
Liberalism, International Terrorism, and Democratic Wars¹

Tim Dunne

Despite its claim that the questions ‘Why do wars occur?’ and ‘How can a stable peace be achieved?’ are fundamental to its *raison d’être*, IR has been relatively slow to re-evaluate its theoretical frameworks in light of the violence generated by terrorist groups and the responses to these threats by state actors.² This short article argues that such a re-appraisal is of some urgency. The so-called war on terror has highlighted the fact that certain liberal democracies are highly war-prone, and their ‘enemies’ are represented as being existential threats to the Western way of life. Moreover, the institutions that are purportedly meant to constrain executive authority from engaging in wars of aggression have failed to prevent illiberal interventions. War-like behaviour towards those who fight without just cause and who do not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants does not in itself refute the argument that democracies have forged a ‘separate peace’; indeed, defending this zone might be regarded as a historic duty.

At a theoretical level, advocates of liberalism take the challenge posed by international terrorism seriously. While their historic rivals, the realists, can invoke the domestic–international divide to argue that terrorism does not materially affect the international system,³ liberals see terrorism as an ideological challenge. While liberalism is about toleration, civility and progress,⁴ terrorism takes us down an altogether different path – one of violent intolerance where human life is lived in fear and dies in anger.⁵

It is commonplace to draw distinctions between the various strands of liberal thought. This made a great deal of sense during the 1980s when neo-liberal institutionalists sought to make liberalism compatible with social scientific methods of inquiry.⁶ In so doing, a space was opened up for normative liberals to re-assert a values-based version of liberalism which centred on the claim that liberal states were more peace-prone. I would argue that this distinction is no longer relevant. Post-9/11, many former liberal regime theorists (such as Robert Keohane and Ann-Marie Slaughter) have grafted onto their once positivist approach a strong normative distinction between liberal and illiberal regimes.⁷

In place of the distinction between positivist and normative conceptions of liberalism, the main fault-line in relation to the war on terror has been between defensive and offensive variants.⁸ Pre-9/11, the dominant narrative inside liberalism was about the pacific character of liberal states. Post-9/11, a significant number of influential liberals have defended the right of Western states to wage war on terrorist groups and those that allegedly harbour them. The legal basis for such action has been contested in domains as varied as the UN Security Council and parliaments where the validity of the use of force against Iraq has been vigorously debated. The tendency for legal



discourse to be at its most universalist at the hour when statecraft is at its most brutal was one that Martin Wight identified over four decades ago.⁹

What follows is a series of reflections on the relationship between liberalism and violence; it is only in this context that it is possible to recover how liberals understand terrorism and what responses are deemed to be acceptable. This means, in part, reaching back prior to 9/11 to show how the phenomenon of 'warlike democracies' evolved.¹⁰ Notice that, in focusing on the 'second-image' dimension of liberal thought, I am self-consciously leaving untouched important liberal debates about the relationship between individual freedom and security (first-image considerations),¹¹ as well as questions of the capacity of international organizations to end systemic violence (third-image liberal theories).¹²

Liberalism and violence: probing the democratic peace

An engagement with the question of liberalism and violence must include consideration of the democratic peace thesis, famously described by Jack Levy as 'the closest thing we have to an empirical law in international politics'.¹³ The strong version of the theory claims that democracies are more peaceful in general: in other words, there are checks on the executive which diminish the war-proneness of the state. Democracies are defensive in character 'all the way down' to the level of rational citizens, who oppose war because it endangers their lives and is a waste of economic resources. This rational aversion to war becomes embedded in the political order of the liberal state such that democracies are 'least prone' to war. The puzzle with this rationalist account of monadic democratic peace theory is that it does not account for why strong democracies do not go to war against weak democracies when the anticipated benefits are high and the costs very low.

To address these weaknesses, advocates of the general hypothesis that democracies are peace-prone have emphasized cultural factors inherent in open societies, such as the emphasis upon mediation, dialogue and compromise. The logic of this position is that war is still possible, though the likelihood is significantly reduced because of domestic institutions and characteristics. The potential pacifying role of public opinion plays a key role here; a liberal public will constrain the illiberal temptation of 'executive power' during periods when there is an alleged threat to the security of the state. What is unclear about this monadic cultural explanation is under what circumstances liberal states can engage in wars of self-defence or wars against what Kant called 'unjust enemies'. How do we know when a breach of the general peace-prone status quo is acceptable and when it is a betrayal of democratic principles?

