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Introduction by Elizabeth N. Saunders, Georgetown University

When Ben Rhodes, a top foreign policy adviser to President Barack Obama, dubbed the Washington foreign policy establishment the “Blob,”¹ one question that probably occurred to many H-Diplo/ISSR readers was, “What will Jervis think of this?”

His answer takes the form of an article critiquing two recent books on American foreign policy after the Cold War: John J. Mearsheimer’s *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, and Stephen M. Walt’s *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*.² Jervis’ article, “Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology,” examines the similar-yet-different arguments Mearsheimer and Walt make about post-Cold War American foreign policy.

Jervis notes that both Mearsheimer and Walt “share a view of the last quarter century of American foreign policy as a failure and the belief that the United States could do better—for itself and the rest of the world—by doing less” (435). Although they both base their critiques on “domestic arrangements and impulses” (434), Jervis argues they diverge in ways “brought out by their subtitles.” Mearsheimer pins recent foreign policy failures on interventionist liberalism, a vision that is not only shared among foreign policy elites but also has, as Jervis puts it, “much deeper roots in American society” (437). This liberalism led to misguided adventures in extending the liberal international order and armed democracy promotion. Walt, in contrast, emphasizes the role of the Blob—a powerful foreign policy elite, which, he argues, holds relatively homogenous views that drove the United States to excessive interventionism.

Jervis’ article raises important arguments and questions in its own right. While Jervis has much to say about the substantive arguments in both books, a significant contribution of his article is its methodological critique, which generates a roadmap for determining how we would know if Mearsheimer or Walt (or both) were wrong. In the end, Jervis argues, the United States may have simply been doing what great powers do—and as another Mearsheimer book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues they do—i.e., expanding out of fear that they can never really be secure.³ America acted this way in the post-Cold War world, but Jervis notes that it did so during the Cold War too.

And though he argues we need counterfactuals to properly evaluate Walt and Mearsheimer’s arguments—for example, what might the post-Cold War world have looked like under a more restrained American policy?—Jervis points out that the United States is such a *sui generis* case that there is nothing to compare it to properly.

The responses in this roundtable show that there are many vigorous debates still to be had on how much liberalism and elite thinking are to blame for the failures of post-Cold War American foreign policy. Raphael S. Cohen finds Jervis’ review essay “well-reasoned and well-evidenced,” but argues it could go further. Taking a “neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire” approach, Cohen states bluntly: “The ‘Blob’ does not exist. Liberalism is not a coherent or consistent strategy. And American foreign policy is not a failure.”

¹ David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen M. Walt’s *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

Benjamin Wilson finds Jervis's article "incisive and stimulating," but notes that Jervis's arguments lack their own historical context. Wilson argues that Jervis's emphasis on the United States' place in the international system is itself the product of a particular time—the Cold War arguments of Thomas Schelling and Kenneth Waltz. This systemic approach is "an outlook that sees trans-historical, law-like patterns in the international environment, and allows comparatively little room for human agency and contingency." Wilson argues this perspective "is at odds with some recent work in the history of U.S. foreign relations" which emphasize "crucial connections between foreign policy, domestic politics, and state institutions." Wilson also suggests that Jervis is too dismissive of liberal motivations for recent U.S. foreign policy, arguing that "we can take Jervis's point that Walt's and Mearsheimer's arguments have a mono-causal character that probably cannot bear the full explanatory burden placed on them" without seeking a "different sole causal variable [that] accounts for all U.S. behavior." Wilson also sees a greater role for the Blob and faults Jervis for not stating more precisely how it influences policymakers, and "where precisely Walt's model goes wrong."

In his response, Jervis largely agrees with Cohen's and Wilson's critiques, while pointing out the often-slippery concepts, comparisons, and evaluations that make the task of explaining and assessing U.S. foreign policy so difficult. With few cases, many domestic actors and interests, and no clear standard for judging policy success and failure against hypothetical alternatives, what is a scholar of U.S. foreign policy to do? In asking these big questions about these recent books, Jervis once again reminds us to think rigorously, counterfactually, and above all, to remember "how much hard work we all have to do to deal with these questions."

Participants:

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University and Founding Editor of ISSF. His most recent book is *How Statesmen Think* (Princeton University Press, 2017). He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and is the founding editor of the International Security Studies Forum. He has received career achievement awards from the International Society of Political Psychology and ISA's Security Studies Section, the Grawemeyer Award for the book with the Best Ideas for Improving World Order, and the National Academy of Science's tri-annual award for behavioral sciences contributions to avoiding nuclear war.

