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**Stephen M. Walt. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*.** New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. ISBN: 9780374280031 (hardcover, \$28.00).

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## Introduction by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

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I think it is fair to say that over the past hundred years most academic students of international politics have urged the United States to take a more active position in the world, one that was more commensurate with its economic power and stake in what was happening around the globe. Roughly a decade ago this began to shift, with many in the field, especially those of the Realist persuasion, urging that it would be better for the U.S. and for others for it to be less assertive. Stephen Walt's *The Hell of Good Intentions* is one of the strongest statements, of this view; our reviewers' evaluations are not surprisingly correlated with their own views of the subject. Michael Desch has written in a vein similar to Walt's and says that "many superlatives" can be applied to "Walt's fine book"; Paul MacDonald has written about the virtues of retrenchment and finds the book "provocative" and "persuasive;" Sergey Radchenko, an historian from the UK who has not been deeply involved in debates on current American foreign policy says that Walt's damning description "rings true"; Kori Schake is a distinguished member of the foreign policy establishment that Walt so strongly criticizes and perceives this book as "not so much a work of scholarship as a diatribe."

Writing for both his fellow scholars and for the educated public, Walt presents a searing indictment of American foreign policy after the end of the Cold War, arguing that it has egregiously over-reached, seeing both threats and opportunities where they did not in fact exist and vastly overestimating its need and ability to reshape world politics and the domestic arrangements of other states. The U.S. sought liberal hegemony, but while the intentions were good (Walt is not a Marxist), the results have not only been disappointing, but have brought widespread harm. For Walt, the explanation lies neither in American traditions and domestic pressures nor in the inevitable consequence of the U.S. being the most powerful country in the system. Walt points instead to the role of what used to be called the Washington establishment and what Ben Rhodes, a top foreign policy aide to President Barack Obama, called "the Blob," a term which Walt borrows. Although American politics is deeply divided, for reasons of worldview and of self-interest, the Blob favors an activist policy and ridicules those who advocate what Barry Posen calls a policy of "restraint."<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the views of his often co-author John Mearsheimer, who provides a parallel evaluation but explains American behavior in terms of its deeply-rooted liberalism,<sup>2</sup> Walt believes the problem lies within the Beltway. Curing it will be difficult since the Blob has been unmoved by failures, and will require the construction of a counter-establishment. Here, according to Walt, President Donald Trump had the right instincts, but defeated them by his narcissistic personality and inability to chart and carry out a consistent course.

Even reviewers who find a great deal to admire in the book also see some weaknesses. Desch and Radchenko suggest that Walt's contrast between the post-Cold War years and the more disciplined American behavior during the Cold War is overdrawn, given that Vietnam is not the only example of American over-reach in the earlier period. More centrally, the reviewers think that Walt's analysis is overly America-centric in that it minimizes others' agency and places disproportionate blame on the U.S. for the world's ills. Here Walt seems to fall into the same trap as the Blob in exaggerating American power.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

In a short but sharp rebuttal, Schake not only shares this critique but more centrally argues that the continuities in U.S. policy and relative consensus within the Blob reflect the realities of world politics. Critiques come easily to academics, but those who bear responsibility for the country's well-being see the virtues and indeed the necessity of trying to create a more benign and cooperative environment in which both the U.S. and others can thrive.

As these divergent evaluations indicate, we are not likely to reach agreement on the merits of Walt's book until we agree on the best course for U.S. foreign policy. In other words, this book will be read and debated for a long time.

### Participants:

**Stephen M. Walt** is Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School and a contributing editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine. His writings include *The Origins of Alliances* (1987); *Revolution and War* (1996); *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (2005); and with John J. Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007). His weekly columns for *Foreign Policy* can be found at <https://foreignpolicy.com/author/stephen-m-walt/>.

**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.

**Michael C. Desch** is Packey J. Dee Professor of International Affairs and Director of the Notre Dame International Security Center. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. His most recent book is *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security* (Princeton University Press, 2019). He is currently working on U.S. Presidential decision-making in nuclear crises.

**Paul K. MacDonald** is associate professor of political science at Wellesley College. His most recent book, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment*, coauthored with Joseph M. Parent, was published by Cornell University Press in 2018. His articles have appeared in *International Security*, *Security Studies*, *International Organization*, *Review of International Studies*, *Political Science Quarterly*, and the *American Political Science Review*, and his first book *Networks of Domination: The Social Foundations of Peripheral Conquest in International Politics* was published by Oxford University Press in 2014.

**Sergey Radchenko** is Professor of International Relations at Cardiff University. His research interests include the Cold War and the history of Chinese and Soviet foreign relations. He is the author of *Two Suns in the Heavens: the Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2009) and *Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2014). His next book, *The First Fiddle: a History of the Cold War and After*, is forthcoming in 2019.

**Kori Schake** is the Deputy Director-General of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and the author of *America vs. the West* (Penguin Random House Australia, 2018).

**Review by Michael C. Desch, University of Notre Dame**

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*Caught Between the Boob and the Blob*

I had occasion to discuss with Stephen Walt an earlier draft of the manuscript for the book we are currently reviewing, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, in the summer of 2016. At that point, just about everyone expected that Democratic Party nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton would be the next president and there would be a return to the Liberal hegemony business-as-usual of the post-Cold War Clinton, Bush, and Obama Administrations.

I teased him that the book was in great shape for anticipating and critiquing the all-but-inevitable 'Madam 45th President' but warned him—tongue-in-cheek—that if lightning should strike and Republican nominee Donald Trump won the election he would be back to square-one. After all, the real estate mogul and reality-TV star had gored some important Establishment foreign policy oxen in claiming to have had doubts about the wisdom of the 2003 Iraq war early on when most of the public and virtually all of the elite were hell-bent for leather to ride to Baghdad, his undiplomatic questioning of whether it still made sense for 'Uncle Sugar' to continue to bankroll wealthy countries in NATO, his insouciance about Japan and South Korea possibly developing nuclear weapons, and his incessant carping that America was, in general, over-stretched around the world. 'America First,' had of course been the rallying cry for interwar isolationists. While Trump was by no means the second coming of Charles Lindbergh, he was saying some things that were generally not said in polite Establishment society.

Not only did Donald Trump, rather than Hillary Clinton, become America's 45<sup>th</sup> president, but much of his campaign and early first year administration talk about changing American foreign policy in a significant way turned out to be mostly hot air. In Walt's apt turn of phrase, "in the war between Trump and tradition, tradition won most of the initial battles" (219). Far from snatching a Clinton victory from the jaws of Walt's *Good Intentions*, the improbable Trump *coup de main*, and his subsequent containment by the Establishment, could hardly provide stronger support for his basic thesis (in the argot of social science a 'hard case') that after the end of the Cold War, which left the United States the only superpower left standing, America's Liberal vital political cultural center went on autopilot, guiding American power globally to promote democracy and open markets (53-55).

What Walt in particular adds to the discussion of why U.S. foreign policy has been so consistently counterproductive since the end of the Cold War is to emphasize how this Liberal rationale for continuing U.S. global hyperactivism dovetails with the vested interests of the U.S. government national security bureaucracy, the inside the Beltway shadow government-in-waiting in the think tanks, the beltway bandits of President Eisenhower's military-industrial-complex, and important parts of the free press and academia which ought to be, but are not, less vested in Liberal America continuing to bestride the world like a colossus (16; see also 95). Indeed, it is striking that the Obama Administration official Ben Rhodes coined the word 'Blob' (his apt metaphor for the foreign policy Establishment broadly defined) to describe what turned out to be a subset of the larger problem of the political swamp that candidate Donald Trump promised to go to Washington to drain.

