

H-Diplo | ISSF Roundtable XI-2

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John Mearsheimer. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities.*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780300234190 (hardcover, \$30.00);
9780300248562 (paper, \$20.00).

23 September 2019 | <https://issforum.org/to/ir11-2>

Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

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INTRODUCTION BY ROBERT JERVIS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

John Mearsheimer has written a stinging indictment of post-Cold War policy as being founded on a form of liberalism that ignores the realities of nationalism and the limits of the power of even the strongest states. It is reviewed here by four scholars of differing political and intellectual orientations, all of whom agree that this is an important and stimulating book. The clarity of the argument, the verve of the writing, and a willingness to stake out a strong claim on an important subject are the hallmarks of Mearsheimer's scholarship and fully on display here. For Jennifer Pitts, this book is bracing and salutary; Jack Snyder says that this is "an incisive book that deeply analyzes the tendency of self-deluded post-Cold War liberalism to overreach in its efforts to remake the entire world in a liberal mold." For William Wohlforth, Mearsheimer gives us "refreshingly bracing prose whose bluntness cannot conceal the profound learning it conveys," and Christopher Layne writes that the great *Delusion* "Is an important book."

Layne also says that "outstanding books on controversial topics invariably provoke debate," and indeed all our reviewers find the argument flawed on one point or another. Pitts argues that Mearsheimer's portrait of the U.S. as crusading for liberal democracy is inaccurate, exaggerating the degree to which it has sought to establish democratic regimes abroad and underplaying its support for illiberal policies and regimes when these serve American interests. Furthermore, the interest the U.S. serves is not only that of enhancing its power, but of the economic advancement of American capitalism. Snyder's critique is different: that Mearsheimer does not fully elucidate the connections and contradictions between liberalism and nationalism, and that his portrayal of the former misses the ways in which, when properly applied, it can ameliorate the strains of economic change and hardship in a manner that is conducive to international peace. Wohlforth sees important methodological flaws in the argument. Mearsheimer's attempt to establish a causal link between liberalism and American overreach is hindered by his failure to look at the behavior of illiberal regimes, the behavior of states when the relatively permissive conditions that Mearsheimer stresses are absent, and the cases in which the U.S. has not overreached. In a somewhat similar vein, Layne takes issue with Mearsheimer's claim that it is only under the benign conditions of the post-Cold War era that America has acted on its liberal impulses. Instead, "liberal hegemony has been America's overriding grand strategic objective for over a century." Indeed, the Cold War itself was in large part generated by American liberalism, which led U.S. leaders to overestimate the Soviet threat.

Mearsheimer's reply fully engages with the reviewers, going over their responses in detail and explaining why he is not persuaded. The result is an insightful dialogue.

I am sure that whether other readers agree with the reviewers' criticisms or develop ones of their own, they will benefit from engaging with the challenges Mearsheimer has issued in *The Great Delusion*.

Participants:

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982. He graduated from West Point (1970), has a Ph.D. in political science from Cornell University (1981), and has written extensively about security issues and international politics. Among his six books, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001, 2014) won the Joseph Lepgold Book Prize; and *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (with Stephen M. Walt, 2007), made the New York Times bestseller list and has been translated into twenty-four languages. His latest book is *The Great Delusion: Liberal Ideals and International Realities* (2018). He has written numerous articles and op-eds that have appeared in *International Security*, *London Review of Books*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Financial Times*, and *The New York Times*. In 2003, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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 2000-2001 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.

Christopher Layne is University Distinguished Professor of International Affairs, and, Robert M. Gates Chair in National Security, at Texas A&M University. His fields of interest are international relations theory, great power politics, US foreign policy, and grand strategy. Professor Layne has written two books: *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2006), and (with Bradley A. Thayer) *American Empire: A Debate* (Routledge, 2006). His current book project, *After the Fall: International Politics, U.S. Grand Strategy, and the End of the Pax Americana*, is under contract with Yale University Press (working title). Professor Layne has contributed extensively to the debates about international relations theory and American foreign policy in such scholarly and policy journals as *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International History Review*, *Security Studies*, *International Politics*, *Review of International Studies*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *The National Interest*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *World Policy Journal*, and *Orbis*.

Jennifer Pitts is Professor of Political Science and the John U. Nef Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Her new book, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2018), explores European debates over legal relations with extra-European societies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She recently co-edited with, David Armitage, *The Law of Nations in Global History* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

Jack Snyder is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations in the political science department and the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. His books include *Human Rights Futures* (co-edited with Stephen Hopgood and Leslie Vinjamuri, (Cambridge University Press, 2017); *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (W.W. Norton, 2000); *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991). Recent articles include "The Modernization Trap," *The Journal of Democracy*, April 2017, examining populist nationalism, and "The Broken Bargain: How Nationalism Came Back," *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (March/April 2019): 54-60.

William Wohlforth is the Daniel Webster Professor at Dartmouth College, where he teaches in Department of Government. His most recent books are *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (Oxford University Press, 2016), with co-author Stephen G. Brooks, and *The Oxford Handbook of International Security* (Oxford University Press, 2018), co-edited with Alexandra Gheciu. He is currently working on a book on subversion among great powers.

REVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER LAYNE, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* is an important book. In it, Mearsheimer takes on the role of liberalism both as theory of international relations (IR), and as a theory of U. S. foreign policy.¹ In both spheres, he argues—with force and effect—liberalism is trumped by both realism and nationalism. At a time when liberal interventionism is reasserting itself in some quarters of the Trump administration with respect to China, Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea, this book is well-timed and should play a big role in shaping the debate about contemporary American foreign policy.

During his illustrious career Mearsheimer has established himself as one of the leading realist scholars of IR. With his now-classic 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, he planted his banner firmly the commanding heights of structural realism.² However, as close followers of Mearsheimer's work know, he also is influenced by such important (non-structural) realist scholars as Hans Morgenthau, and E. H. Carr.³ In *The Great Delusion*, Mearsheimer engages the long-running—or never-ending—debate between realist and liberal approaches to the study of international politics, and the practice of foreign policy. Or, as it sometimes is framed, the debate between realism and idealism.⁴

Those who know Mearsheimer well will not regard *The Great Delusion* as his final word. There is doubtless much more high impact writing on IR and American foreign policy still to come from him. Yet, as I wrote to William Frucht when I peer reviewed the manuscript of *The Great Delusion* that was submitted to Yale University Press, there is a sense in which this book is a capstone: it “is a summation of an important scholar's accumulated thinking about IR theory and American foreign policy.” In *The Great Delusion*, John Mearsheimer makes it clear—if there was ever any doubt—why he is a realist and not a liberal.⁵

¹ On the use of structural realist IR theory as the basis for theories of foreign policy (or grand strategy), see Colin Elman, “Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?” *Security Studies* 6:1 (Autumn 1996), 7-53.

² John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). The seminal work in the literature of structural realism, or as it sometimes is known, neorealism, is Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

³ John J. Mearsheimer, “Hans Morgenthau and the Iraq War: Realism versus Neo-Conservatism,” *Open Democracy*, 18 May 2005, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/morgenthau_2522jsp/; John J. Mearsheimer, “E. H. Carr Versus Idealism: The Battle Rages On,” *International Relations* 19:2 (June 2005), 139-152; E.H Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964); and Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Random House, 1988). In their book about the influence of the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC) on U. S. foreign policy, Mearsheimer and Walt move away from the systemic (“third image”) structural realism, and take a “second image” (or neoclassical realist) approach to assess how the workings of the U.S. political system affect foreign American foreign policy. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 2007). On neoclassical realism, see Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51:1 (October 1998), 144-172. On the three images of international politics, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

⁴ On the contest between realism and idealism in American foreign policy, see Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994).

⁵ To be clear, Mearsheimer states that *The Great Delusion* is not a blanket rejection of liberalism as a political ideology/philosophy: “It is essential to distinguish the way liberalism operates inside a country from the way it functions in the international system. My views about liberalism are different for each of these realms” (11). As I argue below, it is far from clear that

Mearsheimer's story is simple. Liberalism is a universalistic political philosophy/ideology based on a respect for the (purported) 'inalienable rights' of people everywhere. As it has become commonplace for U.S. presidents of both parties to say, "our (liberal) values are universal."⁶ However, just as Communists did not sit back and wait for what they perceived as the 'historically inevitable' triumph of their cause, American liberals also are loathe to wait passively for their universal values to take root in other countries. Instead, liberal states (or at least the United States) try to hurry along the progressive forces of ('Whig') history by protecting the rights of others when they are suppressed or menaced by 'bad' regimes (that is, those that are governed by autocratic dictatorial, authoritarian, or totalitarian regimes).

Moreover, liberalism is not just about the protection of individuals' inalienable rights. For reasons Mearsheimer unpacks masterfully, in addition to protecting individual rights, liberalism also allegedly conduces to peace in the international system. This is for two reasons. The first is the so-called democratic peace theory, which holds that democracies do not go to war with other democracies.⁷ The second is the purportedly peace-inducing effects of an open international economic system (variously known as free trade, economic interdependence, and globalization), which are more likely to manifest themselves in a world of liberal democracies. Put together, protecting universal inalienable rights, democratic peace, and the pacifying effects of economic openness constitute a compelling rationale for liberal great powers (read: the United States) to aggressively promote—at gunpoint if necessary—the spread of democracy abroad.

Liberalism—at least American-style—leads to the belief that the world is populated by two kinds of states: good states (liberal democracies) and troublemakers (non-democracies). Liberal states—or at least since the early twentieth century, the United States—are hard-wired to embark on wars of regime change to get rid of the latter.⁸ Although Mearsheimer does not explicitly say so, the logic of liberalism is an eliminationist policy toward non-liberal states. As he correctly notes, liberalism's crusading spirit leads to bad foreign policy outcomes because nationalism causes non-liberal states to push back against liberal intervenors.⁹ Here, Mearsheimer echoes Andrew Mack, who observed that nationalism is the fundamental reason that big states lose small wars (counter-insurgencies, wars of national liberation, anti-colonial revolts, etc.).¹⁰ In his explanation of France's defeats in Indochina and Algeria, and the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, Mack noted that local forces of resistance have more staying power than the foreign forces opposing them.¹¹ The balance of resolve favors them for a simple reason: they are fighting for their home territory, and do not have the option of leaving. Local forces of resistance to outside intervention do not need to win on the battlefield to prevail. All they need is to go into the strategic equivalent of University

liberalism in the context of American domestic politics is compatible with "restraint" in U.S. foreign policy.

⁶ In my course on American Foreign Policy, I always ask my students this question: "If American values are universal, why does the U.S. need to fight so many wars to get other people to accept them?"

⁷ The first scholarly challenge to the 'democratic peace theory' was Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant? The Myth of the Democratic Peace" *International Security* 19:2 (Fall 1994), 5-49. Also see, Christopher Layne, "Shell Games and Shallow Gains, and the Democratic Peace," *International History Review* 23:4 (December 2001): 799-813.

⁸ Christopher Layne, "Correspondence: The Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19:4 (Spring 1995): 164-184.

⁹ On this point, Mearsheimer is in good company with such scholars as Ted Galen Carpenter, George F. Kennan, Christopher Layne, Walter A. McDougall, Robert W. Tucker, and Stephen Walt.

¹⁰ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27:2 (January 1975): 175-200.

¹¹ As Edward Gibbon warned in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, nothing is "more averse to nature and reason than to hold in obedience remote countries and foreign nations in opposition to their inclination and interest." Quoted in Christopher Layne, "The Contradictions of George Kennan," *National Interest* 117 (January/February 2012), 69.

of North Carolina basketball coach Dean Smith's 'four corners' stall and wait for the outsiders to grow weary of the conflict and go home.

Outstanding books on controversial topics invariably provoke debate. *The Great Delusion* will be no exception. Although I am broadly sympathetic with Mearsheimer's critique of liberalism as a theory of IR, and as a driver of American foreign policy, his argument can be questioned on several grounds. First, his explanation of 'liberal hegemony' is not on solid ground historically. Second, if anything, Mearsheimer *understates* the pervasive, deep-seated influence that liberalism exercises on American foreign policy. It is far from clear that a liberal America can ever adopt a grand strategy of restraint (whether it is denominated as offshore balancing, strategic independence, or, strategic self-discipline) Third, although Mearsheimer does an excellent job of demonstrating how the democratic peace theory actually spawns regime change wars, he overlooks the fact that economic openness is an important cause of U.S. 'imperial overstretch,'—and, sometimes, war.¹² Fourth, although we both are realists, and students of great power politics, I am troubled by the China policy Mearsheimer advocates in *The Great Delusion*.

In Mearsheimer's view, liberal great powers can only pursue liberal hegemony in a unipolar system. When the international system is bipolar or multipolar, he says (vii, 2, 139-140), a liberal great power must place the imperatives of *realpolitik* and state survival ahead of its ideological ambitions: "A liberal great power operating in either bipolarity or multipolarity cannot pursue liberal hegemony because of the presence of other great powers" (139-140). In his telling, therefore, liberalism did not take over American foreign policy until the end of the Cold War, and the so-called Unipolar Moment.¹³ This is because, he claims, until the Soviet Union collapsed the realist imperatives of the great-power competition with Moscow prevented the United States from pursuing liberal hegemony.