Elizabeth N. Saunders is an Associate Professor in the Security Studies Program at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. She is the author of *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

A former active duty Army officer and multiple tour Iraq War veteran, **Raphael S. Cohen** is a senior political scientist at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation and the associate director of the Strategy and Doctrine Program, Project Air Force.

Benjamin Wilson is Assistant Professor of the History of Science at Harvard University. His research focuses on the intellectual and social history of strategic arms control and elite science advising during the Cold War.

Review by Raphael S. Cohen, RAND Corporation

Robert Jervis' "Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology" is a thoughtful review of two books written by prominent international relations theorists, John J. Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* and Stephen M. Walt's, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. Primacy*.¹ Their argument—as recounted by Jervis—is “that American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been a failure and that the reasons stem from the American domestic political system. For Mearsheimer, a prevailing form of Liberalism is at fault; for Walt it is the consensus of the foreign policy establishment (“the Blob”)” (1).

Jervis focuses his critique primarily on methodology, noting that in order to prove that American foreign policy “failed,” we need to either go through the counterfactuals (i.e. how better results could have been achieved through an alternative policy) or comparisons of the outcomes when the policy was present versus when it was not. He further, argues that the actual historical record is more complicated than either Mearsheimer or Walt suggests, since the “Blob” has not always been as powerful as Walt suggests, nor has the United States been as committed to liberalism as Mearsheimer contends. Ultimately, Jervis concludes that Walt and Mearsheimer's arguments are “not supported by adequate evidence” (1).

Overall, Jervis's review essay is well-reasoned and well-evidenced, but perhaps, could to be sharpened. The “Blob” does not exist. Liberalism is not a coherent or consistent strategy. And American foreign policy is not a failure.

The “Blob” Does Not Exist

Walt is not alone in believing that a “Blob” controls American foreign policy. As Jervis mentions, former Barack Obama Administration Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes popularized the term to deride other foreign policy experts, including some fellow Obama administration alumni like former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (4).² Over the years, other administrations have expressed similar frustrations. For example, the Donald Trump administration jettisoned the term in favor of the even more nefarious sounding “deep state,” but retained the core concept: namely, that there is a faceless, unthinking but all-powerful collective pulling strings of government in order to block prudent policy making.³ While these terms undoubtedly have powerful illustrative appeal, they are for several reasons better suited to dystopian fiction than to describing how Washington makes policy.

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

² See also David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign Policy Guru,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016. As of June 12, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>

³ Charles S. Clark, “Deconstructing the Deep State,” *Government Executive*, Undated. As of September 2, 2020: <https://www.govexec.com/feature/gov-exec-deconstructing-deep-state/>

First, these terms convey a false sense of unanimity among the myriad of individuals who shape foreign policy. For example, even though RAND reports are often only identified by their authors' institutional affiliation than by their names, the researchers almost never uniformly agree about anything—apart from the fact that objective analysis makes for better public policy. The same holds for other think tanks, public policy schools, government agencies, academics, and all the other voices on American foreign policy, where hawks and doves, conservatives, liberals and libertarians, isolationists and internationalists all shape the policy discourse. Consequently, on any thorny foreign policy issue, one finds the full gamut of viewpoints represented on any thorny foreign policy issue, from the appropriate level of defense spending to how to approach the rise of China.

Second, as Jervis notes, big foreign policy decisions are made at the top rungs of government and while these decision-makers ascribe to the president's agenda, even here, there often is intellectual heterogeneity. As any number of journalistic and academic accounts document, there were fierce debates between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Vice President Dick Cheney over the invasion of Iraq during the George W. Bush Administration, between Gates and Clinton over Libya during the Obama Administration, and between Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Trump over Syria.⁴

Third, as Jervis alludes to in his piece, presidents consider a host of internal and external factors in making foreign policy, from how American adversaries will respond to how American allies will react to how will a given policy play in the next election. How the president weighs these countervailing factors depends on person and the context, but the bureaucracy's view, to the extent it even has a coherent one to begin with, is only one aspect, and arguably, not even the important one.

Finally, let us briefly consider a couple alternative hypotheses—namely bureaucratic friction and bad ideas. On any given day, tens of thousands of diplomats, soldiers, and bureaucrats execute American foreign policy. Given the massive size of American foreign policy apparatus, there will be a degree of bureaucratic friction, regardless of whether those on the bottom agree with the policies of those at the top. Messages get lost in translation; policies get implemented slowly; people work at cross purposes—not because of malice but because that is a fact of life in organizations of this size and complexity. And to the extent that some of those charged with executing foreign policy might disagree with them, perhaps, it is because these policies may not be as smart, prudent, or feasible as their advocates believe.

