



Why I Didn't Sign Up to Defend the International Order

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Last week, a group of prominent international relations scholars published an ad in the *New York Times* under the headline “Why We Should Preserve International Institutions and Order.” You can find the text and a list of signatories [here](#). The scholars who drafted the ad are a who’s who of experts on international political economy, but the list of endorsers also includes many people who work on other aspects of international relations, including security, gender, and other topics.

The ad is directed at U.S. President Donald Trump’s disregard for—if not outright hostility toward—the various institutions that have been prominent in world politics for the past 60-plus years. It argues that the “international order formed after World War II provides important benefits to the United States,” and declares that “U.S. leadership helped to create this system” and has “long been critical for its success.” It acknowledges that the United States has borne a “significant share of the costs” of this order but has also “greatly benefited from its rewards.” The signatories are “alarmed” by Trump’s repeated attacks on these arrangements, which they describe as “reckless.” While conceding that the “global order is certainly in need of major changes,” they nonetheless warn of a descent into chaos if today’s institutions are discarded.

I was invited to sign the ad, and I gave serious thought to doing so. Its sponsors are scholars from whom I’ve learned much over the years, and some of the people who signed it are valued colleagues or personal friends. Having helped with two earlier public statements (one [opposing the invasion of Iraq](#) in 2002, and another [endorsing the nuclear deal with Iran](#)), I certainly think it is appropriate for scholars to make their views known to the public in this way. And I share the signatories’ dismay at Trump’s incompetent handling of foreign policy, which has done considerable damage to the U.S. position already and is likely to do more in the future.

But in the end, I decided I could not put my name on the ad, despite my respect for its authors, sympathy for their aims, and agreement with some of what they had said. Let me explain why.

For starters, the ad lumps together a set of disparate institutions that it says have characterized the post-World War II order, including the United Nations, NATO, the World Trade Organization, and the European Union. Moreover, it credits them with the past 60 years of prosperity and the absence of war among the major powers. There is no doubt some basis for this claim (and one could add institutions such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty to the mix), but it is not obvious to that each of these institutions was equally important in producing these benefits. For a realist like me, for example, bipolarity and the existence of nuclear weapons did more to prevent major power war than any of the institutions cited in this ad.

Second, the ad reinforces the nostalgia for the “liberal international order” that is now an article of faith among Trump’s many critics. As Andrew Bacevich, Patrick Porter, Paul Staniland, Graham Allison, and others have noted, the so-called liberal order wasn’t quite the nirvana that people now suggest. It was never a global order, and there was an awful lot of illiberal behavior even by countries and leaders who constantly proclaimed liberal values. The United States propped up plenty of authoritarian rulers throughout the Cold War (and has continued to do so ever since), and Washington didn’t hesitate to break the rules of the liberal order whenever it saw fit, as it did when it dismantled the Bretton Woods system in 1971 and when it invaded Iraq in 2003.

Third, the ad does not adequately acknowledge the degree to which some of the institutions it defends are in fact a source of much of the trouble we now face. NATO was an important and valuable institution during the Cold War, for example, and it clearly magnified U.S. influence. But a good case can be made that NATO has been a disruptive force since then, mostly by pursuing an open-ended and ill-conceived eastward expansion. Similarly, the creation of the WTO and the headlong pursuit of what my colleague Dani Rodrik calls “hyper-globalization” has clearly had deleterious economic effects for millions and played no small part in the populist avalanche that has been reshaping politics throughout the Western world and beyond.

To be sure, the final text of the ad acknowledges the need for “major changes” in the current global order (a sentence that was not part of the original draft I was sent), and two prominent signatories of the ad—Robert Keohane and Jeff Colgan—have written a candid and powerful critique of the ways that the liberal order went astray. But the ad gives no indication of what reforms the signatories would support.

On a more personal note, it would have been self-contradictory for me to put my name to the ad. Having written several articles calling for the United States to gradually reduce its security role in Europe, and having recently finished a forthcoming book that criticizes the bipartisan U.S. commitment to “liberal hegemony” and the fetishization of “U.S. leadership” on which it rests, it would have been odd to suddenly reverse course and join this particular enterprise, especially given its broad-brush view of the prior institutional order.

Lastly, I have my doubts about the efficacy of this particular public statement, though I do not question the sincerity of those who wrote and signed it. Lord knows that the ads I signed in the past had little or no effect—our prescient statements didn’t stop President George W. Bush from

invading Iraq or persuade Trump not to tear up the Iran deal—and I'd be astonished if *any* public statement by a group of scholars could persuade the president to alter course or his supporters to rethink their commitment to him. But that's not a reason to remain silent; sometimes it is important to go on the record so that others will know later that objections were raised. Nor am I concerned is that the ad gave Trump and his minions at Fox News another fat liberal target to attack.