

Liberal overreach meets its nemesis in new works by John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and David Hendrickson

# After Hegemony

## A Conservative Foreign Policy

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Jared Morgan McKinney

In contemporary America, conservative foreign policy is often indistinguishable from progressive liberal foreign policy. Only the narcissism of small differences stands between, say, Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton or Nikki Haley and Samantha Power. Institutionally, matters are much the same. If one were to remove the name and affiliation from a score of op-eds selected from six think tanks, three “conservative”—the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Hudson Institute—and three “liberal”—the Center for American Progress, Progressive Policy Institute, and Center for a New American Security—only the most consummate insider could correctly reassign the respective affiliations. The reason is simple. The Washington consensus is for what the Princeton professor John Ikenberry has called “liberal hegemony”: America is to stand astride the globe, defending and imposing its values, with the might of unparalleled power to back its writ. The entire spectrum of disagreement among the Washington elite regards which word to emphasize, “liberal” or “hegemony.”

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Such a consensus might not be problematic except for the fact that the cost of its boondoggles in the Middle East—where we facilitated a new Thirty Years' War that has likely killed millions, directly or indirectly—looks to total \$6 trillion, 100 percent of which has been supplied by debt. The same consensus increasingly risks war with Russia and China. Such considerations have led to rising dissent from thinkers outside D.C., which may revive a foreign policy philosophy that is distinctively conservative. Such, at least, is one reading of new books by John Mearsheimer (*The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*), David Hendrickson (*Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition*), and Stephen Walt (*The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*)—professors, respectively, at the University of Chicago, Colorado College, and Harvard University.

A defining characteristic of liberal hegemony is the pursuit of what Arnold Wolfers half a century ago called “milieu goals”: such goals go above and beyond nations' traditional concern for security and independence and instead seek to transform the international environment. This has been the driving impulse behind U.S. foreign policy since the collapse of the USSR. In pursuit of such goals, in 1989 Charles Krauthammer called on the U.S. “to go all the way and stop at nothing short of universal dominion,” an objective he conceded was “not far from that of the pro-democracy crusade.” George H. W. Bush did not go quite so far in his commitment to building a “new world order,” but the Persian Gulf War of 1991 was seen by that president as the first test of the post-Cold War arrangement. Bush managed to avoid the snare of social engineering that would later entrap his son, but his action nonetheless inaugurated a generation of American policies in the Middle East—in what Hendrickson calls a “shotgun marriage

to the region”—animated by the siren song of American goodness and power.

Mearsheimer, Walt, and Hendrickson all argue that virtually no major foreign policy decision since 1989 has made the U.S. more secure. It is hard to disagree, if only because this has generally not been the objective of American policy in this era. Russell Kirk understood this even before the Soviet Union collapsed, denouncing neoconservatives, at the Heritage Foundation in October 1988, as “rash in their schemes of action, pursuing a fanciful democratic globalism rather than the national interest of the United States.” “We need to ask ourselves,” Kirk continued, “whether the Neoconservative architects of international policy are very different from the foreign policy advisors who surrounded Lyndon Johnson.” The answer, as time has since shown, is that they were not.

The failures of liberal hegemony have become so numerous that they are wearisome to recount. George W. Bush as a presidential contender in 1999 promised that he would “turn this time of American influence into generations of democratic peace”; instead, a generation of war has followed. U.S. wars and interventions led to state failure in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and promoted misery and violence in Syria and Yemen. This is no longer a revolutionary argument. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen commented in 2016 that as far as regime change goes, “We're zero for a lot.” At the same time, NATO expansion (in 1999, 2004, and 2009) alienated post-Soviet Russia, inflaming a Russian response that culminated in the 2008 Georgia War and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which brought Great Power politics back to the European continent.

The 2008 financial crisis may even have been part of the fallout of the liberal hegemonic project. Thomas Oatley, a specialist in international political economy, argued in a 2015 book published by Cambridge



U.S. Army / Wikimedia Commons

*The Iraq War was a particularly egregious example of an American foreign policy in thrall to a “liberal hegemony” or creed of “universal dominance”*

University Press that by borrowing to pay for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the U.S. government artificially stimulated the economy, contributing to the housing bubble even as a stronger dollar hurt manufacturing. The wars that the U.S. undertook under the sway of ideology—which Russell Kirk never missed an opportunity to decry as “political fanaticism”—undermined the global financial supremacy that made those wars possible. This is of course merely a reenactment of one of history’s great patterns, expressed in a venerable phrase: “Nothing fails like success.”