Liberalism is Not a Consistent Strategy

To be sure, the United States is a liberal democracy and since the end of the Cold War, the United States has put promoting democracy and human rights at least in the rhetorical spotlight of its foreign policy. And at times, perhaps most notably with the George W. Bush Administration's "Freedom Agenda," policymakers

⁴ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, New York, NY: Vintage, 2007; Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster 2011; Paul Sonne, Josh Dawsey and Missy Ryan, "Mattis resigns after clash with Trump over troop withdrawal from Syria and Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 2018. As of September 2, 2020: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-announces-mattis-will-leave-as-defense-secretary-at-the-end-of-february/2018/12/20/e1a846ee-e147-11e8-ab2c-b31dcd53ca6b_story.html

tried to turn this general belief in liberalism into concrete actions.⁵ And yet, for better or worse, the United States has never turned liberalism into a consistent or coherent strategy that can be blamed as the source for American foreign policy woes.

First, the United States has never consistently applied a liberalism litmus test to its foreign policy. Even during the Bush administration, the United States still counted nondemocratic regimes like Egypt or Singapore as close friends and allies, and continued to negotiate with authoritarian competitors like Russia and China. Beliefs in human rights and democracy were always tempered to varying degrees with doses of reality.

Moreover, American policymakers' general belief in liberalism has never manifested in a coherent set of policy prescriptions. During the Bill Clinton administration, liberalism in foreign policy arguably meant extending NATO membership to central and Eastern European countries as they transitioned to democracy and limited humanitarian interventions in places like Kosovo. During the Bush administration, liberalism turned into coalitions of the willing and regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan. And during the Obama administration it became more about multilateral institutions and "leading from behind."⁶ With such a plethora of policies and outcomes, it is hard to treat liberalism as single variable.

Lastly, we need to ask ourselves whether the United States would really be better off if it jettisoned any pretense of liberalism in its foreign policy. For better or worse, the Trump administration adopted more of non-ideological, "America first" foreign policy approach at least in rhetoric, if not in practice. Over his tenure, Trump has expressed affinity for variety of world's strongmen from the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte to Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Russia's Vladimir Putin.⁷ While the administration's defenders point out that Trump policies are more nuanced than the critics suggest, to the extent that the administration has rejected liberalism as a beacon for American foreign policy, we need to ask ourselves whether the United States is better off for this embrace of realpolitik.⁸

American Foreign Policy Is Not a Failure

As Jervis points out, the premise that American foreign policy is a failure needs to be assessed against the counterfactual—what would the world have looked like if the United States had not acted—and as he notes, the world could be in a worse shape than it is today than it is. The methodological point is true, but let's ask a different question: has American foreign policy really been a failure?

⁵ See "Freedom Agenda," *The White House*, Undated. As of September 2, 2020: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/freedomagenda/>

⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016. As of September 2, 2020: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

⁷ Tyler Roylance, "As Global Democracy Declines, Trump Embraces Dictators," *Freedom House*, January 18, 2018. As of September 2, 2020: <https://freedomhouse.org/article/global-democracy-declines-trump-embraces-dictators>

⁸ For a balanced analysis, see "U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, August 26, 2020. As of September 2, 2020: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44891.pdf>

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To be sure, over the last three decades, American foreign policy has had missteps (e.g. the Second Iraq War), examples of shameful inaction (e.g. the Rwanda genocide) and more debatably, blind spots (e.g. in handling China's rise), but also its share of successes too. The United States liberated Kuwait from Iraqi domination. The Balkans have remained largely peaceful, thanks in part to American intervention. And while Islamic terrorism remains a problem, the United States has notched a series of tactical victories, destroying al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and the Islamic State's so-called Caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

And military force is only one aspect of American foreign policy. American action took nuclear material out of the former Soviet Union.⁹ American foreign aid has made countless lives better; the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has likely saved millions of lives.¹⁰ American diplomacy helped bring peace to Northern Ireland and between Israel and Jordan and most recently, between the Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and now, Sudan.

Much of the world is better off today than when the Cold War ended. The United States remains wealthy and secure, and while some of the United States' leaders may not be well-liked, the United States is respected.¹¹ Apart from a handful of places in Eastern Europe and contrary to some predictions, Europe is mostly whole, free, and at peace.¹² Latin America is no longer riddled with fascist juntas and Communist insurgencies. For all the tension in the South and East China Sea or on the Korean Peninsula, none of the incidents in Asia over the last three decades compare in devastation wrought by the Korean or Vietnam Wars. Even all the turmoil and bloodshed in the Middle East today needs to be viewed in perspective. During the Cold War, the region regularly saw interstate wars, and the internal stability came at the cost of brutality and repression.