Comparing the Blob to the Wall Street architects of the 2008 Great Recession, Walt laments that its members are never punished for their mistakes and so have no incentive to learn from them (9). Indeed, it resists change hammer and tongs because "a more restrained foreign policy would give the entire foreign policy

community less to do, reduce its status and prominence, decrease the importance of teaching foreign policy in graduate schools, and might even lead some prominent philanthropies to devote less money to these topics. In this sense, liberal hegemony and unceasing global activism constitute a full-employment strategy for the entire foreign policy community” (112).

With no countervailing power to provide a check and balance on America’s messianic Liberal tendencies, and the Blob fully vested in continuing American hyperactivism and assertive global leadership, it should come as no surprise that the football game of American foreign policy is now played within the 45 yard lines of grand strategic approaches. “No matter what the question is,” Walt notes, the Establishment’s “answer is always the same: the United States must take the lead in solving every global issue, and it must keep interfering in other countries in order to keep the liberal world order alive” (132). More accurate, perhaps, would be to say that it continues to be played inside the red-zone of U.S. hegemony and military activism and very far indeed from any more restrained alternatives at the other end of the field.

Walt’s agenda is not just descriptive, however. He is also interested in taking stock of the consequences of the narrow range of foreign policy discourse and debate over the last quarter of a century and—spoiler alert—he finds it wanting and would like to find a way to change it. He prefers a more restrained U.S. approach to dealing with the world. Being a card-carrying realist, and so primarily concerned with the high politics of national security affairs, he advocates a grand strategic posture for the United States through which it can protect its national interests by helping local allies in a few critical areas of the world help themselves, only committing U.S. military power directly when holding local allies’ coats is not sufficient. Such off-shore balancing, he argues, served the United States well in the past, most recently the victorious Cold war against the Soviet Union, and it, rather than Liberal hegemony, will do so again in the twenty-first century (18 and 88).

I am in complete agreement with Walt on his analysis of contemporary U.S. foreign policy, his diagnosis of how instead of strengthening U.S. national security it has debilitated it, and his prescription for a more restrained U.S. grand strategy that would cure what ails our body politic. But since there are only so many superlatives that I can apply to Walt’s fine book, let me suggest two areas in which I might revise and extend his remarks.

The first has to do with Walt’s call for a return to a U.S. grand strategy of off-shore balancing. Here he not unreasonably equates the policy of containment, or at least one version of it, with his preferred restrained approach. Presumably, in his view, a relatively straight-line leads from the George Kennan of the Mr. X. article<sup>1</sup> (which was suitably refined, narrowed, and demilitarized to satisfy journalist Walter Lippmann) through the three major regional contingencies (Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia) approach of the high Cold War. In his view, “for more than forty years, both Republicans and Democrats focused laserlike on containing and eliminating the Soviet rival while avoiding all-out war” (257, 265, and 282-283).

That *telos* makes sense, but I would add two caveats which would make Walt’s line more crooked. First, and to America’s credit, the grand strategy debate at the dawn of the Cold War was far broader and more searching than that of the early post-Cold war era. If the post-Cold War debate was mostly played within twenty yards—between those primacists who preferred to pursue American hegemony unilaterally and those

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. X, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25:4 (July 1947): 566-582.

who thought it more polite to conceal the mailed fist of American leadership in the velvet glove of multilateralism—the early Cold War used the whole field.

Not only, for example, was isolationism back on the table in the late 1940s in the guise of Ohio Senator Robert Taft, but also behind the scenes, an at least a more restrained internationalism was evident in the desire of a lot of otherwise mainstream American political figures, including President Eisenhower, to leave the defense of Europe to the Europeans if at all possible.<sup>2</sup> On the other end of the field, in contrast, there were also Cold Warriors who were ready to heat things up through policies of rollback and even waging preventative nuclear war. The Kennan/Lippmann approach of a selective commitment to a handful of geopolitically important parts of the world, which most realists regard as the strategic sweet-spot from which flowed the long peace of the Cold War, emerged in part out of a much broader strategic debate.<sup>3</sup>

Walt's argument thus puts the old injunction that politics ought to stop at the water's edge in a somewhat different perspective. In his view, foreign policy and grand strategy ought to be as debatable as domestic policy issues, at least early on in periods of significant international change. By constraining debate over foreign policy, as the Establishment does, Americans are in effect shutting down the strategic marketplace of ideas and ensuring that the policies of a bygone era live on like zombies in a horror film rather than because they make sense in the current international environment.

Second, Walt certainly recognizes that the theory of off-shore balancing did not by any means provide the exclusive template for the entirety of actual Cold War U.S. grand strategy. He concedes, for instance, that Vietnam constituted a clear departure from containment and moved the U.S. closer to the more assertive and activist end of the grand strategic spectrum. I think, though, that it would have been worth probing deeper into the puzzle of the disconnect between the restrained (and successful) U.S. approach to waging the Cold War directly with the Soviet Union and the unrestrained (and counterproductive) American approach to its indirect conflict with Communism in the Third World.

Realists tend to have a weak spot in accounting for this part of the Cold War, perhaps reflecting an ambiguity at the theoretical heart of Kenneth Waltz's neorealism. On the one hand, Waltz, like Walt and many other realists, eschewed deep U.S. involvement in the Cold War conflicts outside of the industrial core on the grounds that the rest of the world simply did not matter.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Waltz conceded that under the

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<sup>2</sup> On early Cold War efforts to reduce U.S. exposure in Europe, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 14:1 (Summer 1989): 5-49, and Stephen Van Evera, "Why Europe Matters, Why the Third World Doesn't: American Grand Strategy After the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13:2 (1990): 1-51. This view finds its theoretical roots in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), in his arguments about the tendency of states to "balance" against, rather than "band-wagon" with threats (126), and so presumably the United States could take a more relaxed view given that other states would ensure their own security, and the predominance of



logic of a bi-polar international system both poles would inexorably expand their respective influence into every nook and cranny of the earth.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps there is a way to reconcile these two propositions, but they do not fit together easily.

There is, it seems to me, another way to square the circle which actually fits better with Walt's framework in *The Hell of Good Intentions*. Caution was the watchword on both sides of the Iron Curtain when the stakes for both sides were high and the consequences of superpower war over them were literally apocalyptic. Conversely, the stakes in the periphery were much lower and so both sides were less restrained in pushing them and also more inclined to think about them in the context of not just narrowly defined national security interests but also broader world order principles. Indeed, precisely as the United States was waging the Cold War cautiously in the core areas it was allowing its Liberal impulses to run amok in the less developed world.<sup>6</sup> So rather than there being a clear break between the Cold War and post-Cold War U.S. grand strategies, containment and primacy coexisted during the Cold War. Vietnam and a host of other Third World Cold War misadventures were thus a harbinger of our post-Cold War future.

None of this is to deny that the United States would not be better off with a more restrained approach that characterized at least some of our Cold War history. Rather, it is to caution that nostalgia for the Cold War should not blind us to the fact that not only were the seeds of the United States' post-Cold War overreach planted earlier, but that those same impulses remain hard-wired into American political culture. In other words, Liberal hegemony constitutes a hardy perennial rather than a new flora.<sup>7</sup>

Walt offers lots of smart suggestions about how to bring about change. However, when you unpack how the U.S. got to where it is we discover that change is actually quite daunting and will require generational and epochal thinking.