In fact, however, the United States embarked on a policy of liberal hegemony in the early twentieth century—that is, well before the advent of unipolarity. It is America's liberal political culture and ideology—not systemic polarity—that has been the primary driver of the U.S. quest for liberal hegemony. Liberal hegemony has been America's overriding grand strategic objective for over a century. This has important implications for the future. All those who advocate some form of U.S. grand strategic restraint must come to terms with the continuity in America's grand strategic aims—a reflection of the fact that the nation's political culture is interwoven with liberal beliefs. When we understand how long liberalism has been a driving force behind U.S. grand strategy, the magnitude of the task that restrainers face in trying to reorient American foreign policy becomes clear.

Mearsheimer argues that when the Soviet Union imploded, the United States "was so powerful in the aftermath of the Cold War that it could adopt a profoundly liberal foreign policy, commonly referred to as 'liberal hegemony.' The aim of this ambitious strategy is to turn as many states as possible into liberal democracies while also fostering an open international economy and building formidable international institutions. In essence, the United States has sought to remake the world in its own image" (vii). For sure, following the Cold War's end the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations pursued an ambitious set of liberal foreign policy aims. This was nicely captured in the title of the Clinton administration's National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement (enlargement refereeing to the expansion both of NATO, and the 'democratic zone of peace'). During this era, leading scholars like John Ikenberry advocated for a post-Cold War policy of liberal hegemony, while neo-conservatives simultaneously called for the creation of a "new" American empire that muscularly would promote liberal values abroad.¹⁴ Clearly, the post-1989 unipolar world fueled the international ambition of America's foreign policy elite.

¹² The term "imperial overstretch" was coined by historian Paul Kennedy. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

¹³ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs: America and the World* 70:1 (1990/1991): 23-33.

¹⁴ G. John Ikenberry. *Liberal Order and Imperial Ambition: Essays on American Power and International Order* (London: Polity,

However, few students of American diplomatic history would agree with the argument that the post-1989 saliency of liberal ambitions, or even the pursuit of liberal hegemony, constituted a new direction in American foreign policy. The intellectual origins of liberal hegemony—which fuses liberal political philosophy, the evangelizing spirit of Protestantism, notions about American Exceptionalism, and conceptions about American identity (‘the un-Europe’)—are deeply rooted in American political culture and trace back to the colonial era.¹⁵ Until the end of the nineteenth century the melding of these forces propelled America’s expansion across the North American continent. As the twentieth century dawned, the reach of the America’s ideological and geopolitical ambitions expanded dramatically as the U.S. sought to export liberalism abroad. This outward thrust is unsurprising: as rising great powers acquire more economic and military muscle, their international ambitions grow.¹⁶

America was well down the road to liberal hegemony long before the end of the Cold War, and the advent of unipolarity. Here, Mearsheimer’s own previous work provides a clue as to why the United States was able to pursue liberal hegemony under conditions of both multipolarity (1900 to 1945), and bipolarity (1945 to 1989). In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, he introduced the concept of ‘unbalanced’ multipolarity: a system of multiple great powers but one where the relative power of one of them is appreciably greater than that of the others.

President Woodrow Wilson was able to pursue liberal hegemony because, even if the international system was nominally multipolar, during World War I and its aftermath, the United States was incontestably the strongest great power in the system. Indeed, the historian Adam Tooze suggests that at the end of World War I, the historic Europe-centric international system of multiple great powers (multipolarity) already was on the verge of being displaced by a unipolar system dominated by the United States: “The one nation that emerged apparently unscathed and vastly more powerful from the war was the United States. Indeed, so overwhelming was its pre-eminence that it seemed to raise once more the question that had been expelled from the history of Europe in the seventeenth century. Was the United States the universal, world-encompassing empire similar to the one which the Catholic Hapsburgs had once threatened to establish? The question would haunt the century that followed.”¹⁷

2006). For leading neo-conservative arguments, see Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). For an overview of the post-Cold War debate about American Empire, see Christopher Layne and Bradley A. Thayer, *American Empire: A Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁵ Important works include David Hackett Fischer, *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U. S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), Hans Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretative Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Walter A. McDougall, *The Tragedy of U. S. Foreign Policy: How America’s Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter With the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), Anders Stephenson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996), Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in Martin Ridge, ed., *Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin’s Historian of the Frontier* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986).

¹⁶ See, Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 6.

What was incipient in the period from 1917 to 1920 was reality when World War II ended. 1945 was America's *first* unipolar moment. The United States was, as Paul Kennedy, observed "the only country that became richer—in fact, much richer—rather than poorer because of the war."¹⁸ And Robert Gilpin has noted, "In terms of absolute power, the United States, in 1945, greatly surpassed the rest of the world. In addition to her vast industrial capacity, the U.S. virtually monopolized or controlled the three sources of power in the modern world: nuclear weapons, monetary reserves, and petroleum. She alone had the atomic bomb and the knowledge to produce what at the time was called the absolute weapon. American factories produced over 50 percent of the world's output, and America held approximately 50 percent of the world's monetary reserves."¹⁹ It was America's commanding power at World War II's end that allowed it to build the postwar liberal order—which, though fraying, is still in place today—based on democracy, economic openness, and interlocking security and economic institutions (NATO, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization).²⁰ At a time when the future of the post-1945 'liberal rules based international order' is a topic of intense speculation, it is a bit jarring to be told by Mearsheimer that United States was only able to pursue liberal hegemony after 1989.²¹

America's liberal ideology did not change when the United States emerged as a great power in the early twentieth century; it already was firmly in place. What changed was American power relative to the rest of the world, which gave the U.S. the means to export its liberal views aggressively.²² By 1898, the United States had embarked on its quest for liberal hegemony. First, there was the annexation of the Philippines following the Spanish-American War, which can be seen as America's first attempt at liberal social engineering abroad.²³ Then, promising to "teach them to elect good men," President Woodrow Wilson previewed in the Caribbean and Mexico the crusading liberal ethos that eventually would power the United States into World War I.

In 1917 the United States plunged headlong into the quest for liberal hegemony when it entered World War I. Wilson articulated the American liberal view of international politics when he argued that (purportedly) non-democratic governments like Wilhelmine Germany were the cause of the war.²⁴ Indeed, America's entry into the war was a textbook illustration—and confirmation—of Mearsheimer's point (2) that the eliminationist logic of liberalism leads "straight to an active policy of regime change, whose goal is to topple autocrats and put liberal democracies in their place." As the

¹⁸ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 358.

¹⁹ Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 103-104. For a similar picture of the United States' economic, military and financial dominance at the end of World War II, see Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 357-361.

²⁰ On the post-1945 construction of the liberal world order, see G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²¹ For arguments that Donald Trump is undermining the post-1945 liberal international order that has well-served U.S. interests, see Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018); Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

²² A point nicely made in McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*.

²³ On the annexation of the Philippines, see Stephen Kinzer, *The True Flag: Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the Birth of American Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2017); H.W. Brands, *Bound to Empire: The United States and the Philippines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random House, 1989).

²⁴ For the argument that Wilhelmine Germany was, in fact, a democracy, see Layne, "Shell Games and Shallow Gains." Mearsheimer also makes the point that Wilhelmine Germany was a democracy (195).

diplomatic historian Akira Iriye has written, Wilson believed that Germany was a “menace to world peace and civilization.”²⁵ For Wilson, Iriye argues, “So long as German militarism remained, there could be no secure peace,” and “only a democratic [German] government could be counted upon to pursue a peaceful foreign policy.”²⁶ For Wilson, then, the war against Wilhelmine Germany was all about regime change.

The Wilsonian project, however, encompassed far more than just ridding Germany of the Kaiser, and the Prussian Junkers. The 1917 Russian Revolution, and the subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power in November of that year, were additional impetus to America’s pursuit of liberal hegemony.²⁷ As evidenced by Wilson’s policies in Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America, American liberalism abhorred social revolutions abroad.²⁸ But the Bolshevik Revolution was an order of magnitude different from the revolutionary upheavals in America’s backyard. Unlike those localized affairs, the Bolshevik revolution challenged liberalism’s core tenet: its claim to be a politico-economic model for the world. Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks had their own—very different—universal vision of international order. Inevitably, these competing ideologies clashed—a clash that became literal when American forces intervened against the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War.²⁹ It was under Wilson that the U.S. foreign policy establishment first came to the conclusion that the extirpation of Soviet Communism was a precondition for the safety of American liberalism.

The intellectual foundations of liberal hegemony emerged fully formed from World War I. Wilson sought to guarantee American security in the post-World War I era by constructing an international order based on the League of Nations, collective security, democracy, and economic openness, which was posited by liberals as an inhibitor of war and facilitator of peace.³⁰ Wilson’s vision of world order was directed even more at protecting liberalism from the ideological contagion of Communism than it was at preventing a resurgence of German power. As the historian N. Gordon Levin observed, Wilson sought “the attainment of a peaceful liberal capitalist world order under international law, safe from both traditional imperialism and revolutionary socialism, within whose confines a missionary America could find moral and economic preeminence.”³¹ Wilson’s pursuit of American liberal hegemony laid the intellectual and ideological foundations for the United States’ post-World War II policy toward the Soviet Union.

There is a great deal of mythology that surrounds the Cold War. The post-World War II world, it is said, was bipolar; comprised, that is, of two superpowers. But the Soviet Union never was the superpower equal of the United States. At its peak, the Soviet Union’s GDP was barely forty percent of America’s. Throughout the Cold War, the only area in which the Soviets attained parity with the United States was in intercontinental ballistic missiles. (Cold War wags got it backwards: in truth, Upper Volta was the Soviet Union without missiles). Although it was depicted as such, in the years immediately

²⁵ Akira Iriye, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations, Volume III: The Globalizing of America, 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41.

²⁶ Iriye, 41.

²⁷ Under the Julian calendar still in use at the time, the coming to power of the Bolshevik’s was commemorated in the Soviet Union as Red October.

²⁸ This point is developed in Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*.

²⁹ See James Carl Nelson, *The Polar Bear Expedition: The Heroes of America’s Forgotten Invasion of Russia, 1918-1919* (New York: William Morrow, 2019).

³⁰ Classic IR theory critiques of Wilson’s vision of international order include: Inis L. Clause, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962); Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*.

³¹ N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), vii.

following World War II, the Soviet Union was not a military “threat” to Western Europe (the danger of subversion by Communist parties in France and Italy, however, was real).³² Recall that the Soviet Union suffered some 27 million dead fighting Nazi Germany, and also suffered massive destruction of population centers, factories, farms, and its transportation network. When World War II ended the Soviet Union was incapable of achieving hegemony in Europe, or Eurasia—the only kind of a threat would have (arguably) required American counter-balancing.³³ In *The Great Delusion*, Mearsheimer scores some telling points about the dangers of “threat inflation” (180-181). The views of the Soviet Union that came to be held in official Washington in the aftermath of World War II (and, indeed, throughout the Cold War) prove his point. America’s liberal ideology inflated Washington’s perception of the Soviet ‘threat.’

The Cold War as we know it was not inevitable. As Deborah Welch Larson observed, “Within a bipolar structure of power the United States and the Soviet Union could have defined their relationship in a variety of ways.”³⁴ Postwar relations between Washington and Moscow might have evolved in the more traditional mold of great power relations, in which competition is dampened by mutual restraint, legitimate security interests are accommodated, and spheres of interest are recognized. In the 1945-47 period, some U. S. officials and foreign policy commentators indeed urged that Washington adhere to traditional approaches to great power diplomacy its dealings with the Moscow.³⁵ Their advice was not taken. Why not? Why did the Cold War degenerate into the virulent ideological cum-geopolitical struggle that it became? America’s liberal hegemonic ambitions are a big part of the answer.

In Washington, perceptions of the Soviet threat were colored by liberal ideology, which views international politics as a morality play that pits ‘good’ states (liberal democracies) against ‘bad’ states. A good example of this kind of thinking occurs in the work of the historian John Lewis Gaddis. He places the blame for the Cold War squarely on the nature of the Soviet domestic political system. As long as Joseph Stalin was running the Soviet Union,” he says, the Cold War was “inevitable.”³⁶ However, as Daniel Yergin has pointed out, Moscow’s foreign and domestic policies were linked only tenuously. “The USSR,” Yergin observes, “behaved as a traditional great power, intent upon aggrandizing itself along the lines of historic Russian goals, favoring spheres of influence, secret treaties, Great Power consortiums, and other methods and mores from the ‘old diplomacy.’”³⁷ Having seen its territory invaded by Germany twice in less than thirty years, following World War II

³² See, Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War,” *American Historical Review* 89:2 (April 1984), 359-362. For the argument that Leffler underestimates the Soviet threat, see Marc Trachtenberg, “Melvyn Leffler and the Origins of the Cold War,” *Orbis* 39:3 (Summer 1995), 439-455.

