



Legitimacy and American Declinism: A Nonstandard Approach to a Platitudinous Debate

*Légitimité et déclin américain: Une approche non conventionnelle à un débat
traditionnel*

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Abstract: Ways of looking at the possible decline of the United States are not necessarily quantifiable and speak of an immaterial aspect to shifts of power that seems to be ignored by the mainstream theories. It may be that the US is declining in overall power, economic power, political power, or cultural power, but there is also evidence that suggests that it may not be. The concept of who is *perceived* to have *legitimate* power over another is an example of a lens that is not quantifiable. However the US seems to have largely held the legitimacy of a superpower until quite recently. This paper will look at legitimacy in general, American legitimacy in particular, and finally its perceived loss.

Résumé: Certaines façons d'envisager le possible déclin des États-Unis ne sont pas nécessairement quantifiables, notamment en raison de l'aspect immatériel des relations de pouvoir généralement ignoré par les théories principales. Il est possible que les États-Unis connaissent un déclin de leur influence mondiale sur les plans économique, politique ou culturel, mais il existe également des preuves qui suggèrent le contraire. La perception d'avoir la légitimité d'agir est aussi difficilement quantifiable. Cependant, les États-Unis semblent avoir largement retenu leur légitimité de superpuissance jusqu'à tout récemment. Cet article examinera la légitimité en général, la légitimité américaine plus spécifiquement, et enfin la perception de son déclin.



The state of the international system is in a perpetual cycle of change. Nonetheless, there are times when systemic shifts increase in scope. It is in one of these periods that we currently find ourselves. Traditional International Relations (IR) theorists hold that, at any given time, there is one overwhelming power that helps balance out other nations and provide stability--the hegemon. Traditional IR theorists have different conceptions of what occurs when the existing hegemon loses its power and succumbs to the rising aspirations of the newer global power, be it a war or peaceful transition. Such was the case when the United States became the global hegemon after the Second World War, when the great powers in Europe of the previous eras could not recover.¹

Presently, mid-2012, the question of sustainability of American hegemony has arisen, perceived to be challenged by quickly developing states like Brazil and China. However, before we can say that there is a shift in the global hegemonic structure, we must first ask: what is the nature of American decline? Of course, this leads to many questions: is America truly in decline? The 2007-08 financial crisis and massive debt have certainly hurt America's economy, yet it continues to dominate economic policy and its corporations are still some of the biggest and most successful in the world. In terms of political dominance, America appears to remain at the highest echelon of the global power structure, despite its presence being disputed in the Middle East and indeed, around the rest of the world. Is it America's political clout that is in decline or its economic clout? Or, perhaps it is the American state as a whole that is on the fall, bringing with it the stability of the hegemonic structure. As such, from a neo-Gramscian

¹ John G. Ikenberry, "American Power and the Empire of Capitalist Democracy," in *Empires, Systems, and States*, ed. Michael Cox et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 191-212.; Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, "The Sources of American Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs* 83, (2004), 20.



perspective, it is its cultural clout that is in decline? If this is to be, what nation will be the next global force? China's rise and economic success seem to lead to fears that China is actively trying to seize power from the United States. Such an action would have grand implications for the overall structure and principles of the system. China is not held to be an example of democracy or liberal free trade markets. However, the current and most mainstream debate is missing the immaterial, but key, element of *legitimacy*.

Legitimacy is a hard process to define and identify, with numerous definitions of what it is and how it is achieved and maintained. The general observation within the literature consulted is that it very much depends on perception: how a company, state, or individual, is perceived to be legitimate. This is not something that is quantifiable, as it deals with the rightness of someone or something to wield power over others--a phrase that is reminiscent of Enlightenment and early 20th century philosophy, more so than current scholarly practices.²

In previous eras, the country with most military strength could essentially intimidate other nations into actions that would come better in line with the interests of the dominant state, and could coerce them into allying with it and thus prevent other states banding against its power.³ The unit of analysis in this paper is the United States, with its rise in the post-1945 era, a time when European powers could no longer hold on to their discontented colonies and had dragged many parts of the world into two massive wars and countless conflicts. The United States, aside from being a strong military presence, can be said to have had a legitimacy in the way it wielded power--it

² Kenneth Allan, "Authority and Rationality - Max Weber (German, 1864-1930)," in *Explorations in Classical Sociological Theory: Seeing the Social World* (London: SAGE Publications Inc., 2005), 152.