Let's explore the logic of each part of the challenge of change. To begin with, a return to a period of more intense great power conflict of the sort that many anticipate between the United States and a rising China might encourage restraint in that theater, but as the Cold War unfortunately demonstrated, lack of restraint elsewhere often peacefully coexists with restraint on the central front of great power conflict (284).

The second part of the problem, American Liberalism's illiberal tendencies, also seem likely to remain a permanent feature of the United States' grand strategic landscape. The vital center's "imprudent vehemence,"

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internal over external balancing in bi-polarity (168), which meant that few areas of the world could significantly affect the balance of power.

<sup>5</sup> Waltz, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), and David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32:3 (Winter 2007/2008): 7-43.



in David Hume's apt phrase,<sup>8</sup> may be temporarily restrained by the checks and balances of countervailing power, but they never go away and are always ready, like weeds, to sprout along with the flowers at the first hint of spring.

So that leaves us with the question of how to rein in the Blob. Over the longer term, which I fear is the only way the Battle of the Blob will be won, the solution is to build a counter-Establishment committed to a different view of international relations (285). As Walt rightly notes, "meaningful and positive change will occur only if a well-organized and politically potent reform movement emerges, one that can puncture the elite consensus behind liberal hegemony and generate a more open and sustained debate on these issues" (19). This is where he and other realists can start the long march through the Establishment by training a cohort of aspiring policymakers committed to a more restrained approach to foreign policy.

And we do not have to peg their continuing commitment to realism exclusively upon its ironclad logic and the indisputable real-world evidence of its superiority. If Walt is correct about the role of bureaucratic and corporate interests in motivating aspiring establishmentarians, we should also be teaching them that they will only get their ambitious feet in the door if they embrace a radically different approach to statecraft. After all, who needs a wholesale shift to a counter-establishment if the Establishment is doing fine?

Moreover, radical foreign policy change attempts have rarely emerged from within the Establishment. "It is no accident," he allows, "that offshore balancing's most visible proponents have been outliers within the American political establishment" (290). To be charitable to the previous voices crying for change in the strategic wilderness like paleoconservative Patrick Buchanan or Libertarians Ron and Rand Paul, Old Testament prophets were frequently not the sort of personalities you might invite to a dinner party either.

In order for restraint to be a viable grand strategy for the post-Cold War United States, Walt is absolutely right that the U.S. "will need champions who are smart, sophisticated, well-informed, articulate, patriotic, and free of embarrassing skeletons" (290). At least in the short-term, there are woefully few people who could make that case in the measured and sophisticated way that, while it might not completely convince the Establishment, its members will nevertheless have a hard time dismissing it out of hand. The greatest merit of Walt's book is that it comes as close to that ideal as possible.

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<sup>8</sup> David Hume, "On the Balance of Power" in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume* [Vol. 3] (Edinburgh: Black and Tait, 1926), 381.

## Review by Paul K. MacDonald, Wellesley College

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In his provocative and persuasive new book, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, Stephen Walt launches a broadside against recent American foreign policy. Despite emerging victorious from the Cold War, the United States has pursued an “ambitious, unrealistic, and mostly unsuccessful foreign policy” for the past thirty years (xi). The main culprit responsible for this misguided approach has been the “foreign policy community,” a wide-ranging group of government officials, foreign affairs specialists, and media commentators, which believes that “spreading liberal values is both essential for U.S. security and easy to do” (xi). To sell this policy to a more isolationist American public, the foreign policy community finds it necessary to inflate foreign threats, exaggerate the benefits of foreign engagement, and conceal the costs of military action overseas (147-169). While the pursuit of “liberal hegemony” has “considerable costs and dubious benefits,” it nevertheless “enhances the foreign policy community’s power and status and makes U.S. global leadership seem necessary, feasible, and morally desirable” (180).

Walt writes with clarity, precision, and occasional anger about the United States’ recent foreign policy missteps. He observes that “every major case of U.S. military intervention after 1992—in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, Libya, Somalia, or Yemen—took significantly longer and cost substantially more than U.S. leaders expected, while achieving much less than they promised. *Every single one*” (76, emphasis in original). Pointing to the disastrous decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the lack of accountability for advocates of torture after the September 11th attacks, he laments the fact that “failed policies often persist and discredited ideas frequently get revived, while error-prone experts ‘fail upward’ and become more influential over time” (182). In a particularly scathing and sarcastic section, Walt surveys three high-profile think tank reports released at various points over the past decade and finds them to be shockingly similar in structure and tone: threats are always looming, core U.S. interests are always imperiled, and “no matter what the question is, the answer is always the same: the United States must take the lead in solving every global issue” (132).

Some might dismiss this book as an exercise in academic Monday-morning quarterbacking. It is easy to criticize from the comfort of the Kennedy School, but policymakers work in a high-stress environments where information is ambiguous, threats are complex, and most policy options are unsavory. Yet this is a book that every scholar and practitioner of American foreign policy should read and take seriously. People may disagree with the diagnosis Walt provides or the remedies he prescribes, but it is hard to dispute the symptoms of deeper problems at play. Given its vast power, why has the United States accomplished so little abroad over the past twenty five years? Why do so many global problems remain unsolved?

Since Walt is a self-proclaimed realist, one might expect his explanation to emphasize impersonal structural factors such as America’s favorable geographic position or its considerable advantage in material power relative to its competitors. Yet he admits that structure is indeterminate in this case: “U.S. primacy made an ambitious grand strategy *possible*, but it also made it less *necessary*” (130). To explain America’s consistent pursuit of global hegemony, therefore, Walt turns to domestic interest groups and the power of shared ideas. “Open-ended efforts to remake the world in America’s image gave the foreign policy establishment plenty to do, appealed to its members’ self-regard, and maximized their status and political power,” he concludes (15). America’s impulsive and irrational pursuit of liberal hegemony has turned Walt into a kind of constructivist. U.S. grand strategy is what the foreign policy community makes of it.

While Walt’s argument is well-constructed, I have questions about some of his claims. One is the extent to which U.S. policy bears primary responsibility for current problems in international politics. Walt may be

right that “the overall condition of the world and America’s status within it had declined steadily and significantly between 1993 and 2016” (8), but how much of this was driven by structural trends rather than specific policy missteps? The unipolar moment was never going to last forever. The euphoria of ‘the end of history’ was certain to fade. The United States may have blundered frequently, but it is hard to hold it primarily responsible for the dramatic rise of China (34), the struggles of the European Union (42), the stalled Israel-Palestinian peace process (46), or the proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia (47). While Walt never misses an opportunity to criticize advocates of American hegemony for overstating the degree to which the United States can influence—and is impacted by—global events (60, 164), here he seems to be engaging in the same logic in reverse, suggesting that most of the world’s problems can be laid at the feet of U.S. grand strategy.

A second question relates to the coherence of “liberal hegemony,” a strategy that “seeks to use American power to defend and spread traditional liberal principles” (14). Walt tends to treat proponents of liberal hegemony as a unified bloc. “Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all shared [liberal hegemony’s] broad objectives and actively pursued them,” he observes, “albeit in somewhat different ways” (22). Yet I wonder whether this obscures some meaningful differences. The types of policies one endorses can vary a great deal depending on whether one emphasizes the ‘liberal’ or the ‘hegemony’ side of the equation, and which elements of liberalism one prioritizes. One could respond that these differences are largely cosmetic, and tend to blur together in practice. Yet by not digging into the different strands of liberal hegemony, Walt lets his targets off the hook. Did Bush fail in Iraq because he tried to spread democracy using force, or because he ignored international law and multilateral institutions? Did Obama struggle in Syria because he called for regime change, or because he did not back up such demands with credible military threats? Policymakers can always deflect criticism by claiming that their predecessors did not mix the liberal and hegemonic ingredients together in the right proportions.