³³ The overriding imperative of America’s postwar West European policy was the establishment of U.S. liberal hegemony, not concerns that the Soviet Union could attain hegemony on the Continent. This is developed in Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³⁴ Deborah Welch Larson, *The Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 19.

³⁵ Robert L. Messer, “Paths Not Taken: The United States Department of State and Alternatives to Containment, 1945-46,” *Diplomatic History* 1:4 (Fall 1977): 297-319; Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U. S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1947).

³⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 292. Gaddis argues that the combination of Stalin’s brutality and Communist ideology explains the Cold War, and that Stalin’s foreign policies cannot be distinguished from his domestic policies, 289-291, 293-294. The Russian historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov have a somewhat different take. They argue that Stalin’s personality and diplomatic methods were at cross-purposes with his hope of avoiding confrontation with the United States. See Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 24, 47, 74.

³⁷ Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,

Moscow sought to establish a defensive buffer zone in East Central Europe to protect itself from renewed aggression by a resurgent Germany. Moscow believed that its security concerns required it to control the internal politics of its East Central European neighbors. In other words, the Soviet Union wanted an exclusive—or ‘closed’—sphere of influence in the region. This was unacceptable to Washington.

While purporting to acknowledge that the Soviets had legitimate security interests in East Central Europe, the U.S. insisted that the Soviets allow free elections, open trade, and liberalism’s other accouterments to take hold in the region. The Soviet Union believed that America’s liberal ambitions in East Central Europe would undermine its grip on the region, and compromise its security. Washington, on the other hand, rejected the idea of a closed Soviet sphere as an affront to its liberal, universalistic ideology. American policymakers believed that the United States’ security interests required both the establishment of democratic governments in East Central Europe, and the region’s openness to the liberal capitalist postwar international order that the U. S. sought to construct.³⁸

American liberalism was the catalyst for the Cold War. U.S. postwar policy in East Central Europe was not fundamentally determined by tangible geopolitical and strategic factors. Rather, it was driven primarily by liberal ideology. U.S. policymakers “wanted a world safe both for liberal democracy and liberal capitalism,” and, therefore, it was—or so U.S. policymakers claimed—for the ‘best of reasons’ that the United States opposed Soviet attempts to close off East Central Europe.³⁹ When the Soviet Union resisted America’s attempt to keep East Central Europe open to U. S. ideological and economic penetration, Washington interpreted that as evidence of Soviet “aggression.”⁴⁰ Liberal ideology rendered U.S. policymakers incapable of understanding, or accommodating, the Soviet Union’s security interests in East Central Europe. World War II’s outcome—which saw a vast accretion of U.S. relative power—emboldened a powerful America to pursue its liberal hegemonic ambitions. As Daniel Yergin has written, at the end of the war “American leaders no longer simply found dictatorship abhorrent; they felt *responsible* for what happened all over the world. They were gripped again by messianic liberalism, the powerful urge to reform the world that has been called Wilsonianism.”⁴¹

Liberalism’s eliminationist impulse also was manifest in America’s early postwar policy, the roots of which can be traced back to Wilson’s hostility to the Bolsheviks. As N. Gordon Levin and Ronald Powaski each have argued, from the time of the Russian revolution American policymakers were inclined to regard the Soviet regime as fundamentally illegitimate.⁴² By 1946, this perception had morphed into a consensus view in Washington that “the very existence of the Soviet Union

1977), 12.

³⁸ Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, 415.

³⁹ Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, 84.

⁴⁰ Illustrative is a spring 1946 memorandum written by H. Freeman (“Doc”) Matthews, chief of the State Department’s West European Division. “As long as present Soviet policies and attitude in regard to other countries remain unchanged,” Matthews wrote, “the U. S. must accept the fact that it is confronted with the threat of an expanding totalitarian state which continues to believe and act on the belief that the world is divided into two irreconcilably hostile camps, i.e., Soviet and non-Soviet.” He postulated that Soviet expansion would be “continuous and unlimited,” and rejected the view that “Soviet actions are motivated primarily by a legitimate desire to obtain security for the Soviet Union...” Instead, he asserted, “Soviet expansion aims are unlimited and not confined to areas of immediate concern to the Soviet Union.” Memorandum by the Acting Department of State Member (Matthews) to the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee, April 1, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1946*, Volume I, 1167.

⁴¹ Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, 84 (emphasis in original).

⁴² Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*; Ronald E. Powaski, *The Cold War: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1917-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

threatened American security.”⁴³ From there it was just a short step to seeking regime change in the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ Until the early 1950s, U.S. policymakers hoped that American power, combined with the Soviet Union’s internal weaknesses, would enable the U.S. to undermine the Soviet regime. Indeed, they did more than just hope: they actively sought to bring about its disappearance.⁴⁵

The goals of U. S. policy were outlined in NSC 20/4 According to that document, America’s *peacetime* objectives vis-a-vis the Soviet Union were: “To reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations,” and to “bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the government in power in Russia, to conform with the purposes and principles set forth in the UN charter.”⁴⁶ As Gregory Mitrovich has demonstrated, the policy objectives set out in NSC 20/4 were not just rhetorical: NSC 20/4 “focused...on the steps necessary to eliminate the Soviet threat altogether.”⁴⁷

Discerning readers will be struck by the parallels between America’s post-World War II liberal hegemonic policy toward the Soviet Union and East Central Europe, and Washington’s post-1989 policies toward Russia—first with respect to NATO expansion, and, more recently, Ukraine.⁴⁸ Mearsheimer has established himself as a trenchant critic of Washington’s Ukraine policy. As he observes, the U.S. and the EU “aim to spread Western values and promote liberal democracy in countries formerly under Soviet control” (174)—which is exactly what the United States aimed to do in East Central Europe (and the Soviet Union itself) after the Cold War. This policy makes it difficult to have a sensible relationship with Russia. And it illustrates the how liberalism’s built-in tendency toward crusading undercuts the possibility of diplomatic

⁴³ Yergin, *Shattered Peace*, 244.

⁴⁴ On the offensive, even aggressive, goals of America’s Soviet policy in the late 1940s to the early 1950s, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Cold War, and the Truman Administration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), Gregory F. Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), and Peter Grose, *Operation Rollback: America’s Secret War Behind the Iron Curtain* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

⁴⁵ The U.S. had to give up these objectives once the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons.

⁴⁶ NSC 20/4, “Report to the President by the National Security Council,” *FRUS 1948*, Vol I, Pt. 2:663.

⁴⁷ Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, 36. NSC 68 - which stated that American freedom was challenged by the idea of “slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin” - was the high point of U. S. eliminationist thinking about the Soviet Union. NSC-68, “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” *FRUS 1950*, I: 235-292. Kennan is widely credited as devising a defensive U. S. containment strategy of waiting patiently for the Soviet Union to collapse from the weight of its own internal contradictions. Yet, there was another side to Kennan. He played a key role in the design and implementation of the U.S. strategy to roll-back Soviet power in East Central Europe, and to bring about the collapse of the Soviet regime itself. See Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, 28 From 1946 to 1949 Kennan’s role in America’s Soviet policy was protean. The definitive work on Kennan is John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). See Christopher Layne, “The Contradictions of George F. Kennan,” *National Interest* 117 (January/February 2012): 67-78.

⁴⁸ Perceptive observers understood that NATO expansion would be viewed by Moscow as a threat to its security interests, and thus poison U.S-Russian relations. For criticisms of NATO expansion, see George F. Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>, Michael Mandelbaum; “Preserving the New Peace: The Case Against NATO Expansion,” *Foreign Affairs* 74:3 (May-June 1995): 9-13, Christopher Layne, “U. S. Hegemony and the Perpetuation of NATO,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23:3 (2000): 59-91, Layne, “Why Die for Gdansk? NATO Enlargement and American Security Interests” in Ted Galen Carpenter and Barbara Conry, eds., *NATO Enlargement: Illusions and Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1998), and Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, “A New Grand Strategy,” *The Atlantic* (January 2002).

accommodation with non-liberal great powers; specifically, by ruling out the possibility of agreement on spheres of influence.

These days, American policymakers like to talk about the ‘post-Soviet space.’ This phrase conveys more than a hint of historic myopia. After all, the post-Soviet space is also the *pre*-Soviet space: territory that for centuries belonged to the Russian Empire. It is hardly to be wondered that Moscow—for reasons of security, prestige, and history—feels threatened (and aggrieved) by NATO expansion into the Baltics, and by U.S. (and European) efforts to pry Ukraine out of its orbit. But then, the United States frowns on the sphere of influence claims advanced by *other* great powers. As Secretary of State Cordell Hull declared in 1943, following World War II, “There will no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, for balance of power, or any other of the separate alliances through which in the unhappy past the nations strove to safeguard their security or promote their interest.”⁴⁹ Of course not. American foreign policymakers regarded the entire world as a U.S. sphere of influence, and opposed any attempts to fence-off parts of the world from the ideological and economic penetration of American liberalism. Nothing has changed in this respect.

U.S. policy toward Western Europe in World War II’s aftermath is another example of Washington’s pursuit of liberal hegemony. As Mearsheimer points out, liberal hegemony is based on three pillars: (liberal) democracy, economic openness, and international institutions (188). These three pillars constitute the foundation of the liberal international order that the U.S. constructed following the Second World War.⁵⁰ With the Marshall Plan, the U.S. sought to promote Western Europe’s economic recovery, and, by so doing, create the conditions for liberal democracy to take root firmly in postwar Western Europe. By creating conditions of ‘stable abundance’ in postwar Western Europe, the Marshall Plan aimed to overcome the deep political and ideological cleavages that had roiled politics in interwar Europe.⁵¹ In rebuilding war-shattered Western Europe, American policymakers self-consciously aimed at transplanting much of the New Deal to the Continent.⁵² As the historian Alan Milward has written, with the Marshall Plan, U.S. policymakers expected that once Western Europe recovered economically, “a set of political and social values would emerge akin to those in the United States.”⁵³

When World War II ended, Washington also aimed at transforming Western Europe’s system of national economies by creating a large, integrated market in the region. American policy was driven partly by economic efficiency concerns, but even more importantly, it was motivated by the belief that economic interdependence on the Continent would banish the prospect of future European wars (especially between historic rivals France and Germany). To accomplish this goal, the United States pushed the West Europeans to institutionalize their economic cooperation by creating the European Coal and Steel Community, which was the forerunner of today’s European Union.

The Cold War came to be overlaid on America’s postwar European policies of promoting liberal democracy, economic integration, and institutions. However, these goals pre-existed the Cold War and would have been pursued by Washington

⁴⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, Conferences at Malta and Yalta*, Briefing Book Paper: “American Policy Toward Spheres of Influence,” n.d., <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Malta/d104>.

⁵⁰ The postwar liberal international order reflected the ambition of American liberalism to create an Open Door world. See Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*.

⁵¹ See Michael Hogan, *The Marshall Plan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Alan Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984).

⁵² Hogan, *The Marshall Plan*.

⁵³ Milward, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, 60.

even if there had been no Cold War.⁵⁴ “American leaders had goals besides Communist containment,” the historian Michael Hogan observed, “goals that would have shaped their diplomacy regardless of the perceived Communist menace.”⁵⁵ Although today the rise of nationalism, and populism have cast a shadow over Europe’s future, America’s post-World War II policy of liberal hegemony created the conditions for Western Europe to enjoy some seven decades of unprecedented peace, prosperity, and political stability.

Liberal hegemony’s fingerprints were all over American foreign policy during the Cold War. The Vietnam War is illustrative. As Patrick Hatcher demonstrated in his important book, *Suicide of an Elite*, for the Johnson administration, and the U.S. foreign policy establishment, Vietnam was about far more than just anti-Communist containment.⁵⁶ Rather, they viewed Vietnam as a crucial ideological showdown between two models of political and economic development: liberalism vs. Communism. In Washington, Vietnam thus came to be regarded as a contest the U.S. could not afford to lose. But it did. Vietnam is also important in another respect: it illustrates an overlooked aspect of liberalism’s claim that economic interdependence causes peace.

Mearsheimer does an excellent job of knocking down the ‘interdependence leads to peace’ argument. But he could have pushed his critique a step further. There is historical evidence that far from being a cause of peace, economic interdependence is a generator of overseas military commitments and—sometimes—war. International economic openness occurs *only* when a hegemonic power acts deliberately to establish, and maintain, the kind of stable international security order that is needed for economic interdependence to take root and flourish.⁵⁷ An open international economic system requires the following: an absence of geopolitical turbulence in vital core regions; the existence of stable governments that will keep domestic economies open to foreign trade and investment; secure trade routes; and access to—and stability in—the peripheries. The *perceived* interdependence of core and periphery causes the continual expansion of the liberal hegemon’s security commitments. Both Britain (during its imperial and hegemonic heyday), and the United States, have had to deal with problem of the ‘turbulent frontier.’ This linkage between core and periphery explains how the U.S. became entangled in Indochina—a region in which it had no intrinsic strategic or economic interests

Liberal hegemony requires the United States to guarantee that its ‘allies’ in the geopolitical core have access to markets and raw materials in the periphery. This dynamic explains how America came to be embroiled in Vietnam. The U.S. had no direct interests in Indochina and Southeast Asia following World War II. However, its West European allies (Britain, France, and the Netherlands) did have important economic stakes in the region.⁵⁸ More importantly—as a result of

⁵⁴ There is abundant evidence that American liberal hegemonic policies in postwar Western Europe were independent of the Cold War. The United States would have pursued them even if there had been no Cold War because they were necessary to create the postwar liberal international order that was America’s overriding policy objective. See, Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, Chapters 2 and 4.

