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Woke Imperium:

The Coming Confluence Between Social Justice & Neoconservatism

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Executive Summary

The primacist, interventionist wing of the United States foreign policy establishment—'the Blob'—has a long history of using prevailing moralist trends to serve as ideological justifications for expansionist and hawkish policies. From Presidents William McKinley and Woodrow Wilson on through the militant democracy promotion of the George W. Bush administration, this process often mutated to accommodate the *de jour* proclivities and entrenched biases of the policy-making class. The newest iteration of this process is the adoption of social justice causes and rhetoric as the explicit goals of the United States' foreign policy. Such use and weaponization of the language of justice to advance the foreign policy objectives of the liberal Atlanticist Blob is particularly evident against regions and countries the West believes actively challenge the Liberal International Order (LIO) status quo or where it seeks to justify military and economic interventions on normative grounds.

Rather than a coordinated conspiracy directed from a central organization or even a conscious desire on the part of the participants however, this process of adopting, incorporating, and cultivating new rationales to sustain what is an idealist and internationalist strategic culture in the United States has become routinized. This entrenchment of systemic moralism in the American national security apparatus has been facilitated, and is at least partly driven, by a highly competitive professional class vying to secure their position in the system by using virtue signaling to demonstrate class solidarity to their higher ranks. This mimetic mechanism incentivizes pushing the envelope and chasing trending causes (normative mimicry)—but always in service of the imperial needs of the state where expansionism and primacy are viewed as the triumph of a universalized American conception of virtue over those forces which are viewed as being on 'the wrong side of history'. Under such moralistic conditions, prudence, moderation, and narrower conceptions of interest—provisos of realism—could be effectively vilified as enabling oppression and injustice.

The current Wokeist incarnation of American globalist evangelism seeks not only to change the governments of other nations, but engineer their very cultures according to the Western progressive model. Its universalist framing of human values could be readily applied to violate or undermine the sovereignty of alternate political or cultural systems and justify those interventions for the domestic Western audiences in the name of 'moral responsibility'.

This white paper seeks to elucidate the often hidden processes and mechanisms that have led to the consolidation of this "woke imperium" of moralistic cosmopolitanism: its historical roots, present day trends, and possible future evolution. It is also intended as a guide for advocates of realism and restraint: to help realists understand the nature of the resistance they are likely to encounter from certain sectors of the foreign policy establishment and their sympathizers as they try to realign U.S. foreign policy goals with more limited and concrete national interests.



Key Findings

- The advocates of American primacy within the United States foreign policy establishment historically rely on prevailing ideological trends of the time to justify interventionism abroad. The new ‘woke’ face of American hegemony and projects of empire is designed to project the U.S. as an international moral police rather than a conventional great power—and the result is neo-imperialism with a moral face.
- This is an iterative and systemic process with an internal logic, not one controlled by a global cabal: when the older rationalizations for primacy, hegemony, and interventionism appear antiquated or are no longer persuasive, a new rationale that better reflects the ruling class norms of the era is adopted as a substitute. This is because the new schema is useful for the maintenance of the existing system of power.
- The rise of a ‘woke’ activist-driven, social justice-oriented politics—particularly among the members of academia, media, and the professional managerial class—has provided the latest ideological justification for interventionism, and it has become readily adopted by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. These groups now have an even greater level of symbiotic relationship with state actors.
- Professional selection and advancement under these conditions require elite signaling of loyalty to ‘progressive’ universalism as the trending state-sanctioned ideology, which further fuels the push towards interventionism. This combination of factors encourages a new institutional and elite consensus around trending shibboleths.
- The emerging hegemonic posture and its moral imperialism are at odds with a sober and realistic appraisal of U.S. interests on the world stage, as they create untenable, maximalist, and utopian goals that clash with the concrete realities on which U.S. grand strategy must be based.
- The liberal Atlanticist tendency to push moralism and social engineering globally has immense potential to create backlash in foreign, especially non-Western, societies that will come to identify the West as a whole with niche, late-modern progressive ideals—thus motivating new forms of anti-Westernism.



Introduction

In Tomasi di Lampedusa's classic novel, *The Leopard*, Prince Tancredi announces what could be the guiding theme of U.S. foreign policy: "if we want everything to remain the same, then all things must change." While the domestic American scene has seen a striking emergence of political radicalism over the past several years, foreign policymaking is already proving fully capable of coopting and channeling these trends without deviating from its longstanding norms and practices.

Current trends in media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government institutions within the DC foreign policy complex imply that the rhetoric of North Atlantic interventionism is shifting away from the general post-Cold War approach that is primarily driven by (liberal) exceptionalism and financial globalization into one focused on narratives of human rights promotion and global social justice. This turn is best shown by the rise of human rights NGOs closely aligned with the state, presaged by maneuvers by the Bush and Obama administrations to pivot to democracy promotion and nation-building after the early 'War on Terror' period and the morphing of the Afghanistan mission away from its original focus on pursuing Al Qaeda.

While for much of the period spanning from the late 1990s to the late 2010s the liberal-Atlanticist foreign policy establishment aspired to political projects of regime change, the new consensus has seemingly set global *culture-forming* based on Western norms and mores as its key objective. In the immediate future, rhetoric around causes such as oppression of women and minority groups, failure to affirm self-declared identities, as well as opposition to foreign cultural practices like child marriage and forced gender-based dress

codes will likely be used to justify sanctions and interventions in parts of the world the political and economic establishment in the North Atlantic deems to be of strategic importance.

This shift essentially amounts to further ideologizing and solidifying the neo-imperialism on which conventional liberal internationalist goals depend. As such, members of the establishment in the English-speaking world routinely strive to present their geopolitical ambition as part of a just and universal mission to liberate the world from oppression. In this sense, they are hearkening back to the Puritan cultural roots of Plymouth Rock, rather than George Washington's sober warnings to conduct foreign policy on a basis of cautious calculation that avoids theological or domestic political disputes with foreign countries.¹

Rather than a coordinated effort by a self-aware cabal, however, this new internationalist activism is driven by the professional and corporate managerial elites within a dispersed and decentralized system of power across government, industry, and academia. The establishment groups leading this impersonal complex—i.e., the imperium—genuinely believe in and wish to globalize the current normative trends within their class as the only True axiological paradigm for everyone to uphold—often overlooking and dismissing the subjective, historical, and relative nature of their values.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, this confluence of elites from different domains advocates for policies which, if successful, would amount to global homogeneity under one (North Atlantic) value system—akin to the historic

¹ Mary V. Thompson, Morocco Archive, *National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon*, retrieved 6/12/2022: <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/morocco/>



imperial projects from the heights of the British and American eras of missionary expansionism. Such projects energized and sustained imperial expansion even after its continued economic desirability became less convincing, effectively keeping the bureaucracy of the burgeoning empire employed while transferring wealth from ordinary citizens to an imperial elite.² Meanwhile, foreign social engineering can—as shown in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, among others—often empower the most reactionary local elements.³