American foreign policy has not turned the world into a nirvana, but neither has it been "failure." American values and the many people who work on American foreign policy deserve the credit for its successes, as much as they deserve the blame for its disappointments. Jervis's critique helps elucidate these points. If there is a critique of his critique then, it is that it perhaps did not go far enough.

⁹ For example, see David E. Hoffman, Svetlana Savranskaya, and Thomas Blanton, "Project Sapphire 20th Anniversary: More than a half-ton of weapons-grade uranium removed from Kazakhstan in 1994," *National Security Archives*, November 17, 2014. As of September 2, 2020: [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB491/#:~:text=%22Project%20Sapphire%22%20was%20the%20first.Lugar%20\(R%2DIndiana.\)](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB491/#:~:text=%22Project%20Sapphire%22%20was%20the%20first.Lugar%20(R%2DIndiana.))

¹⁰ United States Department of State, "Results and Impact – PEPFAR," Undated. As of June 20, 2020: <https://www.state.gov/results-and-funding-pepfar/>

¹¹ Laura Silver and Kat Devlin, "Around the World, More See the U.S. Positively Than China, But Little Confidence in Trump or Xi," *Pew Research Center*, January 10, 2020. As of June 20, 2020: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/10/around-the-world-more-see-the-u-s-positively-than-china-but-little-confidence-in-trump-or-xi/>

¹² See John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15:1 (Summer 1990): 5-56.

Review by Benjamin Wilson, Harvard University

In an incisive and stimulating article, Robert Jervis challenges the conclusions of two prominent books on post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy: John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion* and Stephen Walt's *The Hell of Good Intentions*. The books claim that U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been a disaster and that blame goes to liberal hegemony, the interventionist grand strategy they say has characterized U.S. foreign policymaking since the early 1990s. Both authors start with the premise that the United States was catapulted into a position of primacy at the Cold War's conclusion. They offer similar but distinct explanations for why the U.S. then adopted liberal hegemony. For Mearsheimer, the retreat of security concerns with the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the ideology of liberalism (normally confined to the domestic sphere) to enter U.S. foreign policymaking, where it drove leaders to try their hand at social engineering on a global scale. Walt places more emphasis on the foreign policy elite—'the Blob'—whom he argues advanced liberal hegemony for reasons of ideological conviction, personal and professional benefit, and unaccountability in spite of repeated errors.

According to Jervis, Mearsheimer's and Walt's books are crippled by evidential and logical flaws. Their arguments do not persuade because the authors have not examined the kinds of evidence that would conclusively support or falsify them. Jervis raises roughly three specific objections. The first is that the authors assume but do not demonstrate that post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy failed. To prove failure requires counterfactual knowledge (or at least some consideration of counterfactual alternatives) showing that different policies would have yielded more successful outcomes. Second, even granting that U.S. policies were a bust, Walt and Mearsheimer have not demonstrated that liberalism or the Blob are *necessary* to account for the policies. If we compare U.S. policies with those of "similarly placed non-Liberal countries," we will arguably find no meaningful policy differences (8). Third, Jervis objects that Walt and Mearsheimer have not demonstrated that liberalism or the Blob are *sufficient* to account for post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. Thinking (again counterfactually) of things the U.S. should have done if its foreign policies were dominated by liberalism and the Blob, Jervis finds in several cases that the U.S. did not in fact do those things.

I am neither an international relations theorist nor a historian of international relations, and I will not contest Jervis's rendering of the causes of and counterfactual alternatives to specific events. My own work is in intellectual history, so I will raise three general points concerning the intellectual framework of Jervis's claims. The first point concerns Jervis's theoretical commitments, the second concerns evidence from recent historical scholarship, and the third concerns the foreign policy elite and Jervis's dismissal of Walt's indictment.

First, Jervis distinguishes between the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of realist international relations theory, and he notes that Walt's and Mearsheimer's books display the tension between the two strands. In Jervis's rendering, the theoretical perspective Walt and Mearsheimer offer is a kind of frustrated prescriptivism. For them, the U.S. mostly operated by the rules of the anarchic international system during the Cold War, when U.S. power was checked by that of its superpower rival. When the Cold War ended, the restraints were loosed and domestic factors were allowed to exert their corrupting influence. Hence the frustration. Jervis does not offer a definite alternative to this theory; he states his purpose as providing a "roadmap" for future research (22). Yet it is also clear that he disapproves of Walt and Mearsheimer's frustrated prescriptivism. He argues that historical comparisons better support a descriptive realist theory of U.S. behavior. Frustrated prescriptivists are driven to search for domestic causes of a state's deviations from realism, but Jervis concludes that the search is unnecessary. Walt and Mearsheimer would find greater intellectual contentment in descriptivism (though they may disagree with recent U.S. actions). Indeed, they

would be satisfied by adopting Mearsheimer's own theory of 'offensive realism,' according to which powerful states assert themselves because they never feel secure enough.¹ Offensive realism, Jervis suggests, is enough to account for most great power behavior.