⁵⁵ Michael J. Hogan, “Paths to Plenty: Marshall Planners and the Debate over European Integration,” *Pacific Historical Review* 35 (August 1984), 338

⁵⁶ Patrick Hatcher, *Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists and Vietnam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

⁵⁷ As Robert Gilpin observes, “An economic system... does not arise spontaneously owing to the operation of an invisible hand and in the absence of an exercise of power. Rather, every economic system rests on a particular political order, and its nature cannot be understood aside from politics.” Gilpin, *U. S. Power and the Multinational Corporation*, 41. Gilpin also comments that economic interdependence is “not self-sustaining, but is maintained only through the actions...of the dominant powers” (85).

⁵⁸ On how U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was driven by the region’s importance to the West Europeans, as well as Japan, see Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 49-69.

American policy—postwar Japan came to have important economic links to Southeast Asia. It was the need to defend its allies' access to Southeast Asia that dragged the United States into the conflict in Indochina.⁵⁹

When the Cold War deepened, the U.S. determined that its strategic interests required it to promote Japan's economic recovery.⁶⁰ Prewar Japan had depended on China and Manchuria for both raw materials and export markets but Japanese access was shut-off when the Chinese Communist Party prevailed in China's civil war. To compensate, Washington fostered the reorientation of Japan's economy toward Southeast Asia, and its economic interdependence with that region.⁶¹ Washington's policy, however, was jeopardized by the conflicts in Malaya and Indochina, which posed the risk of Japan being cut off economically from the region. Thus, although Southeast Asia was "at best of secondary significance" to the U.S. economically, it became involved in the region in order to insure that it was kept open economically to Japan.⁶² As the historian Melvyn P. Leffler has written, U.S. policymakers believe that "core and periphery were interdependent. If Indochina fell and if it had a domino effect on its neighbors, Japan's industrial heartland might be co-opted [by the Sino-Soviet bloc]"⁶³ The view that America must defend economic openness, and guarantee its allies' access to the periphery did not vanish with the Cold War. Since 1989, official U. S. policy documents have been littered with statements to this effect.⁶⁴

The Great Delusion will provoke intense debate among IR theorists—especially between liberals and realists. But it will also add fuel to an already brewing discussion about the future direction of American grand strategy. Here, the battle lines are a bit murkier, pitting not only realists against liberals, but also realists against realists. Indeed, even restrainers against restrainers. Mearsheimer has a well-earned reputation as an uber-realist. His world is a dark one, several shades darker than that of other hard-edged realists, and filled with the omnipresent risk of strife and danger. In Mearsheimer's world, great powers always have to fear for their survival. One need not buy-in to theories about the "obsolescence of war" to find this

⁵⁹ As Robert Pollard and Samuel Wells observed, "the origins of U. S. involvement in the Indochinese quagmire lay less in direct American economic interests in the region than in political obligations to allied countries." Robert A. Pollard and Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "1945-1960: The Era of American Economic Hegemony," in William Becker and Samuel F. Wells, eds., *Economics and World Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 350.

⁶⁰ This paragraph is based on: David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); William S. Borden, *The Pacific Alliance: United States Foreign Economic Policy and Japanese Trade Recovery, 1947-1955* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Steven Hugh Lee, *Outposts of Empire: Korea, Vietnam, and the Origins of the Cold War in Asia, 1949-1954* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Ronald L. McGlothen, *Controlling the Waves: Dean Acheson and U. S. Foreign Policy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Michael Schaller, "Securing the Great Crescent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia," *Journal of American History* 69:2 (Summer 1982), 392-414; Howard B. Schonberger, "The Cold War and the American Empire in Asia," *Radical History Review* 33 (1985), 139-154; Akio Watanabe, "Southeast Asia in U.S.-Japan Relations," in Akira Iriye and Warren I. Cohen, eds., *The United States and Japan in the Postwar World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 36-60.

⁶¹ PPS 51, "United States Policy Toward Southeast Asia," May 19, 1949, in Anna Kasten Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers*, Vol. III (New York: Garland, 1983), 33-35. In this document (54), the Policy Planning Staff argued that the U. S. "should seek vigorously to develop the economic interdependence between SEA [Southeast Asia], as a supplier of raw materials, and Japan" and Western Europe (and India).

⁶² PPS 51, 38.

⁶³ Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 479.

⁶⁴ See Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 130-133. Also see Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan's remarks at the June 2019 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2019>.

view anachronistic.⁶⁵ During the heyday of multipolar great power politics in Europe (1500 to 1945), survival sometimes was a concern (though more for smaller states than for great powers). But the nuclear revolution, and changes in military technology, have changed the nature of war. The days of big land armies invading and conquering other great powers appear to be over. Moreover, there have always been ameliorating factors—especially geography—that have reduced the incidence and intensity of great power conflict.⁶⁶ In today’s world the only truly ‘existential threat’ to a great power is the risk that it could blunder into a nuclear war. And, to be clear, there is one respect in which ‘American Exceptionalism’ holds: since it became a great power in the early twentieth century, the United States has been the most secure great power in history.⁶⁷

Mearsheimer casts himself as an advocate of ‘restraint.’ And, as already noted, in *The Great Delusion*, he is an insightful critic of dangers of ‘threat inflation.’ Yet his warnings about threat of inflation, and his advocacy of U.S. grand strategic restraint, collide head-on with his hyper-muscular version of realism. For example, he argues that “Realism dictates that the United States should seek to remain the most powerful state on the planet. . . and make sure that no other power dominates its region” (223). Moreover, he writes that the U.S. “*must* prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon in Asia.” (228, emphasis added). Mearsheimer’s policy recommendations will not strike many readers as the counsel of restraint.

For some, the call for the United States to remain the most powerful state in the international system may resonate. But many realists will question the implications of such a policy. After all, there is a deep strain of American realism that is Lippmannesque. As Walter Lippmann wrote, “Foreign policy, consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power.”⁶⁸ One must wonder whether going forward, the U.S. will be able to afford a blank check policy with respect to defense spending, which is what it would take to for the U.S. to indisputably remain the world’s number one power. Given America’s declining power, is this goal even attainable—or attainable at an affordable cost (socially, economically, and politically)? What about the risks of ‘imperial overstretch’ inherent in a policy of maintaining unchallenged U.S. primacy. And how would such a strategy reconcile the need to allocate always scarce resources between domestic needs and the pursuit of American dominance? Would pursuing the aim of preserving America’s position as the world’s most powerful state increase the risk of future great power war by causing other states to push-back against U. S. predominance? Would such a policy have the boomerang effect of undermining the economic strength on which American power ultimately rests? In short, the question must be asked as to whether pursuing the goal of being ‘the most powerful state on the planet’ will make the United States less secure (and less prosperous) rather than more secure, and, indeed, whether it is a realist policy—realistic—at all.

There are other serious problems with Mearsheimer’s policy prescription with respect to China. As set out in *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, rising powers seek to attain hegemony in their own backyards. This is precisely what a rising China is seeking to do. An American policy that seeks to frustrate China is a recipe for Sino-American conflict. Fear about China becoming a regional hegemon in itself is actually a form of threat inflation. How exactly would Chinese hegemony in East Asia actually threaten the U.S.? In *The Great Delusion* Mearsheimer does not really say. But based on his previous work, we can infer he would say the threat is that a Eurasian hegemon could draw upon the area’s resources to develop enough capability to threaten the U.S. in the Western hemisphere. This, of course is a long-standing American grand strategic

⁶⁵ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁶⁶ For example, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978), 167-214, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Security Seeking Under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security*, 30:2 (Winter 2000/2001), 167-214.

⁶⁷ I will develop the argument in this, and the following paragraphs in my forthcoming book with Yale University Press, which has the working title “After the Fall: International Politics, U. S. Grand Strategy, and the End of the Pax *Americana*.”

⁶⁸ Walter Lippmann, *U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943).

nightmare based on a Mackindersque view of geopolitics.⁶⁹ But it is also one that ceased to be relevant or realistic (if it ever was) with the dawn of the nuclear revolution.⁷⁰ In the face of a militarily potent, nuclear-armed America, even if China someday gains hegemony over all of Eurasia, its fleet will not be sailing into San Francisco Bay, and its armies will not be landing on Malibu beach.⁷¹

‘Restraint’ is not a new concept. It has deep roots as an American foreign policy tradition. It extends back at least as far as the anti-imperialists who opposed America’s annexation of the Philippines, and includes the realists who opposed the Cold War’s globalization and militarization, the Vietnam War, and those who have opposed the American misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. This tradition of restraint has been based on concerns for matching ends and means, and resources and commitments. It is a foreign policy tradition that has counseled prudence and the moderation of America’s foreign policy ambitions. It is a tradition that leaves open the possibility of accommodating the interests of rival great powers. After all, as Lippmann wrote:

The history of diplomacy is the history of relations among rival powers, which did not enjoy political intimacy, and did not respond to appeals to common purposes. Nevertheless, there have been settlements. Some of them did not last very long. Some of them did. For a diplomat to think that rival and unfriendly powers cannot be brought to a settlement is to forget what diplomacy is about. There would be little for diplomats to do if the world consisted of partners, enjoying political intimacy, and responding to common appeals.⁷²

This is, to be sure, a time of renewed great power competition. But there is a big difference between competition and confrontation.

At a time when the United States and China seem to be on a collision course, there is a need to think hard about Mearsheimer’s vision of realism, and the policy prescriptions he offers. The Sino-American great power rivalry is not ‘existential.’ It is not about survival (at least, as long as Beijing and Washington manage to avoid a real—as opposed to a trade—war). Rather, the stakes are status, prestige, and the shaping of the next international order. Instead of attempting to stifle China’s rise (which appears to be the goal of some Trump administration officials), the United States should be looking for ways to accommodate it. The recent centenary of the Great War produced an outpouring of reconsideration of the war’s causes, and lessons. The most important lesson from World War I is that unless a declining power can make room for a rising rival, war is the result.⁷³ While important, the issues at the core of the Sino-American relationship are the kind

⁶⁹ The early twentieth century British geographer and strategist Sir Halford Mackinder famously argued that if any great power dominated the European/Eurasian “heartland,” it would be able to gain global hegemony. See Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23:4, (April 1904), 421-437

⁷⁰ For the argument that nuclear weapons rendered obsolete traditional balance of power calculations and American fears of a European (or Eurasian) hegemon, see Robert W. Tucker, *The New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

⁷¹ Mearsheimer and I have long differed on the nature of the U.S. world role. He says the United States is a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, but an offshore balancer in Eurasia. That is, the U.S. stays out of Eurasian conflicts unless there is a danger of a single power gaining hegemony in Eurasia. See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. I argue that, since World War II, the United States has established its extra-regional hegemony in the three parts of the world that matter most to it: Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. See, Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; Layne, “The Poster Child for Offensive Realism: America as Global Hegemon,” *Security Studies* 12:2 (Winter 2002/2003), 120-164.

⁷² Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper, 1947), 60.

⁷³ See Christopher Layne, “The Sound of Distant Thunder: The Pre-World War I Anglo-German Rivalry as a Model for Sino-American Relations in the Early Twenty-First Century,” in Asle Toje, ed., *Will China’s Rise be Peaceful? Security, Stability, and Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Layne, “Sleepwalking with Beijing,” *National Interest* 137 (May/June 2015): 37-45. These were based on a paper I presented at the Norwegian Nobel Institute’s Summer 2014 Symposium, the topic of which was Will China’s Rise

about which it should be possible to strike reasonable bargains. At least it would be if American liberalism does not get in the way. As it is likely to do.

Liberalism is the most potent generator of American hubris and overreaching. As I argued in *The Peace of Illusions*, liberalism is America's own distinctive 'myth of empire.' This is evident today in the attitudes of America's foreign policy elite toward China. For them, it seems that the real 'threat' to the United States is not the rise of Chinese military—or even economic—power. Rather, it is the 'threat' to America's identity—and the asserted universality of its model—by a non-democratic, state capitalist China.⁷⁴ China is a problem for American liberal internationalists not because of its policies with respect to human rights (what Mearsheimer describes as liberalism's concern for inalienable rights everywhere) but because it taps into their deepest fear: that a powerful non-liberal state will be able to close off the world (or at least its key regions) from ideological and economic penetration by the United States. This fear is inextricably rooted in American liberalism, and explains why the United States has such a difficult time co-existing with non-liberal states. The last thing we should want is for the Sino-American relationship to degenerate into a new, highly ideological Cold War. Yet, that is the outcome to which American liberalism is likely to lead. American liberalism looks to be a big driver of Sino-American tension, and an obstacle to accommodation between the two powers. Where that leaves us remains to be seen. But John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion* will focus attention on this issue and on the question of liberalism's influence—for good or ill—on American foreign policy.

be Peaceful? For the argument that Britain's failure to accommodate the rise of Wilhelmine Germany was an important cause of World War I, see David Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered: Germany and the World Order from 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). On the Sino-American relationship, also see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can China and America Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

⁷⁴ Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Center, 2004).

