THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

# THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY:
# A CONVERSATION WITH G. JOHN IKENBERRY

Washington, D.C.

Monday, January 4, 2021

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PROCEEDINGS

MR. JONES: Welcome everybody to Brookings for the first event of 2021. I'm delighted to welcome John Ikenberry to join us for this event. I can't think of a better way to start 2021 than with a learned conversation with an extraordinary scholar of democracy and international order. I want to do a quick tech check and make sure that John is actually with us and can hear and speak. Unfortunately, I don't think we have John.

MR. IKENBERRY: I'm here.

MR. JONES: There we go. (Laughing) It's always the AV. John, it's great to have you. I'm sorry we're not in person at the Falk Auditorium at Brookings, but it did spare you a trip on the Amtrak. And we do have about 300 people more listening in to this than we would have in the room, so there are pros and cons to our modern moment. But it's a delight to have you back at Brookings.

John Ikenberry is the Albert Milbank professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University and also the co-director of the Princeton Center for International Security Studies. He's a global eminence scholar at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea and a couple of years ago was a visiting fellow at All Souls College of Oxford, where I think a lot of this book was written. He has written several previous books — I think most cited are "Liberal Leviathan" and "After Victory" — and formerly served on the policy planning staff during the Clinton administration, one of the best known professors of international relations and probably the leading scholar on the liberal international order itself and the associated issues. So it's a delight to have you with us, John.

This is a magisterial book. This book, "A World Safe For Democracy," it's a rich history, debate, account of international relation, theory, and practice and politics over the last 200 years. It's also a cri de coeur in defense of the project. And I think as I said to you before, has a somewhat somber tone. So maybe take us and the audience to what led you to write this book at this time, sort of looking backwards over the past 200 years in order to look forward, and what accounts for that more somber tone.

MR. IKENBERRY: Thank you, Bruce. It's great to be here and talk about this book with you.

The book really began as a series of lectures at the University of Virginia that were held in November of 2016, literally the week after the presidential election. So I had a somewhat somber audience. And it did, of course, create the backdrop for this book, the thinking about the future of liberal internationalism, which was my assignment at the University of Virginia. And it really led me in the following months and years to look backwards as much as forwards, to look into the past to look for a usable past. Lessons from the longer period. Because as we dig deeper into the current crisis, we've seen that all the great questions that scholars wrestle with regarding world order are on the table. What are the sources of order, can liberal democracy come back, can the tensions inherent in liberal democracy between capitalism and democracy, liberty and equality, can these basic values be brought back into balance? And more than anything else, the question of liberal internationalism as a way of organizing the world, the way of thinking about the world. One of the great traditions that stands alongside realism. What is its standing? And as I ask at the very beginning of the book, what is the ground upon which liberal internationalism can plant its flat?

And so in doing that I took the long view. I wanted to go back and do so to make the point that liberal internationalism, liberal order, did not begin in 1989, or for that matter in 1945, that it's a longer tradition deeply rooted in the enlightenment and the age of democratic revolutions and that has this long history of struggle, a more agonistic, a more contested biography as a set of ideas and projects across two centuries. Golden eras and crises, deep contestation, close run things. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. at the end of the 20th century said, looking back in an essay, liberal democracy was really hanging by a thread in the '30s and '40s.

One of the inspirations for the book was Ira Katznelson's book "Desolation and Enlightenment," where he looks at an earlier era, the period of the 1930s and '40s, the generation of 1945 you might call it, when that generation lived through a horrific sequence starting with the Great Depression, the rise of totalitarianism, fascism, total war, the whole of cost, and then of course punctuated by the dropping of the atomic bomb. And during this period you had liberals — that generation's liberals — trying to pick up the pieces in 1945 thinking what can we do. Can we refashion, can we re-imagine, can we reinvent?

And so to answer your questions, the book has three purposes. One is to go back and capture and excavate, if you will, the ideas and projects of liberal internationalism to convey a sense of gravitas to this tradition. And, secondly, to try to be honest about accomplishments and failures, that there's a lot to discuss. It's not all a story of marching triumphantly into the future. And then, thirdly, to try to identify a set of ideas and principles, a kind of usable past, as I suggest, a set of ideas to pragmatic, suitable ideas for the moment that are liberal internationalist in spirit. A kind of liberalism for winter as opposed to for spring.