Jervis thus accuses Walt and Mearsheimer of endorsing U.S. exceptionalism and indulging in ahistorical reasoning. For support, he looks to the history of great power conflict as described in works like Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.² Viewed against the sweep of centuries, Jervis writes, "much U.S. behavior resembles that of other great powers," including illiberal ones. The U.S. has arguably acted "like a normal state that has gained a position of dominance" (1 and 9). There is perhaps a crucial historical insight here. Among other things, it calls into question the idea that 1990 marks a rupture between pre- and post-lapsarian phases of U.S. foreign policy, instead suggesting a deeper continuity. For as long as the U.S. has been a great power, it has behaved like one.

Yet Jervis's perspective may carry an ahistoricism of its own. The descriptive realist position is that the U.S. has done certain things because those are the sorts of things great powers do. Here the underlying premise (common to much IR theorizing) is that once we have understood the international system and its regularities, we can say what states would (or would ideally, or would likely) do given certain facts about their relative power and structural position. In this vein, Jervis charges Walt and Mearsheimer with committing what social psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error" by giving too much weight to internal and characterological explanations for U.S. actions while ignoring the external situation in which the U.S. acted (23). Jervis's thinking about the dynamic between structure and agency, determinism and contingency, and systems and their components is sophisticated, and I do not wish to oversimplify his view. But the outlook of his article is consistent with what he has written previously: "Crucial to a systems approach is the belief that structures are powerful and that the internal characteristics of the elements matter less than their place in the system."³

This style of thinking has its own history. The most influential formulation in IR was the structural neorealism of Kenneth Waltz. Waltz's abstract systems-concept of global politics was steeped in the midcentury vogue for systems and cybernetic thinking.⁴ So was the work of other luminaries of the day, including Thomas Schelling, who drew on a field of formal systems thinking (Keynesian macroeconomics) to formulate the concept of nuclear-strategic stability.⁵ As we gain distance from that era, its peculiarity as an intellectual-historical moment becomes more striking. Schelling and Waltz were towering figures—but like all

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

³ Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5.

⁴ Daniel Bessner and Nicolas Guilhot, "How Realism Waltzed Off: Liberalism and Decisionmaking in Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism," *International Security* 40:2 (2015): 87–118; Hunter Heyck, *Age of System: Understanding the Development of Modern Social Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

⁵ Benjamin Wilson, "Keynes Goes Nuclear: Thomas Schelling and the Macroeconomic Origins of Strategic Stability," *Modern Intellectual History* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244319000271>.

thinkers, they worked within the intellectual horizons of their time and place. Jervis has noted the strong influence of Schelling and Waltz on his early thinking; and when he says that a great power's behavior is best understood in terms of its position among "states in the system" (23), he is adopting a framework that bears some of the imprint of their intellectual style.⁶ It is an outlook that sees trans-historical, law-like patterns in the international environment, and allows comparatively little room for human agency and contingency.

It is also a perspective which is at odds with some recent work in the history of U.S. foreign relations. This work has emphasized crucial connections between foreign policy, domestic politics, and state institutions.⁷ To take a small handful of examples, James Cameron has shown how the rarefied realm of strategic arms control was shaped by policymakers' sensitivity to popular domestic politics and the vicissitudes of election cycles.⁸ Megan Black's fascinating recent book shows how the Department of the Interior used its expertise in minerals and geological surveys to widen the postwar footprint of America's informal empire, sending state representatives and U.S. corporations to far-flung locales around the world. Department officials were driven to exploit new territories in part because they hoped to maintain the Department's profile within the federal bureaucracy, making the story as much domestic as it is global.⁹ As Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall summarize in a recent article: "Domestic processes and phenomena—elections, institutions, coalition-building, business interests, ideologies, individual pride, and careerist ambition—often have had more of an effect on the course of U.S. foreign relations than international processes."¹⁰

It could be true that some factor—liberal ideology, say—is neither necessary nor sufficient to explain all U.S. behavior across time. Yet the factor could explain important policies at particular times, if only because we find it stubbornly present in the archival record. Indeed, if new historical scholarship is correct, the founding of U.S. global primacy had more to do with liberal commitments than with security concerns. In an important book, Stephen Wertheim shows how during the Second World War U.S. foreign policy elites attached a new impulse for military intervention to their longstanding liberal internationalist commitments.