**H**ow is it that American foreign policy lost its way? This is the driving question behind all three of the new works from Mearsheimer, Hendrickson, and Walt, and the authors answer it differently. Mearsheimer presents a full-on postmodern critique of liberalism, arguing that it always contained the seeds of its own destruction. Hendrickson, in contrast, seeks a renewal of republican liberalism—also known to some as “conservatism”—contending that the version defended by America’s Founders is still appropriate for today. Walt avoids the philosophical questions and instead presents what might be termed a “sociology of the

Blob,” the acerbic term coined by President Obama’s deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes to describe the cloistered D.C. community of foreign policy elites who have led the nation so poorly even as they personally “failed up.”

To develop his critique of America’s expansive foreign policy in the post–Cold War era, Mearsheimer begins by articulating his own philosophical anthropology. His position is one of learned skepticism: “People who believe their critical faculties can help them find moral truth are deluding themselves.” He thinks that enduring disagreement in the form of different religions, sects, and philosophies is the strongest proof for his argument, and that his anthropology of skepticism undermines liberal thought’s foundational belief in universal rights. Such rights were derived from natural law in the misty fog of yesteryear, but since there is no “universal agreement” on what the natural law is, the rights derived from it are philosophically defective. Whatever rights do exist, he then argues, are constructed by nations, and are only valid and protected within the context of particular nation-states. Mearsheimer has built this philosophical edifice because he thinks the belief that there are universal

rights leads to the conclusion that these rights must be universally protected by the world's leading liberal states, and this syllogism is at the root of the global disorder America has wrought in the name of doing good. Eventually, he contends, the belief in rights leads to the sort of universal interventionism that erodes national safeguards—such as sovereignty—and prevents compromise, for who can compromise with evil?

This argument is one-sided. Or as John Lukacs would say: true, but not true enough. Mearsheimer is right to be critical of the modern liberal intellectual tradition. Such new dogmas as the “Responsibility to Respect,” used to justify America’s intervention in Libya, are nothing but militant moralism and are certain to spread chaos and blood the world over. He is also correct to point out the failure of the modern just-war tradition as represented by intellectuals such as Jean Bethke Elshtain, James Turner Johnson, and Michael Walzer, the first two of whom penned justifications for the Iraq War, while Walzer supported “a” war with Iraq, even if not “the” war Bush launched. Mearsheimer, in contrast (along with Walt and Hendrickson), vocally opposed the Iraq War in all possible permutations. Yet his overall skepticism is not convincing: universal rights could exist even if not everyone agreed on what they were or followed them. And Mearsheimer makes no attempt to discern where there is in fact general moral agreement across cultures and epochs. Piety before the gods, fairness, respect of elders, and an obligation to do justice all come to mind, even if different cultures have interpreted these concepts in various ways across history. The present secular age—in which unbelief is common—is an exception to the pattern of history and is not itself the pattern. It is precisely for this reason that Mearsheimer can call Ted Kaczynski “wicked” and expect general agreement across all cultures and nations.

Having failed to identify any constraint on liberalism, Mearsheimer has retreated to skepticism even as he elevates nationalism. But his argument fails to meet his own standard. Even if he were objectively right—something difficult for a philosophical skeptic to establish—lots of people beg to differ. “Rights” are today enshrined in the discourse of the West. Anyone who thinks a few scholars can abolish them is only a voice crying out in the wilderness. What is needed is a way to limit the more militant impulses of liberalism. This is in fact the kind of argument developed by Hendrickson, who argues that the most powerful critique of America’s failures is found within the liberal tradition.

Hendrickson, who has written two splendid books on the influence of the liberal tradition in American thought—*Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (2003) and *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789–1941* (2009)—is ideally equipped to defend and reinterpret the tradition. *Republic in Peril* completes his trilogy. For Hendrickson, the problem is not liberalism but all the “neo-isms” that redefine it. In his conception, the heart of liberal doctrine is not dominance but reciprocity. Russell Kirk called the neoconservatives “cultural and economic imperialists”; Hendrickson agrees. Even so, he recognizes that this is an urge that emerges from the liberal tradition. “If empire is about domination,” he writes, “liberalism is about resistance to domination, in the name of right.” The trouble is that “nominal opposition to imperialism had been part of the justification for every major American war.” So indeed, there are “rival anti-imperialisms.”

