power that Barnett and Duvall outline; America can 'establish global institutions that...further American interest and spread American values'.<sup>4</sup> Thus Western power becomes not just compulsory power, the 'use [of] coercion and intimidation...to develop and sustain [Western] supremacy',<sup>5</sup> but extends to 'guidance, and steering'.<sup>6</sup> This is evident through the institution of justified intervention, the subject of this paper.

From a theoretical perspective however, it is difficult to reconcile this Western ideology constructed as peaceful, liberal internationalism with the number of conflicts conducted in the name of liberalism. Reid claims instead that liberalism has failed 'to realise its pacific ends'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the post-

9/11 era has become one of 'active, muscular liberalism' in the words of British Prime Minister Cameron,<sup>8</sup> whereby liberal rhetoric of freedom is used in a way that entails *enforcing* freedom. Thus this Western concept of liberalism maintains a heavy sway over the direction of international law. Reid goes on to argue that liberalism is based around the premise of spreading peace by spreading democracy and market capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Hartmann writes that new global economic regulations are 'disciplinary neoliberalism' – forcing states to act according to Western free market principles rather than protectionist ones.<sup>10</sup> In the area of intervention, international law based on liberalism simply allows for the West to intervene in order to maintain their power. Knox argues that the 'dominant' position on intervention argues the 'desirability of spreading democracy and human rights through war'.<sup>11</sup> Thus liberalism becomes linked with Eurocentric modernity, recognising the primacy of democracy and inferiority of non-Western regimes. Reid argues that liberalism is thus used to attack rivals pursuing different political projects,<sup>12</sup> a Marxist critique which can be applied to attempts to secularise the Muslim world, discussed below.

The links between liberalism and modernity can be regarded as closely linked to neoimperialism, barely masked by the Western concept of the humanitarian intervention or the 'responsibility to protect'. US National Security Advisor (later Secretary of State) Rice stated in 2004 that America

'is taking the side of the millions of people in the Muslim world who long for freedom, who cherish learning and progress





pursuit of justice in Western terms, those who fight for counter-hegemonic, transnational justice are excluded, while the West is '[shielded] from critical scrutiny'.<sup>17</sup> Thus humanitarian intervention is a Western construct used as a means of actively promoting liberalism.

and who seek economic opportunity',<sup>13</sup> going on to state that 'we need to get the truth of our values and our policies to the people of the Middle East'.<sup>14</sup> This muscular liberalism thus entails intervention when a nation is not following a Western notion of governance. Beres, a supporter of these interventions, writes that 'the concept of the civilised nation continues to make legal and geopolitical sense in the present world order',<sup>15</sup> highlighting this neoconservative foreign policy which treats some nations as more civilised than others. Indeed, this Eurocentric neoimperialism relies on a stark distinction between modern and primitive nations – <sup>16</sup> justifying spreading democracy and peace to those nations who do not possess it. Through framing the

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Drawing on an example of humanitarian intervention – the 1998 NATO-spearheaded intervention in Kosovo – the nature of this doctrine becomes clear. Glennon writes that the US and NATO abandoned the 'old rules' of the United Nations Charter that prevented the use of force<sup>18</sup> and instead moved toward a system 'much more tolerant of military intervention but [with] few hard and fast rules'.<sup>19</sup> While Glennon goes on to argue that 'little will be lost in the attempt to forge a new system of rules',<sup>20</sup> it can be noted that the West was simply able to disregard the Charter and pursue its own aims. While Cohen argues that this may be due to the 'absence of obvious or agreed upon mechanisms of resolving...disputes',<sup>21</sup> if the West can challenge the very base of international law like this, then international law is certainly subject to Western interpretation of these mechanisms. As Knox writes, states were no longer the 'possessor of unparalleled sovereign rights' – where a state failed its obligations, it was 'necessary for the international community to intervene'.<sup>22</sup> The West then becomes the judge of this failure of obligations, as was seen when it was decided that the situation in Kosovo formed a threat, requiring a response from the 'guardians of the system, acting outside...

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normal channels'<sup>23</sup> but nevertheless able to intervene with its liberal values of peace.

Thirteen years after Kosovo, the Libyan intervention marked another significant development in Western justification for the use of military force. Defined in 2005, the responsibility to protect placed the primary responsibility of protecting civilians from ICC-level crimes on the nation-state, but the international community could intervene should the state be 'unwilling or unable to fulfil this responsibility' – <sup>24</sup> thus ceding the sovereignty of 'uncivilised' states to the more civilised West. Security Council Resolution 1973 permitted the use of all necessary measures (i.e. force) 'to protect civilians and civilians populations under threat of attack'.<sup>25</sup> This resolution passed the Security Council despite Russia and China's general contempt towards Western intervention, perhaps due to the strictly limited mandate that the resolution contained. Yet, Obama, Sarkozy and Cameron stated that 'it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Qaddafi in power'.<sup>26</sup> Thus a mandate protecting civilians was interpreted by the West as allowing for regime change, on the grounds that 'regime change would protect civilians'.<sup>27</sup> The eventual downfall of Qaddafi was substantially attributable to NATO support for rebel offensives, again showing that the West retains power over international law as a means of spreading democracy and toppling dictators.