⁶ Robert Jervis, "How I Got Here," H-Diplo Essay 198 (4 March 2020), <https://hdiplo.org/to/E198>. Of course, Jervis understands deeply the contextual sources of Waltz's ideas. In the H-Diplo/ISSF roundtable on Bessner and Guillhot's article, he disagrees with the authors' overall account of Waltz's turn to a structural version of realism, but acknowledges Waltz's "deep interest in systems theories from several disciplines [as] central to the way he thought theorizing could and should proceed ..." See the H-Diplo/ISSF Article Review Forum 59 (9 September 2016), <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-AR59.pdf>, on 18.

⁷ As Charles Maier writes, "We cannot really understand the structural ordering of domestic and international politics apart from each other." Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 145.

⁸ James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); James Cameron, "From the Grass Roots to the Summit: The Impact of US Suburban Protest on US Missile-Defence Policy, 1968–72," *The International History Review* 36:2 (2014): 342–362.

⁹ Megan Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (2020): 38–55, on 41. For responses to Bessner and Logevall's essay emphasizing challenges and limits to U.S. power, see the H-Diplo Roundtable: H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-42 (25 May 2020), <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>. Logevall and Bessner have separately undertaken studies of the sources of U.S. foreign policy. See esp. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

As he tells it, after the fall of France in 1940 (and before the attack on Pearl Harbor) an influential group of internationalists became convinced that to safeguard the principles of open trade, travel, conversation, and international law against destabilizing assaults, the U.S. would need to balance or exceed the power of totalitarian states. As the war progressed, the champions of intervention crafted an enduring conventional wisdom according to which U.S. global military supremacy was essential for maintaining international order.¹¹

Interestingly, Jervis himself has argued that liberalism provided motivation for major U.S. actions. In the months following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he described the Bush doctrine as “a far-reaching program that calls for something very much like an empire” and the Bush administration’s perspective as “consistent with liberalism.” “Bush and his colleagues,” he wrote, “are Liberals in their beliefs about the sources of foreign policy.”¹² In a subsequent analysis from 2012, Jervis changed course, now arguing that the Bush administration was moved to invade Iraq not because it hoped to democratize the Middle East but because it feared an Iraqi WMD program. Still, he held that domestic factors had been crucial. “The combination of unwarranted fear and reckless optimism,” he wrote, “the crusading ideology, the expectation that others will see the purity of our motives, are hard to explain in terms of a reaction to the international environment.”¹³

In the article under review here, Jervis faults claims not entirely unlike those he previously supported. Are his earlier writings about Iraq subject to the flaws he finds in Mearsheimer and Walt? I think a different conclusion is possible. We can take Jervis’s point that Walt’s and Mearsheimer’s arguments have a mono-causal character that probably cannot bear the full explanatory burden placed on them. We can acknowledge the power of Jervis’s observation that U.S. behavior resembles that of aggressive empires of the past. But if we find coherent liberal motivations in the documentary record, then absent countervailing evidence we are justified in concluding that liberalism motivated relevant policies. It is one thing to point out that Walt and Mearsheimer have overstressed sole causal variables, and another to insist that a different sole causal variable accounts for all U.S. behavior. A more nuanced approach would seek to understand the conditions and contingencies, both global and domestic, that brought liberal aims to the fore at some moments and prioritized unsentimental power politics at others. Such an approach would be consistent with the literature on U.S. grand strategy that has identified containment of great power rivals and the maintenance of an open international order as the twin pillars of America’s approach to the world.¹⁴ It would be more historically

¹¹ Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

¹² Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2003): 365–88, on 365, 368, and 367, respectively.

¹³ Robert Jervis, “Explaining the War in Iraq,” in Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 25–48, on 43. See also Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the containment and openness missions, as well as their inability to account for U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, see Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 75–108. For a broader history of liberalism in U.S. grand strategy, see Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the 20th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

discriminating than the approach of Mearsheimer and Walt, which divides recent U.S. history into epochs before and after the Liberal Flood.

Part of the issue here is a question about how policy gets made, and by whom. Jervis is unimpressed by Walt's impeachment of the Blob, in part because Walt has been unclear about "exactly how it exerts influence" (4). Jervis may be right about Walt, but he does not quite offer a competing picture of policymaking here. "The thin portrayal of domestic politics in these books misses many of the pressures that bear in on policymakers," Jervis writes, while adding little about what these pressures are or how they work (4). Does the Blob exert pressure? Does it influence policy, but only marginally and indirectly (by, say, producing an intellectual discourse within which policy ideas can be formulated and debated)? Is the view that a principle of natural selection is at work, such that only Blob-emitted policies consistent with offensive realism survive competition? Or is the Blob basically unimportant—a sideshow of conference jockeys and opinion-piece peddlers? All are conceivable possibilities; but one wants a more direct statement about where precisely Walt's model goes wrong.