A final question concerns the extent to which the primary ‘pathologies’ in American foreign policy are the result of liberal hegemony in general or the ‘foreign policy community’ in particular (95). Walt offers a number of insightful criticisms about how U.S. national security policy is formulated. Some of the flaws—such as the absence of policy coordination (97), ambiguous assessments of success (184), and excessive leadership turnover (275)—seem to be inherent features of all government bureaucracies. Walt is on stronger ground when he describes the “activist bias” of many national security officials (124). Yet the origins of this bias are unclear: is it because officials are technocrats who like to solve problems? Is it because they are liberals committed to doing good around the world? Or is it because they are parochial actors chasing promotions and greater prestige? No doubt the motives of individual members of the foreign policy community are varied, but this makes it harder to predict when pathologies will take hold or to suggest effective reforms. It is also unclear whether the primary problem in the foreign policy community is excessive groupthink rather than excessive partisanship. Walt criticizes the Trump administration for scrapping both the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Iran Nuclear Deal (248-249), but these choices seem driven less by a coherent grand strategic vision than a desire to score domestic political points.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the day, I suspect the purpose of this book is not to suggest reforms, but to spark a revolution. “We stand at a crossroads,” Walt writes in his conclusion; “repeating past follies may be endurable but is hardly desirable” (291). Yet the dispiriting reality is that a certain amount of folly and misfortune might be

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul K. MacDonald, “America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump’s Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 133:3 (Fall 2018): 401-434.

inevitable in American foreign policy. The United States will always struggle to manage events in distant places, to match policy instruments to shifting conditions, and to mobilize its sprawling national security establishment. Sometimes it will blunder by being ideological, other times by being unscrupulous. Sometimes it will suffer because it tries to do too much, other times because it does not do enough. As its relative power declines, the United States will have to learn to husband its resources more effectively. But a more restrained grand strategy would only temper, not eliminate, these dilemmas. In international politics, great powers are frequently tempted to walk the road to hell, regardless of how it is paved.

## Review by Sergey Radchenko, Cardiff University

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“Ambitious, unrealistic, and mostly unsuccessful” (xi). This is how Stephen Walt describes U.S. foreign policy in his new book. It’s brutal. It’s damning. And it rings true. Blunder after blunder, missed opportunity after missed opportunity, quagmire after quagmire: Walt offers a useful summary of the major follies but we all know what they are. Iraq looms large. Afghanistan is like a hangover that won’t go away. It is hard to pronounce the words ‘democracy promotion’ without an embarrassed cough. In 1989 things looked so bright and promising. How did we get into this mess? Walt’s book has some of the answers.

The biggest problem, Walt explains, is the existence of something called “the Blob”—a community of experts, media pundits, and special interest groups circulating inside the Beltway; “Instead of being a disciplined meritocracy that rewards innovative thinking and performance, the foreign policy community is in fact a highly conformist, inbred professional caste whose beliefs and policy preferences have evolved little over the past twenty-five years, even as the follies and fiascos kept piling up” (16).

There is a perverse system of rewards and punishments in place. Aspiring policy wonks won’t dare to contradict the prevailing consensus, because it is only by working within the consensus that they can advance professionally. The outliers will be exiled into irrelevance, even if they are right. In the ‘you-scratch-my-back-I’ll-scratch-yours’ environment, accountability for past mistakes is almost non-existent: “going public with criticisms or blowing the whistle... carries a high price in a world where loyalty counts for more than competence and integrity” (215). That is why, Walt avers, the same old tired faces that advocated disastrous policies in the past, continue to advocate them today. They happily rotate between the successive administrations, the media, and the think tanks, even as their blunders multiply.

Walt goes on to name and shame some of the mighty and the great, including conservative commentators and former officials William Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz, diplomats Dennis Ross, Aaron David Miller and Daniel Kurtzer, former intelligence heavyweights James Clapper and John Brennan, and media personalities Thomas L. Friedman and Joe Scarborough, among many others. Put it this way: the book will not win Walt any friends in Washington, except among those who may want to use it as a handy manual for ‘draining the swamp.’

Speaking of which, President Donald Trump features prominently in the book, and Walt even finds himself in agreement with some of Trump’s pronouncements, such as the notion that U.S. foreign policy has been a complete disaster. Unfortunately, Walt explains, Trump has made things worse. For, despite his claims to the contrary, he has very much fallen back on the worn methods of advancing America’s liberal hegemony, except that he is also completely incompetent in the execution of this flawed strategy.

What is to be done, then? In the final chapter, Walt outlines an alternative to the pursuit of liberal hegemony. It’s called ‘offshore balancing.’ This strategy forgoes the pipe dream of remaking the world in America’s image and instead “focuses on preventing other states from projecting power in ways that might threaten the United States” (261). Walt continues: “If there is no potential hegemon in sight in Europe, Northeast Asia, or the Gulf, there is little reason to deploy U.S. ground or air forces and little need for a national security establishment that dwarfs those of the major powers” (262). But what about spreading democracy and human rights? Those goals are still important, Walt concludes, “but the best way to do this is by setting a good

example. Other societies are more likely to embrace US values if they believe the United States is a just, prosperous, peaceful, and open society” (282). Who can argue with this?

The devil, as always is in the details. As much as I salute Walt’s brave description of the maladies affecting U.S. foreign policy—maladies that are so much more obvious to anyone who does not look at the world through Washington’s fog—I have to question some aspects of Walt’s diagnosis and policy prescriptions.

Consider NATO. Walt pronounces himself squarely against NATO enlargement: it needlessly provoked Russia and saddled the United States with weak allies, e.g. in the Baltics. In general, Walt seems to be absolving Russia of any responsibility for its worsening relations with the West. While it is correct to argue that Russia (or Russian President Vladimir Putin) should not be held solely responsible, it is also important to give Putin his due: resilient quasi-imperialist impulses continue to drive Russian foreign policy, and it is not at all self-evident that Moscow would behave more responsibly on the international stage even if it operated in a less threatening environment. Indeed, one of the counter-arguments against Walt’s take is that Eastern and Central Europe are relatively free and peaceful today precisely because the region was incorporated into the Western security structures. Would things have been better now if NATO had not extended eastwards? It is a hard call to make, though one can generally sympathise with Walt’s argument that it would have been much better if more had been done in the early 1990s to integrate Russia into a pan-European security framework (266).

But of course we are not in the 1990s. The world has changed, and so has Europe. So the idea of “turn[ing] NATO over to the Europeans” (269) in the hope that they can somehow sort themselves out appears to be slightly far-fetched. 1989 is a bus that has long gone. Today we face an autocratic and potentially irredentist Russia. True, it is a failing kleptocracy, but one that could do a lot of damage if left unopposed. Should it be allowed to? Should the U.S. just go ‘offshore’? What would happen, then, if Russia began gobbling up its neighbours? I am with Walt, actually: it probably won’t but this ‘probably’ will be hard to sell in Washington, since the price of getting it wrong is so astronomically high.

The problem with staying ‘offshore’ for as long as ‘there is no potential hegemon in sight’ is that there always seems to be a potential hegemon in sight, and it is very, very difficult at times to distinguish between merely imaginary threats to America’s ‘vital interests,’ and those that are real. So much here depends on perceptions, not only of the adversary, but of oneself, and one’s ‘credibility,’ which is why the United States found itself embroiled in so many unnecessary wars after 1945.