REVIEW BY JENNIFER PITTS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

John Mearsheimer argues that American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been driven, with disastrous consequences, by the project of liberal hegemony, which he describes as bent on spreading democracy, protecting human rights, and “doing social engineering on a global scale” (231). Such a project may be what some self-described liberals would like United States foreign policy to be, and would like to think it has been. But it is a poor description of the actual goals of American foreign policy over the last twenty-five years. Mearsheimer’s alarm at the damage inflicted by U.S. conduct around the world, and especially in the Middle East, is bracing and salutary. He is surely right that those who delude themselves into believing that their violence has a moral purpose can be especially dangerous. The book’s potentially robust prescriptions, however, are hampered by its diagnostic shortcomings. This is a realist account of recent American foreign policy that is often unrealistic.

During the Cold War, as Mearsheimer notes, American foreign policy routinely involved toppling democratically elected leaders and helping to install or prop up authoritarians: Iran in 1953, Congo in 1961, Chile in 1973, to mention just a few. U.S. efforts to spread constitutional democracy abroad during the period were inconsistent at best and accompanied by support for racialized international hierarchy. Continuities in such liberal illiberalism, in fact, stretch back through American history and to British imperial policy in the nineteenth century, as Jeanne Morefield showed powerfully in *Empires without Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). They have continued throughout the post-Cold-War period. The war in Afghanistan has lasted 18 years, with a peak of 100,000 U.S. troops in 2010-2011. Today there are nearly 800 American military bases across the world, in more than 70 countries. More than 170,000 U.S. military personnel are deployed overseas.¹ There are many reasons to criticize this massive, indeed imperial, global military presence. But if we understand the reason for it as idealistic democracy promotion, we are hampered in our ability to identify the actual causes of the militarism and therefore to criticize it effectively.

Mearsheimer’s picture of crusading liberal imperialism simply does not capture the policies of successive post-Cold-War U.S. administrations. President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, the book’s prime example of the policy of liberal hegemony, may have been dressed up with talk of installing democracy, but nothing in American actions during the invasion and the war or its aftermath gave any reason to believe that the Bush administration was going about installing democracy with any seriousness at all. Even the rhetorical dressing for the war as a democracy-spreading project was thin and half-hearted. The war did have a number of other aims and benefits for various American players. It was profitable for cronies of Vice President Dick Cheney. It created a rally-round-the-flag effect that helped the approval ratings of the younger Bush, who came into office as a remarkably unpopular president, installed by a bare Supreme Court majority in the wake of an extraordinarily contentious election, and whose presidency was dogged by charges of illegitimacy. The war distracted Americans from Bush’s failure to heed warnings by his own intelligence agencies during his first nine months in office about the forces that were to unleash the 9/11 attacks. It was also seen as an effort to protect oil supplies, a longstanding driver of U.S. and European policy in the Middle East and one Mearsheimer supports (222).

Human rights promotion had next to nothing to do with Bush/Cheney foreign policy more generally, which was marked by the rampant violation of human rights through the use of torture in American interrogations, the secret rendition of prisoners to violent authoritarians such as Bashar al-Assad’s Syria for further torture, heedless militarism, support for authoritarian regimes like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and rampant privatization of governmental functions and public wealth. Mearsheimer notes some of these phenomena toward the end of the book, but he sees them as the consequences of an overzealous promotion of liberal democracy, rather than as evidence of the administration’s consistent contempt for liberal norms in its foreign policy.

¹ Department of Defense, “Personnel, Workforce Reports and Publications,” Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country, data for September 2018, https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp, 11 February 2019.

While he notes that “capitalism and liberalism go hand in hand,” American economic and corporate interests are nearly absent from Mearsheimer’s analysis (51). But U.S. foreign policy can perhaps most plausibly be said to driven by ‘liberal’ concerns if we understand liberalism to entail support for the interests of capital. The support for capital in American foreign policy has often come, under rubrics from shock therapy to the Washington Consensus and especially in relation to the global south, at the expense of precisely the liberal values Mearsheimer highlights: democracy, human rights, and the provision of social welfare. Indeed, some would argue that the U.S. more reliably fostered democracy and material betterment in at least parts of the world during the Cold War, when “the specter of the Soviet Union not only justified interventionist violence, it also created the need for an achievable account of shared prosperity” under American leadership.²

The Bush administration’s abuse of democracy rhetoric was especially flagrant. But no post-Second World War American administration has been distinguished by either reliable opposition to authoritarianism or economic policies that would foster democratic stability around the world. The U.S. has instead long used its power in support of the aims of consolidating its dominance, installing regimes it considered friendly regardless of their democratic credentials, and furthering the aims of American capital. Despite some variation among administrations, the U.S. has been a reliable ally of, and arms-supplier to, Saudi Arabia (which is hardly mentioned in the book), a friend to authoritarian regimes across the Middle East, and a major source of funding and military aid to repressive regimes from Suharto’s Indonesia to Yoweri Museveni’s Uganda. President Bill Clinton’s foreign policy was marked not by crusading interventionism but by inaction or late and reluctant action in the face of the two genocides of the 1990s, in Rwanda and Bosnia. President Barack Obama largely continued Bush’s policies in Afghanistan. He escalated a counterterrorism strategy, one which was widely protested by human rights groups, of CIA drone strikes with extensive civilian casualties. The major instances that fit Mearsheimer’s conception are the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo (which is not mentioned in the book) and the 2011 NATO intervention in Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, which President Obama defended as necessary to protect innocent civilians from a merciless dictator and prevent “a massacre that would have...stained the conscience of the world.”³ The Libya invasion did nothing to prevent, and may have prolonged, the country’s humanitarian crisis; Obama later called “failing to plan for the day after” his administration’s “worst mistake.”⁴

Arguing that “liberal foreign policy is mainly concerned with maximizing the number of liberal democracies in the world,” Mearsheimer takes the claims of liberal IR scholars and other academics such as John Ikenberry and John Rawls to stand in for the aims of U.S. foreign policy (130). But even when American politicians and officials proclaim the noble purposes of American foreign policy, why take their words at face value? Talk of fostering democracy has long served to justify the flexing of imperial or hegemonic muscles. As a realist, Mearsheimer discounts claims of high-minded motives in most circumstances; see also his dismissal of the “false pretext” of imminent massacre in Libya (166). States normally abide by realist logic, he believes. Talk is cheap, and whatever they may say, states act above all in the interest of increasing their power for the sake of their security. But he thinks the post-Cold-War moment of preponderant U.S. power is different. Under unipolarity, he argues, the hegemon, if it is liberal, will act according not to self-interest but to a set of ideas: liberal ideas about the desirability of self-government for all political communities and the normative value of freedom, including free trade.

² Asli Bâli and Aziz Rana, “Constitutionalism and the American Imperial Imagination,” *University of Chicago Law Review* (2018), 257-292 at 272-273. The authors make this case while underscoring “American direct involvement or complicity in truly staggering forms of mass violence across large swathes of the world” during the Cold War as well as the “highly racialized terms” of postwar American foreign policy (259).

³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya, 28 March 2011,” <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>.

⁴ “Barack Obama says Libya was ‘worst mistake’ of his presidency,” *The Guardian*, 11 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/12/barack-obama-says-libya-was-worst-mistake-of-his-presidency>, accessed on 4 February 2018.

This is one of the peculiarities of Mearsheimer's argument: it rests on a case for radical discontinuity in the history of American foreign policy, despite considerable evidence of long-term continuities of both rhetoric and conduct. And yet Mearsheimer himself also gestures toward continuities that defy the supposed uniqueness of liberal unipolarity, suggesting that American violence was driven by 'liberal' goals before the end of the Cold War. He cites a study by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George Downs that between the Second World War and 2004, "the US intervened more than 35 times in developing countries around the world.... In only one case—Colombia after the American decision in 1989 to engage in the war on drugs—did a full-fledged, stable democracy...emerge within 10 years. That's a success rate of less than 3%" (170).⁵ Such an abysmal "success rate" itself should make us doubt that installing democracy was ever the goal.

Why might a realist settle for a description of U.S. foreign policy that is itself so unrealistic? Cynics would say that IR realism has never been about reality. Instead, one could argue that what realists get from taking liberal rhetoric at face value is a kind of moral salvation for realism. In one of the book's key statements, titled "Why I am a Realist," at the end of chapter 7, Mearsheimer writes that "[s]tates operate in a self-help world in which the best way to survive is to be as powerful as possible, even if that requires pursuing ruthless policies. This is not a pretty story, but there is no better alternative if survival is a country's paramount goal" (216). The book's larger lesson seems to be that such an approach is also, on balance, not just less hypocritical than liberal idealism but also less destructive for everyone else as well. Mearsheimer uses his critique of crusading 'liberal' violence to cast doubt on any but self-regarding commitments. The claim is especially pointed, and troubling, with respect to international opposition to Russia's 2014 seizure of the Crimea from Ukraine, opposition which he considers to have been ill-advised.

If the main cause of violence in the world is liberal idealism, then realism can be seen as not just the more prudent but also the more honest and more righteous path. If, however, the real driver of American militarism and heavy-handedness is the advancement of (some) American interests—especially but not only those of American capital—then the moral field is muddier and realist policies less compelling. Given America's liberal self-image, these phenomena have often been legitimated with reference to liberal ideals, but liberal idealism alone cannot account for the appalling injustice of much American foreign policy. A certain version of realism may still be the course of prudence, and one means of lessening violence. But much of the destabilizing violence in the world today is due neither to high-minded but misguided liberal crusading, nor to dysfunctions wholly internal to 'outlaw' regimes and 'burdened societies,' as liberals such as Rawls believe.⁶ It stems, rather, from a highly unequal and racialized global order long dominated by American military and economic might, power deployed heedlessly for the short-term interests of American capital or to reinforce American dominance.

The American foreign policy response to this condition should be, not more relentless self-interest, but rather a radical reconsideration of what sorts of actions ideals such as genuine respect for the autonomy of other nations, and concern for their well-being, might demand of powerful states. While tensions could, to be sure, arise between such goals themselves, attending to both would often mean not liberal interventionism but restraint. It would mean refraining from using international institutions to impose structural adjustments and austerity policies on weaker countries to boost the profits of multinational corporations at great cost to their people. Reforming the global intellectual property rights regime. Reining in the CIA's vast paramilitary operations. Imposing tight restrictions on U.S. arms dealers, prohibiting arms sales to dictators, and the like. Indeed, such a foreign policy is perhaps not only more just but, in the end, more 'realist'; better able to serve the interests and security of the United States. For the long-term interest of all Americans is arguably best served by a global order in which all states have stable democratic regimes, healthy and prosperous citizens, racial equality, and sustainable economies. It is just possible that Mearsheimer's formula—"policies based almost exclusively on one criterion: what is best for the American people?" (232)—if understood in a truly inclusive and far-sighted way might produce similar prescriptions. But a foreign policy narrowly premised on American interests is not well calculated to produce such an order.

⁵ George W. Downs and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Gun-Barrel Diplomacy Has Failed Time and Again," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 February 2004.

⁶ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 80-81, 106-110.

The book raises further questions of method. Mearsheimer writes that powerful liberal states “invariably...pursue liberal hegemony” and that “[w]hen a liberal country finds itself in a position to pursue this ambitious policy, it will almost always do so” (120-121). But if the post-Cold-War United States is the only liberal hegemon ever, as the book implies, then how can one write in terms of how liberal hegemons act in general? We have, in political science parlance, an n of 1. How do we know the theory generalizes? It may be more useful simply to write histories and analyses of U.S. foreign policy. If we did, we might pay more attention to the country’s history of slavery, settler colonialism, and imperial expansion (on which, see Daniel Immerwahr’s new *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*).⁷ These have left deep traces in a U.S. internationalism that, as Mearsheimer so rightly insists, remains a major source of violence and instability, as well as a pillar of a hierarchical, racist, and profoundly unjust world order.

⁷ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

REVIEW BY JACK SNYDER, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

John Mearsheimer has written an incisive book that deeply analyzes the tendency of self-deluded post-Cold War liberalism to overreach in its efforts to remake the entire world in a liberal mold. He sees this idealistic excess as a built-in propensity of the basic tenets of liberalism, which is at loggerheads with two stronger basic forces of modern international relations, realism and nationalism. During the Cold War and before, the Wilsonian impulse to go on a crusade to make the world safe for liberalism was kept somewhat in check by prudence born of the balance of power, but at the unipolar moment liberalism tragically overindulged its instincts for excess.

