

Disorder

Peace Through Strength

In her book Disorder, Helen Thompson argues that modern world disorder results from a struggle around energy. She describes a world where wars are consistently fought over oil and alliances are created to ensure oil availability; where the most contested region in the world, the Middle East, has lots of it. She argues “[the] American failure in Iraq was one of the reasons that crude oil production stagnated in 2005” (p. 274). As Thompson describes in Disorder, Russia is one of the leading exporters of oil and natural gas – in 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine to prevent the expansion of NATO closer to Moscow, not because they need oil. Similarly, Hamas did not attack Israel on October 8th, 2023, for oil – they had a much more cynical goal in mind – and more broadly, international terrorism, e.g. 9/11, Baghdad, and Hamas on October 8th, is not motivated by oil. It is true that there are implications for oil, such as the fact that the U.S. was in the Middle East prior to 9/11, in part on a quest for oil, but Thompson fails to consider any of these counterpoints. Moreover, her logic appears to explain that the U.S. *should* play a large role on the global stage to ensure peace, though she does not overtly argue that the current world disorder is due to a lack of action by such superpowers. In section 1 of Disorder, dubbed “*Geopolitics*,” Thompson discusses examples of American power: soft power from the dollar’s pertinence and the energy stability provided from NATO, and hard power from the U.S. and NATO’s military strength in regions with large amounts of oil. Thompson is correct to say that oil is a critical factor in international stability – this fact is indisputable – however, Thompson has been heavily criticized for misrepresenting facts to fit her narrative. Oil is important, but there are deeper issues at play when it comes to world disorder: a lot of talk, a lack of consequences, and a deeply polarized society.

For decades, international order has been ensured by fear. Since World War II (WWII), there have been no more “world wars” in part due to the U.S. and NATO’s strength. After the first World War (WWI), the Big-Four (U.S., France, G.B., and Italy) “dominated the peace negotiations in Paris.”¹ Less than 20 years later after WWII, the aggressor, Germany, was forced to pay large amounts of reparations and barred from standing a large military, effectively “undermining of the country’s industrial capacity to make war.”² To this day, mutually assured destruction prevents leaders from using weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Indisputably, the first atomic bomb is the primary reason the U.S. and its allies won WWII; arguably, having the courage to do so is why the U.S. became the “international policemen” of the world, and disorder ensued once the U.S. lost credibility of this title. Post-WWII world order relies on the principle

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaty-of-versailles-1>

² <https://academic.oup.com/book/11457/chapter-abstract/160156435?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

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of peace through strength, an idea that only works when the superpower(s) are *willing* to use their strength to keep peace. The U.S. is hesitant to involve itself in conflicts for a variety of reasons, not least domestic politics, but ensuring world order relies on U.S. strength. Isolationism is not a productive strategy.

The podcast *Left, Right, & Center* is hosted by David Greene, an award-winning journalist and New York Times best-selling author. In the most recent episode, “Who’s in charge of the border,” the guests discuss the idea of peace through strength from a bi-partisan point of view. Sarah Isgur, former spokesperson for the Pentagon under President Trump, describes “the beauty of peace through strength ... everybody knows how it would end for them; therefore, nobody starts [anything].”³ She continues to explain that over the past decade, America has failed to uphold this principle and that its adversaries do not fear consequences for their actions. She argues, “now that [America] has lost that credibility, nobody believes that the American people are willing to use that strength. That’s why the peace goes away.” Recent world events align with her points: Russia invaded Ukraine, in part, to prevent the expansion of NATO and because Putin believed NATO would not directly intervene⁴; China brandishes its strength and threatens to invade Taiwan but is deterred from any kinetic action by the possibility of a major conflict with the United States (though this mindset may be changing)⁵; the U.S. pulls out of Afghanistan due to the political isolationist views of past Presidents, and the Taliban immediately bring back chaos⁶; the list continues. The U.S. has the strongest military in the world⁷; Americans complain about the current state of the world, about injustice, but are reluctant to actually *use* their dominating power to protect world order.