The difference between the Cold War and the post-Cold War, according to Walt, is that during the Cold War the threats were just so much more real. The Soviet Union exported an ideology that found ready adherents around the world. The U.S. may have been globally engaged but at least it was fighting an existential threat. But there is no ‘ideological’ component to today’s replay of the King of the Hill, nor an existential threat in sight.

Walt made a similar argument in a *Foreign Policy* piece one year ago, when he argued that during the Cold War, “live and let live was never a serious option.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, it has been a perfectly serious option ever since nuclear warheads were coupled with missiles, leaving policy makers in Washington and Moscow no choice

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “I Knew the Cold War. This Is No Cold War,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 March 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/12/i-knew-the-cold-war-this-is-no-cold-war/>.

but to co-exist. Were the Soviet leaders committed to a global Communist revolution? In theory, yes. In practice, no. Their policies were geared towards securing their own legitimacy, which helps explain their never-ending quest for American recognition. Even maintaining clients in far-flung corners of the globe was important not because these clients represented ideological gain for the socialist camp but because the Soviet Union sought recognition as a superpower with global commitments and a global clientele.

It is not that I disagree with Walt's analysis; in fact, he may be more right than he gives himself credit for. Looking back on the Cold War and the post-Cold War, on closer inspection many of the threats America faced and continues to face, turn out to be less existential than is commonly assumed.

By the same token, the U.S. pursuit of liberal hegemony did not begin in 1989: it goes back to earlier Cold War policies. For instance, a full fifty years before getting bogged down in 2003 the Iraq war, Washington was interfering in the Middle East by overthrowing popularly-elected leaders. Why? Who knows! Maybe for some of the same reasons that liberals and conservatives alike continue to root for unwinnable wars today. Washington's 'blob' has a long and proud history.

Last but not least, what is the purpose of America's foreign policy? "The primary task of U.S. foreign policy," argues Walt, persuasively, "is to protect and promote the interests of the American people and to help them remain secure, prosperous, and free," Walt writes (287). But if so, then why is he so concerned with the fact that "U.S. influence and status is declining" (254)? By repeatedly voicing this concern in the book, Walt implicitly suggests that U.S. policy makers should do something to increase and maintain America's influence and status in the world. But the same logic drives the pursuit of liberal hegemony. After all, 'hegemony,' 'status,' and 'influence' are closely interrelated. Can America remain 'prosperous and free' even as its global 'influence' wanes and its 'status' declines? Or do its prosperity and freedom somehow depend on the United States remaining "atop the global pyramid" (276)?

The gulf between Walt and those he criticizes may run deep, but they seemingly share a common preoccupation with America's place in the hierarchy of states. Looked at from this angle, the disagreement is perhaps less about the ends as it is about the means.

Walt's book is an ambitious, highly realistic, and mostly successful effort to upset a lot of people who do foreign policy for a living. It's also a fabulous read.



**Review by Kori Schake, International Strategic Studies Institute**

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Stephen Walt's assessment is that "the years after the cold war were filled with visible failures and devoid of major accomplishments...both the overall condition of the world and America's status within it had declined steadily and significantly between 1993 and 2016" (7-8). Walt does not make a serious attempt to engage the counter-arguments, analyze the range of choice available to policymakers, or acknowledge that factors other than U.S. government choices often determine foreign policy outcomes.<sup>1</sup> He simply states his belief that U.S. foreign policy is "unrealistic," "unsuccessful," "impossible to defend," "fundamentally flawed." *The Hell of Good Intentions* is not so much a work of scholarship as a diatribe.

Walt applauds President Donald Trump's campaign against the foreign policy attitudes that have shaped U.S. foreign policy for generations; "When Trump told audiences 'our foreign policy is a complete and total disaster,' he was telling it like it was" (9). He endorses Trump's policy positions: asserting American national interests as the United States' motivation, arguing that allies take advantage of the U.S., opposing nation-building and globalization and international institutions, using common values as a basis for partnership, and supporting compromise with China and the assertion of America's strength. He objects only to Trump's methods, appointments, and ineffectiveness.

His specific policy recommendation is 'offshore balancing,' which means jettisoning values in foreign policy, disengaging from active management of most problems, and protecting America's predominance by "preventing other states from projecting power in ways that might threaten the United States" in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf (261). There are four major problems with this approach. First, it ignores problems within states, such as the development of jihadist groups and drug cartels, and would deny assistance to governments struggling against them, consigning those governments to failure, which would make the international order more dangerous for the U.S. and its allies. Second, it eschews preventative measures that reduce the cost of achieving his preferred goal, confronting challengers only when they have grown strong enough to defeat regional powers. Third, it fails to take account for the interconnectedness of economies and publics. Fourth, it ignores the fact that other governments assist in the United States' efforts because its values resonate with their publics and their interests. If the U.S. is nothing more than its power, other states are likelier to work against it.

Walt's entreaty to "bring diplomacy back in" is persuasive, and I share his criticism that whole swathes of U.S. foreign policy that ought to be in diplomatic hands have become militarized (271). It is a leap from leading with diplomacy to "focus more in promoting peace," the benefits of which he extolls while not weighing the compromises to achieve it in specific instances (276). One example his acceptance of the argument that "reducing U.S. security guarantees might lead a few vulnerable states to seek their own nuclear deterrent. Such a development is not desirable, but all-out efforts to prevent it would also be costly and may not succeed" (280).

Walt gives almost no agency to any government or people but the United States. The only acknowledgement that any affect their own fate is this sentence: "China's rapid rise and growing military potential would probably have occurred no matter what the United States government did" (52). He argues that the only other problem in the world for which U.S. policy is not to blame are design flaws of the European Monetary

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<sup>1</sup> Walt does have four pages (256-260) of rebutting what he views as the main defenses of the liberal order.

Union. It is a simplistic view, and sits oddly with his central critique that U.S. policy refuses to acknowledge that there are limits to its leverage.

The core of liberal internationalism is the belief that mutually beneficial solutions are the likeliest path to peace and prosperity. Institutionalized cooperation gives weaker states a stake in outcomes and binds strong states to agreed rules. It merits recalling that the liberal international order wasn't a grandiose strategy, but a series of reluctant extensions of cooperation undertaken by the hard men who had fought Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany to stave off another descent into apocalypse. Walt's recommendations would shear away those buffers by withdrawing from the preventative measures that shape the international order in positive ways.

The main argument of the book is that an unaccountable cabal known as the 'foreign policy establishment' has been obdurately wrong, impressively unified, and relentlessly successful in subjugating the will of the American people and their elected representatives across thirty years, during which time it "pursued a series of unwise and unrealistic objectives and refused to learn from their mistakes" (13). Walt argues that these "interest groups, corporations, and lobbies that have long shaped U.S. foreign policy" are working against better policies and perpetrate the dangerous fraud that the U.S. can advance its ideals at little cost or risk. (278-279). The opportunity that Trump represented for a major redirection of U.S. foreign policy was squandered because "the foreign policy community forced Trump back toward the same familiar paths" (17).

Yet Walt does not acknowledge the most likely explanation for continuity in American foreign policy: that irrespective of what sounds great on the campaign trail or from the banks of the Charles River, once someone is responsible for the safety and prosperity of the country, policies that attempt to shape the international environment in ways conducive to American interests look more cost-effective and successful than the policies which Walt advocates. It isn't a conspiracy, it is that the simplistic ideas proposed by Walt have been weighed in the policy balance by president after president and found wanting.

