

David C. Hendrickson, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition*

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- 1 David C. Hendrickson, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition*
- 2 Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 287. ISBN: 978-0190660383.
- 3 Joseph Michael Gratale
- 4 In early July of 2019 leaked diplomatic cables from the UK's ambassador to the USA, Kim Darroch, were divulged to the public by a British newspaper. The British ambassador is reported to have said the following about the Trump administration back in the summer of 2017: "As seen from here, we really don't believe that this administration is going to become substantially more normal, less dysfunctional, less unpredictable, less faction-riven, less diplomatically clumsy and inept."¹ Darroch's alleged comments garnered an abundant amount of criticism from a great number of government officials and media pundits, but one can wonder if the diplomat's undiplomatic reflections were indeed on the mark. Did he not merely express something that many observers are already aware of—that President Trump, in the realm of executing American foreign policy, is exhibiting poor judgement and flawed leadership?
- 5 In his book, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition*, David C. Hendrickson addresses key issues and themes connected to the making and implementation of American foreign policy over the past twenty-five years. Since his book was written late in 2017, Hendrickson's analysis of President Trump and his administration is largely based on Trump's election campaign rhetoric and actions taken during his first year in office. Despite not having 'experienced' Trump's unorthodox style and shortcomings as a leader, Hendrickson's reading of the president is astute and canny. As he states, Trump exhibited an "inability to articulate a coherent alternative to America's globalist policies" emphasizing an America First stance (6) pivoting around nationalist discourse, and American unilateralism. Several years down

the road this assessment of Trump by Hendrickson remains intact. But to probe any further on Trump would be misleading since *Republic in Peril* provides, quite plausibly, only scant coverage of the current administration. Instead, this volume offers an insightful reading and critique of the US national security state and American imperialist practices from the Clinton administration in the 1990s to President Obama's years in office from 2008 to 2016. Over the years, and especially since the 1990s, writings on the American Empire, or lack thereof, has been profuse, and has in terms of academic literature, become a hallmark of studies on US foreign policy. In the immediate post 9-11 period many volumes focusing on the rise of American hyper-militarism and the foreseeable decline of American dynamism and power had been ubiquitous. While there is indeed abundant criticism on the direction contemporary American foreign policy has taken, *Republic in Peril* provides readers with analyses and insights that probe deep into America's historical-ideological traditions coupled with relevant case studies that illuminate failures and shortcomings in how the US operates within the international system.

- 6 *Republic in Peril* is divided into five main chapters and includes an introduction and a conclusion. A central argument in the book is that US foreign policy has disturbingly strayed from key principles and values that were first articulated by America's Founders. These founding principles, including distinctive forms of liberalism that evolved and developed beyond the early phases of American history, became institutionalized in American socio-political traditions. In concrete terms, the US by the early twentieth century played a major role in constructing a liberal international order. As Hendrickson points out, the US "has encouraged the peaceful settlement of disputes; has upheld fundamental principles like the defense of territorial integrity and freedom of navigation; and has built a cooperative international system" (17). These notions were in part conceived to create stability and order in a 'chaotic' international system in order to facilitate the conditions for the smooth operation of American capitalism and ideas regarding US national interests, while simultaneously remaining committed to both core liberal principles and the Westphalian system of nation-states.
- 7 A second key component of Hendrickson's volume is his blistering critique of US foreign policy practices over the last twenty-five years. Although there is some mention of the Clinton administrations of the nineties, it is the Bush and Obama administrations that face the full brunt of Hendrickson's ire. President Bush, for example, irresponsibly "stretched the ambitions of American power to Olympian heights—proposing unquestioned US military supremacy, a doctrine of preventive war, unilateral prerogatives, a vast expansion of American spying apparatus, and the militarized pursuit of democracy with the aim of ending tyranny and terrorism in the world" (1). For President Obama, the analysis is no better, and in certain respects worse than his predecessor in particular respects. Hendrickson provides over a page of bullet points on policy decisions made by Obama that the author deemed unsatisfactory. For example, he states that despite having made promises to the contrary in 2008, "there was more continuity than change in the Obama administration's approach to foreign policy. He departed from the Bush foreign policy in some respects...but in most respects he confirmed the precedents that Bush had set" (3). In the final analysis, Obama's claim of reorienting US foreign policy never came to fruition. In short, Obama remained committed to the maintenance of American military superiority. According to Hendrickson, Obama "continued to build the panopticon. He embraced regime change and the strategy of overthrow...[and] although he prohibited torture and sought to

bring US conduct within the scope of the laws of war, he authorized the expansion of the global battlefield to include Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and Libya..." (54).