While, at first glance, it may seem surprising that late-modern progressive ideologies—i.e., ‘Wokeism’—could support and empower (often highly militarized) interventionist and expansionist policies, this tendency is in many ways neither new nor especially unlikely. To understand why, however, it is necessary to examine both the history and the current prevailing structure of U.S. foreign policy-making across both governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Historical Evolution of a Complex

A certain idealistic and moralistic element in Anglo-American culture dates back to the rise of Puritanism in the 17th Century. While frequently a cover for ulterior motives, it nevertheless also represents a genuine belief—one that contributes to that same culture’s endurance. This worldview, which eschews particularity and places universalist narratives at the center of the human story, is an outgrowth of an interpretation of Christianity that

has, in one form or another, survived since the days of Oliver Cromwell.⁴

A secularized version of this worldview first appeared in the early United States with Thomas Jefferson and his belief in an exemplar ‘Empire of Liberty’ that would shine forth like a beacon to the other benighted nations of the world.⁵ Though restrained by the fragile state of the young republic, ideas that were previously hidden underneath certain sectarian trends began, in time, to enter the political mainstream. By the end of the 19th century, such views had become even more influential. While the colonial expansion that occurred in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War was brief and controversial, the McKinley administration would already declare that the United States’ form of colonization to be different from other powers, claiming that American hegemony served as “an instrument of God.”⁶

With the presidency of Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921), this cultural trend (or “civil religion”⁷) was incorporated into policy-making. Wilson saw the First World War as an opportunity for spreading American political values and a universal framework for understanding inter-state affairs once the United States became embroiled in

2 Lance Davis, Susan Davis, and Robert Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Political Economy of British Imperialism 1860-1912*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

3 Ben Denison, “The More Things Change the More they Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime-Change Operations,” *CATO Institute Policy Analysis* No. 883, January 2020: <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/more-things-change-more-they-stay-same-failure-regime-change-operations>

4 Matthew Hutson, “Still Puritan After All These Years,” *The New York Times*, August 2012: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/opinion/sunday/are-americans-still-puritan.html>

5 Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, “Thomas Jefferson and American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1990: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-03-01/thomas-jefferson-and-american-foreign-policy>

6 Gary Scott Smith and William McKinley, *Religion in the Oval Office: The Religious Lives of American Presidents*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

7 Walter McDougall, *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest*, New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2016.



the conflict.⁸ This attempt at changing the international order would lead to the formation of the League of Nations (which, due to the intransigence of Congress and president Warren Harding's active resistance, the United States would eventually abstain from), but Wilson's contradictory stances⁹ and the imperial interests of the most intact postwar powers (namely Britain, France, and Japan) fatally undermined the project of defending national sovereignty as an ideal.

The United States also failed to extend the principle of self-determination to colonized people outside of Europe.¹⁰ Additionally, the newly-born states in Europe quickly turned to fighting each other over disputed borders and thus were often of insufficient strength to serve as a bulwark against resurgent powers—namely Germany and the Soviet Union—so the project of building a new American internationalism was brief and quickly faded. Nevertheless, the idea that the United States could Americanize the world and globalize its values with little regard for the values of other civilizations had just made its world debut.¹¹

The end of the Second World War saw the emergence of two global superpowers along with the renewed opportunity to globalize the world under an American framework, with the

United Nations becoming a reconstituted version of the League of Nations. This time, the United States would be one of the founding members, ensuring a strength previously missing from the League. However, this more successful turn at internationalism depended more on the almost absolute authority enjoyed by the victors of the Second World War than on an idealist model of cosmopolitanism. With the swift descent of the shadow of the Cold War upon the postwar order, the realities of great power politics compelled the United States to downplay exceptionalism and focus instead on countering Soviet influence with whatever partners it could find. The global challenge of Soviet Marxism, it seemed, could restrain the missionary drive in America's self-conception.

The rapidity and unexpectedness of the Soviet collapse beginning in the late 1980s, however, which culminated in the fall of that regime in 1991, coupled with the overwhelming military victory of U.S. and allied forces in the First Gulf War produced an immense sense of euphoria to match the new situation of unipolarity. The United States was now the world's sole superpower. This development raised immediate questions as to how this unprecedented position of power and influence should be utilized. The Clinton Administration—the first to have its tenure entirely overlap with the new unipolar order—was rife with internal disagreements about embracing humanitarian intervention. The issue was finally decided during the collapse of Yugoslavia, as human rights were explicitly invoked to justify military intervention against Serbia's attempts to retain former Yugoslav territories not recognized as Serbia proper and in response to the atrocities of Milošević forces against non-Serbians in those territories. In a statement that best captures the mood of the time, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at one point asked Colin

8 Milan Babik, "George D. Herron and the Eschatological Foundations of Woodrow Wilson's Foreign Policy 1917-1919," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 35 No. 5, Oxford University Press, November 2011: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44254537>

9 Josh Axelrod, "The Treaty of Versailles and its Rejection of Racial Equality," NPR, August 2019: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/08/11/742293305/a-century-later-the-treaty-of-versailles-and-its-rejection-of-racial-equality>

10 Krista Johnson, "Wilson's Imperial Internationalism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, August 2020: <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/08/19/wilsons-imperial-internationalism/>

11 Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations," *Palgrave MacMillan*, 2002: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781403970046_2



Powell, “What is the point of having this superb military you are always talking about if we can’t use it?”¹²

Mere months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush Administration pivoted from the specific mission of hunting down Al Qaeda and its allies to declare a global war on terror—embarking on a utopian project to pacify global flashpoints through ‘nation-building’ (beginning in Afghanistan).¹³ These policies were often justified with explicit calls for democracy promotion. The religious tinge of that effort and that of prior U.S. administrations¹⁴ also colored priorities, such as developmental and AIDS-related educational aid to African countries being contingent on abstinence-only education, then a major culture war cause of the religious right in domestic politics.¹⁵ These programs were largely ineffective and often counter-productive.¹⁶

True, the most notorious action of the Bush Administration, the Iraq War, was initially presented as a necessary hard power response to a profound security threat—that of Saddam

Hussein arming Islamist terrorists with chemical and biological weapons. However, as predictions by the intelligence agencies of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda proved to be false, Bush returned to the old playbook of attempting to justify the war in terms of explicit democracy promotion. Already, Clinton-era liberal internationalism had shown that it could pivot quickly towards a kind of Christian internationalism and then back again when that failed. Such moralistic rationalizations were fungible even if the policies they triggered and justified often endured with little change.