Additionally, the evidence of U.S. foreign policy during the Trump administration contradicts most of Walt's claims of establishment influence. Nearly all the Republican foreign policy establishment refused to serve in the Trump administration and so cannot be blamed for Trump's policies or credited with influencing the administration. Those establishment figures who did join the administration, such as former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, exerted some centripetal force early on, but have since departed. Donald Trump is lurching toward Walt's recommendations on the wars, trade, allies, globalization, and international organizations. But ironically, Trump may now be untethered by convention, just in time to refute the conclusions of Walt's book, which will then be judged by those who advocate a more engaged and cooperative United States.

## Author's Response by Stephen M. Walt, Harvard University

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I am delighted that *The Hell of Good Intentions* is the subject of an H-Diplo review symposium, and I thank my four interlocutors for taking the time to read and respond to it. Because each reviewer raises different issues and offers somewhat different assessments of the book, I shall not try to distill common themes from their separate critiques. Rather, I shall simply address each of their comments in turn, and then offer a brief concluding observation.

When a reviewer says they are “in complete agreement” with one’s assessment of contemporary U.S. foreign policy, it is tempting to simply thank them and distribute copies of the review far and wide. I am grateful for Michael Desch’s positive appraisal, but he also raises three important issues that deserve brief comment.

First, he questions my favorable view of the so-called Cold War consensus, and reminds us that debates on U.S. grand strategy at the beginning of the Cold War were more wide-ranging and contentious than the ‘non-debate’ that followed the Cold War’s end. Second, he points out that the Vietnam War was both a clear departure from a realist-based approach to U.S. grand strategy and a blunder at least as grave as the United States’ subsequent wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. From this perspective, today’s foreign policy elite performed no worse than the ‘Best and Brightest’ of an earlier era, though that is cold comfort to all who have suffered from America’s more recent follies. Building on themes he has explored in some of his own research, he also suggests that the roots of ‘liberal hegemony’ lie deeper in America’s political culture than my book admits.<sup>1</sup> If so, then creating a new and improved foreign policy elite will be more difficult than I suggest.

Needless to say, Desch and I are not very far apart in our interpretations of these events. We agree there was a far broader debate on U.S. strategy at the dawn of the Cold War than at the beginning of the ‘unipolar moment.’ This difference is not surprising for several reasons. Prior to World War II, the United States had consciously avoided permanent alliances and let the other great powers check each other, intervening abroad only when the balance of power in Eurasia broke down completely (as it did in the World Wars). To lead alliances in Europe and Asia and to deploy substantial military forces abroad *in peacetime* was a radical departure for the United States, and it took time before the need to do so was widely accepted. The extent of French and British weakness after World War II was not fully evident until the French defeat at Dienbienphu in 1954 and the humiliation of Britain and France during the Suez Crisis in 1956, and it is worth remembering that Dwight D. Eisenhower, NATO’s first Supreme Allied Commander and later U.S. president, originally believed that the deployment of U.S. troops in Europe should be a temporary measure lasting no more than ten years. Indeed, Eisenhower repeatedly sought a viable way to bring the troops home during his presidency, only to conclude that leaving them there made more sense as long as the Soviet Union loomed to the east.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. Desch, “America’s Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreactions in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security* 32:3 (Winter 2007/2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

Given these novel circumstances, as well as uncertainties at the time about the global appeal of Communism and the implications of decolonization, it is not surprising that the early Cold War featured a lively debate on America's global role.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, when the Cold War began, the main elements of today's foreign policy establishment were still being created. By the time it ended, however, U.S. foreign policy was conducted by a vast array of national security and foreign policy organizations inside and outside the government, including think tanks, special interest groups and lobbies, philanthropic foundations, and academic institutions. The 'military-industrial complex' about which Eisenhower had warned in 1960 was now firmly in place, and in the words of I. M. Destler, Leslie Gelb, and Anthony Lake, the conduct of foreign affairs had passed from the old "Eastern Establishment" to "a new Professional Elite, from bankers and lawyers who would take time off to help manage the affairs of government to full-time foreign policy experts."<sup>4</sup>

As described in detail in my book, most of these institutions and individuals are now strongly committed to America's role as the 'indispensable nation' and wary of any significant adjustment in its global ambitions. Because ordinary Americans have always been less enamored of trying to police or transform the world, advocates of an expansive U.S. role have become adept at inflating threats, overstating the benefits of overseas military engagement, concealing its costs, and insulating themselves from accountability for its repeated failures. Their goal is to convince the American people to support (or at least tolerate) their efforts, even when success proves elusive. Because most Americans usually pay little attention to foreign policy, and because the elite can shape much of what the public knows or believes about foreign affairs, gaining the necessary acquiescence is usually easy.<sup>5</sup>

When the Cold War ended, therefore, and the United States found itself without a major peer competitor, the foreign policy elite turned quickly from the (mostly) realist strategy of global containment to the even more ambitious goal of liberal hegemony. Four decades of Cold War competition had marginalized those who favored a more restrained grand strategy and a broader debate did not begin until the failures of liberal hegemony were impossible to ignore.

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include Walter Lippmann's critique of the excesses of containment and James Burnham's advocacy of a more aggressive policy of rollback. See Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947); and James Burnham, *Containment or Liberation?: An Inquiry into the Aims of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: John Day, 1953). The United States had also acquired an extensive array of overseas colonies, territories, bases, facilities, and other possessions by the end of World War II, and deciding what to do with them proved to be a complicated and politically challenging question. On this point, see Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019), especially chaps. 13 and 14.

<sup>4</sup> I.M. Destler, Leslie H. Gelb, and Anthony Lake, *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Unmaking of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 91.

<sup>5</sup> As I noted in the book, "Vested interests within the government and the broader foreign policy establishment have significant advantages in shaping what the public knows about international politics and foreign policy, and these advantages tilt the competition among policy alternatives in their favor. In other words, the marketplace of ideas is rigged" (139).

Desch is also correct that Vietnam was a departure from a realist strategy, which is why prominent realists such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and George Kennan all opposed the war in the 1960s. Vietnam was the tragic result of some of the flawed arguments that were used to sell containment in the 1950s—most notably the domino theory, the Munich analogy, and the related obsession with credibility—and similar arguments remain all too potent to this day.<sup>6</sup>

Desch and I also agree that a change of course will not happen overnight. Although powerful structural forces (such as the rise of China and the growing economic importance of Asia more broadly) will eventually force the United States to move toward a more realistic grand strategy, those who favor more ambitious and/or idealistic objectives remain influential. As I point out in my book, both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump took office intending to reduce America's global burdens and focus more attention on problems at home, yet each found themselves following in their predecessors' footsteps, partly because neither could find a sufficiently large cadre of people who shared their views on foreign policy and therefore both had to appoint familiar figures from the 'Blob.' One should not forget that, as of this writing, the National Security Advisor to President Trump is one John Bolton, whose entire career has been spent either in government or at inside-the-Beltway think tanks and law firms. Moving to a more sensible grand strategy will require sustained efforts to broaden the debate on America's role and the creation of a knowledgeable and politically sophisticated community of foreign policy and national security experts who are not wedded to the failed policies of the past quarter-century.

I am glad Paul MacDonald finds *The Hell of Good Intentions* “persuasive,” and that he praises its “clarity” and “precision.” He believes my indictment of U.S. foreign policy and the elite that has led it is too harsh, however, and he reminds us that it is easier to criticize policy than to make it and that “most policy options are unsavory.” I agree with the latter two points, but I draw a different conclusion from them. A central theme of the book is that policymakers in recent years have been resolutely committed to an overly narrow set of options, even when there was good reason to think none of them would work. The puzzle is why the foreign policy elite did not seriously consider more promising alternatives.