In an earlier essay, Jervis registered the following view about the field of security studies in the Cold War: "Scholarship influenced American behavior, especially in the areas of nuclear strategy and arms control; academics served in the government; and differences among scholars were carried to Washington in the form of their students who took competing ideas into the bureaucracy."¹⁵ This sounds like a good case for the influence of the Blob. Is it at odds with Jervis's case against Walt? Perhaps Jervis means that while intellectuals shaped the novel and technical field of nuclear strategy, their influence in the wider field of grand strategy was limited. Recent historical work could challenge the claim in different ways. On one hand, it is arguable that strategic theory had less impact on nuclear weapons policy than is generally believed, as top-level decision-makers were often more sensitive to fundamental political questions than to the niceties of strategic stability.¹⁶ On the other hand, it is arguable that foreign policy intellectuals *were* decisively influential in shaping the project of liberal hegemony. According to Wertheim's book, the State Department, distracted with the wartime situation, largely punted the task of postwar planning to enterprising and well-connected thinkers at the Council on Foreign Relations, who seized the opportunity to advance their vision of a liberal order policed by American power.¹⁷

Perhaps Jervis's objection is less to the claim that the foreign policy elite has been influential than to the claim that it has been influential, self-interested, and wrong. The debate is an old one. Criticisms of the civilian defense intellectuals emerged with force in the 1960s and gathered steam in the wake of the Vietnam War. Scholars significantly nuanced these critiques in later years, although it could never be denied that highly placed thinkers had sometimes gotten it spectacularly wrong.¹⁸ Browsing through the archival documents in

¹⁵ Robert Jervis, "Security Studies: Ideas, Policy, and Politics," in Edward D. Mansfield and Richard Sisson, eds., *The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Democracy, Autonomy, and Conflict* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004), 100–26, on 101.

¹⁶ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Cameron, *Double Game*.

¹⁷ Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World*.

¹⁸ Classic critiques include Anatol Rapoport, *Strategy and Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) and David Halberstam *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972). More recent contributions include Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*:

my collection, I recently came across the transcript of an October 1966 meeting of the Harvard-MIT Joint Faculty Seminar on Arms Control. The setting is the Harvard Faculty Club, the day's topic is the Vietnam War, Thomas Schelling is in the chair, and one of the featured speakers is William Kaufmann, an MIT academic and Pentagon consultant. During the discussion, Kaufmann conjectures that by October 1967, "the [Viet Cong] main force units will have been dispersed."¹⁹ To use a basketball metaphor, he has just tossed an air ball. (A young Robert Jervis, attending the meeting as a fellow of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, watches from a courtside seat.) Kaufmann was dead wrong—but was he influential? Perhaps: he was an advisor to Robert McNamara.²⁰ Even if the best and the brightest cannot be blamed for the war, they might be blamed for collectively failing to oppose its escalation. Jervis makes a similar observation when he notes that perhaps the War in Iraq would have been avoided had a unified Blob "vigorously opposed it," but this "would represent only a much-weakened version of Walt's position" (15). Surprisingly, neither he nor Walt discuss the older critiques. Either author's case could be strengthened with a careful analysis of what was either compelling or misguided about that earlier debate.

One implication of Jervis's review is a case for deeper continuity between the Cold War and post-Cold War eras than Mearsheimer and Walt allow. Their argument that everything came off the rails in the 1990s carries a whiff of Cold War nostalgia. Jervis's descriptive realist position is that the same structural mechanisms explain U.S. behavior before and after 1990, although the structural conditions changed. For many historians, it is impossible to explain U.S. behavior in the absence of domestic factors, but these too have displayed a certain durability. They include liberal ideology, whose effects in U.S. foreign policy have been felt since the birth of American hegemony, and an active and unelected elite, whose role (benign, malignant, or negligible) is as old as the national security state. Whether or not Jervis agrees with the historians, his article is a call to careful thinking and should be read by all who wish to grapple with Walt and Mearsheimer's important claims.

Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) and Michael C. Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ "Joint Arms Control Seminar, Minutes of the First Session," 3 October 1966, Box 3, Folder 7, Lincoln P. Bloomfield Papers, MC326, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Distinctive Collections.

²⁰ Kaufmann was primarily an advisor on nuclear strategy and defense budgets. According to Fred Kaplan, "Kaufmann himself had practically nothing to do directly with Vietnam planning," but Kaufmann's remarks in 1966 indicate that he held views on the conduct of the war, and he did have access to Pentagon leaders. See Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991 [1983]), 330.