In answering this question it is useful to engage with advocates of the democratic peace theory who believe that democracies are only peace-prone in relation to other democracies, the weaker version of the thesis (the so-called dyadic explanation). In relation to illiberal states, democracies are as war-prone as any other regime type. While war might have become unthinkable between democracies, the dyadic explanation allows for the fact that war remains an instrument of statecraft in relation to authoritarian regimes that are unpredictable, unjust and dangerous.

The most convincing account of the dyadic theory comes from constructivism. Inter-democratic peace emerges because democracies project the same preferences and intentions onto other democratic regimes.¹⁴ Without the fear of aggression, cooperation becomes possible across a range of issue areas, from the technical to the substantive. In structural theoretical terms, proponents of dyadic theory believe that the logic of anarchy does not apply to those who have contracted a separate peace.¹⁵

This variant of the literature is particularly germane for considering the relationship between liberalism and terrorism. No liberal theorist believes there is a duty to include authoritarian enemies – be they states or terrorist networks – in the pacific union: they do not share ‘our values’ and their states are illegitimate because they lack the consent of the governed. Yet, beyond the exclusion of non-democracies, there is no agreement on how liberal states should engage with those whom Kant called ‘unjust enemies’.

Democratic peace theory provides powerful openings into the relationship between domestic institutions and values, and foreign-policy outcomes. From the vantage point of international history after the Cold War, however, both variants of the theory are in need of revision. The monadic variant cannot explain the war-like interventions on the part of liberal states in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Looked at from a vantage point outside the liberal zone, the monadic claim to peace-proneness appears to be illusory.

The dyadic account has greater immunity to the several post-Cold War cases in which liberal states have resorted to war. As we have seen, there is no particular claim to peace-proneness in relations between democracies and authoritarian regimes. That said, the dyadic variant is challenged by two factors. First, in the period since 1990, the incidence of initiating inter-state war has been lower among authoritarian states than among democracies, casting doubt on Risse’s claim that democratic states are ‘defensively motivated’. Second, given the centrality of regime type to the democratic peace thesis, there remains the puzzle how and why democracies have varied so significantly in their response to ‘new threats’ such as international terrorism. In short, why do anti-militaristic norms of ‘civilian power’ frame the response by certain liberal states to foreign policy threats, while others are quick to resort to force and demonstrate effective war-fighting capability? To begin to address these questions requires a rethinking of the relationship between liberalism and international terrorism – specifically, the institutional and social processes by which war is produced and legitimated.

The re-framing of liberalism and violence, post- 9/11

The process by which 9/11 opened up a space for the declaration of a ‘war on terror’ has been intricately traced in a number of excellent papers.¹⁶ What matters for the argument advanced in this article is the relationship between liberal institutions and the war on terror. Despite the anti-liberal rhetoric of the Bush administrations, it only requires a brief engagement with the administration’s security strategy to realize that liberal principles are key drivers of foreign and security policy. In his 2004 State of

the Union address, President Bush confirmed that 'our aim is a democratic peace'. Previously, the 2002 National Security Strategy was framed by the desire to protect and extend liberty – even including the enigmatic goal of achieving 'a balance of power that favours freedom'.¹⁷

The extent to which the pattern of democratic wars predates 9/11 ought not to be understated: to peoples outside of the 'greater West', the continuity of intervention reaches much further back into their colonial and post-colonial past. Influential writers on United States foreign policy also reinforce the on-going tendency convergence between republican virtue and imperial temptation. In Thomas Caruther's formulation, 'The most consistent tradition in American foreign policy ... has been the belief that the nation's security is best protected by the expansion of democracy worldwide.'¹⁸

Only the most obdurate defenders of America's role in the world since 9/11 would argue that its security – and that of its allies – has been enhanced by the wars waged against the Taliban in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussein's wretched base in Iraq. What follows is a sequence of arguments that challenges the theoretical linkages between democratic institutions, international rules and moral conduct.