³ Robert Kagan, "America's Crisis of Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs* 83, 6 (2004), 68.; Ikenberry, *American Power*, 193.



was not Europe that had been colonizing the globe and it acted within accepted international and moral norms. The United States, for the most part, appeared as a benign world power that was capable of bringing stability.

What, then, is the link between American decline and legitimacy? It is a particular kind of legitimacy that is declining for the United States, a power that is no longer implicitly accepted, domestically and internationally. The hegemony of a super power that has largely been seen as benevolent and necessary since the end of the Second World War is no longer accepted as such. Beginning with the global shifts at the end of the Cold War, the end of the USSR, the decline of communism and subsequent increased rise of capitalism, the United States was no longer needed to be the power that stood against the Soviet Union. In addition, the Neo-Conservative foreign policy of the Bush administration has been detrimental to this perception of legitimacy as it can be said to have been belligerent, which largely alienated the United States from its allies and other nations. In addition, it should be mentioned that the cost of the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not help its economy stability.

The focus of this paper is to look at the perceived decline in American legitimacy, as opposed to the decline in its power, political power, or economic power--the legitimacy to wield this power and for it to be accepted by other states is what is deteriorating. First, I will look at legitimacy in general, then American legitimacy in particular, and finally at its descent.



Legitimacy

First, a brief overview of aspects of legitimacy and how it is defined, generally, is of great importance to this study. Max Weber and Jürgen Habermas are two theorists that have looked at how something, especially a state, would garner legitimacy. Weber has focused on the different types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal, with the United States falling into the category of rational-legal, as it garners its (domestic) legitimacy through the rule of law.⁴ In addition, he has been attributed with theorizing that “legitimacy works only because people believe in the rightness of the system.” Habermas, however, has described legitimacy as being in accordance with what is true, right, and good, stating that societies are stable when their members perceive it to be legitimate.⁵ This echoes one of the perspectives laid out by Ian Clark in his overview of legitimacy in international society, which will be discussed later.⁶

Moving to a slightly more contemporary view more of consequence to this essay, many theorists seem to keep to the view that legitimacy is partially garnered through law, perception, and the ability to bring stability to a system. Patrick Cottrell uses Ian Hurd’s definition that it is a “normative belief that a rule or institution should be obeyed.”⁷ This shows that there is an element of coercion in legitimacy, albeit one that is implied and accepted. Furthermore, Cottrell states that in the context of institutions,

⁴ Allan, “Authority and Rationality - Max Weber,” 152.

⁵ James Bohman and William Rehg, “Jürgen Habermas,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2011), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/habermas/>>.

⁶ Ian Clark, “Another ‘Double Movement’: The Great Transformation After the Cold War?” in *Empires, Systems, and States*, ed. Michael Cox et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 237-256.

⁷ Hurd in Patrick Cottrell, “Hope or Hype? Legitimacy and U.S. Leadership in a Global Age,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, 2 (2011): 339.



legitimacy is based on how an actor perceives it, stating that legitimacy and power are complimentary.⁸

Yet another perspective, as formulated by Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson, posits that legitimacy is based on a state following the rule of law.⁹ This must come from the “rightful authority” and must not “violate a legal or moral norm.” They too believe “legitimacy is rooted in opinion,” making illegal acts not necessarily illegal in all situations. This further emphasizes that notion that legitimacy is based in perception of the state that wields it. It is closely tied to accepted laws and norms, but does not have to remain strictly within the boundaries set by such rules.

Legitimacy, throughout the literature consulted, is seen as an important component of power that is based on perception, and that is furthermore not necessarily tied to law or morality, even though they are aspects important to consider when analysing the concept. It also holds an element of implied and accepted coercion, which we can link to empires or hegemonic characteristics, like those of the United States.

American Legitimacy

Focusing on the particular case of American legitimacy, Tucker and Hendrickson construct four pillars that constitute the analytical framework, while John Ikenberry (2001) sees it as being rooted in institutions and the perception of the United States as

⁸ Ibid., 340.

⁹ Tucker and Hendrickson, “Sources of American Legitimacy,” 18.



a reluctant super power, one that was prepared to “bind its own power in multilateral rules.”¹⁰

Contrarily, by following realist thought, Robert Kagan sees it rooted in the systemic legitimacy of a bipolar system.¹¹ However, the weakness of his argument is that he can only explain American legitimacy from a purely Western, and particularly Eurocentric perspective, not the legitimacy that was seen globally; with non-Western and non-European states more or less implicitly accepting America’s legitimacy as a super power.¹² Within Europe, it was believed that 1) only the United States was able to deter the power of the Soviet Union, 2) the USSR was a common ideological threat, and finally 3) there was the “structural legitimacy” garnered from a bipolar system, which meant that its power was automatically kept in check. Nevertheless, this does not explain why some Asian, African, and Middle Eastern nations accepted American legitimacy and influence even after the fall of the USSR. This perspective is useful in bringing attention the shift after the Cold War and the perceived necessity of the United States, which will be discussed further on.