And so that's where this book is coming from. And I think that the somber tone that you mentioned, people have mentioned that. That I guess there's a kind of elegiac kind of aspect to it, a kind of a love letter to a dying friend. You know, there is a sense of looking back and trying to recall and remind today's generation of what we've done because it is a question of how we go forward. There's nothing inherent in modernity or the history of liberal internationalism or for liberal democracy that we will continue. There is a sense of an existential issue there. So that's clearly what is creating the mood I think that you identified.

MR. JONES: Well, let's hope that we're not yet at eulogy, but still in defense. And I actually think that one of the things that I found most compelling about the book is that it is written — it's not just that you analytically identified the fact that this is a contested project and has been part of a contested set of ideas and has itself contested for power and for authority, but you deliberately and consciously align yourself with that contestation. It is almost a manifesto. It's not quite that, but it has that feeling that you are consciously aligning yourself with an intellectual and political project that you believe has merit and value for all of its imperfections and you're calling others to join that struggle in a difficult time. Liberalism for winter, as you just put it very well.

One of the things that has surprised me ever since I've been in D.C. — you know, this a town chock full of foreign policy professionals — and the terms U.S. led order, alliance based order, rules based order, liberal international order, are sort of bandied around with a huge amount of imprecision in the mouths of American policy and policy professionals. But as a scholar of this topic and as a participant in this project how do you define and depict the liberal international order project itself?

MR. IKENBERRY: Yes. That's a great question. And it goes to the title of the book in fact, "A World Safe For Democracy." This book is about a set of ideas and projects, it's not a book about American foreign policy or, directly speaking, the nature of the order that we've lived through. Although it speaks to that, it's looking at a tradition of thinking, the collaborative or cooperative organization of international order to address what I call the problems of modernity.

What is liberal internationalism? Well, the most famous phrase that seems to capture the essence is Wilson's 1917 speech — phrase that came in a speech through congress, to make the world safe for democracy. That's why we're fighting the war. And that has been understood and passed down as a phrase, a kind of idealist crusade to transform the world and make everybody better and the world better and kind of expansionary, as I said, crusader kind of image of spreading democracy to distant shores. What I have suggested in this book is a different reading of that phrase, that it's taken literally — it can be taken literally as to make the world safe, to make democracy safe by creating an international order that helps democracy do that. So this notion of safety is an emphasis here. And in that sense liberal internationalism, as I argue, in the 100 years before Wilson and the 100 years after Wilson, is much more captured in this project to create a kind of ecosystem or environment or geopolitical space so that liberal democracies can survive and prosper. And so there is a kind of a very much of a focus on that kind of intersection between domestic and international. But the way in which liberal democracies have special capacities to cooperate, special reasons to, but also special vulnerabilities, long recognized in the grand political theory tradition of republicanism and liberal democracy. The kind of vulnerability to geopolitics — this is of course the Kantian thesis — but also this notion that I've mentioned already that liberal democracies have at the heart of them values, intention, liberty and equality, individualism and community and sovereignty and interdependence. So there's a kind of constant process of balancing trade-offs that is a complicated affair that is not something that other types of regimes have. And that creates its own demand for a congenial international system. And of course, more broadly, challenges that are not uniquely liberal democratic, what I try to argue in the book that what makes liberal internationalism different from realism is that is that realism is focused on what are famously called the problems of anarchy. How do we balance power and so forth in a world of anarchy.

Whereas liberal internationals across two centuries has been more focused while taking seriously the problems of anarchy, the problems of modernity, of rising interdependence, both taking advantage of those modernity transformations and guarding against the downfall. So liberal internationalism, a set of ideas about how to navigate liberal democracy in a modernizing world, a set of convictions, the openness is good for all countries, properly managed, that liberal multilateral institutions facilitate cooperation, that liberal democracies have special capacities to cooperate. And then, fourthly, in a world of rising economic and security interdependence — and I should say environmental interdependence — you can't solve your problems alone, you can only solve them together.