International rules and (il)liberal procedures

Shortly after the attacks on the Twin Towers, the United States and its allies set about persuading other members of international society that a militaristic response to the threat posed by Al Qaeda was necessary and justifiable. The rationale for resorting to war was self-defence – an implausible claim which enabled the US and its allies to turn domestic conflict in failing states into a legitimate *casus belli*.

The blurring of several post-9/11 interventions with the 'war on terror' has highlighted an important tension in the liberal understanding of international order. On the one hand, international institutions are designed to be procedurally liberal, meaning that membership is not restricted to democratic states, and collective action requires the consent of legitimate institutions (however imperfectly expressed). The expectation of a liberal order defined by pluralist principles is that all states have an interest in, and an obligation to obey, the rules. There is empirical evidence that liberal publics strongly buy in to the importance of procedural correctness. One of the striking features of the polling data acquired in the UK prior to the 2003 Iraq War was the astonishing 'bounce' in favour of military action if it was backed by a UN Security Council resolution. In one poll, 76 per cent preferred multilateral action, as against 32 per cent who favoured war in circumstances when the US launched a war but the Security Council did not authorize it.¹⁹

The unipolar moment coincided with a shift towards substantive liberal norms to do with democratic entitlement, good governance and the responsibility of states for ensuring terrorist groups acting inside their borders were either contained or eradicated. These emergent substantive norms can be invoked to justify military interventions – against tyrannical states committing human rights violations (Kosovo 1999) or failing states unable to control terrorist networks (Afghanistan 2001 to the present). In the absence of the UN being able to act militarily, as was

envisaged by the framers of the Charter, the consequence of this shift towards substantive liberal norms in international society is to place significant power in the hands of those states and alliances who have the capacity to act militarily. Such inequities are thrown into even sharper relief when, in the case of Iraq, the US and the UK brazenly circumvented the will of the very institution tasked with legitimating forcible action.

The flexibility with which democratic wars are conducted by coalitions of powerful liberal states operating alongside military forces from authoritarian regimes adds weight to those who are sceptical about how far democratic ideals animate foreign policy behaviour. It is uncertain why democracies should be so sensitive to regime type when engaged in long-run institution building (such as NATO or the EU), yet so indifferent to regime type when constructing war-fighting coalitions. How can it be defensible to fight unjust enemies while standing shoulder to shoulder with unjust friends?

The problem of war entrepreneurs

From the Kosovo War to the Iraq War, it has been apparent that the executive branch of government in the UK and the USA has not been held in check, as liberal peace theory would lead us to expect. The first anomaly relates to the question why state leaders engage in a process of threat inflation. In relation to Kosovo, while it was clear that Milosevic was engaged in human rights abuses on a significant scale, the representation of his regime as being engaged in genocide stretched the truth to breaking point. The sense of threat inflation was only heightened by the corresponding claim that, unless military action brought about regime change, the future of NATO was at stake.

Much has been made of the role played by the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, as a norm entrepreneur in relation to publicly articulating a rationale for which 'we' should forcibly intervene to resolve 'their' humanitarian catastrophes. In perhaps the most memorable line from his Chicago speech, Blair opined that 'today, we fight for values not for territory'.²⁰

Public support in the UK for the Kosovo War was high. In the case of the 2003 Iraq War, fought in part because of an explicit linkage between failing states and WMD capability, the UK government realized it had to mobilize opinion in favour of war. War entrepreneurs such as Prime Minister Blair and his supporters realized that a strong case had to be made in order to 'upgrade' the Iraq problem from the category of a normal security risk to one that demanded a military response. The September 2002 intelligence dossier in which the Iraqi threat was described as 'serious and current' is an example of a liberal leader engaging in the politics of securitization.

The absence of constraining domestic institutions

In thinking about the relationship between liberalism and terrorism, an important line of enquiry ought to be how and why 'war entrepreneurs' are able to escalate the

threat without significant pushback from democratic institutions (such as the media and political opposition parties). Writings on liberalism and war have a great deal to gain from engaging more closely with work on 'the marketplace of ideas' and how this failed to operate in the case of the Iraq War.