MacDonald also suggests that I pin too much blame on U.S. foreign policy for certain adverse international developments, such as the rise of China or the spread of nuclear weapons in South Asia. This is a valid point, although I did make it clear that the United States was not solely responsible for all of the setbacks that have taken place in recent years. In the introduction, for example, I bemoan the return of great power competition, the Euro crisis, the Brexit decision, the growing turmoil in the Middle East, Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation, and the spread of violent extremism, concluding that “U.S. foreign policy is not the primary cause of all of these developments, perhaps, but it played a significant role in many of them” (8). At the end of chapter 1 (entitled “A Dismal Record”), I emphasized that “U.S. foreign policy [is not] solely responsible” for the various negative developments described in that chapter. Indeed, I went on to say that “some of these adverse trends—such as China's rapid rise and growing military potential—would probably have occurred no matter what the United States government did” (52). U.S. actions played an “outsized role” in many of these developments, however, and its missteps in the Middle East and elsewhere made it more difficult to respond effectively to them.

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<sup>6</sup> On this point, see Fredrik Logevall and Campbell Craig, *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

MacDonald also questions whether the strategy of ‘liberal hegemony’ was as coherent as I depict, and suggests that more attention to the differences between the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations would have been illuminating. In particular, had I focused on differences rather than similarities, I might have identified what each administration did right and did wrong, and determined whether a different combination of policy tools might have led to better results. He may be right, although I do address the most obvious foreign policy ‘success stories’ (such as the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the removal of Libya’s nascent WMD capabilities, or the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program in the former Soviet Union), and I tried to highlight the ways in which these successes differed from the more typical U.S. approach (85-88).

But to be clear: I do not believe there is a ‘right’ way to pursue liberal hegemony. There is no magic formula that would have allowed the United States to spread its values around the world rapidly and at low cost, and thus the broad program that all three administrations pursued was doomed to fail. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama each implemented liberal hegemony in their own fashion, but as Tolstoy might have put it, ‘every unsuccessful administration is unsuccessful in its own way.’

MacDonald is correct that I did not delve deeply into the origins of the “activist bias” that pervades the foreign policy and national security establishment, but I did suggest that it reflects a combination of idealism and self-interest, along with America’s remarkably favorable geopolitical position. As I wrote in the preface, “the institutions examined in this book are filled with dedicated public servants who genuinely believe that U.S. dominance is good for the United States and good for the world. At the same time, however, the pursuit of liberal hegemony appeals to this elite’s sense of self-worth, enhances their power and status, and gives them plenty to do. These individuals also operate in a system that rewards conformity, penalizes dissent, and encourages its members to remain within the prevailing consensus” (xii). I stand by that assessment.

Last, MacDonald speculates that my purpose in writing the book was “not to suggest reforms, but to spark a revolution.” That was not my intention. I am a realist, not a revolutionary, and I accept that top officials are human (and therefore fallible), that great powers frequently make costly blunders, and that no foreign policy strategy will yield perfect results. I wrote the book to help Americans (and others) understand the United States’ most recent blunders, and to remind them that there is an alternative strategy—offshore balancing—that worked well in the past and could serve the nation equally well in the future. I would be astonished if the country were to accept my recommendations in toto, but I hope the book moves the needle in the right direction.

Sergey Radchenko offers an enthusiastic endorsement of many of the book’s judgments, but he also challenges my preferences for ‘offshore balancing.’ He is especially troubled by my recommendation that the United States gradually terminate its commitment to NATO and let the nations of Europe take greater responsibility for their own defense.

Radchenko has two specific reservations. First, while he agrees that the U.S. decision to embrace open-ended NATO expansion helped poison relations with Russia, he says we cannot turn the clock back to the early 1990s. The question for today, therefore, is how the United States and its allies can best deter “an autocratic and potentially irredentist Russia.” Relatedly, he thinks I am too quick to absolve Russia for its role in the deterioration of relations and argues that I understate the “quasi-imperialist” impulses that underpin Russian President Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy. Because the price of Russia gobbling up its neighbors to the West would be “astronomically high,” he believes it is better for the United States to stay “onshore” there.



For the record, I do not think the United States bears sole responsibility for the deteriorating relationship with Russia, but I do think it deserves most of the blame. For starters, NATO expansion violated the assurances that U.S. officials gave Mikhail Gorbachev and other Soviet officials in order to win their acceptance of a reunified Germany's membership in NATO.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, it was naïve to expect a great power such as Russia to stand idly by as the world's most powerful country (and its former rival) kept moving its security commitments ever-deeper into Russia's traditional sphere of influence, while at the same time actively conducting regime change in several sensitive regions and openly proclaiming its intention to spread its liberal ideals as far as it could. Russian officials repeatedly expressed their concerns about these policies, and their warnings grew more vehement as U.S. ambitions expanded to include Georgia and Ukraine. Russia's responses (in Crimea and elsewhere) may have been illegal, cruel, and worrisome, but they were also entirely predictable.

As for NATO itself, I agree the United States should not depart precipitously, but I favor a gradual disengagement that would force NATO's European members to rebuild their increasingly moribund defense capabilities. There is no question that Europe has the wherewithal to mount a formidable defense against future Russian aggression: the EU contains more than 500 million people and has a combined GDP in excess of \$17 trillion; by comparison, Russia has a rapidly aging population of around 140 million and a GDP that is less than \$2 trillion (smaller than Canada or Italy alone!). Furthermore, NATO's European members spend three-to-four times more on defense than Russia does every single year, although they do not spend the money very wisely or well. And why have these countries been willing to let their own defenses atrophy? Because they can always count on Uncle Sam to ride to the rescue if things look dangerous. Given that no country is in a position to dominate Europe at present, it is not clear why the United States should continue to subsidize its wealthy European allies, especially in an era of persistent U.S. budget deficits, serious domestic needs, and a growing strategic challenge in Asia.

Second, Radchenko cautions that offshore balancing depends on the balancer's ability to identify when potential hegemonies are emerging and it is time to go back "on-shore." I agree that it is sometimes hard to measure the level of threat, or to figure out which of several emerging dangers is the most serious, but that is (fortunately) not the case today. The only potential 'regional hegemon' today is China, although there is still considerable disagreement over the magnitude of the threat it poses.<sup>8</sup> In my view, the risk is not that the United States will be too complacent and fail to respond to some new and ominous danger. It is far more likely that the foreign policy establishment will indulge in its usual penchant for threat inflation and end up taking on burdens that can be safely left to others.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Joshua Shiffrin, "Deal or No Deal: The End of the Cold War and U.S. Offers to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40:4 (Spring 2016).

<sup>8</sup> For the view that China is destined to keep rising, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015). For a more optimistic appraisal that highlights China's liabilities and America's enduring advantages, see Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see Michael Cohen and Micah Zenko, *Clear and Present Safety: The World Has Never Been Better and Why That Matters to Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).



Finally, Radchenko calls attention to what he sees as a potential contradiction in the book, or at the very least something of an ambiguity. Specifically, although I am in favor of a more restrained foreign policy, I also seem to be in favor of maintaining America's position of primacy. If that is the case, he writes, is there any real difference between my position and that of the more ardent proponents of liberal hegemony? The answer is yes. As a realist, I believe that being the strongest state maximizes U.S. security, although it cannot protect Americans from every conceivable danger. Liberal hegemony threatens that position of primacy because it squanders resources that could be used to strengthen the United States at home and allow Americans to lead more bountiful lives. It also encourages free-riding by U.S. allies, provokes unnecessary resentment in some quarters, and encourages some of America's foes to unite against it. By reducing America's burdens somewhat and committing the United States to fighting only when its vital interests are at stake, offshore balancing will preserve American primacy over the long haul. Advocates of liberal hegemony believe the best way to make America safe and prosperous is to remake the world in its image; offshore balancers believe that goal is a fool's errand that is accelerating America's decline.