The shift toward nation-building was not only limited to Iraq but became the basis for American policy throughout the greater Middle East.¹⁷ This did not stop the backlash against Bush’s interventionist foreign policy goals among the general public. As the Sudanese state careened into civil war and sectarian strife, attempts by various NGOs and media outlets to drum up support for a military intervention in Sudan’s Darfur region were stymied by the growing dissatisfaction with the foreign policy of the neoconservatives who largely directed the Administration’s Iraq policy.¹⁸ Now, with the benefit of hindsight, the results of these policies have become even more pronounced. In the wake of the disastrous NATO Afghanistan experiment, not to mention the troubled circumstances in which many other previously ‘liberated’ countries find themselves after U.S. withdrawal, the notion that liberal

12 Kelly Beaucar Vlahos, “Remembering Powell’s revealing exchange with Madeleine Albright,” *Responsible Statecraft*, October 2021: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/10/18/remembering-powells-revealing-exchange-with-madeleine-albright/>

13 Ted Galen Carpenter, “The Imperial Lure: Nation-Building as Response to Terrorism,” *The CATO Institute*, Winter 2006: https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/carpenter_nation-building-terrorism.pdf

14 David K Shipler, “Missionaries for Democracy: U.S. Aid for Global Pluralism,” *The New York Times*, June 1986: <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/01/world/missionaries-for-democracy-us-aid-for-global-pluralism.html>

15 Robert Walgate, “Bush’s AIDS plan criticized for emphasizing abstinence and forbidding condoms,” *BMJ Publishing Group*, July 2004: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC487767/>

16 Christine Gorman, “The U.S. Blew \$1.4 Billion on Abstinence Education in Africa,” *Scientific American*, August 2016: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-u-s-blew-1-4-billion-on-abstinence-education-in-africa/>

17 Thomas Carothers, “U.S. Democracy Promotion During and After Bush,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2007: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/democracy_promotion_after_bush_final.pdf

18 Harry Verhoeven, Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, and Madhan Mohan Jaganathan, “To Intervene in Darfur or Not: Reexamining the Darfur Debate and Its Impact,” *Global Society*, Volume 30, issue 1, November 2015: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13600826.2015.1093464>



interventionism is a boon for the recipients of U.S. largesse could be readily dismissed.¹⁹

With the collapse of the Bush Era's evangelism and the coming of the Obama Administration's professed realist outlook, Americans voted to reject messianic thinking and regime change policies as the proper response to Twenty-First Century threats. Rather than abandoning the utopian policies of the past, however, the new government simply shifted the rationale for such policies yet again. In the wake of the 'Arab Spring' protests, the United States and its allies proceeded to launch military operations in Libya and Syria under the pretext of humanitarian interventionism.

The theoretical framework for this ideological bait-and-switch was the concept of 'Responsibility to Protect' or R2P—the brainchild of Samantha Power whose inclusion in the Obama administration coincided with the shift away from the realism promised by Barack Obama to the more conventional approach characterizing U.S. policy in the unipolar era. The acolytes of this doctrine argued that only by engaging with human rights and building certain types of governments abroad could the United States and its allies deal with issues such as state failure and terrorism in the long term.²⁰ Counter-terrorism evolved into counter-insurgency, itself viewed as a corollary to nation-building, with the former being seen as increasingly precise and even 'humane'—though this interpretation runs contrary to empirical results.²¹

19 Christopher Mott, "The Unraveling of a Myth: "Nation-Building" and Calamity in Afghanistan," *Institute for Peace and Diplomacy*, August 2021: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/08/17/the-unraveling-of-a-myth-nation-building-and-calamity-in-afghanistan/>

20 Samantha Power. *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.

21 Samuel Moyn. *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace*

The consequences of military action in Libya, however, show that the R2P doctrine ruined the country. Indeed, the intervention turned that country into an example of state failure following the collapse of a centralized government.²² It currently has no functioning national government, is wracked by civil war between different factions, has a burgeoning terrorism problem that did not previously exist, and is now host to slave markets which operate openly on the street.²³ In the case of Syria, where intervention was more covert and conducted by proxy actors rather than through direct NATO operations, jihadist groups acquired massive amounts of military aid intended for supposedly 'democratic' anti-government opposition groups. Allied nations were severely tested over the direction and purpose of the intervention and, once again, state failure rather than successful nation-building was the result.²⁴

The true consequence of R2P and its devastating impact on foreign nations has been one of perpetuating and exacerbating the problems it set out to solve, which in turn perpetuates systemic violence and—perhaps most crucially—created new opportunities for future humanitarian interventions as state failure becomes reality. In creating and exacerbating the conditions that would arguably make it necessary, humanitarian intervention thus becomes a kind of perpetual

and Reinvented War. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021.

22 Dexter Filkins. "The Moral Logic of Humanitarian Interventionism," *The New Yorker*, 2019: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/16/the-moral-logic-of-humanitarian-intervention>

23 Stephanie Nebehay, "Executions, torture and slave markets persist in Libya: U.N.," *Reuters*, March 2018: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-rights/executions-torture-and-slave-markets-persist-in-libya-u-n-idUSKBN1GX1JY>

24 Christopher Mott, "The Last Straw for Liberal Hegemony- Intervention in the Syrian Civil War," *Institute for Peace and Diplomacy*, July 2021: <https://peacediplomacy.org/2021/07/23/the-last-straw-for-liberal-hegemony-intervention-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>



casus belli for a vicious cycle of crisis.²⁵

Concurrent to these policies being implemented by Washington was a strong shift in media and NGO quarters. The post-9/11 patriotic jingoism and the allied desire to force economic integration of ‘rogue’ countries fueled in part by messianism²⁶ was gradually replaced with a liberal-cosmopolitan concern for the rights of the people trapped in conflict zones. Effectively, these ideologies proved to be highly compatible with interventionism while creating new fertile grounds of instability primed for more intervention pushed by a mainstream media that functioned to uncritically boost such narratives, especially in regard to the rise of the Syrian Civil War²⁷ (the primary issue of foreign policy commentary for that time and one particularly prone to moralism and falsehoods).²⁸

One of the most coordinated and impactful examples of this humanitarian-NGO turn was Kony 2012²⁹, a social media campaign waged by the group Invisible Children, whose purpose was to raise awareness about the activities of warlord Joseph Kony and his Lord’s Resistance Army which operated in the ungoverned spaces between

the Central African Republic and Uganda.³⁰ Of course, the United States was already increasing its Central African footprint concurrent with this viral campaign.³¹ While the actual effect of the campaign on policy was nearly negligible, it took over media discourse for weeks and became a viral cause among young news consumers in a way that the declining War on Terror was increasingly failing to do. Moral outrage could be exploited and channeled to manufacture consent around confronting an actor or issue, but the more complex³² a situation appears to be, the less the public can be persuaded to sustain the outrage long term.³³ The downfall of this social media campaign was therefore as rapid as its rise and culminated in a very public meltdown on behalf of the group’s evangelist frontman.³⁴

Despite the specific failure of the Kony 2012 campaign, its immense—if temporary—popularity signaled a shift in how the foreign policy establishment would evaluate its future prospects for manufacturing consent for intervention in targeted countries as well as presenting new opportunities for professional growth for the elites in the competitive national security ecosystem.

25 Philip Cunliffe. *Cosmopolitan Dystopia: International Intervention and the Failure of the West*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.