I agree with much of what Mearsheimer says about the dangers of heedless liberal overreach which were given freer rein after the Cold War. Indeed, I have written about the danger of democratization in contexts where institutions are weak, the risk that hate-mongering nationalists will hijack free speech when media institutions lack professionalism, and the risk that uncompromising demands for criminal accountability will derail post-conflict peace bargaining.¹ As with Mearsheimer, my criticisms of liberal dogmatism were based on an appreciation of the power of realism and nationalism.

My main disagreement is that Mearsheimer reifies ideal types of liberalism, nationalism, and realism in a way that underestimates the degree to which these ideas overlap and interpenetrate in real life. Far from being antithetical, liberalism and nationalism developed in tandem in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both were based on the idea that a people should exercise self-determination in its own state. The main difference between them was how much emphasis should be placed on 'rule by the people' as opposed to 'rule for the people.' Since these national states, whether liberal or not, sought to survive in international anarchy, they were socialized to realist logic and the balance of power.

Contradictions between liberalism and nationalism were most sharp when states failed to manage crises in international markets, causing adjustment pain for politically mobilized people who demanded protective action by the state. The nationalist solution, exemplified by Germany and Japan, was to stabilize the national economy through state-controlled markets in expanded empires. The liberal welfare state solution, exemplified by the United States and Sweden, was to develop a social safety net, Keynesian countercyclical economic management tools, and the Bretton Woods international economic institutions to reconcile democratic accountability with the liberal approach to open markets. The latter formula achieved a high degree of integration of liberal democracy, national self-determination, and realist containment of the illiberal Soviet geopolitical threat.

Mearsheimer's remarks about the international order between 1945 and 1989 credit the successes of the liberal democracies mainly to their realism and nationalism, not to their liberalism (192). He is right that this was a realist bipolar order, but it was equally a liberal order within its U.S.-organized half, and its liberal aspects were set up in ways that were not dogmatic and universalistic in their liberalism. It found ways to accommodate British nationalism within the European Economic Community, French nationalism within NATO, and U.S. exceptionalism and hegemonic privileges. During this era, the U.S. was famously pragmatic in supporting illiberal dictatorships. It paid very little attention to universalizing human rights. But it got the job done of setting up a liberal economic order that outproduced that of its less efficient superpower foe while also accommodating domestic pressures in a way that stabilized democratic states. In that broad sense, the order was simultaneously liberal, realist, and nationalist.

Arguably, this form of liberalism was not just a temporary, uncharacteristic accommodation to exigencies of power politics. Rather, it has the potential to be an enduring model of the liberal realist welfare state as a basis for economic growth and

¹ Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas," *International Security* 21:2 (Fall 1996): 5-40; Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri, "Trials and Errors: Principle and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice," *International Security* 28:3 (Winter 2003/04): 5-44.

international alliances. The IR field usually calls this "embedded liberalism."² Many scholars of international relations, including liberal ones, nowadays think it was a mistake to move away from this version of liberalism. Although nobody thinks it is now possible or even desirable to move back exactly to 1955, proponents of embedded liberalism believe that there is nothing inherent in liberal thinking or institutions that prevents it from returning to some of these pragmatic, foundational methods.

Is there anything in Mearsheimer's account that convincingly argues that going 'back to the future' of liberalism is impossible? Or can liberals learn from the mistakes of the post-Cold War period, when they were dizzy with success?

Mearsheimer's comments on liberal excesses in the 1990s mostly ring true descriptively. He argues that liberalism, unbound from its balance-of-power fetters, assumed its true nature: an idealistic (in all senses of the term), universalistic ideology that heedlessly and futilely tried to propagate democratic regimes and individual human rights worldwide. Blaming liberalism for the mistakes of the 2000s, however, is less convincing. George W. Bush's overstretch in the Middle East, which was an afterthought self-described as a democracy promotion campaign, had almost nothing to do with liberalism or democracy. Moreover, Barack Obama's foreign policy was a mixture in which the prudent realist element dominated its vestigial liberal aspect.

To the extent that liberalism did go on a self-destructive crusade after the Cold War, why did this happen? Mearsheimer's book gets one big thing right: the unipolar distribution of power allowed the U.S. and other liberal democracies to indulge their ideological proclivities if they wanted to. But if so, this argument implies that the geopolitical conditions favoring pragmatic constraint and reining in liberalism's purist zealotry are now once again upon us. China and to some degree Russia are now rival geopolitical powers. This would seem to predict a return to the realpolitik liberalism of the Cold War, which would solve Mearsheimer's problem with liberalism.

At a deeper theoretical level, Mearsheimer explores several variants of liberalism that might be able to sustain a more moderate form of liberal politics and policy. These include what he calls "modus vivendi liberalism," based on live-and-let-live principles, and "bounded progressivism," based on tolerance for different views of the public good (54-65). He also briefly considers and dismisses "civic nationalism" as a national culture based on loyalty to inclusive liberal rules and rights (105). Mearsheimer offers a number of specific arguments to justify his skepticism about these escapes from liberalism's fateful tendency to excess, but overall they boil down to his doubts about the stability of liberalism's twin core commitments to individualism and to rights. He thinks these principles are flimsy because of humankind's fundamental social nature and the central role of group culture in cementing social relationships and in underpinning the states that protect people from rival groups. Thus, if a country happens to be simultaneously liberal, nationalist, and realist, as the U.S. was during the Cold War, it is mainly the latter two that are doing the real work of keeping the nation state together.

In a very important qualification buried under the subtitle "The Authoritarian Temptation," Mearsheimer offers five reasons why a liberal state might survive in the face of competition among factions that all want to seize permanent power in one last election. In a nod to the importance of rule-based institutions in a "well-ordered liberal state," he notes the stabilizing potential of a balance of power among factions, the existence of cross-cutting cleavages, "organic solidarity" rooted in the functional interdependence of the economic division of labor, liberal democratic practices and beliefs as the basis for a deeply rooted culture of nationalism, and what he calls "the deep state" of committed civil servants (117-119).

If we pursue this analysis beyond a mere list, I think there is real potential to see how the liberalism of individuals with rights, which Mearsheimer sees as ungrounded, actually has firm connections to the elements of nationalism and realism that he sees as better rooted. Bringing together all three of these isms are the foundational works of Charles Tilly, who famously argued that war made the state, and that the state, to make war, bargained with its people and thus created the basis for both

² John Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36:2 (Spring 1982): 379-416.

nationalism and ultimately democratic self-rule. Less famously, Tilly also argued that modern states and nations emerge when social relations change from personalistic ties of family, patronage, and narrow group favoritism to impersonal social relations based on equality of individual citizens before the law and public goods provided by the state—i.e., to the “organic solidarity” of which Mearsheimer speaks.³ If this is right, liberal individualism is not the tag-along in the triumvirate of isms, but their key ingredient.

Insofar as Mearsheimer is taking his list of five qualifications seriously, they establish the conceptual basis for arguing that one of his moderately liberal options, ‘bounded progressivism,’ could provide a stable antidote to liberalism’s ‘great delusion.’ Mearsheimer’s insistence on starkly portraying liberalism as an inherently flawed, self-contradictory idealism sometimes seems based more on his rhetorical style favoring sharply drawn distinctions than on the content of his ideas. In this regard, I think there is a double standard in the way the book presents a cartoon of liberalism, which can be even more easily done with realism and nationalism. Consider Randall Schweller’s argument that fascist nationalists, judged purely by their ideology, could be considered the quintessential stereotype of realists.⁴ Indeed, nationalists, realists, and Communists, just like liberals, sometimes manifest themselves in cartoonish, extreme forms in real life (and suffer when they do), but they can also appear much more successfully in moderate and hybrid forms.

Related to this is the book’s treatment of liberalism mainly as an idealistic ideology rather than as an empirical theory of political order and economic development. The democratic peace—the absence of war between mature democracies—is a fact, not an idealistic wish. Likewise, there is a potent liberal causal logic behind the fact that no country except Singapore and some oil states has made it past the middle-income trap (one-fourth U.S. GDP) without becoming a full-fledged democratic, rule of law, human-rights-observing state.⁵

Given that the delusional unipolar moment is now past, and the power and potential of actually existing liberalism is far from exhausted, it seems timely to ask what tools are still useable from the huge successes of liberalism in the second half of the twentieth century. Many of us already get the point that the U.S. should stop trying to export democracy to infertile soil, should pay prudent attention to balancing the power of democracy’s authoritarian foes, and, as Jill Lepore recently argued in her history of the United States, should rediscover the connection between American nationalism and its liberal democracy.⁶ Embedded liberalism, which seems quite compatible with Mearsheimer’s analysis, provides a sound template for that approach.

³ Charles Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17-20.

⁴ Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 20-1, 105, 116-7, 121-5.

⁵ David Dollar, “Institutional Quality and Growth Traps,” Pacific Trade and Development Working Paper Series, No. YF37-07, prepared for a conference at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, June 3-5, 2015.

⁶ Jill Lepore, “The New Americanism: Why A Nation Needs a National Story,” *Foreign Affairs* 98:2 (March/April 2019), 10-19.

REVIEW BY WILLIAM C. WOHLFORTH, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

Suppose the Soviet Union had won the Cold War, the NATO alliance had been disbanded, Communist-party led political revolutions took place in former U.S. allied countries that then all quickly started seeking entry into the Warsaw Pact, the United States itself lost a couple of its constituent states, and the rump U.S. fell into a deep crisis with many elites wondering if in fact perhaps Soviet style institutions were the answer. The sole surviving superpower, the USSR, would have looked out at a world in which people in nearly every region would have seen Soviet-style socialism as the future, and political forces within societies all around the world would seem eager to team up with Moscow to alter their domestic institutions so that they looked more like Soviet ones. Would Soviet leaders perhaps have responded with an interventionist mindset, and conceivably taken things too far? I think the answer is probably yes. After all, as John Mearsheimer notes in *The Great Delusion*, the Soviet Union was “a great power committed to spreading communism across the globe,” and “Communism was a universalist ideology with a broad appeal” (221). If you agree, then you may end up wondering what exactly Mearsheimer has shown in this book.

In refreshingly bracing prose whose bluntness cannot conceal the profound learning it conveys, Mearsheimer argues that countries whose politics and institutions are infused with liberal thought are especially prone to imprudent interventionism when external constraints are weak. Take away the pressures of balance-of-power politics, he contends, and your standard liberal great power will be inclined to follow a strategy he calls “liberal hegemony,” which “aims to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies...” (1). The book’s core (chapters 2 through 6) places liberalism under a microscope and exposes aspects that might nurture overly interventionist foreign policy aims. This is a scholarly exercise that builds from theories of human nature all the way up to the ways in which liberal convictions and institutions might induce a state that has the opportunity to want to spread the blessings of freedom to other countries. I learned from this impressive disquisition. Invoking key aspects of group identity and nationalism, Mearsheimer also develops arguments that explain why attempts to impose domestic institutions on other countries by force so often fail. This nicely complements a growing literature on foreign-imposed regime change that adds up to the same cautionary conclusion.¹

What the book manifestly does not do, and cannot do by design, is make good on its basic claim. Three basic problems stand out. First, you cannot establish a causal connection between liberalism and imprudent foreign policy by looking at only liberalism and imprudent foreign policy. Because Mearsheimer subjects no other ideology to the same scrutiny to which he subjects liberalism, there is no way to know whether liberalism stands out this regard. As the Soviet counterfactual above suggests, shelves groan under the weight of tomes arguing that there is something about revolutionary Marxism Leninism that generates the impulse to impose compatible institutions abroad. Similar arguments have been advanced about many other ideologies, including Fascism, Nazism, theocracy, even nationalism, which appears in this book chiefly as a constraint on liberals drunk with power but which many scholars see as a potential generator of dangerous expansionism in its own right.

By shining the light only in one direction, Mearsheimer seems blind to the fact the he is describing just one instance of a general phenomenon. John Owen shows that the propensity to seek to impose preferred domestic institutions on foreign countries is uncorrelated with regime type.² States that are animated by all sorts of ideologies—monarchies, theocracies, Communist party-states, and liberal democracies—occasionally decide to go on a rampage, imposing their favorite

¹ See, for example, Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations,” *International Security* 41:2 (October 2016): 43-89; Lindsay O’Rourke, *Secrecy and Security: U.S.-Orchestrated Regime Change during the Cold War* (Ithaca, : Cornell University Press, 2018); Melissa Willard-Foster, *Toppling Foreign Governments: The Logic of Regime Change* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

² John M. Owen, “The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions,” *International Organization* 56:2 (2002): 375-409; John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

institutions upon others. Indeed, by many measures, the post-1991 efforts of the United States to ‘remake the world in its image’ seem tame by comparison.

Second, you cannot establish that a permissive systemic environment is a necessary condition by looking only at cases that occur in a permissive strategic environment. Again Owen’s research is instructive: “The incidence of institutional imposition rises steeply during periods of hegemonic struggle, either hot or cold wars.”³ Those findings run directly counter to the arguments in *The Great Delusion*, which link liberalism and high levels of security with a policy of foreign institutional imposition. States of all sorts get into this game, often when they are facing intense security competition, most obviously in wartime.