This is not a new problem, Hendrickson insists: America’s driving contradiction, like that of Rome, is *Libertas et Imperium*. He quotes Joseph Schumpeter:

There was no corner of the known world where some interest was not alleged to be in danger or under actual attack. If the interests were not Roman, they were those of Rome's allies; and if Rome had no allies, then allies would be invented. When it was utterly impossible to contrive such an interest—why, then it was the national honor that had been insulted. The fight was always invested with the aura of legality. Rome was always being attacked by evil-minded neighbors, always fighting for a breathing space. The whole world was pervaded by a host of enemies.

This is a broader critique than that attempted by Mearsheimer. It suggests that national paranoia and self-righteousness may be enduring elements of republics, and that America's foolish uses of force in the "unipolar era" may not be unprecedented. The relevance of ancient history was a commonplace to America's Founders, who specifically constructed the union in such a manner as to avoid the experience of Rome. Throughout his trilogy, Hendrickson shows how classical liberalism—from Adam Smith to George Washington and James Madison—denounced the "war system" and warned against consolidated power. Thus Hamilton: "The spirit of moderation in a state of overbearing power is a phenomenon which has not yet appeared, and which no wise man will expect ever to see." The central insight of Mearsheimer's neorealism was made two hundred years before that neo-ism was even coined, and the classical liberal tradition remains a potent—if sometimes nostalgic—force through which the modern imperial turn can be challenged.

Stephen Walt's contribution is to explain, practically, how the moral purpose of the American state has remained liberal hegemony in the face of repeated failures. He argues that "the marketplace of ideas is

rigged." The Washington elite inflates threats, exaggerates benefits, conceals costs, and engages in self-dealing within a cloistered community in which dissent is uncommon and accountability totally absent. Presidents intellectually suspicious of the Blob—such as Obama and Trump—can come and go, but the establishment remains established, ineluctably suggesting, in Hendrickson's words, "the power of the machine over the man." In the sixteen years since thirty-three political scientists, including Walt and Mearsheimer, paid for an ad in the *New York Times* opposing the Iraq War, not one of them has been invited to serve the government or a presidential campaign, Walt informs us. In contrast, the architects of foreign policy disaster—from political appointees Elliott Abrams and Paul Wolfowitz to journalists Jeffrey Goldberg and William Kristol—remain influential and typically find their way to "well-funded Washington sinecures."

Walt's broader point is that the system can operate in this manner because of the relative uniformity of the Blob's elite institutions. Until dissidents master the institution-building game, there is no reason to expect anything to change. Walt does not cite James Davison Hunter's 2010 book *To Change the World*, but Hunter's reflections would have fit nicely within the larger argument. Hunter, the sociologist who coined the term "culture wars," argues that neither renewed pietism nor intensified political activism is likely to bring about lasting change, something that instead tends to come through a top-down process beginning in elite institutions. He also insisted that a dialectic of negation was not enough and warned against *ressentiment*. Translated to the current discussion, this makes a positive program of an alternative foreign policy imperative.

The time has come for conservatives to reclaim a distinctive foreign policy. Its watchwords should be peace, prudence, and

restraint. Conservatives, in a formulation of George Kennan's recalled by Hendrickson, should conduct foreign policy to live rather than living to conduct foreign policy. The first principle of such a foreign policy is to recognize America's "free security." Alone among the major states of the world, the U.S. is protected by two great shields—the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—and it is the only Great Power in a region inhabited otherwise by comparatively weak states. Globalization has not changed this. Indeed, as Patrick Porter has argued in his 2015 book *The Global Village Myth*, technology today is increasingly expanding—rather than shrinking—strategic space. This is an era of defensive dominance, a result of technological developments (such as precision-guided munitions and nuclear weapons) as well as broader societal trends (such as nationalism) and market-shifts (such as America's re-emergence as an energy superpower).

This does not mean abandoning vigilance, but it does require properly acknowledging America's unprecedented degree of security. The generation since the end of the Cold War has demonstrated that typically it is America's own policies that do the most to undermine its position of strength. Mearsheimer, Hendrickson, and Walt all concur that America's policy of dual containment in the Middle East, which began in the early 1990s, was largely responsible both for fueling the region's more radical actors—including Osama Bin Laden—and for producing an environment in which dreams of regime change and the sweeping reorganization of the region were possible. This stands in contrast to America's more traditional "offshore" role, enabled by the nation's maritime dominance.