26 Mark Tooley, “Christian Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Providence Magazine*, February 2020: <https://providencemag.com/2020/02/christian-influence-on-usa-foreign-policy/>

27 Kevin Young, “How to Hoax Yourself: The Case of a Gay Girl in Damascus,” *The New Yorker*, November 2017: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-to-hoax-yourself-gay-girl-in-damascus>

28 Gordon Lubold and Shane Harris, “Exclusive: McCain Hires Controversial Syria Analyst Elizabeth O’Bagy,” *Foreign Policy*, September 2013: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/27/exclusive-mccain-hires-controversial-syria-analyst-elizabeth-obagy/>

29 Fuyuki Kurasawa, “On humanitarian virality: Kony 2012, or the rise and fall of a pictorial artifact in the digital age,” June 2019: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1470357219851807?journalCode=vcja&>

30 Adam Branch. *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

31 Mareike Schomerus, Tim Allen, and Koen Vlassenroot, “Obama Takes on the LRA: Why Washington Sent Troops to Central Africa,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 2011: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/uganda/2011-11-15/obama-takes-lra>

32 Michael Diebert, “The Problem With Invisible Children’s ‘Kony 2012’,” *The Huffington Post*, May 2012: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/joseph-kony-2012-children_b_1327417

33 Daniel Sullivan, Mark Landau, and Aaron Kay, “When enemies go viral (or not)- A real time experiment during the ‘Stop Kony’ campaign,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 5(1), 2016: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-12883-001>

34 Paul Harris, “Kony 2012: campaigner’s meltdown brought on by stress says wife,” *The Guardian*, March 2012: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/17/kony-2012-meltdown-stress-wife>



A Cultural Shift in U.S. National Security Strategy

As the symbiosis between the cultural and foreign policy elites continued to accelerate, providing a suitable ideology that would justify the expansion of imperial influence turned into an internal competition for the professional classes in how to reconcile their primacist interests with their moralistic certitude and sense of self-righteousness: to both signal their virtue as good people aware of the struggles of the marginalized and to grease the cogs of the War Machine. The underappreciated continuity across Republican and Democratic administrations became clearly evident in the run-up to the 2016 election when many traditional neoconservatives began to look upon Hillary Clinton as the candidate most likely to carry out their preferred policy objectives.

These growing associations quickly matured into a ‘mainstream’ coalition after the unexpected victory of Donald Trump, leading to new think tanks bringing together formerly Republican commentators with the leadership of the Democratic Party.³⁵ Bill Kristol—the neoconservative partisan once loathed by Democrats in the Bush Era as the primary propagandist for the prosecution of the Iraq War—even got his own one-off segment on Democrat-leaning MSNBC as ‘Woke Bill Kristol’.³⁶ The congruency between human rights advocacy and activists who advocate military interventionism by NATO countries in conflict zones thus expanded to mainstream commentary once a significant

political realignment found it useful. This has become increasingly apparent when examining the foreign policy rhetoric concerning not just the Middle East and Central Asia but South and Central America as well.

Such trends also underlie the increasing usage of social justice buzzwords to describe nations that are cast as rivals to the U.S to foment increased hostility toward them among the American media consumers. For example, the 2021 protests in Cuba were described by the left-wing but generally pro-U.S. North American Congress in Latin America as primarily a reaction against the Cuban government’s tolerance for anti-black racism.³⁷ A more direct sign of this rhetoric being used was when a far-right and U.S.-backed government that came to power through a coup in Bolivia under Jeanine Anez was often referred to approvingly in English-language media as being headed by a ‘women’s activist’.³⁸ This government then went on to take an extremely hostile position towards people of indigenous Amerindian backgrounds and practitioners of their traditional religions in that country before it fell not too long after in an electoral defeat.³⁹ Anez ended up arrested and imprisoned under charges of sedition and ordering massacres of activists.⁴⁰

35 Glenn Greenwald, “With New D.C. Policy Group, Dems Continue to Rehabilitate and Unify with Neocons,” *The Intercept*, July 2017: <https://theintercept.com/2017/07/17/with-new-d-c-policy-group-dems-continue-to-rehabilitate-and-unify-with-bush-era-neocons/>

36 The Beat with Ari Melber, “Fat Joe and Woke Bill Kristol,” YouTube, *MSNBC*, December 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnAGwA9zmI8&ab_channel=MSNBC

37 Bryan Campbell Romero, “Have You Heard, Comrade? The Socialist Revolution is Racist Too,” *North American Congress in Latin America*, August 2021: <https://nacla.org/cuban-socialist-revolution-racist-too>

38 “Women’s activist Jeanine Anez takes the reins in Bolivia,” *The Australian*, November 2019: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/womens-activist-jeanine-anez-takes-the-reins-in-bolivia/news-story/1a19c22fed8cc62aac5e43384fd447c3>

39 Cindy Forster, “Bolivia’s Post-Coup President Has Unleashed a Campaign of Terror,” *Jacobin*, May 2020: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/05/bolivia-coup-jeanine-anez-evo-morales-mas>

40 Redacción AN / GS, “Bolivia: ordenan arrestar a la ex presidenta Jeanine Áñez y 5 de sus ministros por golpe de Estado,” *Aristegui Noticias*, March 2021: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/1203/mundo/bolivia-ordenan-arrestar-a-la-ex-presidenta-jeanine-anez-y-5-de-sus-minis->



With the end of the U.S.-led NATO operation in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, this new rhetoric made itself even more predominant in North Atlantic discourse. The war in Afghanistan had previously been justified as a counter-terrorism operation and then a nation-building enterprise. Part of this nation-building effort, as revealed by the Afghanistan Papers,⁴¹ involved mandating gender representation quotas in that country's government⁴² and military which caused difficulties with Afghan recruits and cost the United States at least \$110 million before the inclusionary aspect of the program was dropped.⁴³

Despite these programs, U.S. and global media coverage of the war waned over the course of the war. However, with the fall of Kabul in August of 2021, 'Afghan women and girls' suddenly became the primary topic of discussion once again, showing that this approach to nation-building clearly had at least rhetorical power among journalists and policymakers.⁴⁴ In keeping with a general strategy of framing their Afghanistan coverage in terms of domestic social issues and topical causes in America, Western journalists even highlighted the covering up of a George Floyd mural in Kabul by the Taliban as a particular example of backsliding

[tros-por-golpe-de-estado/](#)

41 Craig Whitlock, "At War with the Truth," *The Washington Post*, December 2019: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>

42 Gender Quotas Database, "Afghanistan," *International IDEA*, retrieved February 2022: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/44/35>

43 John F. Sopko, "Support for Gender Equality: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, February 2021: <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/gender-equality/index.html>

44 Jim Lobe, "Three major networks devoted a full five minutes to Afghanistan in 2020," *Responsible Statecraft*, August 2021: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/08/20/three-major-networks-devoted-a-full-five-minutes-to-afghanistan-in-2020/>

in the global march of liberalism brought on by America's withdrawal from that country.⁴⁵