So this notion of cooperative of organization of order I think is at the heart of this longer 200 year drama of liberal internationalism. And these moves I make in the book to focus on safety and to focus on modernity, are part of my effort to identify what the liberal internationalist project is.

MR. JONES: And one of the themes that comes across for me very strongly in the book is — just to kind of draw this out — that this is not at core a book about democracy promotion, it is about the defense of democracy among the established democracies, primarily in the kind of wider set of more established democracies. And that's an important distinction, particularly in today's debate.

I want to push you on one part of the book. One of the things you do in the book is acknowledge that liberal internationalism was at various points in its — and the project thereof — was at various points in time aligned with or rode on the back of projects with which it did not align in values — imperialism, some of the elements of the Cold War, etc.. And you talk about the way free trade, for example, was pushed out into the east. In chapter two you talk about superior naval and military technology allowing the British Empire to force open India and China. During the Cold War you acknowledge that the West behaved in illiberal ways outside of the liberal core.

That's all analytically correct, but I think, to my read, you depict it as a sort of a — you sort of depict it almost en passant. Maybe that's a little bit unfair, but it's certainly not — I certainly don't have a sense of it being a major challenge to the depiction of order in those two periods. And the reason I emphasize it is because it seems to me that a number of the countries who have grown substantially in wage over the last three decades are countries that experienced the downsides of this project, either in

the imperial phase or during the cold now. And so if you're India or Indonesia or Brazil or Nigeria, you did not experience the benign version of liberal internationalism, you experienced a very rapacious and often brutal version of it, or of the American and the British project.

These countries, if you're a realist you can dismiss them because they're not military powers. Obviously China is in a different category. But if you're a liberal you can't dismiss them because they are institutional powers and they're diplomatic powers and they're economic powers. So how do you grapple with the phenomenon of a world in which an increasingly influential body of countries were at the wrong end of these efforts over many decades?

MR. IKENBERRY: Yes, that's a great question. And I do spend a fair amount of time on that. This is one of the kind of issues that really propelled this book forward. And, indeed, doing so in an ongoing conversation I've had here at Princeton with colleagues, a working group over many on empire. And some of the most articulate critics of some of my earlier work — and I would say more broadly of liberal order and liberal internationalism coming from the left, both inside the Western intellectual world and outsiders beyond that — have been of this sort, trying to push me and the liberal internationalists to in some sense reckon with the complexity of and entanglements of liberal internationalism in empire broadly speaking.

What I do in this book, which is different from anything I've done before, is to try to analytically separate liberal internationalism as a set of ideas and projects from other forces that are part of the grand rise of the West and the imperial story of the 19th and 20th centuries. The way I put it is that one can think of it as liberal internationalism as a kind of fellow traveler to other great forces that are unfolding in the 19th and 20th century. In the 19th century liberal internationalism entangled itself and was brought into the 20th century, I argue, on the backs of nationalism, empire, imperialism, great power politics, certainly capitalism, and a succession of Anglo-American hegemonies. And in each of these ways liberal internationalism either tied itself to or pushed off against these other grand forces.

So in some sense I'm both acknowledging its entanglement but also trying to separate it from these other forces that have their own life. One of the paradoxes that I try to illuminate in the book is the paradox that liberal internationalism as an ideology or a collection of ideas and visions about how to

organize the world, is incredibly capacious intellectually. Vast horizons, universalisms. Al these features that have roots in the enlightenment, that give it a kind of global reach, yet paradoxically, very thin politically. There's no one I found — there weren't movements across 200 years to march in the street for liberal internationalism. It's a flag without an army, liberal internationalism is. And it's always had to tie itself to other forces. And, indeed, the forces I just mentioned. It's more like it needs a host to light upon, to attach itself to. And it has attached itself to empire liberal democracies who were simultaneously imperial and initially and completely a liberal democratic in the 19th century. And so they've always been in some sense sharing space with these other forces.

So that's my first point. My other point, more directly responsive to your question, is there's no question that liberal internationalism has a kind of double edge to it. To free trade, the kind of hegemonic projects attached that the liberal internationalism attached itself to, the Cold War, great power politics, was deeply invasive, intrusive, and oppressive in so many parts of the world. And it's kind of the tragic character of the story that we have in front of us, that it has great upside forces attached to it, it's brought great advancement to peoples, but it's also been deeply entangled with empire.