The case of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France is telling. Here we have a state in a multipolar setting that was first animated by Republican ideas but then infused with Bonapartist monarchism but throughout followed the same policy: relentless, forceful all-azimuth imposition of compatible domestic institutions on foreign countries. Ideas changed, the propensity to try to impose institutions abroad did not. Conservative monarchies can also adopt grand strategies that feature imposition of compatible institutions on weaker states. As historian Paul Schroeder summarizes Metternich’s view of the matter “every state—or rather, every sovereign of a great power—has the duty, in the name of the sacred right of independence of every state, to supervise the governments of smaller states and to prevent them from taking false and pernicious steps in their internal affairs.”⁴ Or consider the United States in the Cold War, when, Mearsheimer notes, Washington “followed a policy of hyper involvement in the affairs of minor powers . . .” (226). That policy (and its Muscovite mirror image) occurred when balance of power politics were working at full steam.

In short, because it zeroes in so intently on the unipolar U.S. case, the book cannot refute the claim that liberalism is the best of all ideas to animate the policies of an unbalanced great power—that any other set of real-world political ideas would have induced really reckless attempts to remake the globe in search of ultimate security. *Great Delusion* notwithstanding, the world perhaps should thank its lucky stars that the U.S. is liberal for fear of what a country infused by other plausible political ideologies would have done in its position.

One might shrug that objection off and argue that it still matters that liberalism leads to imprudent expansion even though we have no way of knowing whether it is special in this regard. But that runs afoul of the third problem: you cannot make the case that domestic politics and liberal ideas explain U.S. post-Cold War interventionism by looking only at cases of interventionism. Just because policy makers sometimes invoke liberal notions when they intervene does not mean that those ideas explain the overall pattern of U.S. choices as a unipolar power. The U.S. has the capability to intervene in any number of places where it chooses not to. As numerous critics of U.S. policy stress, the broadly liberal issues at stake (human rights, democracy, etc.) are often very poor predictors of when the U.S. chooses to get involved. Mearsheimer’s notion of liberal hegemony as an effort to “turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies” (1) is an exceedingly poor explanation for the actual pattern. Clearly, more prosaic considerations of cost and benefit—many of which may be identified by realist theory—may help account for this variation.

This brings up the thing I found most disorientating about reading this book. Weirdly, Mearsheimer failed to probe realism’s rich theoretical tradition to make more systematic sense of the behavior under scrutiny. Here we have the planet’s most prominent living theorist of realism trying to explain the last 30 years of the foreign policy of the world’s most powerful state, and he arrives at an explanation wholly rooted in domestic politics and ideas. More disorientating yet, the explanation offered renders a huge area of state behavior – the persistent efforts by great powers of all types, in all kinds of system structures, in peace, war, and in between, to meddle in other countries’ domestic politics—a glaring anomaly for realist theory. Mearsheimer deploys his offensive realism here in a manner that makes it clear that it has zero to say about 30

³ Owen, “The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions,” 394.

⁴ Quoted in Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30:2 (January 1978): 167-214, 169.

years of U.S. foreign policy except that eventually unipolarity will erode, great power politics will come back, and liberal ‘delusions’ will come a cropper on balance of power realities. To put it mildly, this seems logically inconsistent with the theory Mearsheimer presented in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, which predicts endemic power seeking under anarchy.⁵ Given that other great powers were destined to come back, and the theory’s stipulation that their preferences (i.e., revisionism) are independent of anything the U.S. does (because nothing the U.S. does can reduce their uncertainty about U.S. intentions, and vice-versa), why would a unipolar U.S. not seek to expand and lock in gains when it had the opportunity to do so?

There is no question that the *Innenpolitik* explanation Mearsheimer offers captures some of the story. And it goes without saying that patterns of great power interventionism are likely to vary in different structural settings as threats and opportunities change. But even a cursory review of international history reveals that efforts to impose institutions on other states often are a handmaiden to balance-of-power politics. If states involved in knock-down drag-out fights for their lives, as the Soviet Union and the United States were in World War II, periodically see it in their interests to impose domestic institutions on foreign countries, as both Moscow and Washington did during and after that war, then perhaps in other times as well this practice can flow from, rather than contradict, power politics. Forty years ago, Robert Jervis noted that “When there are believed to be tight linkages between domestic and foreign policy or between the domestic politics of two states, the quest for security may drive states to interfere pre-emptively in the domestic politics of others in order to provide in ideological buffer zone.”⁶ *The Great Delusion* is designed from its first to its last page to miss such timeless insights and see U.S. post-Cold War behavior as sui generis, utterly unconnected to security-seeking under anarchy, and wholly the product of America’s liberal disposition. While it delivers hard and perhaps well-earned blows to inside-the-beltway liberal conceits, it reflects a strangely impoverished understanding of realism.

REPLY BY JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The four leading international relations scholars that H-Diplo has asked to review *The Great Delusion* have delivered serious and intelligent critiques. Of course, I disagree with many of their arguments, but I greatly appreciate the time and effort they put into reading my book and offering their views on it. In an important way, it is the highest compliment one can pay a fellow scholar. I also appreciate Robert Jervis taking the time to provide a comprehensive introduction.

Although the discussion below revolves around *The Great Delusion*, I would encourage readers who have a deep interest in the issues raised in my book to also look at a recent article I published: “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” in the Spring 2019 issue of *International Security*.⁷ This article and *The Great Delusion* complement each other in important ways, and some of the key points at issue between me and the reviewers are addressed at greater length in the article than in the book.

There are few common themes among the reviews. Each author comes at my book from a different perspective, which makes it difficult to arrange my response according to overlapping themes in the reviews. Thus, I will deal with the reviews seriatim.

‘U.S. Foreign Policy Has Always Been Liberal’

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

⁶ Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” 168

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43:4 (Spring 2019): 7-50.

Christopher Layne and I agree on five key points: 1) there is a powerful crusading impulse built into liberal America; 2) whether the United States can act on that impulse is largely a function of the global distribution of power; 3) the United States has behaved according to the dictates of liberal hegemony during the unipolar moment; 4) this policy has led to multiple failures, and is not in the American national interest; and 5) the United States should pursue a more restrained foreign policy based on realist principles.

There are two fundamental differences between us. First, Layne believes that the United States has been pursuing liberal hegemony since 1898, and thus American foreign policy during the unipolar moment is not unusual. In fact, it is part of a much broader pattern of U.S. behavior. Second, my version of restraint calls for actively containing a rising China; Layne's version does not. For him, China is not a serious threat to the United States and balancing against it would lead to no end of trouble.

Layne maintains that the United States "embarked on its quest for liberal hegemony" in 1898, "well before the advent of unipolarity." Moreover, it has remained firmly committed to that policy over the course of the twentieth century and into the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It is important to note that there is hardly any evidence in Layne's story that realist calculations about power and security competition drove American foreign policy over this 120-year period.

Layne excises realism from his story and emphasize the pursuit of liberal hegemony because he believes that the United States has been remarkably powerful relative to its competitors over that entire period. He maintains that from 1898-1945 it operated in an unbalanced multipolar system that "was on the verge of being displaced by a unipolar system dominated by the United States." He then makes the stunning claim that "1945 was America's *first* unipolar moment." One might ask: what about the Soviet Union? He tells us that "Upper Volta was the Soviet Union without missiles." Thus, the system was almost unipolar from 1898 to 1945, but clearly unipolar from 1945 to the present.

For starters, I disagree with Layne's description of the global balance of power before 1989. The United States was the most powerful country in the world economically from 1898 to 1941, but it deployed remarkably little military power during that period, save for the two years (1917-1918) it participated in World War I. One can argue about how exactly to measure the balance of power, but there is no question that how much military might each great power controls matters a lot for calculating that balance. It is for this reason that hardly any other scholar contends that the United States was on the verge of global domination between 1898 and 1941.

Regarding the Cold War, the international system was commonly described as bipolar, not unipolar, because the Soviet Union was a superpower like the United States. It was hardly Upper Volta with missiles. It played the central role in defeating Nazi Germany during World War II and it emerged from that conflict with by far the most powerful army on the planet. In fact, there was no state in Western Europe capable of containing the Soviet Union, which is why the United States created NATO and maintained large-scale conventional forces and thousands of nuclear weapons in Europe throughout the Cold War. Moreover, the United States and the Soviet Union competed with each other all over the globe. Contrary to Layne's assertion, the world was not unipolar between 1945 and 1989, which is why virtually none of the leading international relations scholars during those years discussed unipolarity in their works, and focused instead on bipolarity and multipolarity.

There is also little evidence that the United States pursued liberal hegemony before 1989. Consider American foreign policy after World War I. Instead of joining the League of Nations and attempting to shape the politics of Europe, the United States refused to join the League, pulled all of its military forces out of Europe, and adopted an isolationist foreign policy that only came to an end when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. After World War II, the United States initially had little interest in maintaining a military presence in Europe, but was forced to do so because the Soviet Union could not be contained without American military forces. There is even evidence that during the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration was anxious to reduce if not eliminate the U.S. role in defending Europe and turn that task over to the West Europeans. In short, there is little evidence that Washington was pursuing liberal hegemony after World War II, much less that "American liberalism was the catalyst for the Cold War."

Layne's other major criticism focuses on whether the United States should contain a rising China. I maintain that if China continues to grow economically and militarily, it will try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. It is not in America's interest, however, to allow China to become a regional hegemon, which means Washington should seek to contain China's rise. Layne disagrees, mainly because he believes that the "nuclear revolution" has relegated my realist theory of international politics to the scrapheap of history. Nuclear weapons, he argues, "rendered obsolete traditional balance of power calculations." Thus, China is not a serious threat to the security of the United States and there is no need to balance against it. Indeed, "the only truly 'existential threat' to a great power is the risk that it could blunder into a nuclear war."

It is worth noting that if one accepts Layne's claims about the nuclear revolution, the logical consequence is that American policymakers should pursue an isolationist foreign policy. After all, if the balance of power no longer matters in a nuclear world, whether another great power dominates Asia or Europe is of little strategic importance to the United States.

There is a fatal flaw in Layne's claims about the nuclear revolution: all the available evidence shows that it has not fundamentally altered great power politics. Nuclear weapons were invented in 1945 and both the Soviet Union and the United States deployed huge nuclear arsenals during the Cold War. Yet there is no evidence that either superpower thought that those weapons rendered balance of power calculations irrelevant. On the contrary, Moscow and Washington engaged in a fierce security competition, to include competing for more and better arms, allies, relative power, and strategically important territory.⁸ Both superpowers consistently acted in ways that contradict the claims of nuclear revolution advocates. For sound strategic reasons, American policymakers cared greatly about whether the Soviet Union dominated Eurasia, and for those same reasons, they will be deeply committed to preventing China from dominating Asia.

Two final points are in order regarding Layne's response. First, like me, Layne self-identifies as a realist, which one would think means that he believes the world operates in good part—or at least somewhat—according to realist dictates. Nevertheless, there is hardly any evidence of realist behavior in his account of U.S. foreign policy over the past 120 years. Moreover, by explicitly making the case for the nuclear revolution, he is effectively saying that realism was rendered irrelevant in 1945 and has no future. All of this is to say that it is hard to see how he is a realist.

Second, Layne describes himself as a realist who favors a different form of restraint than me. In fact he comes close to saying that the case for restraint is a hopeless cause. He writes: "It is far from clear that a liberal America can ever adopt a grand strategy of restraint." It seems that Layne is suggesting that once the United States became an especially powerful country in the late nineteenth century, it was doomed to pursue liberal hegemony for as long as it maintained its commanding position in the global balance of power. I obviously disagree with his description of the past as well as the prospects for future change in American foreign policy.

'U.S. Foreign Policy Has Never Been Liberal'

Jennifer Pitts and I generally agree that American foreign policy was often ruthless, violent, and destabilizing during the Cold War as well as the post-Cold War period, which is the time frame I examine in *The Great Delusion*. She writes, for example, that my "alarm at the damage inflicted by U.S. conduct around the world, and especially in the Middle East, is bracing and salutary," and that I am right to argue that the United States "remains a major source of violence and instability" in world politics.

We disagree, however, about the driving forces behind U.S. foreign policy. I maintain that realist calculations were largely responsible for American behavior during the Cold War, while liberal calculations were driving the train after 1989. My analysis, she writes, is "hampered by its diagnostic shortcomings." I offer a "poor description of the actual goals of American

⁸ Keir Lieber and Daryl Press describe in impressive detail the case against the nuclear revolution in *Power Politics in the Atomic Age: The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

foreign policy over the last twenty-five years.” She maintains that U.S. actions during both the Cold War and its aftermath have been driven by special interests on the home front, especially “economic and corporate interests.” She does not elaborate on her theory or provide much evidence to back it up. Thus, it is difficult to assess her alternative explanation and compare it to mine.

Nevertheless, the question remains: how well do my claims about the sources of U.S. foreign policy stand up to Pitts’s criticism? Three points are in order. First, I do not analyze American foreign policy during the Cold War in *The Great Delusion*, but focus instead on the post-Cold War period.