Influential U.K. professor Mary Kaldor, long an advocate for liberal interventionism, wrote about how the War on Terror might have been a failure, but humanitarian intervention could take its place as a guiding mission for the U.S. and its allies. This would be accomplished by outside powers holding onto international airports (and thus controlling foreign airspace) in war-torn or illiberal countries so that they could fly out dissidents seeking refuge.⁴⁶ Considering the degree of military supremacy over other countries such maneuvers would require, it is hard to see this suggestion as meaningfully different from the 19th and early 20th-century treaty port system in China, where European powers and Japan carved out autonomous port districts and railroad corridors inside Chinese territory as de facto colonies.⁴⁷

As it was, the temporary U.S. military presence at the Kabul airport during the evacuation in the summer of 2021 led to turning the troops stationed there into prime targets for militants. A suicide bombing carried out by a single ISIS-affiliated actor caused the deaths of 170 civilians and 13 U.S. troops.⁴⁸ It is difficult to see how such small zones of control could be effectively secured

45 Akhtar Mohammed Makoi, "The soul of Kabul': Taliban paint over murals with victory slogans," *The Guardian*, September 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/07/the-soul-of-kabul-taliban-paint-over-murals-with-victory-slogans>

46 Mary Kaldor, "The main lesson from Afghanistan is that 'the war on terror' does not work," *The Guardian*, August 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/24/lesson-afghanistan-war-on-terror-not-work?>

47 Catherine Ladds, "China and treaty-port imperialism," *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, John Wiley and Sons LTD, 2016: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe079>

48 Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, "Lone ISIS Bomber Carried Out Attack at Kabul Airport, Pentagon Says," *The New York Times*, February 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/us/politics/kabul-airport-attack-report.html>



against such attacks when they exist as remote islands deployed deep inside hostile territory.

Bringing the conflict's commentary full circle, the rhetorical tactics most often employed at the end of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan serve as an exaggerated form of the moralist posturing signaled earlier in the war. After all, intelligence agencies in the first decade of the war had decided to use human rights and feminism rather explicitly to justify the shift in U.S. policy toward nation-building in Afghanistan to the people of allied European countries.⁴⁹ With the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, Western legacy media's targeted communications strategy attempted to present the chaos of the Taliban takeover as an unmitigated and largely avoidable tragedy rather than the necessary conclusion of the longest war in American history.

The Raison d'Etre of the Woke Imperium

Fundamentally, this latest iteration of liberal interventionist ideology centered on co-opting activism and progressive causes to advance U.S. global primacy is not so much of a break with the past as it might at first appear, especially considering the long-entrenched nexus between academia, defense contracting, and government agencies. In fact, the first draft of President Eisenhower's famous speech on the dangers of a 'Military Industrial Complex'⁵⁰ originally included a reference to academia as an important driver of that oligarchic relationship.⁵¹ The original

draft was also prescient in recognizing the role ideas germinating in the university would play in providing convenient and useful rationales for advancing globalism and future projects of empire in the name of 'liberation'.

The cumulative effect of presenting complex international issues through the lens of domestic Anglo-American cultural and ideological concerns—focused on global justice and equity for marginalized groups—is to sacrifice particularity and sovereignty at the altar of universalism and moralism and thereby undermine any prudential arguments that might oppose regime change operations or international sanctions. The new academic-governmental consensus intends to promote a conception of political theory based on universal morality and designed to push global cultural homogeneity by weaponizing both soft and hard power.

In this context, it should not surprise that one of the most influential living theorists of postmodernism and critical gender theory, Judith Butler, has taken to writing about the domestic politics of countries she has little stake in in a way that casts them as 'authoritarians', in lockstep with the commonly heard phraseology of the Beltway foreign policy establishment. Such writings on an ascendant 'Authoritarian Axis' fuel the perception that an existential, Manichean struggle for global values—rather than simply the return of historical patterns of realpolitik—is underway.⁵²

Certainly, there are strong internal incentives for furthering the activist causes originating in the

49 Wikileaks, "CIA report into shoring up Afghan war support in western Europe," March 2010: https://wikispooks.com/w/images/0/06/Cia-afghanistan.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1yHYWk3ZS4PVEhzd-PVxo_Nax_rSlQyX-nEYOek9ZqsIShLgWYvB4KvBo

50 President Dwight Eisenhower's Farewell Address, January 1961, YouTube upload on Ewafa, 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyBNmecVtdU&ab_channel=Ewafa

51 Henry A Giroux. *University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex*. United Kingdom: Routledge,

2007: <https://www.routledge.com/University-in-Chains-Confronting-the-Military-Industrial-Academic-Complex/Giroux/p/book/9781594514234>

52 Judith Butler, "Why is the idea of 'gender' provoking backlash the world over?", *The Guardian*, October 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>



university and its continual merger with the more hawkish elements of the defense establishment. The consolidation of an elitist and culturally-defined language of power and access has created a kind of holy lexicon for policy middle-management types hoping for promotion and advancement within government agencies and non-government institutions awash in credentialed applicants. Elite overproduction has increased the pool of humanities graduates beyond society's ability to employ them.⁵³ It, therefore, becomes necessary for the class of applicants to demonstrate their ability to work within the language not just of academia generally, but also of the obscurantist jargon so prevalent within postmodernist schools of philosophy.

American intelligence agencies, which once had a role in influencing a formerly class-based left opposition and molding it into one of safely middle-class cultural revolution, find this process quite natural.⁵⁴ The end result is one of performative radicalism and activism, where desire to reform policy at home can be safely integrated into the structures of the government and redirected abroad. The danger posed by truly radical and dissenting domestic voices can therefore be weakened in the domestic sphere and redirected to support military expansionism abroad. Given elite overproduction and the highly competitive nature of selection within these institutions, these trends are only exacerbated by the virtue-signalling that is needed to appear cutting edge and 'woke', hence the championing of ever more niche and avante-garde causes.