It is interesting, however, that it's not in this kind of multilateral institutional forum empire itself. And this is where I've been very sort of passionate in pushing back against left critics who argue that liberal international order, even its manifestation in the America era, is simply the most recent version of empire. It's not that. I think it's been crudely imperialistic in Latin America, the U.S. (inaudible) in the Middle East, there's no question. But there's this other feature to it that has a more open, reciprocal, bargained aspect to it that traces back to enlightened self-interest, the U.S. finding itself in a world that it wants to get into, a world of empire, that it emerges as a great power in the 1930s and '40s and wants to have global access to Eurasia. And that is a national interest that leads towards trying to open the system, trying to break down empire. And so its own national interest was tied to a post-imperial project. And that's profound. And that's something that countries that have been on the downside of American power have also found ways to take advantage of it. Not least China, that has had its best 30 years in two millennia during the period that has been described by historians as Pax American. That's kind of interesting.

MR. JONES: Absolutely. By the way, there are two things in what you just refer to, one, the notion of a flag without an army and, two, the important project of multilateralism within this, that remind me that if it's a flag without an army it did have some warriors and one of them died yesterday, Sir Brian Urquhart, who was a — played a critical role in British intelligence in defeating fascism during the World War and was the architect of the U.N.'s operation in the Suez Canal and essentially invented modern peacekeeping, which if there were any armies of liberal internationalism, they are presumably those. So that's a substantial loss.

I'm going to now start feathering in questions that I'm getting from the audience, but I do want to continue this theme of the kind of contestation around the ideas and bring you to a debate you were centrally involved in in the George Bush Jr. era, when at the kind of height of American power, but under attack after 9/11, etc., there was a sense that the defense of democracy required a much more expansive use of American power and the kind of the launch of this new era of interventionism, new — we've intervened in places before, but an expansion of the interventionist impulse, particularly in the Middle East and the global war on terror.

You were part of the debates around that and in particular around the question of what role the democracies should play in the structuring of order in a period in which there were no rival great powers at that moment. Just bring us back to that debate and your — as you think back on it what you learned from those set of exchanges.

MR. IKENBERRY: Yes, that's a great question. And that's where we started the debate some decades ago now. During that period I was a critic of the Iraq war and never saw that as a liberal internationalist project and saw it as really something that was driven by the more kind of realist logic of maintaining regional hegemony and putting down regional powers that potentially are threatening to — both physically threatening, but threatening to order itself. I wrote a piece in Foreign Affairs called "America's Neoimperial Ambition" and it was kind of my critique of this kind of unilateralist use of American power, often with the idea that it's serving liberal ends. So that certainly became part of the George Bush Jr. vision, the second inaugural and all of that.

I guess the first thing I'd say is that in the liberal internationalist world there's a continuing

debate about who's in and who's out and what it is. It's never — it's not settled, it's not settled because it's moved across two centuries. It's not settled because there's a continuing debate about well what are neoconservatives — are they in or out. What about neoliberals? So there's always been a kind of — and that's healthy. So there's a debate as to — there's a debate within the political theoretical tradition of liberalism itself. What is liberalism. And there's no settled core. It's contested all the way down. And that's something that we lived through with this period of is this simply the Iraq war story, "Wilsonianism in boots" as it was once called.

What I've tried to do is find ways to distinguish between the project of liberal internationalism, which has this kind of sort of vision of multilateral cooperative organization among democracies from various intersecting projects that take it in directions associated with military interventionism and hegemonic use of force on the periphery. These sorts of activities always are entangled, but important when we criticize them not to keep an eye on the core because there would be a true tragedy if the Iraq war were a kind of definitive test of whether a liberal international order is worthy or not.

And the message I'm giving in this book is that it's a — the projects that have flowed out of liberal internationalism as a traditional way of thinking have had great accomplishments and successes, great failures, but the important point is that there is inside of the liberal international ecosystem a space for struggles, political struggles to correct the kinds of excesses and failures that we're talking about here. That there's a kind of a platform for rethinking, renewal, and lesson drawing. The process of correction is very important. I think this is true of liberal democracy itself. And those of us who don't want this era to be the end, but want it to be an era of renewal and rethinking need to protect the core as we acknowledge the failures and entanglements that have been the sort of dark side of this story.