In contrast to Kosovo and Libya, the intervenor in the 2008 intervention in Georgia was Russia, who claimed grounds of humanitarian intervention. As Knox believes, this intervention was evidence of the 'severely weakened' position of the US; humanitarian intervention did not occur with the consent of the US but instead was committed by one of its rivals.<sup>28</sup> Thus it could be theorised that the West is beginning to lose control over international law, following the economic weakening of the 2008 global financial crisis, the rise in military power of America's rivals, and the decline in political support for continuing Western interventions. However, while the US criticised Russia for its intervention, it was essentially treated as a minor issue rather than one requiring a mass international response. Indeed, perhaps the lack of significant US strategic interest in Georgia, or the unwillingness to intervene militarily with what Russia deemed a domestic issue, meant that the US did not take substantial action. Thus Knox's claim of dying US power is not made apparent, especially when the Libyan intervention is examined. Instead, there are greater grounds for arguing that US rivals are challenging the dominance of the West in international law.

These three interventions were based on humanitarian grounds. However, the link between intervening to help victims of primitive regimes is closely linked to the racialisation of Muslims throughout the war on terror. The



‘exaggerated form of liberalism...associated with the Bush doctrine’<sup>29</sup> has been used to create a Manichean construction of the world into good and evil – white and Muslim. International law has been used as both ‘an attempt to justify [as] legal’<sup>30</sup> interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as a means of ensuring the Western democratic model remains at the heart of international law. This insistence on Western values suggests that international law is a construct which allows realisation of Western political goals. Nazir’s description of the world as ‘a power domain comprised of nation states with vastly differing degrees of power and levels of control over their sovereignty’<sup>31</sup> can thus be applied to this neoimperial split into West and Islamic, with the Islam world as incompatible with the West.

Building on this racialisation of Islam as *too* different from Western morality, it is important to examine the relationship between Christianity and liberalism and the impact it has had on the construction of international law, especially following 9/11. Nabers and Patman examine this relationship in detail, arguing that the ‘fusion of evangelism and foreign policy activism’<sup>32</sup> has led to America adopting political fundamentalism. They believe that there is a strong connection between the Manichean construction of the war on terror – which Bush characterised as ‘a long struggle between good and evil’<sup>33</sup> and Christian fundamentalism. Rojecki echoes these sentiments; ‘no other nation would have been hopeful enough to try to evangelise for democracy across the Middle East’.<sup>34</sup> These fundamental Christian values are linked to foreign policy in a way that further promotes the liberal spreading of freedom through violence. Western Christian values, especially those of the US, thus play a major role within shaping the norms of international law.

The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 following the terrorist attacks on September 11 displays a link between the neoimperialism discussed above and international law as a Western concept, maintaining Western power. The construction of Taliban-led Afghanistan as an ‘ongoing threat’ to security<sup>35</sup> displays the ease by which the US constructed the *state* of Afghanistan as a threat requiring a military response, suggesting that the indeterminacy of international law<sup>36</sup> allowed for the West to construct a solution fulfilling their policy goals. Subsequently, the 2003 invasion of Iraq by America’s ‘coalition of the willing’ was carried out in pursuit of the war on terror, but without direct approval from the UN. Despite protests, and the threat that the coalition’s intervention would be challenged,<sup>37</sup> the US-led West continued the intervention, as it deemed it necessary to fight terrorism on every front. The shaping of the world as Manichean by Bush – ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’<sup>38</sup> – makes these links between modernity and liberalism clear. The notion that force is limited by Article 2(4) of the UN Charter is seemingly superseded by the desire of the West to employ ‘the strategic use of violence [to] spread freedom, progress and peace’<sup>39</sup> by extending and

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reinterpreting international law. Iraq and Afghanistan represent attempts by the US to enforce regime change and create secular, democratic states in the heart of Muslim world in the place of states which posed a threat to Western power.

The war on terror has now diversified from the offensives outlined above to a campaign of targeted assassinations by American drones. Beres, supporting these tactics, writes that 'under international law, the legitimacy of a certain cause can never legitimise the use of certain forms of violence'.<sup>40</sup> He points

well-intentioned moral exemplar'.<sup>44</sup> Yet international law continues to turn against Muslims, not the West; Guantánamo Bay remains an anomaly of international law created by America and Obama's drone assassinations are increasing. Thus Chomsky's view that we must apply the same standards to ourselves as we do to others<sup>45</sup> becomes the paradox within international law; the West as freedom-bringers and the East as freedom-haters, while both employ violence.

The West remains at the political forefront of the international community. It retains

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to the indiscriminate murder of civilians by Islamist terrorist groups as indicating that America's 'civilisational enemies'<sup>41</sup> are primitive, fitting the terms of the discussion on Eurocentric modernity and New Oriental primitivity outlined above. Yet he supports drone strikes from a utilitarian perspective: 'assassination as counter-terrorism is reasonable [because] fewer lives [are] lost'<sup>42</sup> ignoring the number of civilian deaths caused by such tactics. Indeed, Nabers and Patman argue that there is a risk of America's 'political fundamentalism [replicating] the norms of Islamic terrorism'.<sup>43</sup> As Rojecki writes, 'photos [of tortured Iraqi prisoners] were incompatible with an image of the United States as a somewhat naïve but nevertheless

undeniable influence over the direction of international law. I have argued that through interventions, including those during the war on terror, international law has been used to maintain Western power. However, China's rising economic dominance, and the power China and Russia retain on the Security Council poses threats to Western power. As was seen in the Iraq intervention, the US did not return to the Council to seek explicit authorisation but instead took law into its own hands. Despite this, the influence that the West retains over international law is significant, in that freedom and democracy are seen as necessary international values.

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