Response by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

I would like to thank Seth Offenbach and the reviewers for developing this symposium. It has value, I think, in raising important issues that go beyond my article, which the reviewers summarize very well.

Raphael Cohen extends my critique of John J. Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* and Stephen M. Walt's, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. Primacy*.¹ In doing so he makes us think again about recent American foreign policy. I would not entirely disagree with him, but rather would simply point out how much hard work we all have to do to deal with these questions.

I questioned Walt's stress on the role of the 'Blob' in determining U.S. foreign policy. Cohen takes the bolder position that the Blob simply does not exist. Questions of definition and of evidence blend into each other here. There clearly is a group of people, sometimes serving as government officials and sometimes in the surrounding ecosystem of think tanks and pundits, clustered in Washington whose careers involve foreign policy. But where to draw the boundaries is not clear, and how we do so strongly influences how much consensus we see within it. Casual inspection indicates that agreement is far from complete. But not all ideas are equally represented, and whether we see uniformity or diversity is inevitably influenced by our own political views. Those who do decry the 'Blob' also believe that its members are harshly intolerant of views that fall outside of the range of respectable opinion. But is the Washington world really less tolerant than other ones, such as the universities? In part I think we are dealing with questions of scale and perspective that lack entirely objective answers.

I think Cohen is also correct to raise the question of exactly how liberal American policy has been in the post-Cold War era. The poster child for the follies of liberalism is of course the Iraq war, but it is far from clear that the desire to make Iraq a democracy played a significant role in the decision to invade or even in the conduct of the subsequent occupation. Liberalism may have been evident more in terms of rhetoric than in action. But rhetoric is not without its consequences, and actions were not entirely absent, as is apparent when we contrast U.S. policy under Donald Trump with its predecessors. Here, perhaps even more with the Blob, measurement is difficult, opening room for our disagreements. Relatedly, as Cohen notes, liberalism is capacious, leaving a great deal of room for quite different policies that can all be claimed as liberal by their proponents or labeled as liberal by their critics. It may then be relatively easy for the latter to attribute most failed policies to liberalism.

In my article I argued for the importance of comparisons to the policies of other countries in order to judge whether the U.S. is unusual. Benjamin Wilson picks up on this in his review. As he notes, in part this is linked to arguments about the relative impact of domestic and international influences on American policy. And he also is correct to point out that I have been ambivalent on this score, with my review commending Mearsheimer for giving his first footnote to Louis Hartz's classic *The Liberal Tradition in America*, which remains one of my favorite books.² But the problem with studies that look at the domestic interests and ideologies that press for expansion is that they rarely make comparisons to other countries in similar international circumstances. The methodological difficulty here, of course, is that circumstances are never identical and judgments as to their similarity are, to say the least, debatable. Unlike our colleagues in the natural sciences or even in many areas of the social sciences, we do not have many cases and even if political scientists are right that historians tend to exaggerate how special each instance is, we can never compare foreign policy cases 'holding everything else constant,' if for no other reason than that decision-makers may have learned from the other cases.

¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

² Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1955)

On the relative impact of internal and external influences, I admit to reverting to the core of Realism, in part because I think its useful cynicism guards against the common twin tendencies to regard one's country as either uniquely good or uniquely bad (the former of course is much more common in the political elite and the general public; the latter is often to be found in the academy). I think the title of one of my favorite Mozart opera applies: *Così fan tutte*—they all do it (the opera is often considered misogynist, but I think it is better understood as being misanthropic). This is not to deny all national differences, but to say that the very fact that a policy was adopted means that we can always find domestic impulses and interests which supported it. We need to at least ask whether these were necessary or sufficient for the policy to have been followed and to do this we need to look to how other countries behave. My Realist sense of IR is that they often behave badly, both in the sense of not caring about others and in adopting policies that in retrospect look foolish.

Realism is also relevant to Cohen's third point: it is difficult to judge the success or failure of a policy. When endeavors fall short of the objectives, can we simply declare it a failure or do we need to consider the hypotheticals of how alternatives might have turned out? To come at this a slightly different way, given the contending interests and perspectives in world politics, should we expect happy outcomes even if policymakers are wise and skilled? Whether this is the voice of despair that would lead the country to be too quick to accept the inevitability of conflict and failure or whether it is wisdom that will save the country and the world from ill-considered attempts to change what cannot be changed remains an answered and probably unanswerable question. Perhaps the best we can do is to remember the serenity prayer offered by the great realist, Reinhold Niebuhr.