In a much-cited article published in the journal *International Security*, Chaim Kaufmann argues that, in the United States, the decision to go to war can be explained in terms of a failure in the marketplace of ideas. Working within the liberal tradition, Kaufmann assumes that attempts by elites to mobilize for war will trigger wide-ranging debate in which the government's justifications are subject to detailed public scrutiny. In this process, 'unfounded, mendacious or self-serving foreign policy arguments' will be exposed as false.²¹ Yet in the run-up to the Iraq War the Bush administration persuaded the American public that the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and had developed operational links with Al Qaeda, and that these factors warranted military action against Iraq. In his words:

The marketplace of ideas failed to correct the administration's misrepresentations or hinder its ability to persuade the American public. The administration succeeded, despite the weakness of the evidence for its claims, in convincing a majority of the public that Iraq posed a threat so extreme and immediate that it could be dealt with only by preventative war.²²

The notion of there being a 'marketplace of ideas' can trace its roots back to John Stuart Mill's argument that rigorous public debate is a condition both of overthrowing error and of fully understanding the grounds on which truths are held. How might we judge the effectiveness of a *political* market? For Kaufmann (as for Mill) what counts is the truth. Are 'unfounded, mendacious or self-serving' arguments – in this case those arguments about the threat posed by Iraq – exposed as being false through a process of scrutiny and deliberation? The public's capacity to reach informed decisions about complex debates depends upon the institutional environment and prevailing political circumstances. A key finding in this literature is that the institutions of democracy were unable to correct the flawed arguments that were being advanced in favour of war.

Conclusion

Thinking through the relationship between liberalism and terrorism requires a wider consideration of the complex inter-relationship of the challenges and responses of liberal states and institutions to security threats. The arguments set out in this article broadly coincide with 'second-image' responses to liberalism and terrorism – I have said little about the ordering of the international system and how this impinges on the conduct of liberal states. We should be mindful of the structural realist claim that democratic wars happened 'because they could'; in other words, a crucial variable in constraining or enabling war-proneness is the presence/absence of countervailing power.

The succession of democratic wars – from the interventions for justice in the 1990s to the interventions for order in the twenty-first century – are not easily comprehensible though the lens of liberal peace theory, particularly the strong version which sees an automatic connection between the virtuous democratic culture on the ‘inside’ and an ethical foreign policy on the ‘outside’. It is, however, in relation to the weaker version of the hypothesis that the ambiguities of liberalism and terrorism are most in evidence. Advocates of the dyadic interpretation admit that democratic states can be as (or even more) likely to resort to war in relation to authoritarian states. From this it is logical to infer that liberal democracies are likely to be war-prone in relation to terrorist movements and the countries which are complicit in their activities.

Reflecting on the incidences when democracies are ‘at war with terrorism’ shows the tensions evident in the dyadic theoretical interpretation. The basis of the post-1945 liberal order has been put under strain by the Bush doctrine that every individual and every state has to choose – ‘you’re either with the civilized world or with the terrorists’.²³ Similarly, the limited and imperfect procedures of the UN Security Council to have consent as a prior condition for collective action has also been undermined by the war of regime change against Iraq.

In waging war against what certain states regard as unjust enemies, the values ascribed to the liberal way of life – fairness, toleration, dignity – have not been extended to those captured enemy soldiers held in brutal and dehumanizing torture chambers, from Abu Ghraib to Guantanamo Bay. While it is coherent for liberal states to, in the last resort, fight wars of necessity, there can surely be no grounds in liberal theory for defending the prosecution of such wars unjustly.

It is apparent that, in contradistinction to the Kantian hope that republican states would be judicious and risk-averse, we have witnessed modern liberal states – the USA, the UK, Australia and at times also Spain, Denmark and Poland – rushing to war. For various domestic political reasons, the executive branch of government inside these countries has not been held in check by either the media, the opposition parties, or public opinion. Arguments that both Afghanistan and Iraq constituted a threat to our security have not been subjected to sufficient scrutiny, hence the fact that the natural correctives of the political marketplace have been conspicuously absent. One response might be to argue that those countries where the marketplace of ideas failed to operate are those in which democratic institutions have little or no constraining power over foreign policy. Only where liberal-republican institutions are deeply embedded is it possible for securitization claims to be refuted. Even then, there is always the possibility that an exogenous factor, such as a major terrorist attack, could turn institutional restraint into a pro-war mobilization. In short, Stanley Hoffmann was right. By inquiring into liberalism in international affairs, we are exposed to the limits of liberalism itself.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Ken Booth for suggesting that I submit this article, and Li Meiting for providing valuable research assistance.