- 8 A particularly alarming element that runs through much of American foreign policy actions is the government's proclivity to intervene in the domestic affairs of other nation-states. Throughout his narrative, Hendrickson points out how this stance undermines US liberal discourse and policy positions anchored to claims about respecting the sovereignty of other nations, respecting liberal ideas, and respecting international law. Admittedly there is a fine line between the two opposing sides relating to foreign intervention. On one hand, non-interventionism is premised on the notion of self-determination, whereas interventionism, on the other hand, could be justified on humanitarian grounds. If one just considers one of Hendrickson's case study analyses on the Greater Middle East, he concludes that US intervention in the region sowed more disorder than stability. As he states, America's "quest was informed by the view that destroying existing state structures was a viable path to the goal of peace, when its manifest tendency was to unleash anarchy throughout the region, giving extremist groups a wide field to manoeuvre" (133).
- 9 Hendrickson's most stinging appraisal of the American foreign policy establishment is encountered by the reader about halfway through his book. For the author, American democratic ideals and institutions have been undermined, especially over the last generation, in the name of national security. He suggests that since the 1940s "with just about every subsequent decade adding new reinforcement, a national security state coupled with a military-industrial complex has arisen that exercises enormous domestic influence" (138). He also makes a number of interesting observations on America's endless national celebration of the military and its soldiers in public discourse, rituals, and aspects of popular culture. As he states in a regretful tone in regard to the military, the "promise of liberal internationalism was that it would rein in the spirit of militarism—abroad, of course, but especially at home. Having gone into the world to crush the specter of domestic militarism, alas, the consequence of America's global role was to entrench it" (149).
- 10 In the final sections of *Republic in Peril*, Hendrickson provides the reader with prescriptions for renovating US foreign policy. Although he articulates views critical of US interventionism, he argues against any notions of deep-ended isolationism, as well as the dangers of indiscriminate globalism. The US, according to Hendrickson, "should return to its tradition of liberal pluralism," and reject dangerous schemes of regime change abroad (168). In essence, he is proposing a new internationalism that rejects haphazard military adventurism, and instead pivots around the principle of the Golden Rule of working toward peace in concert with other nation states rather than deploying aggressive tactics and strategies in the name of national security. As the author expresses quite forcefully, the key is "not instigating quarrels with friends but reconciling with enemies, by taking their vital interests into account in the formulation of US policy. Such a step would contribute to both the US national interest and international order" (193).
- 11 Some might suggest that Hendrickson's narrative is overly pessimistic, naïve, and anti-American. I believe that such criticisms are unfounded. However, I would suggest two issues could be reflected on further by the author. First, while there is more than adequate coverage of the Bush and Obama administrations, in terms of the projection of American power, there should be greater coverage of the Clinton administrations

during the 1990s. It was a pivotal period in terms of the reformulation of American foreign policy largely due to the dramatic changes of the era including the collapse of the Soviet Union, the collapse of numerous communist states, the perceived victory of American capitalism, and the growing boldness of American military interventionism around the world. Many of Clinton's actions played an important role in decisions taken later by subsequent administrations. Second, having read numerous volumes critical of US foreign policy, I find it disappointing that yet another study as Hendrickson's fails to seriously engage with the stance of a majority of American citizens that either overtly or tacitly support particular aspects of the American imperial project. Sooner or later US citizens need to be more engaged and cognizant of its country's violations of international law, more responsive to inept foreign policy actions, and accountable for the individuals they elect to political office, from local politicians to the office of the presidency.

- 12 These observations, I would emphasize, are minor. *Republic in Peril* is a book that stands out in the field of American foreign relations. Hendrickson provides his readers with a shrewd and multi-layered analysis of contemporary America's presence and influence in world affairs. It is a volume that is rich and textured in its historical depth, relevant case study analyses, and valid argumentation relating to needed adjustments in how foreign policy is conducted by the US government. Particularly instructive are Hendrickson's warnings about the growing power of the surveillance state and its threat to freedom and individual rights. Americans certainly need to be vigilant about the dangers of technology and vested interests in a free society such as the USA. Equally pressing, however, is the need for vigilance in preserving America's liberal traditions and democratic principles from threats not just from abroad, but also domestic, in the form of tyrants, just as the founders of the nation had warned over two-hundred and thirty years ago.

NOTES

1. Quoted from Andrew Sparrow's *The Guardian*, July 7, 2019, "What Kim Darroch is reported to have said about Trump and what it means."

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