Tucker and Hendrickson accept this aspect but believe that it goes further than Kagan’s reasoning.¹³ The four pillars of American legitimacy begin with the post-1945 era, inevitably, and continue until the current state in which the Bush administration has placed it after its two invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, including the diplomatic and foreign relations behaviour surrounding them. The first pillar is the contribution to the creation of and adherence to international law, taking away the stipulations of conflict

¹⁰ Barry Buzan, “A Leader Without Followers? The U.S. In World Politics After Bush,” *International Politics* 45, 5 (2008): 555.

¹¹ Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³ Tucker and Hendrickson, “Sources of American Legitimacy,” 19-23.



perpetrated by realpolitik, such as the idea that the military victor is the final undisputed decision-maker. They point out that during the Cold War, the United States attempted to adhere to international laws and norms whenever possible, which contributed to their legitimacy. Furthermore, as they define the concept being rooted in opinion, not every break with international law that the United States committed has automatically been seen as illegal.

The second pillar is the American use of consensual decision making and multilateralism, wherein they took the interests of their allies into account. There was consultation, common policy, and compromise that may have even been facilitated by the American system (as Ikenberry calls it). Furthermore, Tucker and Hendrickson point out that the lowest point of American legitimacy in the post-1945 era was during the 1960s, when it pursued a policy of isolationism and unilateralism during the Vietnam War (similar to the Iraq invasion in 2003).

The third pillar describes the reputation that the United States earned for a policy of moderation, which stems from its choice to be an ‘unwilling super power,’ rather than follow an isolationist policy or exert its full power. Linked to this is the fourth pillar, which is an identification with the preservation of peace, “within the community of advanced industrialized democracies.”¹⁴ This has led to the belief that American power is “necessary and rightful”, and therefore legitimate during the frigid period of the Cold War.

Moving on to John Ikenberry’s theory of American power and legitimacy, he takes a systemic approach that differs from that of Robert Kagan, stating that it was the

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.



institutionalization of American power that has kept balancing powers at bay, which Kagan's realist theory misses. Ikenberry sees American hegemony as being multifaceted and creating "a sort of primitive governance system" around the economic, monetary, technological and cultural aspects of the international order.¹⁵ The global US-centric system constituted of the Bretton Woods institutions was created with American interests in mind during the post-1945. In this way, it is possible to conceive of a non-coercive American empire of democratic capitalism, which is based on reciprocity and makes it a benign and legitimate cost, according to John Gaddis.¹⁶ The American system, which was created with the interest of advanced industrialized democracies at Bretton-Woods has spread over time, encompassing more nations than simply those advanced and industrialized. Indeed one could say that it has become the dominant system, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Based on the characteristics of American unipolarity, Ikenberry finds that it has four dimensions of durability. The first is American power, which he sees as the glue of the system, maintaining it but not occupying an overt presence. The second dimension is the geographical location of the United States and its military, which is offshore and isolated. The third aspect is that of the institutions, which make it seem less threatening by restraining its power. This institutionalization means that it is hard for states to determine who truly holds the most power and influence over the system.¹⁷ In this way, the "overtly coercive power of domination is muted," which contributes to the non-threatening nature of the American hegemony. This is described by Ikenberry as a "web

¹⁵ Ikenberry, "American Power," 191-192.

¹⁶ John Gaddis in *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.



of institutional relations--security, political, and economic--that the United States spun after World War II.” In addition, he claims that the United States “rose to power as an anti-colonial, post-imperial” presence, which would contribute to its perceived legitimacy in non-Western states.¹⁸ This is where Kagan’s realist notion of the automatic legitimacy of the bipolar system shows its weakness. Not only did non-Western and non-industrialized states accept American legitimacy, but continued to do so after the end of the Cold War, which resulted in American unipolarity.