Yet returning to an offshore role is only a first step. As Hendrickson comments, the U.S. has a long tradition (1812, 1844, 1916, 1941) of taking steps in the name of war avoidance that actually are war facilitating. Three kinds

of behavior fit this mold today: defense commitments to other states, sanctions, and overheated rhetoric. It is unconscionable that in 2010—with no public debate and evidently little serious analysis—the U.S. extended its defense treaty with Japan to cover the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu "islands" of the East China Sea, a matter Henry Kissinger in his own day intentionally left ambiguous in order to avoid creating a focal point of contention with China. Sanctions, meanwhile, have become bludgeons with which to beat others on the head—for now Russia, but the movement to sanction China is picking up steam—poisoning strategic relationships in a quest for moral catharsis. Finally, Obama's Syria "red line" nearly brought the U.S. into that country's terrible civil war in 2013. Had the U.S. then intervened, the civil war almost certainly would have been prolonged, increasing the loss of life as the U.S. was pulled further into the maelstrom. Violence in Iraq, after all, only worsened even as Saddam Hussein was captured and executed.

A conservative foreign policy must refocus on harnessing the power of the state. Hendrickson rightly comments that "over the last generation, the United States has run a massive social science experiment confirming the veracity" of the argument of Adam Smith and James Madison that government borrowing is "an invitation to war." Republican peace theory has long maintained that democracies can restrain the war-making propensities of the state because the voting public will not want to pay and die for foolish wars. The American state has engineered a workaround: force future generations to pay by funding foolish wars through debt, and send a small, professional class of soldiers to die while most of the nation remains unaffected. Probably the simplest and most practical thing a reinvigorated conservative foreign policy could insist on is that any new war be paid for by a new tax. This would not be innovation but a return to American tradition.

Conservatism does not require withdrawing the U.S. from the world; it requires, in Hendrickson's phrase, "reframing" the U.S. role. This means re-creating America's tradition of diplomacy, with the goal not of spreading propaganda or threatening others' sovereignty but of solving disputes and promoting harmony among nations. For instance, America's republican tradition valued international law—John Quincy Adams, for instance, would always welcome discourse on the subject—but conservatives today have been seduced by various ideological *-isms* that condemn international law as foreign to America's traditions. International law exists to facilitate the coexistence of independent states. As we enter an increasingly multipolar world, relearning its lessons should be a priority.

Avoiding many small errors is important, but so is avoiding one great error. Mearsheimer and Walt are good guides for the former, but poor guides for the latter. Unlike Hendrickson, who is steeped in the tradition of republican foreign policy, Mearsheimer and Walt are beholden to a theory of international politics called neorealism. This theory indisputably has some merit, and both Mearsheimer and Walt have spent much of their lives refining it. The trouble is that their theory of international politics, in an attempt to understand regularities, ignores change and consequently, in certain contexts, becomes as unbendingly ideological as the *-isms* they critique. China is a case in point.

Neorealists want to avoid foolish interventions in faraway places not because of any moral commitment to peace but because such engagements distract from the big fish they prioritize: other Great, or potentially Great, Powers. According to Mearsheimer:

The theory portrays a world where the possibility of war is part of the warp and woof of daily life. Moreover, realism dic-

tates that the United States should seek to remain the most powerful state on the planet. It should...make sure that no other great power dominates its region of the world, thus becoming a peer competitor.

Practically speaking, this means preventing China from rising to a status equivalent to America's. The proffered reason is that if China felt secure in its own region, it would be "free to roam" and might cause trouble for the U.S. elsewhere in the world, or even—Walt warns—"outspend" the U.S. "in an arms race" or "interfere close to American soil, as its own homeland would not be in serious danger from its immediate neighbors."

The problem with this theory as applied to China is that it never enters the real world of politics, which—as Mearsheimer and Walt ought to know—is a realm of trade-offs and second bests. A China "free to roam" is not only not likely (for reasons discussed below), but it also would not be that bad—compared to the alternative, which they openly admit is something close to a new Cold War. What could be more "realist" than making a cost-benefit calculation and acknowledging that living with a "risen" China would be less costly than seeking to prevent its rise and risking a catastrophic war?

Neorealists have a hard time making this calculation because their theory does not account for the important ways in which the world has changed since the Second World War. By talking about nationalism in his book, Mearsheimer seems to be making a first attempt to reorient his theory to the contemporary world, but his reflections are inconsistent. There are four powerful forces that should amend any realist assessment of China's rise, but which neorealists ignore. They are the development of nuclear weapons, the evolution of nationalism, the emerging offensive-defensive balance, and the geopolitical realities of East Asia.