MR. JONES: It's probably a conversation for another time, but I wonder looking back at that episode, global financial crisis, the current moment, whether we don't have a deep weakness in our democracy around elite accountability. That there can be debate and self-correction as you describe. There isn't a great deal of accountability and I wonder if we aren't getting into pretty deep trouble as a

nation as a result. But as I say, that's maybe a debate for another time.

I'm going to ask you about the penultimate chapter of your book, but before I do that — and there are several questions in the audience that related to India — and it's an interesting question for me to ask you, is India in this project, peripheral to this project, or are we trying to pull it in, is it going to come? How do you think about India? It's the world's largest democracy. It's now the seventh largest or sixth largest economy in the world. It seems to me that if there is a project of liberal internationalism that encompasses democracy and India isn't part of it, it's inherently weaker, and yet India is complicated in this picture.

So how do you think about India?

MR. IKENBERRY: Yeah, I think India's very important. And I put India inside of the — we'll call it the broad liberal democratic world. All liberal democracies have been works in progress. And remember we should be humble in our acknowledgment of those countries that have been at the — you know, in the hall of fame of liberal democracy. They certainly didn't start out that way. And certain — one of them today, namely ours, is certainly not worthy of the hall of fame perhaps over the recent past. The original sin of American democracy, slavery, the — but there's been this other story that is part of the — what is uniquely liberal as a kind of world historical imagination of kind of unfolding, of moving across generations to solve problems and to make our system better.

You think about Obama's eulogy to John Lewis, which gets at it perfectly. It's the — if I had known about it — if I'd read that before my book was finished, I would have made it one of my epigrams. We were given an imperfect union with instructions to make it better and that each generation takes what we have received and passes it on with further improvement. So we have the suffrage movement, we have the 13th and 14th and 15th Amendments, we have this kind of the New Deal period. So the kind of expansion of the kind of promise. So this is true domestically and I would say internationally it's true as well. All of our countries are struggling. I think India is complicated, but so are we. And there is a kind of glimmer there that is part of this larger system of states that are working within a kind of understanding of limited government and rule of law and free press and multi-party competition.

So it's in the — I would say broadly speaking, the liberal modernity project that makes it

part of our world and part of the community that has to work together to preserve these basic features.

MR. JONES: One of the things I found interesting over the last several years is although the Indian bureaucracy and Indian political class still broadly speak out against an alliance with the United States, they resist being pulled into kind of formal structures, like a concert that would be aligned against China, these kinds of things, there is an increasing reference to what I think is a very careful phrase, value based multilateralism, by which they mean in effect, working with other democracies, but within the multilateral system and not against the multilateral system, which is quite an important distinction, which is sometimes lost in the United States.

I want to pivot from where you just were to ask you to lay out the argument you make in the penultimate chapter of the book. Before I do, let me just say that if there are other questions people can still email questions at events@Brookings.edu. I've still got several on my list, but there is still space for more.

In the penultimate chapter of the book you lay out a four part argument that responds to some of the contemporary critiques of liberal internationalism and beings to kind of set what you see as a pathway forward. So could you just summarize that chapter for us?

MR. IKENBERRY: Well, I do spend a fair amount of time at the end of the book to try to figure out the nature of the crisis. And what I do is make an argument about sort of what went wrong. And this relates to this question of the D-10, about value based like-minded kinds of coalitions. The argument I make in that chapter is that the period when liberal international order seemed to embody the ideas that I'd been mapping in this book the most clearly is this Cold War era inside of the bipolar system, the so called free world period. And it was built around bargains and institutions and a kind of connection between domestic middle class liberal democratic societies and the larger international order, the kind of embedded liberal compromises that allowed for these countries to both be open and trade based and flowing in their trade and investment and simultaneously social welfare states that were ensuring employment and economic security. And that was inside of a larger world. It was not a global system.