- 2 M. C. Williams, 'Identity and the Politics of Security', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4, 1998, pp. 204–25.
- 3 K. Waltz, 'The Continuity of International Politics', in K. Booth and T. Dunne (eds), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002).
- 4 A line of argument which led Stanley Hoffmann to argue that international affairs have been the 'nemesis' of liberalism. See T. Dunne, 'Liberalism', in J. Baylis, S. Smith and P. Owens (eds), *The Globalization and World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 4th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 108–23.
- 5 The term 'terrorism' is fundamentally about the threat or use of force – this sets such actions apart from other instruments of political change such as demonstration or passive resistance; terrorism requires an impact beyond that immediately effected by a violent event – acts of terror are designated to create extreme anxiety and fear beyond the immediate target of the violence; finally, terrorism is political – violence is not undertaken for reasons of personal ambition or financial gain.
- 6 R. O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, December 1988, pp. 379–96.
- 7 For a persuasive critique of liberal rationalism, see C. Reus-Smit, 'The Strange Death of Liberal International Theory', *European Journal of International Law*, 12(3), 2001, pp. 573–94.
- 8 This distinction has in the main been applied in debates about structural realism, with Waltzians being on the defensive wing, in contrast with followers of Mearsheimer being characterized as offensive. There are many sources for this debate; for a good overview, see the discussion in J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).
- 9 M. Wight, 'Why Is There No International Theory?', in H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 29.
- 10 For an outstanding reader on this topic, see A. Geis, L. Brock and H. Müller (eds), *Democratic Wars: Looking at the Dark Side of Democratic Peace* (London: Palgrave, 2006).
- 11 See, among others, T. Dunne "'The Rules of the Game are Changing": Human Rights in Crisis Post-9/11', *International Politics*, 44(2–3), 2007, pp. 269–86.
- 12 See R. O. Keohane, 'The Public Delegitimation of Terrorism and Coalition Politics', in Booth and Dunne, *Worlds in Collision*.
- 13 J. S. Levy, 'Domestic Politics and War', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4, 1988, pp. 653–73.
- 14 T. Risse-Kappen, 'Democratic Peace – Warlike Democracies?: A Social Constructivist Interpretation of the Liberal Argument', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1(4), 1995, pp. 491–517.
- 15 M. Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs: Part 1', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12, 1983, pp. 205–35. Also see M. Doyle, 'Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs: Part 2', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12, 1983, pp. 323–53.
- 16 A. Flibbert, 'The Road to Baghdad: Ideas and Intellectuals in Explanations of the Iraq War', *Security Studies*, 15(2), 2006, pp. 310–52.
- 17 M. C. Williams nicely draws out the liberal republican convergences with neo-conservatism in 'What is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11, 2005, pp. 307–37. As does N. J. Renger, 'Democracy, Peace and War: Perspectives from Political and Sociological Theory', in Geis et al., *Democratic Wars*.
- 18 T. Caruthers, *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion* (Washington: Carnegie, 2004), p. 34.
- 19 YouGov, 'A Possible War with Iraq', 14–16 March 2003. Other polls taken on the eve of war support what I have called 'the multilateral bounce' in public opinion. A 5 March Mori/Ipsos poll put support for a UNSC-led war at 75 per cent, dropping to 24 per cent if the UN did not approve the action and no proof was found that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction. 'War with Iraq', 5 March 2003.
- 20 L. Freedman 'Selling the Threat', *Survival*, 46(2), 2004, pp. 7–49 at p. 43.
- 21 Polls suggest a majority of opinion in the UK supported the NATO-led war against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- 22 C. Kaufmann, 'Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War', *International Security* 29(1), 2004, p. 6.
- 23 Speech on the Middle East, the White House, 3 April 2002, available at: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/04/20020404-1.html (accessed 20 October 2008).