

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Grand Strategies of the Left: The Foreign Policy of Progressive Worldmaking. By Van Jackson. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2024. 218p. \$26.83 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1537592724002196

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Jackson performs a real service to students of US foreign policy and IR by providing a straightforward mapping of the left-progressive foreign policy landscape, as well as the debates and inconsistencies between three identifiable “progressive” tendencies. Fundamentally, progressives believe that liberal internationalism has failed in building a peaceful or secure world, let alone in eliminating international hierarchies. Indeed, on the contrary, the liberal international order led by the US has more or less achieved the very opposite. The problem is the US has strong imperialistic drivers that promote a militaristic state, an obsession with hegemony and primacy, underpinned by neoliberal globalization.

American foreign policy faces challenges of various forms at home and abroad. At home, the almost universal bipartisanship that persisted since the 1940s is under pressure. On the Republican Right in particular, there are objections to idealist democracy promotion, nation-building and unchecked military interventions. While this trend may be exaggerated—there is near-unanimity across the main parties on the gargantuan military budget—popular opposition to “forever wars,” for example, is making serious inroads on any complacency that Americans stand united behind American interventionism let alone hegemony. A post-Cold war generation of millennials seems to have had enough of mass shootings at home, violent and racist policing, and “endless wars.”

Moreover, on the Left, inside and on the fringes and beyond of the Democratic party, there have been explosive developments, particularly since the outbreak of the Israeli war on the people of Gaza, ruled as “plausible genocide” by the International Court of Justice. The Biden administration has, with minor disagreements, supported the Israeli war—with billions of dollars of military aid, weapons, and diplomatic efforts. The Republican party and its nominee for president in 2024, Donald Trump, back the Biden strategy’s unconditional support of Israel. In the Democratic primaries of 2024, which President Biden swept, dissenters voted in large numbers for “uncommitted” to register their protests against the policy of US arms to Israel and in support of a ceasefire. Given that many of those voters reside in “swing states,” their votes have the potential to severely damage the chances of a Democratic victory.

This is the context of this fascinating and necessary study by Van Jackson. Jackson is open about his career and

intellectual trajectory: a national security intellectual embedded in conventional establishment campaigns and mindsets who became increasingly disillusioned with the forever wars promise of US power. This is important to bear in mind regarding this fine study: both because Jackson now rejects the mainstream establishment positions that he previously espoused but also because he remains committed to a strategy for change that is “realistic,” that ultimately retains faith that the mainstream parties and their favored institutions have the potential to remake US foreign and national security strategies.

Jackson’s goal for US foreign policy is admirable: he wants US grand strategy to be “retooled not for primacy, endless power accumulation, or a political status quo that privileges elites, but rather to shape the context that gives rise to perpetual insecurity” (book cover description). That is only, or most likely, achievable through a “progressive” grand strategy, in his view.

It is important to be clear about what constitutes “progressivism” in this study: “reformist, critical of capital and power, and aligned with the interests of what Henry Wallace dubbed “the common man.” But *progressive* is best understood as a nonrevolutionary subset of *left*” (pp. 39–40). Herein lies a crucial problem when considering the chances of enacting progressive reforms to the foreign and military policies of an imperial power which, has at its very heart, a powerful establishment including what President Eisenhower called a “military-industrial complex.” This is largely avoided here but is a central question because the forces behind America’s imperial power—in the engine rooms of empire—would have to be either converted or defeated to enact anything like the programme implied by the current book. This would be a fascinating, if chastening, matter to explore in a future study.

According to Jackson, three distinct schools (pragmatists, anti-hegemonists, and peacemakers) of progressive foreign policy thought make up the core of progressivism. Together those schools might form the foundations of radical reform of US power and its remaking of the world. “Progressive pragmatists” demand US promotion of economic equality; “anti-hegemonic” progressives prefer “restraint”; while “peacemakers” value and promote cosmopolitanism, democracy and international cooperation. This is a long way from the concerns of traditional policy intellectuals and of academic IR—largely focused on balance of power, deterrence—though there are overlaps regarding “restraint.” But the larger point stands—progressives want, somewhat idealistically, to remake the world to align with their values: equality, democracy, international solidarity; peace.

Van Jackson’s book is an important one because it lays out in a clear and compelling way what progressive reformers might do with US foreign policy should they get anywhere near the levers of power. The book reminds

me of another published many decades ago—Geoffrey Foote’s *The Labour Party’s Political Thought: A History* (1985). In that book, Foote considered the British Labour Party’s internationalism and its relations to foreign policy thinking while the party was in and out of power. The book identified key flaws with the Labour Party and the reformist trade union movement from which it sprang and whose version of “internationalism” it sought to advance, in the British colonial era. Of course, Foote showed the labor movement’s anti-militarist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist tendencies but less attention was paid to a key aspect however which proved highly significant, and relates to sentiments of the book under review—that labor leaders were part of an “aristocracy of labor,” nurtured from the super-profits of empire. Consequently, when it came down to the wire, such as at the outbreak of World War 1, those “progressives” voted for war. The question is whether the American working class and its organized labor unions, which do not make much of an appearance in Jackson’s book, nurtured in the heart of American empire, have any revolutionary vigor with which to take on and change the Democratic party. The latter, in the age of a volatile Trumpist Republican party, is the party of liberal order, and war.

We see the military-industrial complexified minefield in which progressive foreign policy wonks operate in the Biden administration’s embrace of a “foreign policy for the working and middle class” which, importantly, overlaps with aspects of Trump’s America First-ism. Bidenomics has managed to marry a “progressive” policy of supporting organized labor at home with an industrial policy to strengthen the US economy in its bid to maintain global primacy, against China in particular but against any challengers in general. The two party system seems to manage to embrace, shape-shift, assimilate and domesticate progressive alternatives. It is one of the secrets of its longevity.

It is important however that Van Jackson, and the progressives, are at least trying to consider how to move the US from its endless wars mission. And the moment is ripe for the consideration of such ideas, however problematic they may be or difficult to put into practice. Given the apparent rifts opening up in American foreign policy, progressives surely must be one voice that needs to be heard. The authentic implementation of their ideas would indeed be a vast improvement from the status quo, particularly in strengthening multilateral institutions, reducing the US’ militaristic mindsets and “forever” wars, and bringing US global behavior into closer alignment with its stated democratic, peaceful, and human rights’ values.