Politics, especially geopolitics, are perhaps too complicated for the average citizen to fully grasp. In an August 2023 poll, CNN found that the majority of Americans believe the economy is getting *worse* under Biden than it was under Trump. In the same month, the U.S. unemployment rate was just 3.8 percent – a near 50-year low – yet the majority of American adults believed the unemployment rate was nearing a 50-year *high*.^{8,9} In part, this discrepancy is the result of a distrust in the media and the extreme polarization of American politics. Similarly, regarding the conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, and recently Yemen, Americans on both sides of the aisle protest *against* the United States acting in these regions on the grounds of “humanitarian rights” and “American first,” and yet, nothing was humane about Putin’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 or his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in 2022; nothing was humane about Hamas’ actions on October 8th, 2023; and nothing was humane about the Houthis killing three

³ <https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/left-right-center/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-aims-stop-ukraine-joining-nato-lavrov-2022-03-03/>

⁵ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/12/deterrence-and-dissuasion-in-the-taiwan-strait/>

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/taliban-takeover-afghanistan-5-days/>

⁷ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/top-10-countries-with-most-powerful-military-strength/89891/1>

⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/03/politics/cnn-poll-economic-pessimism-joe-biden/index.html>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/sep/15/biden-economy-bidenomics-poll-republicans-democrats-independents>

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U.S. servicemembers in Jordan in 2024. The world is inhumane. For decades, the United States did not negotiate with terrorists, and for good reason: negotiating after a terrorist attack is incentivizing similar actions by showing an unwillingness to enforce consequences. In the past decade, this policy has undergone political pressure from both sides and has changed to borderline *supporting* terrorism. This argument applies to both sides of the political aisle.

On the Left, the most recent chants call for a “Ceasefire or no vote,” implying that Liberal voters will vote third party in the 2024 general election if President Biden does not negotiate an unconditional ceasefire in Gaza. Paradoxically, these same voters will be *livid* if Trump wins the 2024 general election; they fail to understand the gravity of the consequences to their ideology of voting third party. Furthermore, if the world were that simple, President Biden would have already negotiated a ceasefire. Unfortunately, the world is complicated, and the President is walking a thin line; although he may agree with the majority of his Party that Israel’s response is unproportioned compared to October 8th, Israel is still one of the U.S.’s most critical allies in the Middle East. If the U.S. simply abandons Israel, It will lose even more credibility and trust with other Allies and a large amount of the influence It holds in the region.

According to a Gallop poll in November 2023, Republican voters do not want to fund Ukraine; 84 percent of adults who identify as Republican and 64 percent of self-identifying Independents believe there should be a limit on the amount of funding the U.S. gives Ukraine, as opposed to 34 percent of Democrats.¹⁰ For decades, Putin has consistently stated that his goal is to “restore the Soviet Union to its former glory” (paraphrased);¹¹ controlling Ukraine would move Putin significantly closer to Western Europe, to NATO allies, and to his goal. Part of the argument from these Republican and Independent voters is that Europe should bear more of the cost of funding Ukraine – a fair argument with some merit – but unfortunately, the world is not quite this simple. Putting America first requires supporting Its allies; it requires money; it requires fighting in geographically distant regions; most importantly, it requires protecting more than just the material homeland. WWII taught the world the consequences of allowing a rouge leader to freely invade over sovereign states, but the same war also showed what is possible when one country has the courage to use its’ strength. America first should encompass American values, ideals, and strength – isolationism is fundamentally paradoxical to this ideology.

The world has always been complicated. Since the second World War, the world has accepted the United States as the international policemen of the world largely because of President Truman’s actions during and immediately following the war – he understood the power of peace through strength. In 2015, Peter Kuznick, the director of Nuclear Studies Institute at American University in Washington, told CSpan:

“Truman, who was not bloodthirsty – he was not a Hitler, he did not take pleasure in killing people ... a big part of his motivation was that he was sending a message to the

¹⁰ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/513680/american-views-ukraine-war-charts.aspx>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-speech-russia-ukraine.html>

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Soviets that if the Soviets interfered with American plans in Europe or in Asia then this was the fate they were going to get. And the astounding thing is the Soviets interpreted it that way.”¹²

Truman’s motivation for twice dropping the A-bomb on Japan stemmed from a desire for world peace. This decision, perhaps the single most consequential and deadly decision made in modern U.S. Presidential history, stemmed from an understanding of peace through strength. When used properly and in the right moments, deterrence can be a powerful weapon; crucially, however, deterrence requires action. Since WWII, the United States has not been involved in a military conflict with another world power because Truman understood the consequences of action versus inaction – a concept lost with Americans today. A world with peace can only come at the cost of violence; the question then becomes, how expensive is peace? How much violence, and under what circumstances, is acceptable? The answer cannot be none, and the question cannot be put off for much longer. To restore order, society needs to accept the principle of peace through strength and come to terms with the fact that fear, sometimes destruction, can be necessary. The world is complicated, often inhumane, but this is reality. Deterrence can be a powerful weapon, but using it properly requires courage, accountability, and the ability to see the world beyond one’s own political ideology.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/04/harry-truman-grandson-hiroshima-nuclear-atom-bomb>