

Mary Ellen O'Connell

A review of contemporary scholarship and think tank discussion reveals two prominent myths about the concept of sovereignty in the United States today: One concerns a belief that a sovereign state's sovereignty comes from within the state—from such sources as “the people”, government institutions, or military power. Another holds that international human rights treaties would be more widely and completely adopted were it not for sovereignty, dubbed by holders of this view as the “S-word”. This talk will respond to these myths by explaining what sovereignty is, where it comes from, and why these myths have developed. The thesis is that with the rise of Realism as the predominant theory of political science, general knowledge of international law has declined. Myths and misunderstanding filled the void, which helps explain the disrespect shown for international law in a nation that once revered it.