53 Peter Turchin, "Blame Societies' Elites as Our Society Frays," Bloomberg, November 2013: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2013-11-20/blame-rich-overeducated-elites-as-our-society-frays>

54 River Page, "The CIA and the New Dialect of Power," *American Affairs*, Winter 2021: <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/11/the-cia-and-the-new-dialect-of-power/>

This same phenomenon undergirds the rise of what could become a 'woke military' in the United States. A Department of Defense internal report from 2021 made several recommendations to increase recruitment pools for officers in order to address the very real problem of the upper echelon ranks being disproportionately unrepresentative relative to the general military population. Despite an enormous conservative backlash to the report, there is nothing inside of the paper that can be taken as a direct attempt to transform the military along the same ideological lines as is currently happening in the Department of State.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, given the current institutional proclivity to exploit social justice causes and redirect them towards advancing a more hawkish foreign policy at the highest echelons of the state, the possibility that the United States could one day tout its efforts at 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' as evidence of its suitability to restructure other societies through occupation, training missions, or logistical support cannot be discounted. Currently, certain identitarian signaling within the army and the navy has already shown how impactful presently fashionable ideologies like critical race theory (CRT) have become within U.S. bureaucracy.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley gave a pointed defense of using niche academic theories like CRT in the education of military officers, stating that 'I want to understand white rage, and I'm white'⁵⁶ and denied

55 Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion Report, "Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military," *Department of Defense*, June 2021: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554852/-1/-1/0/DOD-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-FINAL-BOARD-REPORT.PDF>

56 Connor O'Brien, Top General fires back at 'offensive' military being 'woke,' Politico, June 2021: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/23/top-general-fires-back-criticism-military-woke-495703>



accusations that such a focus would undermine the functionality of the military, but critics contend that this course could raise questions about the future ability of the military to remain mission-focused and independent of the cultural trends dominating the American foreign policy ecosystem.⁵⁷

Moreover, General Milley personifies a worrying trend of cultural fragmentation between the military leadership staff (the three and four-stars who represent the views of the dominant class) and the junior officer corps (who often enlist from among the less privileged and working class). Further politicization of the U.S. military could therefore undermine institutional cohesion and tear apart the U.S. military from within—reflecting the general polarization of Western societies that pits populist groups against the elitist ruling class, and the proliferation of ideology throughout all institutions.

These worries were magnified by a leaked draft policy by the army that would provide soldiers the ability to request to move from states if they felt discriminated against in some way—a policy that would “in practice, [see] the military taking sides in a bitterly divisive political dispute.”⁵⁸ Other signs of this type of gradual infiltration of domestic politics into the functioning and indoctrination of the military came in the form of a video from the Naval Undersea Warfare Division in Newport in June of 2021 which served as an instructive video on the usage of preferred pronouns in the workplace.⁵⁹

57 Edward Chang, “Whose Army Is It, Anyway? *Substack*, May 2022: <https://edwardchang.substack.com/p/whose-army-is-it-anyway?s=r>

58 *Ibid.*

59 NAVspeaks-Pronouns, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, June 2021: <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/844401/nav-speaks-pronouns>

The rise of fashionable activist rhetoric garnering prestige in policymaking circles is clearly gathering pace and being conflated with the United States’ international image and role in the world given America’s status as a great power. This process also reflects a general trend of postmodern theories permeating the political center⁶⁰—where the majority of pro-interventionist policies in the U.S. originate.⁶¹ The factions which adhere to the conventional Post-Cold War view of interventionism clearly see utility in turning U.S. domestic causes centered on social justice into international ones with no regard to how divergently issues of minority rights operate in culturally and historically different contexts. The parallel to state-directed missionary activity is obvious. If other nations live differently in ways deemed unacceptable, they can be deemed “*problematic.*”

The adoption of progressive speech patterns by the establishment serves to fracture and effectively silence internal dissent against hawkish policies such as sanctioning or launching military operations against the ‘illiberal’ country in question. This, in turn, makes it easier for interventionists to adjust to a post-9/11 era that has largely discarded security-based arguments in favor of a United States that acknowledges and repents for its troubled past, and then uses that newfound self-awareness and atonement to proclaim that countries that have not gone through the same process should adopt an American-style historical reckoning.

60 Liza Featherstone, “Radical Academics for the Status Quo,” *Jacobin*, December 2019: <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/radical-academics-judith-butler-kamala-harris-donation>

61 David Klion, “Anne Applebaum and the Crisis of centrist politics,” *The Nation*, January 2021: <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/anne-applebaum-twilight-democracy/>



In this light, the problem with speeches such as the one given by the U.S. Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the General Assembly is that by seeking to leverage the *New York Times*' '1619 Project'⁶² within the context of a foreign policy address, she universalizes the American historical experience (as posited in that report) and transforms it into an absolute moralistic position from which to interpret global trends.⁶³

The pivot towards these themes as the new way to single out rival states also came up at the acrimonious Alaska summit between Washington and Beijing, where both sides accused each other of hypocrisy on human rights.⁶⁴ Building on this trend, in September 2021, the Biden Administration released an executive order imposing sanctions on actors related to the outbreak of civil war in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region which explicitly cited the ethnic nature of the violence and its impact on women specifically as justifications for the U.S. to begin inserting itself into that conflict.⁶⁵ Coupled with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) hosting workshops on "Exploring Gender and Hybrid Threats" in February of 2022, and the

U.S. canceling talks with the Taliban over seized assets due to the government in Kabul declaring it would not reopen education for girls in March of 2022⁶⁶, it becomes apparent that this new phase of the national security establishment is now well underway and being used to tie allied nations together under one ideological rubric as an international community spearheaded by Washington with the goal of targeting and 'prosecuting' enemy states as moral criminals.⁶⁷

It is questionable whether these policies advance concrete U.S. national interests or if they function as yet another vehicle to empower the liberal-Atlanticist ruling class internationally. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of such policy shifts, should they continue, will likely be to create a new method for delegitimizing foreign states in the eyes of the Western media consumers who largely share similar socio-cultural mores. Such an ideological pivot also means keeping rhetoric consistent and complementary with much of the news media's priorities which in turn allows less scrutiny of the strategic wisdom of the adopted policies and their benefit to the general public. It further suggests that a new generation of policymakers will more successfully integrate themselves with mainstream public opinion bringing non-state activists into closer alignment with the objectives of the state.

With the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022, some of this commentary has already started to percolate in the press, with Ukraine's poor record on LGBT issues being positioned as

62 Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project*. One World Publishing, October 2021.

63 Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, "Remarks at an UNGA Commemoration on International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination," *U.S. Mission to the United Nations*, March 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILBYPhSle8&t=3s&ab_channel=USMissiontotheUnitedNations%5BPress%5D

64 CNN, "US-China meetings breaks into tense confrontation on camera," YouTube, *CNN channel*, March 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfGkJAX2WUc&ab_channel=CNN

65 Presidential Actions, "Executive Order on Imposing Sanctions on Certain Persons With Respect to the Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Ethiopia," *The White House*, September 2021: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/09/17/executive-order-on-imposing-sanctions-on-certain-persons-with-respect-to-the-humanitarian-and-human-rights-crisis-in-ethiopia/>

66 Charlotte Greenfield and Jonathan Landay, "US cancels talks with Taliban over U-turn on girls' education," *Reuters*, March 2022: <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-us-officials-cancel-talks-with-taliban-over-bar-girls-education-state-2022-03-25/>

67 *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, "Deep Dive Recap: Exploring Gender and Hybrid Threats," February 2022: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_191429.htm



still superior to Russia's. While this is admittedly a low bar considering Moscow's present culture war proclivities, the issue is clearly seen as one of utility and soft power advantage in certain sections of the press amenable to interventionism.⁶⁸

A media market for such commentaries already clearly exists, with the generally pro-interventionist *The Atlantic* running an article in May of 2022 advocating for the 'decolonization' of Russia by painting the multi-ethnic history of that state as identical to Victorian colonialism and thus in need of dismantling via regime change.⁶⁹ Whether the conflict escalates further or remains frozen, one could expect to see rhetoric like this increase.⁷⁰

Of course, by emphasizing the ideological nature of the U.S.-Russia competition, Washington undermines its own diplomacy by neglecting the real security concerns that motivate potential allies in the Ukraine crisis:⁷¹ the sovereignty of smaller states located at regional and civilizational fault lines.⁷² This obvious core of diplomacy has been all but forgotten in the rush to make foreign policy into an extension of domestic culture wars. Given these trends, the liberal imperium

has clear interests in making U.S. foreign policy appear 'woke' while casting unfriendly nations as illiberal and anti-woke. These moves could also be amplified by state, media, and NGO actors.