When the Cold War ended, that inside order became the outside order. And it was a kind of a beginning of what was seen as the universalization of globalization of liberalism. And it was seen as

something that was to be celebrated. Leonard Bernstein and the Berlin Philharmonic playing on the ruins of the Berlin War with a sense of all the bridge and — the bridges are being built and walls are being torn down. But in the process of globalizing that system, the bargains and institutions and governance structures that had been the genius of really the liberal order, began to erode and become dysfunctional. And the argument I make is that in some sense the club feature of the order broke down and the liberal order became less of a club and more like a shopping mall where states can come and get what they want, they can go to one store. But they didn't have to buy into a suite of rights and responsibilities. And, of course, China played this role quite well with the WTO.

But the key, I might say, international relations theory point about the club is that the club was doing a lot of work. One of the important arguments I make in the book is that the transition in the theory of order from Wilson to Roosevelt, from those two generations, Wilson — it was story of international order being reinforced by global public opinion that will insist that governments do right things. By the time of Roosevelt that was clearly not feasible. And the enforcement mechanism for how do we get states to agree to cooperate and not defect and make costly decisions, it was about living inside of a club where you would get benefits from doing the right thing, a kind of logic of being — to be inside was to — and to gain the benefits of a kind of mutual aid society was to comply with the norms and rules of that order. All of that kind of was eroded during the period when we were celebrating the broader triumph of the system.

And so what I argue about how do we move forward, what do we do now, I do try to make a series of observations based on these kind of lessons of the past. And one of them is that there needs to be a kind of reframing of the global — of the liberal international narrative. That it's not about marching into a more globalized world, it's about managing interdependence. So making it clear that this is not a celebration of Davos world, this is a pragmatic set of ideas for managing economic security and environmental interdependence. So that's number one.

Number two, the reconnecting, the life opportunities of people inside of these societies, these liberal democracies and the outside world. That was lost in the period of globalizing liberalism, the sense that the well-being of middle classes are tied to a multilateral cooperation and internationalism

more generally. That got lost in this kind of neoliberal phase. And reconnecting, even if it means more managed trade or liberal protectionism or — and so that's number two.

And I'll just leave it at number three. Why shouldn't the vision of international order be simply global? After all, the problems of modernity are global. And that's a good point, but what I try to argue is that liberal democracies want a — to live in a world with social purposes that are not sustained by the larger aggregate of states. That to have a high performance, high social purpose system that liberal democracies want to live in that includes their own standards for environment, labor standards, labor unions, human rights standards, they have to support and champion those values within a subset of the larger system. And that was the insight — I'll just end with this — that was the insight of FDR's generation when they were looking at a much more ominous future where illiberal great powers would dominate great parts of the world. And that generation of liberal — sort of liberal democrats — FDR being the one I see as a kind of leader of that generation — saw that the liberal democracies had to reconfigure themselves to create a critical mass, because if they were simply sort of left adrift in this larger Westphalian system of illiberal great powers, those social purposes at the heart of liberal democracies would be compromised and jeopardized.

So we have to walk and chew gum. We have to walk in the sense of champion a multilateral global system where its willingness to make good on your commitments is the currency of the realm, but simultaneously chew gum, which is to say look for ways for liberal democracies to, as a subset, to protect social purposes that the wider world does not yet embrace.

MR. JONES: So building off that, let me ask you this. Obviously if we're talking about sort of the authoritarian competitors right now, we're really talking about China and Russia. There is a growing view in Washington that the challenge posed by China over the long-term should form essentially the rallying cry around which we try to reboot American unity, American competitiveness, American purpose. How do you react to that kind of argument? Where do you stand on that kind of ground?

MR. IKENBERRY: It's a great question, and I think we're all thinking about this in real time because China itself is evolving and Europe and all of our competitors and partners are evolving in different ways.

I've moved towards a more critical view of China as China itself has moved. China in 2018 made a decision to allow its leader to have — to be a leader — a dictator for life. If that had happened in the United States — and let's be honest, there's somebody who would like to have that authority as well. So China has moved in a direction that if the United States were to be configured, thusly, it would be quite alarming to much of the world. And so China — but beyond that, China has clearly embarked, more than we appreciated 10 years ago or even five years ago, on what Jurgen Habermas called a modernity project, capitalism without liberalism, capitalism with democracy. And what I think is true of the critics, that you've acknowledged are now much more oriented towards competition with China, what I agree with them is that it is a challenge and it's a challenge at the deepest level of how we envisage polities to exist at the end of the century. And there are I think increasingly two different modernity projects on offer.