Finally, it is the domestic framework of the United States that contributes to its legitimacy, through the democratic and open principles that it follows, making it a ‘penetrated hegemony.’¹⁹ The penetrated, or open, aspect of American hegemony blurs the distinction between domestic and international politics. This is focused around the institutions that the United States has largely created, based on the rule of law and predictability, contributing to stability in the ‘anarchic’ global system. According to Ikenberry, this allows for mutually beneficial relations or a type of trust, which in turns leads to legitimacy.

Decline in American Legitimacy

The decline of American legitimacy as a super power is one that is hard to distinguish as it is based on perception, which is difficult to identify empirically. In addition, it may seem as if it is the economic or political power that is weakening. In fact, it has been American legitimacy that has been declining. This contributes to the perception all American power is incrementally diminishing. While there have been numerous

¹⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹ Ibid., 206.



episodes of American activity which have been perceived as illegitimate, one of the most damaging exertions of American power seems to have been the policies and actions of the Bush administration (2001-2009) in regards to the Iraq invasion in 2003, which had violated the principles of legitimacy laid out in this essay.

First, the four pillars of legitimacy described by Tucker and Hendrickson will be examined and an analysis will follow, describing how the pillars have not been adhered to by the most recent Bush administration.²⁰ The question of American legitimacy was already partially threatened at the end of the Cold War, with the United States no longer seen as necessary and automatically legitimate. This was exacerbated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which contravened the four pillars.

There was the perception that the United States was distorting international law to fit its interests, something that it had not done so overtly in the previous years since the post-1945 era (and its super power status) began. Shaw states that in the current international system, “‘authoritative deployment of violence’ is reinforced by its attachment to global symbols of legitimacy, such as the United Nations.”²¹ The United States did not gain the consent of the Security Council, the body that legitimizes the use of force, and so the United States bypassed legitimate practices in two ways. First, it broke with its own principles of legitimacy, as laid out by Tucker and Hendrickson and, second, the United States violated internationally accepted norms of legitimacy *and* military force.

The pillar of committed multilateralism was almost entirely abandoned by the most recent Bush administration when it could not garner support for the invasion.

²⁰ Tucker and Hendrickson, “Sources of American Legitimacy,” 23-28.

²¹ Shaw in Clark, “Another ‘Double Movement’,” 253.



George W. Bush's rhetoric of "either you're with us or you are with the terrorists" served to distance American allies that did not support the invasion, such as France. Previously, Ikenberry notes an allowance for other states to air their interests and the United States would take them into account.²² With the Iraq invasion, there were already questions circulating around the degree of its 'rightness' and yet the younger Bush administration pushed forward *and* alienated American allies.

Next, the identification with moderation was not adhered to as the United States entered into two wars between 2001 and 2003, not following a policy of isolationism or of restraint.²³ Furthermore, this propensity for conflict undermined the fourth pillar of legitimacy, which was the apparent preservation of peace. Tucker and Hedrickson hold that the United States was afforded an understanding in the conflict with Afghanistan because of the events of September 11th, but when coupled with the invasion of Iraq, it was a worrying predicament.²⁴ This is especially true as the United States' claim to be 'intervening' in Iraq on the basis of human rights violations was largely seen as disingenuous.

Second, Ikenberry's theory of American power is looked at in the context of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Where there used to be a covert presence of power, the United States had used it overtly and coercively, no longer restraining it with institutions. The military, which had been isolated geographically and on bases located offshore, now took a central and highly visible role in two conflicts within a short period of time. These two conflicts, together, took away the third dimension of restraining its power. The

²² Ikenberry, "American Power," 206.

²³ Tucker and Hendrickson, "Sources of American Legitimacy," 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.



United States, as stated previously, did not bind itself to the resolutions of the Security Council, which made its moves seem threatening, with an imperialist tint. Though the UN and its bodies are often criticized, it is still perceived to have the power to legitimize the use of force, an avenue which the United States did not follow. This is especially damaging in the current system, which has a normative aversion to inter-state wars and imperialism, accepting force only in self-defence or in the defence of human rights violations on a massive scale. The nation of Iraq does not have a clean record when it comes to human rights violations, however it was not on such a massive scale as to warrant military intervention, unlike the case with 1991 Gulf war, when it had invaded Kuwait in its defence.

The fourth dimension of American penetrated and institutionalized hegemonic system no longer appears to be stable, which has two effects. First, the United States' legitimacy rested on the fact that it was perceived to be able to keep a stable system. The second result, following Watson, is that the American decline in legitimacy points to a larger crisis of legitimacy in the international order.²⁵ Clark states that legitimacy is a form of imperialism, an integral part of the "global distribution of power."²⁶ The American system of institutions is intricately and indubitably linked to the United States itself, and as such, whenever a crisis of legitimacy in the larger system rises, we can automatically perceive a decline in American *state* legitimacy.