Such selective use of 'woke' causes allows for an open-ended potential for intervention in a long list of trouble spots in the Global South while also shoring up a domestic narrative that intervention would be beneficial—and outright righteous—given the purity of the Blob's convictions. Foreign rivals opposed to these policies can be painted as being “on the wrong side of history”, “against Progress”, “diabolical”, and so on. Most likely, Washington will emphasize these causes when dealing with nations that the U.S. wishes to undermine and or to interject in regions in which it seeks to expand its military footprint. At the same time, these very causes are likely to be systematically de-emphasized in the cases of nations allied to the U.S.—such as Saudi Arabia—opening Washington and its allies to charges of hypocrisy and further undermining their claim to moral virtue.

The Role of Culture and Class in the Woke Imperium

While it may be tempting to treat the adoption of social justice rhetoric by the administrative state as a matter of ideological commitment and puritanism on the part of its partisans—and this is precisely what most media coverage as well as institutional recruitment, like that of the Central Intelligence Agency,⁷³ typically emphasizes—this does not tell the whole story.

Ideology alone—of whatever stripe—cannot explain either the widespread incorporation

68 J. Lester Feder. “The Fight for Ukraine is Also a Fight for LGBTQ Rights,” *Vanity Fair*, March 2022: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/03/the-fight-for-ukraine-is-also-a-fight-for-lgbtq-rights>

69 Casey Michel, “Decolonize Russia,” *The Atlantic*, May 2022: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/russia-putin-colonization-ukraine-chechnya/639428/>

70 Malcom Kyeyune, Pride and American Imperialism, *Compact Magazine*, June 2022: <https://compactmag.com/article/pride-and-american-imperialism>

71 Stephen Wertheim, “The One Key Word Biden Needs to Invoke on Ukraine,” *The Atlantic*, June 2022: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/06/russia-ukraine-war-democracy-sovereignty-right/661231/>

72 Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, David Polansky, and Zachary Paikin, “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” *The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, March 26, 2022. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/>

73 “Humans of CIA,” *Central Intelligence Agency*, March 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X55JPbAMc9g&ab_channel=CentralIntelligenceAgency



of various forms of progressive discourse into the policymaking apparatus nor the way that the hawkish policies themselves have largely continued uninterrupted. For an explanation, it is necessary to look at how the prevailing structure of material and professional incentives shapes and exploits the cultural mores of the policy-making class—the class that then proliferates those same mores.

Dating back to the Central Intelligence Agency’s financial support for the modern artists of the early Cold War to push liberal values associated with American Exceptionalism⁷⁴, the ruling class has been attuned to exploiting the prevailing cultural winds in the West to advance their foreign policy and security interests disguised as American national interest. In practice, state-backed institutions have used carrots and sticks of grant-making and professional advancement and development to secure systemic groupthink among the bureaucracy, foster ideological hegemony around liberal internationalism, and to manufacture consent around permanent U.S. global primacy. And networks of elite recruitment and promotion are foundational both to reinforce institutional prestige and to cultivate and catalyze a culture of strategic consensus enhanced and propagated by a highly visible and media-savvy army of activists and advocacy groups.

This complex has routinized a positive feedback loop reinforcing conformity among the technocratic, bureaucratic, and managerial class operating in different domains rather than simply being dominated by the military.⁷⁵ As

new generations of a professional class enter public service, the media organizations that are responsible for the majority of foreign policy coverage are also overwhelmingly represented by those from the highest echelon of the university system—hence joining the complex out of class solidarity as much as from ideological conviction.

Conceptualizing policy—including foreign policy—through the lens of social justice is now the mainstream position of the university-credentialed class who make up the majority of the government, media, and corporate middle-management. Ironically, the former ‘Boston Brahmins’, whose patronage networks ensured Anglo-Saxon and Protestant domination of government institutions more than a century ago, have now given way to its successor movement, one that might nominally resist such an association or be unaware of its philosophical linkages to the former but behaves symmetrically in practice: the professional managerial class social justice activist.⁷⁶

Just as the largely performative use of LGBT or Black Lives Matter symbols by investment banks and arms manufacturers does not indicate a sacrifice of their respective bottom lines, so too can Langley and Foggy Bottom publicly signal their commitment to *au courant* forms of social progressivism without deviating from their imperial ambitions and universalist missions.⁷⁷ Moreover, this form of signaling can in turn be picked up and disseminated by both existing and prospective personnel solely through the

74 Frances Stonor Saunders. *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: The New Press, 2013.

75 Israel Vargas, “How did American “wokeness” jump from elite schools to everyday life?”, *The Economist*, September 2021: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/09/04/how-did-american-woke-ness-jump-from-elite-schools-to-everyday-life>

76 Jonathan Wai and Kaja Perina, “Expertise in Journalism: Factors Shaping a Cognitive and Culturally Elite Profession,” University of Arkansas: *Journal of Expertise* Volume 1, 2018: https://www.journalofexpertise.org/articles/volume1_issue1/JoE_2018_1_1_Wai_Perina.html

77 Leo Sands, “Pride month: Kuwait criticizes US embassy over pro-LGBT tweets,” *BBC*, June 6, 2022: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61678929>



process of professionalization. It is one of the means by which would-be staffers indicate their acculturation into these institutions.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called this resource cultural capital, which he defined as “familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society.” This broadly takes the form of various kinds of knowledge, skills, mannerisms, and credentials and marks one as a member of the dominant class. A certain verbal facility with the tropes of modern discourse represents a form of cultural capital for the contemporary policy-making class.

The point is not that certain progressive ideals cannot also be held as sincere beliefs by those who espouse them; it is more so that the functional significance of these beliefs rests not upon the intensity of those ideological commitments on the part of the adherents, but rather upon the role they play in consolidating and perpetuating the hegemonic prestige of the institutions of governance and the class that staffs them. This is not to say that the dangers of genuine belief in such an idealistic framework for understanding geopolitics should be overlooked either. The purpose, however, is to maintain continuity in the foreign policy establishment as it enters a new cultural environment—i.e., to use the very cultural shifts to resist a fundamental paradigm shift in U.S. international posture while protecting the status quo for the establishment and safeguarding its underlying strategic assumptions.