Where I somewhat part company, certainly from the Trump version of the China strategy, is that it should be oriented towards simply pushing back on China, whereas I would emphasize building the — rebuilding the infrastructure of open free societies. Less about China, more about our own system. And that's why I think one can be an advocate of strengthening the fabric of the liberal democratic world without necessarily igniting a cold war.

So I think the focus is, yes, China is a competitor, but less in the traditional problems of anarchy kind of problematic than the problems of modernity that require liberal democracies to perfect — or if not perfect, improve and reform their own modernity project.

MR. JONES: I actually think it's one of the great contributions of the book, intellectual contributions of the book, is the way you depict the relationship between realism and anarchy on the one hand and liberalism and the problems of modernity on the other and the interplay between those two. They're both facts of the real word, but the management of the problems differ in the intellectual traditions. I think it's a huge contribution the way you depict it.

We are two days away from the moment when 12 senators will cast their votes in defense of an effort by the sitting president to overturn what overwhelmingly Republican judges, electors, secretaries of state, overwhelmingly have described as a free, fair, legitimate, and valid election result,

which this president has sought to overturn. It's a dramatic set of developments in this democracy.

To your view, how badly have we been weakened as a democracy and how badly does that weaken the overall project?

MR. IKENBERRY: Yes, I think it's been hugely damaging for both the American brand, which is not simply a liberal brand, but America and the world, but also for liberal democracy as a brand. And I think it's — a liberal democracy is truly in crisis in a sense. It's in crisis in a way that we haven't seen since the 1930s and Trump is in some sense a manifestation of that. He's illuminating and perhaps exacerbating it. It's a deeper problem.

I would also say that Trump reminds us that America itself has always been not simply liberal. There's always been a kind of illiberal alt America that goes all the way back to the founding. President John Adams called it the slavocracy, the kind of non-liberal, non-modernizing part of the Americas that has always kind of been the kind of shadow America that has had its different leaders from Lindbergh and MacArthur and onward into our era. So Trump is not a one off figure, there's always been a kind of other America.

It is interesting that America, as it became more powerful and engaged and struggled with illiberal great powers, that great power struggle made America more liberal. If you think about the era of Wilson and Roosevelt, in each of those two periods — and during the Cold War would be the third period — the U.S. as kind of the first new nation, ever great power America has ever confronted has always been less liberal than America. China, of course, is obviously so, but in the earlier instances as well. And in that struggle, that struggle always led American leaders to — partly to find the struggle as we are in this struggle to make our principles more real.

And so in each of these periods we've had these moments where the liberal side of America has, in a global context, been pushing back on this other vision, more blood and soil, more particularistic identities, white nationalism, a kind of ethnocentric kind of identity. All those sorts of things are still in the American system, but they always have been. And it's a never-ending struggle to find our better half. And I think in the end, you know, we — if — this is a stress and I'm ever the optimist that we will eventually look back on this and see that we survived, that our institutions were stronger than those

who thought to undermine them.

MR. JONES: I'm knocking on metaphorical wood as you speak. Tom Wright and are spending some time these days writing and doing events around what he called — I think well calls — shock proofing the international order to see where the core stresses are going to be and what can be done to reinforce them. And I think a them that you write about in the book and that I've been thinking about a lot recently is the role that other democracies can play in buttressing key pieces of the order. You know, we live in a world now in which there are many other democracies who are very wealthy and very capable. It's not just the United States. And then that kind of, you know, loosely recovering sort of second tier powers. I mean Germany and Japan and, you know, France, Britain — these are powerful wealthy countries that have their own difficulties.

But I think an important question becomes what role the set of countries plays in what form of collaboration with one another. We've seen Japan defending free trade in Asia when the United States was walking away from that whole scene, and Germany play a key role in the management of Russia. So I think an important question becomes what role the other democracies play.

