

Benjamin Allen Coates, *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2016. Pp. x, 284. \$35.00

The United States seized its place as a world power in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, and it consolidated that power through the first two decades of the twentieth century. While the history of that rise to power has been told many times before, what has not been done is to fully integrate that history with the history of international law. In *Legalist Empire*, Benjamin Coates does just that, examining how the development of international law went hand in hand with the development of foreign policy. In doing so he effectively reveals how international lawyers were deeply embedded in the American political system, and how their ideas about international law reinforced American imperialism and ideas about civilization in the years prior to World War I.

Coates argues that the American empire of the early twentieth century was in many ways a legalistic one. International law became a way for Americans to understand their place in the world. International lawyers increasingly became part of government, while they also represented non-governmental interests that had financial stakes in overseas interests. Just as importantly, and perhaps surprisingly, international law was used to justify American intervention during this period. Although subsequent decades have occasionally seen the United States reject international law as something fundamentally un-American, the progressive era saw a convergence of international law and America's national interests as law was used to justify American imperialism. Coates concedes that this convergence was neither inevitable nor permanent, but *Legalist Empire* makes it clear that the early twentieth century marked a time when American foreign relations cannot be fully understood without an assessment of the role of international law.

Opening with a brief history of international law prior to 1898, Coates emphasises the nineteenth century origins of American interest in the subject through the nation's role in developing neutrality laws, its burgeoning peace movement, and its support for solving disputes through arbitration. Yet the story moves quickly on to assess how international law was used after 1898 in less than neutral ways to justify American expansion not only in formal instances such as Puerto Rico and the Philippines, but also more informally in Cuba and Panama. Here, the influence of key figures such as Elihu Root, William Howard Taft, and John Bassett Moore looms large. The concurrent development of the international law profession in America is also examined, most notably through the American Society of International Law and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as Coates highlights how the profession mobilized to promote and reinforce an international order based on law. The chapter on involvement in Latin America makes it all too clear how what might sound like a universal project based on neutral laws actually worked intimately with American interests to promote an American conception of civilization, and with it an American empire. As international law developed, Coates highlights how it developed in a subjective and ideological manner.

The subjective nature of American international law was further revealed with the outbreak of World War I. While it was clear that the United States failed to maintain a strict neutrality between 1914 and 1917, Coates argues that this was no surprise. Building on the international legal assumptions of the previous two decades, which now supported the status quo, the American conception of civilization was threatened by German aggression. German violations of American neutrality were deemed by legal experts to be more egregious than British violations, not simply because they threatened American lives, but because they represented a militaristic system that was incompatible with the international system desired by the United States. Germany was incompatible with the new international legal system, and law ultimately provided a framework for America to join the war against it.

Yet while legalist ideas remained important in thinking about the shape of the postwar world, it was not the League to Enforce Peace or the Carnegie Endowment that defined the peace. Instead, the anti-legalist attitudes of President Woodrow Wilson shaped the American response to the war and designed the League of Nations. Wilson's League deemphasised international law and arbitration and focused on the need for security and the potential use of military force. This was no surprise given the failure of international law to prevent war in 1914, even in supposedly civilized Europe. For Wilson, something stronger was needed to back up international law, but his plans failed to gain domestic support, and conflicting visions of American internationalism saw none succeed in 1919 and 1920. In a regrettably short section in the final chapter, Coates illustrates how the interwar years saw American interest in international law dwindle but never vanish, while the brief conclusion hints at areas for further exploration since 1945. Nevertheless, Coates achieves his aim integrating international law and American foreign relations in a way that greatly enhances our understanding of the Progressive era.

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