In an age of nuclear weapons, the fact that one state has a conventional advantage does not give it any additional advantage in a war of expansion against another Great Power. This renders Walt's purported "arms race" virtually irrelevant.

Nationalism is a theme developed by both Walt and Mearsheimer but curiously never applied to East Asia. As John Lukacs has long argued, nationalism is the dominant ideology of the contemporary world. Nationalism today renders conquest of a foreign land prohibitively costly for the occupying power. The age of empire is over: this is the age of nation-states, and any state that forgets this will face a bloody and costly insurgency that will soon remind its leaders. This fact alone changes what it means for a state to dominate a region. When America was a rising power, dominating North America meant taking half of Mexico. When Russia and Japan were rising powers at the beginning of the twentieth century, dominating their regions meant occupying Korea, northeast China, and then Southeast Asia. Today, "dominating" has been reduced to control over a few uninhabited and mostly worthless islets. This is not the geopolitical equivalent of the rise of nation-states a century ago.

The offensive-defensive balance reflects the technological innovations and operational practices of an era. The present era is one of precision-guided munitions. When the U.S. was the only state to possess these, they gave it a tremendous offensive advantage, as seen in the Persian Gulf War. Now that these weapons are cheap and widely possessed, they give defense a tremendous advantage, particularly in maritime environments. As Patrick Porter has argued, despite decades of preparation, China could not successfully complete an amphibious invasion of Taiwan without suffering dreadfully in the most optimistic scenario; in more pessimistic scenarios, the world might witness a "million-man swim." These dynamics apply

more broadly to the entire East Asian region. All the serious states of the region are developing "area denial" capabilities; the era of Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy has definitively ended.

Finally, China—unlike Imperial Japan after Tsarist Russia's defeat in 1905—is not rising in a power void. Serious military-technical analyses conducted by such scholars as Michael Beckley, Eric Heginbotham, Richard Samuels, Stephen Biddle, Ivan Oelrich, and Evan Braden Montgomery have demonstrated that China is not going to "dominate" its region, in the sense that its neighbors are militarily helpless. China, which is surrounded by nuclear weapon states (Russia, India, Pakistan, and Japan via the U.S.), will never be predominant in its region the way the U.S. is in North America.

These four realities suggest a "risen" China will not pose the sort of threat neo-realists are worried about. To the contrary, the principal way the U.S. could undermine its security is by sleepwalking into a conflict with China. Hendrickson understands this. He therefore calls for the U.S. to acknowledge "the zones of vital interests possessed by other great states" as "a sphere of limitation on ourselves." With great insight he dismisses "the overheated imaginations of the security caucus, who cannot tell the difference between a boundary dispute and Napoleonic ambitions." Mearsheimer and Walt agree temperamentally with such warnings, but—because of the blinders of their theory—cannot quite apply them to China.

As the Soviet Union's empire disintegrated, Russell Kirk remarked in April 1990 that "conservative prospects in the field of foreign affairs look bright just now." Even so, he warned against the excesses of the "zealots for global democracy" and opined that "Soviet hegemony ought not to be succeeded by American hegemony." Kirk was to die in 1994, and in the period



between his death and the present the zealots have had their go at things even as the conservative approach to foreign affairs was forgotten. President Trump's populism and the serial failures of the Washington elite have today opened a new era in which conservatives have the possibility to rediscover their

classically republican traditions. Whether they will succeed is an open question and largely depends on whether—in the words of Walt—"a well-organized and politically potent reform movement emerges." There is much work to be done. 📖

## The Feast of the Epiphany

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Ryan Wilson

Hard going, yes, for an astronomer,  
A man of science, the cold journey long.  
Especially for three such as we were:  
Scatterbrains, mooncalves, heads full of sphere-song,  
Kings of forgotten realms, perhaps not extant  
For all we knew. Applying esoteric terms  
Of azimuths, nuances of the sextant,  
To striking tents and goading pachyderms,  
We lumbered day and night through desert places,  
Incarcerated by pain, hunger, thirst,  
Our one hope that hope held, in fact, no basis.  
What doesn't kill us only makes us stranger.  
Among the oxen, sheep, and pigs, we cursed  
Our charts, and stared, lost, starving, at the manger.