Finally, Clark outlines three legitimizing principles of the international society: 1) multilateralism and a commitment to the global free market economy, 2) the

²⁵ Watson in Clark, "Another 'Double Movement'," 248.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.



collectivization of security, and 3) the adherence to a set of liberal rights values.²⁷ The principles of legitimacy in international society echo the four pillars of American legitimacy laid out by Tucker and Hendrickson. In this way we see a link between American legitimacy, the American system, and its influence on the legitimizing principles of international society. The decline is explained at the state level, and not at a systemic level as Kagan claims, because it is the actions of the United States that has placed it in a circumstance of diminishing legitimacy. An example of this is the United States policy toward Russia, after the Cold War, which was a manifestation of the switch from covert to overt power that began in the early 1990s.

If we accept Watson's assertion that a break in practice with legitimacy creates tension, then we can say that the events of September 11th may have been a product of this tension or crisis of legitimacy that had begun in the post-Cold War era as a result of the increasingly overt power displays by the United States. The 2003 invasion of Iraq is therefore the most crucial blow to American legitimacy, and thus its power (in addition to the enormous economic cost of the war). Tucker and Hendrickson highlight the 'moral' aspect of neo-conservative foreign policy under the Bush administration, which added a secondary objective of spreading democracy, as a possible reason for beginning the conflict. Thus the Iraq invasion shows little strategic restraint and a coercive or overtly forced transition to democracy, taking away the label of a reluctant super power.

²⁷ Ibid., 239.



American power resides in institutions, which produce “high levels of willing compliance” and the “ability to engage in strategic restraint”.²⁸ In his overview of legitimacy in international society, Ian Clark questions whether legitimacy is separate from power, or if it is simply the will of the hegemon. We can use Patrick Cottrell’s definition to answer this, as he posits that power and legitimacy are complimentary, yet simultaneously distinct, since legitimacy holds a certain element of coercion, becoming a form of power in itself.

In the case of the United States, its power came from its hegemonic position, however since this position was seen as legitimate and necessary during the Cold War (as an opposition to the Soviet Union) American power was legitimate, with all its elements of implied coercion. Robert Kagan’s realist theory can only claim that American legitimacy fell with the “Berlin Wall and Lenin’s statues,” as a result of the unipolarity that followed in the post-Cold War era.²⁹

Finally, we can sum up legitimacy as being based in opinion and perception, as well as holding an element of trust. Because something is legitimate, it is trusted and assumed that it will act in such a way as to reward trust in its power. In return, there is a perceived element of stability if the system is seen as legitimate, based on opinion and in compliance with existing norms. It is understood that norms and laws may be violated on necessity and so public opinion allows for fluidity in defining what is legitimate. Within the context of the current global system there is an emphasis on the rule of law, multilateralism, and an aversion to outright inter-state conflict. Trust was placed in the United States, as the predominant super power and creator of many institutions, that it

²⁸ Ikenberry in Clark, “Another ‘Double Movement’,” 251.

²⁹ Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” 68.



would act in accordance to the accepted legitimate behaviour. However, with the Iraq invasion and the policies pursued by the Bush administration, the accepted behaviour and trust was violated by the United States, which has led to its decline in legitimacy as a welcome super power.

The importance of a decline in American legitimacy is tied specifically to its link with the American system. United States legitimacy was tied to the stability that it enhanced through its institutions to which it bounds itself. With the overt power that the United States began to employ in the post-Cold War era, a tension between accepted legitimacy and practice has occurred. This may have been a contributing factor to the September 11 attacks on the United States, and in response to a perceived illegitimacy throughout non-Western regions. The Bush administration's pursuit of unilateral foreign policy has exacerbated the crisis of legitimacy throughout the rest of the world and to the general legitimacy of the United States, as a welcome super power; with it is the question of the American system's legitimacy. The questioning of the systemic legitimacy shows that the tension between norms and practices has created an instability, which may continue and possibly foment further conflict throughout the globe, unless the importance of legitimacy is observed and understood. International Relations theory needs to take into account different ways of perceiving power, and incorporating its immaterial aspects. By broadening the scope of theories to include non-traditional approaches such as political theory, we can more easily analyse the shifts that take place in the international system and power structure with a more nuanced observation.