So that takes me to January 21, when President-elect Biden takes office. One of the things he has said he will do, he said this in the election, he wrote about it in his foreign affairs articles, is he would convene a summit of democracy. It has a kind of character similar in the phraseology to your concert of democracies, your legal democracies, although I think he doesn't depict it quite that way, he depicts it more as something like the national — the Nuclear Security Summit, that kind of rolling series of commitments and etc. He has been explicit — or his team have been explicit about the notion that it would combine pledges by the democracies about reform and improvements of their own democracy with commitments to defense of democracy and internationalism. He's gotten some criticism from it from some of the allies who don't want to be put on the spot in those ways, there are sort of downsides, who's in, who's out — all that kind of stuff.

Nonetheless, you know, let's imagine it's January 22 and Ron Klain calls you and says, look, you know, John, you're going to have to come and be head of policy planning or you're going to have to take leave from Princeton and figure out this democracy summit for us. What is your advice?

MR. IKENBERRY: Well, I'm generally supportive of the idea, even though it's a very fraught and complex and tricky initiative. And I think — I was just on Zoom last night with friends in South Korea who don't want to be put in position where they have to choose between one camp or the other. I mean they want to remain actively inside of the alliance system and the trade system with the United States, but they are a little skittish about finding themselves on the front lines of an ideological divide. And I understand that. I made the case for why greater cooperation is important. And precisely this point you made, that I wanted to just call attention to what you said. That liberal democracies come in different shapes and sizes and they have different kinds of systems and different ideas about how to operate. And one of the arguments in favor of a kind of lively community of democracies is that we learn from each other. Australia and its approach to voting, let's say, healthcare in Germany. So there's a kind of laboratory of democracy, much like was talked about in the American federal system, that our states, individual states, are kind of laboratories for the larger country, so it too at the global level.

I think the informal gathering of democracies is a good idea for the reasons we've talked about before. And I think that the kind of problem oriented approach of the Nuclear Safety or Security Summit of the Obama period, I think that's a great template. I've always been a fan of that. I thought that was a way to go. But I would say it should not just simply focus on how can we make our domestic systems more viable and resilient, but also to drive the reform agenda for multilateral cooperation. I think one of the first issues that our partners have — we need to talk about with our partners is the trade system.

MR. JONES: Yeah.

MR. IKENBERRY: Particularly in the face of China's effort to kind of create facts on the grounds that will make a kind of common approach to trade principles more difficult.

So I do think a core leadership group, call it the D-10, that informally drives an agenda for how we approach reforming WHO, WTO, and many other institutions — we've got a lot of work to do — and a working group of like-minded states can really make progress there in a way that could not happen with just pronouncements from the Oval Office.

So I think it's a good idea, but has to be — it's a delicate — there are delicacies there

that have to be really considered.

MR. JONES: So I have a piece coming out on what I all democratic multilateralism, which is similar to what you just described making the case that the way to organize this is actually within the key institutions. You don't need a separate institution to organize the democracies around international health, you can do that within the WHO.

And I said during (inaudible) I was really struck by how — and it's been in my experience as well — how limited cooperation among the democracies is within international institutions. You would think it happens all the time and it doesn't. I mean there's close coordination in the U.N. with the Canadians and the Israelis, etc., but there's not actually very well organized collaboration among the democracies within the key institutions. On WTO one of the challenges it seems to me is that in the last couple of rounds it's often been China that's been the obstacle to advancement. It was Brazil and then India who were the major obstacles. And it goes to your point that there are different systems and different interests that we'll have to reconcile.

We're pretty much out of time. We'll need to let you go. I want to end with this. I want to show people the book and remind them that if they failed to buy a Christmas present for their in-laws or their loved ones, this is available in great book stores everywhere, as well as Barnes & Noble. They should buy it. It's really an extraordinary book, John. It's a pleasure to read and it is a — I found myself reliving and relearning things I had forgotten about history, about international relations theory, and it's inspiring. As I said, it's a cri de coeur, but it's also a call to arms, or at least a call to diplomacy in defense of the project to which you have made such a huge contribution throughout your career.

So thank you for writing it and thank you for talking about with us today, John.

MR. IKENBERRY: Thank you, Bruce. Great to see you.

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Expires: November 30, 2024