Radchenko concludes his comment by calling *The Hell of Good Intentions* an "ambitious, highly realistic, and mostly successful effort to upset a lot of people who do foreign policy for a living." I appreciate his kind words.

Kori Schake's harsh assessment of my book is understandable, given that she is a veteran member of the foreign policy 'Blob' that I criticize. But rather than engaging with and rebutting my arguments, her review either misrepresents what I wrote or tries to discredit my views by linking them to Donald Trump's policies. At the same time, however, her critique contains virtually no evidence that challenges my central points.

Schake argues that offshore balancing "jettisons values in foreign policy," implying that liberal hegemony promotes American values abroad. This claim is wrong. One of my main criticisms of liberal hegemony is that trying to spread the United States' political values in this way has been counterproductive. For example, Freedom House reports that 2019 was the thirteenth consecutive year in which global freedom declined, and *The Economist* magazine's annual "Democracy Index" recently downgraded the United States from a "full" to a "flawed" democracy.<sup>10</sup> In short, liberal hegemony is not achieving its central purpose abroad, even as American values erode at home. Far from ignoring values, I argue that the best way for the United States to promote its liberal ideals is by setting a good example (39-44, 281-282), not by interfering—at times with military force—in the politics of countries all across the globe. The concluding chapter also explains why the U.S. should "make peace a priority" for both self-interested and moral reasons (276-278). Realists do not "jettison" values; we think a different strategy than liberal hegemony would promote them more effectively.

Schake also claims offshore balancing ignores various transnational issues like crime or the environment, and maintains that it "eschews preventative measures . . . confronting challengers only when they have grown strong enough to defeat regional powers." This charge is also incorrect: acting as an offshore balancer in no way precludes cooperating with other countries on climate change, counter-narcotics efforts, human trafficking, global health, or other transnational issues. I also emphasize in the book that the United States

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<sup>10</sup> See *Freedom in the World 2019*, at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>; and "U.S. Democracy is in Grave Danger, a New *Economist* Report Warns," *Washington Post*, 1 February 2018, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/01/u-s-democracy-is-in-grave-danger-a-new-economist-report-warns/>.

should do more to balance a rising China in Asia, a clear illustration of ‘preventative action’ against a potential challenger. Thus, the review’s initial charges miss their mark.

Second, Schake’s review suggests that I am a closet Trumpian, which is simply not true. She says that my book “applauds” Trump’s critique of U.S. foreign policy and claims that I endorse Trump’s policy positions, but she does not provide any examples of my supposed endorsement. (I do agree with Trump’s charge that America’s NATO allies are not bearing a fair share of the collective defense burdens, a position also held by every U.S. president since Eisenhower.) She claims Trump is “lurching toward Walt’s recommendations,” without identifying either what I prescribed or what he is doing that is consistent with them. For the record: Trump is certainly not following my advice on Iran, Israel-Palestine, North Korea, trade policy, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, NATO, Russia, climate change, or international terrorism. Nor does the review come to terms with the chapter dealing with Trump’s handling of foreign policy, which is revealingly titled “How *Not* to Fix Foreign Policy,” or my descriptions of him as “erratic, combative, self-indulgent, and decidedly unpresidential,” “his own worst enemy,” a “poor judge of talent,” a man with a “penchant for lying,” or “the least competent president in modern memory.” The review acknowledges my objections to Trump’s “methods, appointments, and ineffectiveness” (a rather damning indictment, one would think), yet still suggests that I am on his side.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Schake and I agree on one thing: Trump has been mostly a disaster as president. Yet the more fundamental issue is how such a man got elected in the first place. As I wrote in the introduction: “How could the U.S. have gone so badly off the rails that American voters would elect a completely inexperienced leader who had openly challenged well-established foreign policy wisdoms and who was opposed by senior foreign policy experts from both parties?” (12). One need not agree with all of Trump’s charges or any of his subsequent policies to recognize that the critique he presented in 2016—which was a direct and unrelenting attack on liberal hegemony—resonated with many voters.

Surprisingly, Schake’s does not refute my claims by offering a robust list of recent foreign policy successes. If liberal hegemony—and the foreign policy elite responsible for crafting and implementing it—had performed well over the past three decades, then surely it would be easy to compile an impressive list of success stories to rival the parade of costly blunders documented in my book. In fact the handful of minor successes is dwarfed by the much longer list of significant foreign policy failures.

Schake rejects my explanation for these recurring missteps, that is, the entrenched power of the foreign policy elite and its commitment to liberal hegemony. In her words, “once someone is responsible for the safety and prosperity of the country, policies that attempt to shape the international environment in ways conducive to American interests look more cost-effective than the policies which Walt advocates.” She adds that “the simplistic ideas proposed by Walt have been weighed in the policy balance by president after president and found wanting.”

One must ask: “wanting” in what way? How well did the foreign policy choices that ‘president after president’ made since the end of the Cold War work out? One of my book’s central themes; namely, the unwillingness of the foreign policy elite to question its own judgment, hold itself accountable, and learn from its mistakes. Since the early 1990s, both Republicans and Democrats in the foreign policy establishment have been rigidly committed to pursuing liberal hegemony, and have persistently defended its attendant orthodoxies, no matter how often those policies and beliefs were discredited by subsequent events.

I have no doubt that former officials believed they were implementing policies that were in the American national interest. But the issue here is not whether they had good intentions; it is whether their ambitious efforts to ‘shape the international environment’ were successful. Did they get the job done, and leave Americans safer, more prosperous, and with their values intact? On that point Schake’s review is silent, which is hardly surprising given the failures of liberal hegemony. To appreciate that policy’s dismal track record, one need only compare the optimism with which the ‘unipolar moment’ began in 1989 with the abject pessimism we find today regarding the state of the world and America’s position in it.

Even so, at heart I remain an optimist about America’s future. The United States still retains enormous advantages—a diverse and innovative economy, a remarkably favorable geopolitical position, a robust nuclear deterrent, powerful conventional forces, and political institutions that have shown an ability to adapt when necessary. These features are no guarantee of continued success, of course, but they certainly improve the odds.

On the foreign policy front, the good news is that a broader debate on America’s role in the world is finally beginning. A wider range of views is now apparent—even within the commanding heights of the ‘Blob’—and younger Americans are clearly receptive to new ideas.<sup>11</sup> If *The Hell of Good Intentions* contributes to a broader and richer conversation about how the United States can best navigate the twenty-first century, it will have been well worth the time and effort it took to write it.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the recent symposium “Searching for a Strategy,” in *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3 (May/June 2019), with contributions by Daniel Drezner, Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, Kori Schake, and myself. On the views of younger Americans, see Pew Research Center, “The Generation Gap in American Politics,” March 1, 2018, at <https://www.people-press.org/2018/03/01/3-u-s-foreign-policy-and-americas-global-standing-islam-and-violence-nafta/>; and Trevor Thrall et al., “The Clash of Generations?: Intergenerational Change and American Foreign Policy Views,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs/Charles Koch Institute (June 2018), at [https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report\\_clash-of-generations\\_180625.pdf](https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/report_clash-of-generations_180625.pdf)