

The New Sovereignists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets

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November/December 2000

Summary: America's participation in international institutions faces a new and ominous threat: a vocal group of intellectuals seeking to guard U.S. sovereignty at all costs.

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The streets of Washington, D.C., and Seattle may have been controlled last spring and fall by a new breed of antiglobalization progressives, but the old-fashioned, conservative anti-internationalists continue to hold sway among American policymakers. Although the United States has accepted the North American Free Trade Agreement and participation in the World Trade Organization, it has spurned important multilateral regimes relating to arms control, the environment, war crimes, human rights, and other emerging global issues.

This brand of anti-internationalism runs deep in the American political tradition, as any casual student of history knows, and its persistence is to be expected. More surprising is the respectability that the movement is winning among academics and policy analysts. During the Cold War, it was too closely identified with crude conspiracy theories and the isolationist legacy of the Versailles Treaty to attract serious support among policy elites. That has now changed: anti-internationalism claims a growing intellectual following. This group of academics -- many of whom are highly credentialed and attached to prestigious institutions or conservative Washington think tanks -- has developed a coherent blueprint for defending American institutions against the alleged encroachment of international ones. This school does not oppose international engagement per se and thus cannot be classified simply as isolationist. Rather, it holds that the United States can pick and choose the international conventions and laws that serve its purpose and reject those that do not. Call it international law *à la carte*.

At the center of their thinking stands the edifice of sovereignty. Sovereignty, in this conception, calls for America to resist the incorporation of international norms and drapes the power to do so in the mantle of constitutional legitimacy. "Because the United States is fully sovereign," claims Jeremy Rabkin, a professor of political science at Cornell University, "it can determine for itself what its Constitution will require. And the Constitution necessarily requires that sovereignty be safeguarded so that the Constitution itself can be secure."