Most importantly for those who would prefer to see the United States adopt a more realist and prudent foreign policy, the new social justice ethos fulfills approximately the same function as democracy promotion or R2P did in years past: it legitimizes any form of military and diplomatic action that is nominally undertaken in its service

while delegitimizing criticism of such policies. The new wokeist coming of the empire, however, is arguably even more destabilizing as it seeks not merely *political* restructuring in targeted countries but total *cultural* submission—which could, in time, further radicalize the countries in the Global South against, not just America, but liberalism and progressivism as such. Already, nations with little common interest but that of shared opposition to U.S. meddling appear to be aligning with each other in the name of state and civilizational sovereignty against the hegemonic globalism of the liberal imperium.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The processes described above are, historically speaking, neither new nor unique to the United States. The British Empire furthered the global slave trade for financial and colonial reasons in the 17th and 18th Centuries. With the coming of industrialization and the anti-slavery movement in the Victorian Era, however, the anti-slavery cause became a means to reinvent the expansion of British imperial power as one of moral duty.⁷⁹ Both of these contradictory phases, however, still fueled greater levels of colonialism around the world. Where once the empire had expanded to find more slave labor and workable plantation land, an abolitionist cultural shift enabled a reinvention of the empire as extirpating the slave trade it had helped create.

A similar logic applies to the functioning of the

78 Benjamin Norton. Venezuela and Iran sign 20-year cooperation plan, Maduro pledges “joint anti-imperialism struggle,” Multipolarista, June 2022: https://multipolarista.com/2022/06/11/venezuela-iran-20-year-agreement/?fbclid=IwAR3vzX2vFHemz0Zi8x8gtkX-qN2ZJUz_OctmaB5hYzqXTwhWbhfViC-U7C9w

79 Padraic Scanlan, “The Emancipated Empire,” *Aeon*, October 2021: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-british-empire-was-built-on-slavery-then-grew-by-antislavery>



liberal imperium led by the U.S. establishment: humanitarian intervention often occurs in regions of previous interventions, creating the conditions with which it can continually respond in a spiral of frozen and perpetuated conflicts. The utility of *casus bellis* rooted in social justice is apparent for those of hawkish foreign policy dispositions.⁸⁰ Thus, one way to read this analysis is as a warning to advocates of social justice: that the military-industrial complex is perfectly capable and incentivized to assimilate their language and repurpose it for its own internationalist or militarized ends. Wokeness, after all, is good for the imperium. Whether it is good for the nation that hosts the imperium, however, is a very different question.

The advocates of a more realist and restrained foreign policy in the North Atlantic, and especially the United States, must realize that a rhetorical shift toward social justice and human rights represents only the latest iteration of a universalism already predominant in most U.S. institutions—the fated ideological evolution for those in favor of expanded military and sanctions policies. This will be accomplished by redirecting, enlarging, and universalizing U.S. domestic politics within the extant machinery of U.S. national security and Western alliances such as NATO.

This move is likely to be championed by a media apparatus and NGO network committed to the ever-expanding liberal project. Both of these domains will enjoy enhanced political access and increased financial support from the U.S. government bureaucracy. Certain allied states—such as Britain and its cultural descendants like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as well as countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian nations—will also be likely to

80 Cunliffe, 2020.

view U.S. hegemony as a net positive, given their institutional and cultural adherence to similar worldviews.

The result of these policies elsewhere, however, is the eventual division of an otherwise pluralistic civilizational international system into a bifurcated system along the lines of Anglo-American domestic culture wars—fomenting a new global Cold War the West cannot easily win. Indeed, from the standpoint of the advocates of realism and restraint, such an ideological framing will invite—if it has not already—a new form of international backlash against U.S. influence.

One can point to the democratizing impulses in U.S. foreign policy during the end of the First World War or after the Cold War as precedent, but the rhetoric of ‘wokeness’ targets foreign cultures and is not simply seeking to reshape the political and economic system of those distant lands. It seeks to subvert core beliefs that diverge across class lines and vary greatly from culture to culture in order to push normative and cultural homogeneity.

Interference of this type is so totalistic as to be akin to cultural eugenics, which if anything, is likely to produce a powerful backlash against the country advocating for the intervention as well as against the policy recommendations themselves, ironically harming the very causes espoused. The non-Western world is therefore increasingly likely to define its future in the existential terms as often cast by the West and to view its own collective resistance against liberal values as a struggle for cultural autonomy and sovereignty against moral imperialism and foreign interventionism of the liberal imperium.

While the attempts to remake foreign cultures according to the mores of the 21st-century American (and, to a lesser extent, European) haute



bourgeoisie cosmopolitanism is also ethically troubling, it is no less imprudent. The source of social justice-tinged imperial quests, after all, is not shared and critical agreement on the national interests of the people but the desire to further entrench and prolong the existing power structure.

As professional competition for limited promotional opportunities within the apparatus of numerous state and NGO institutions intensifies, the desire to advocate for interventionist missionary activity in foreign policy as an instrument of leverage and enhanced prestige will continue to strengthen so long as the ‘wokeist’ culture retains its dominance over the hearts and minds of the elite university-credentialed ruling class.

With the greater consolidation of the ‘Woke Imperium’ over the coming years, one could therefore expect significant domestic ramifications as well, particularly as the process aggravates the growing divide between the interests of ordinary citizens in the West and those of a professional cosmopolitan class in the liberal Atlanticist capitals that increasingly identifies itself with the status markers of ‘wokeness’.

Whether wokeism will prove a more effective cover with which to justify a hawkish foreign policy and military interventions abroad than previous ideological umbrellas remains to be seen. Either way, it is likely that once its utility ends, woke internationalism too will be replaced in turn by another ideological vehicle, and the cycle will repeat itself—unless pragmatists, realists, and prudent statesmen come to recognize and actively resist the underlying logic and utilitarian pull of ideology and idealism as such in greasing the wheels of the U.S. war machine.

But as of now, such idealism is repeatedly

weaponized to create a new—and perhaps more pathological—version of American Exceptionalism to continue the same unpopular and dangerous policies of the post-Cold War era but *reformed* so as to appeal to a new generation. After all, those conditioned to believe that geopolitics is a realm of moral certitude can be convinced to support any action carried out by a foreign policy establishment provided it only sounds the correct ideological notes.

About the Author

Dr. Christopher Mott is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy and an international relations scholar focused on historical geopolitics, grand strategy, and the intersection of defensive realism and conceptions of sovereignty in an era of increasing multi-polarity. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of St Andrews, an MA in International Relations from London Metropolitan University, and a BA in History from Rutgers University. He has published a book, '*The Formless Empire: A Short History of Diplomacy and Warfare in Central Asia*,' on the rise of indigenous forms of geopolitical strategy on the Eurasian steppe as well as numerous peer reviewed and general audience articles on foreign policy and historical topics in a variety of places. Dr. Mott was previously a fellow at Defense Priorities in Washington DC, and a former researcher and desk officer at the U.S. Department of State.

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