Second, I examine in detail three important policies the United States pursued after 1989 to show that they were based on calculations that are straight out of the liberal hegemony playbook. Specifically, I analyze: 1) Washington’s policy of ‘engagement’ with China; 2) the Bush Doctrine, which was designed to spread democracy across the greater Middle East; and 3) the American-led effort to expand NATO and the EU eastward across Europe, while also promoting the ‘color revolutions’ in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. I went to great lengths to show that these policies were based on liberal calculations, and were not cases where liberal rhetoric was masking policies based on realist considerations or economic interests. Readers can determine whether I make a compelling case in these instances.

Third, Pitts does not focus on those three policies and directly challenge them, save for briefly challenging me about the causes of the 2003 Iraq war, which is directly linked to the Bush Doctrine. She recognizes that President George W. Bush and his lieutenants frequently argued that they were committed to turning Iraq into a democracy, but she maintains that this was “thin and half-hearted” rhetoric designed to cover up other motives.

There were numerous occasions during the Cold War where the United States behaved according to realist dictates and tried to cover up its behavior with liberal rhetoric. But the United States tended to both talk and act abroad in accordance with liberal dictates during the post-Cold War period. Consider the case of President Bush, who was ‘the ultimate decider’ in his administration. He gave speeches before the Iraq war making it clear he believed that turning Iraq into a democracy was of paramount importance because it would pacify that country and turn it away from pursuing Weapons of Mass Destruction and supporting terrorism. His second inaugural address in January 2005 is so suffused with democracy promotion that it reads like Woodrow Wilson wrote it.

Pitts claims that Bush was not sincere, that he had ulterior motives. She says, for example, it might have been done “to protect oil supplies.” Although this is a popular view, there is hardly any evidence that considerations involving oil were behind the Iraq war. Iraq was not threatening oil supplies coming out of the Persian Gulf at the time and there is no evidence that the oil companies wanted a war with Iraq. She also suggests that the war was launched because it was “profitable for cronies of Vice President Dick Cheney.” There is no evidence that this calculation was at play in the decision-making process leading up to the war. Moreover, Cheney’s “cronies,” not to mention the oil companies, could have made substantial amounts of money in Iraq if the Bush administration had eschewed war and instead worked to improve relations with Baghdad.

Finally, Pitts suggests Bush started the war to create “a rally-round-the-flag” effect that would help generate public support for “a remarkably unpopular president ... whose presidency was dogged by charges of illegitimacy.” The main problem with this line of argument is that there is no evidence that this factor was at play in the decision-making process. Furthermore, Bush’s standing in the polls was especially high in early 2002, when the wheels were set in motion for invading Iraq. The Taliban had been routed from power in the late fall of 2001 and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was on the run. In the fall of 2002, Bush campaigned vigorously for Republican candidates in the mid-term elections, where Republicans not only recaptured the Senate, but also increased their control of the House, a rare accomplishment in American politics. Also, given 9/11 and the Afghanistan war—and the terrorism problem more generally—few people were paying much attention to what happened in the 2000 election in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Pitts critiques my claims about the centrality of democracy promotion from another angle. She notes that “nothing in American actions during ... the war or its aftermath gave any reason to believe that the Bush administration was going about installing democracy with any seriousness at all.” It is understandable why Pitts reached this conclusion, because Bush and his advisors did little to plan for turning Iraq into a democracy. But their failure on this front was not due to a lack of interest in that goal; they thought—foolishly for sure—that it would be easy to create a fledgling democracy in Iraq once President Saddam Hussein was removed from power. After all, that appeared to be what happened in Afghanistan when the Taliban was toppled and Hamid Karzai became the president in December 2001. What transpired in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War—when Communist dictators were overthrown and democracy quickly took root—also helped lead the Bush administration to think that creating democracy in Iraq would be a quick and easy undertaking, and thus there was little reason for extensive planning for the war’s aftermath. Of course, this was an enormous blunder.

There seems to be the suggestion in Pitts’s review that given the “appalling” consequences of U.S. foreign policy, it is hard to believe that it has been motivated by noble concerns about human rights and spreading liberal democracy. In other words, the outcome bears virtually no resemblance to the intentions in my story. As noted, I agree in large part with her description of how brutally the United States has behaved since the end of the Cold War, but my point is that this is the likely outcome when a country tries to remake the world in its own image, which is what liberal hegemony is all about. I note in *The Great Delusion* that James Scott argues that “many of the great disasters in modern history are caused by ‘great utopian social engineering schemes’ that depend on a ‘high-modernist ideology’” (186). Liberal hegemony, I believe, fits nicely with Scott’s argument.

Pitts’s final criticism is that the “United States is the only liberal hegemon ever,” which means I have an “n of 1.” Therefore, it is not clear that my theory has much explanatory power if it only applies to a single case. It is true that this is the only instance of a great power pursuing liberal hegemony, but it is still important to theorize about that policy and look carefully at whether the evidence from that case fits with one’s theory. This is precisely what I tried to do in *The Great Delusion*, which is not to deny that it would be helpful to have additional cases that could be used to test the theory.

One wonders what Pitts thinks U.S. foreign policy should have been after the Cold War ended, or what it should be moving forward. She offers a glimpse of her thinking on this all-important matter when she writes that “the long-term interest of all Americans is arguably best served by a global order in which all states have stable democratic regimes, healthy and prosperous citizens, racial equality, and sustainable economies.” Pitts’s prescription sounds a lot like liberal hegemony.

‘Liberalism Done Right Is The Solution’

Jack Snyder suggests that I am hostile to liberalism as a political ideology. He writes, for example, that I insist “on starkly portraying liberalism as an inherently flawed, self-contradictory idealism.” He then writes “there is a double standard in the way the book presents a cartoon of liberalism.” To be clear, I am deeply critical of liberalism as a foreign policy, but I am a huge fan of liberalism as a political system. Indeed, I wrote in *The Great Delusion* that, “Within countries, I believe liberalism is a genuine force for good, and it is highly desirable to live in a country that privileges and protects individual rights. I consider myself especially fortunate to have been born and lived all my life in liberal America” (11).

Yes, I pointed out some flaws and contradictions in liberalism, which one can do with any ism, as Snyder points out. But that hardly means I am an enemy of liberalism. I might add that as best I can tell he does not directly challenge my claims in the book about those contradictions, much less back up his assertion that I present a cartoonish description of liberalism. None of this is to say that my interpretation of liberalism is correct or superior to his.

Snyder offers two main criticisms of my book. First, he believes that I misunderstand the relationship between liberalism, nationalism, and realism. He implies that I believe that liberalism and nationalism are “antithetical” ideologies, when they are not. They “overlap and interpenetrate in real life,” and in fact they “developed in tandem in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” he writes. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that there are “contradictions between liberalism and nationalism,” which are most acute when states fail to “manage crises in international markets.” Finally, he maintains that

liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism, has firm connections with both nationalism and realism, which I see “as better rooted.” Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that “liberal individualism is not the tag-along in the triumvirate of isms, but their key ingredient.”

Snyder’s first critique does not accurately capture what I wrote in *The Great Delusion*. For starters, I do not argue that liberalism and nationalism are ‘antithetical’ ideologies. I argue that they are built on different assumptions about human nature and that nationalism rests on a more solid foundation than liberalism. Nevertheless, I emphasize that liberalism and nationalism can coexist in a country, as they obviously have in the United States for well over 200 years. I also recognize that liberalism and nationalism were burgeoning forces in Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and that together they played an important role in challenging the *ancien régime*. Still, when those two isms are at odds, which sometimes happens, nationalism triumphs because it is based on a more accurate understanding of human nature. My story is hardly one that portrays liberalism and nationalism as unequivocally opposed ideologies.

While Snyder concentrates on emphasizing the close links and overlap between these two isms, he does note that there are “contradictions between liberalism and nationalism.” Of course, this is exactly my point. As best I can tell, he does not tell us what those contradictions are, which makes it impossible to know how important they are and how he and I differ on this crucial issue. Moreover, Snyder’s failure to elaborate on those contradictions has implications for his claim that liberalism is the “key ingredient” in the troika of isms, contrary to my argument that liberalism invariably takes a back seat to nationalism and realism. One simply cannot assess his claim without some understanding of the contradictions he sees between liberalism and nationalism, as well as those that might exist between realism and the other two isms. In short, it is impossible to assess Snyder’s assertions about the relationship between the three isms and determine whether they are more compelling than mine.

Snyder’s second major criticism of *The Great Delusion* concerns the question of whether the United States can pursue a liberal foreign policy that works well and does not lead to “heedless liberal overreach.” He agrees with me that liberal hegemony, which he describes as “self-deluded post-Cold War liberalism,” was a huge failure. He thinks that the American foreign policy establishment was “dizzy with success” after the Cold War, which caused it to engage in “a self-destructive crusade.” But where I think that any kind of liberal foreign policy is a formula for failure, he believes that the United States could have pursued a more restrained version of liberal hegemony after 1989 and should employ this policy of “bounded progressivism” moving forward.

The model Snyder has in mind for this more limited version of a liberal foreign policy is U.S. behavior toward its allies in the West during the Cold War. He recognizes that the bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was realist to the core, but he maintains that “it was equally a liberal order within its U.S.-organized half.”

There are four problems with Snyder’s case for “bounded progressivism.” First, the Cold War order in the West was a realist order set up by the United States in order to wage security competition with the Soviet Union. This is not to deny that it had certain features that were also consistent with a liberal order, but those attributes were based on realist logic. In fact, Snyder’s description of that order goes a long way toward showing that it was based on realist dictates. He notes, for example, that “its liberal aspects were set up in ways that were not dogmatic and universalistic in their liberalism.” Moreover, “the U.S. was famously pragmatic in supporting illiberal dictatorships. It paid very little attention to universalizing human rights.” Indeed, the United States was “famously pragmatic” at almost every turn in the Cold War, which is why the Western order was realist at its core. It is no surprise that Snyder concludes the relevant paragraph on this matter by arguing that “the order was simultaneously liberal, realist, and nationalist.” It is hard to understand how any order can be liberal and realist at the same time, as those ideologies are at odds in fundamental ways.

Second, the U.S.-led order established during the Cold War depended on the Soviet threat for its existence. Again, it was created mainly to contain the Soviet Union. But that threat disappeared when the Cold War ended and the world became unipolar, which is what allowed the United States to pursue liberal hegemony. It is not clear how the United States could have continued pursuing the same foreign policy after 1989 that it had pursued beforehand, given that the driving force

behind its Cold War policy had vanished and American policymakers were operating in a completely changed security environment.

Third, to know whether there was any way to avoid pursuing liberal hegemony after the Cold War, and to know whether the United States can pursue a more prudent liberal foreign policy in the future, it is essential to know what caused American policymakers to adopt liberal hegemony in the first place. In other words, we need to have a good understanding of the driving forces behind Washington's delusional thinking in the early 1990s if the problem is going to be remedied. But Snyder provides no real explanation for why the United States erred so foolishly in the wake of the Cold War. So, we cannot be confident that liberalism as a foreign policy can overcome its "fateful tendency to excess," as he hopes.

Fourth, one might argue that with the rise of China, a replacement for the Soviet threat is emerging, and thus the United States will be able to create a liberal order to contain China, much like the one it created to deal with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The problem with this argument is that the order that existed before 1989 was realist, not liberal, and the same would hold for any order created to engage in security competition with China. But even if the world becomes unipolar once again and the United States has an opportunity to pursue a more modest liberal foreign policy, it is still likely to morph into liberal hegemony. In such a future world, it would make much more sense to construct a foreign policy of restraint that is based on realism and a sound understanding of how nationalism affects international politics.

'Where Is the Realism, Mr. Realism?'

William Wohlforth offers two main criticisms of *The Great Delusion*. First, he maintains that I focus exclusively on liberalism as a foreign policy and do not subject other ideologies "to the same scrutiny." Specifically, I do not consider whether other isms would have been as expansive as liberalism had the sole pole in 1989 been under the sway of a different ideology, say fascism or communism. In fact, Wohlforth argues that there is abundant evidence that the behavior I am ascribing to liberal hegemony is "just one instance of a general phenomenon," but I am "blind" to that fact.

Wohlforth relies mainly on the scholarship of John Owen to support this point.⁹ Owen, he writes "shows that the propensity to seek to impose preferred domestic institutions on foreign countries is uncorrelated with regime type. States that are animated by all sorts of ideologies—monarchies, theocracies, Communist party-states, and liberal democracies—occasionally decide to go on a rampage, imposing their favorite institutions upon others." Wohlforth singles out the behavior of Napoleonic France and the United States during the Cold War, noting that they were both deeply involved in the affairs of minor powers in a "multipolar setting" at a time "when balance of power politics were working at full steam."

The bottom line is clear: there is nothing "special" about liberal hegemony, because unremitting expansion is common to all great powers. Any unipole, regardless of its ideology, would have tried to remake the world in its own image, the way the United States did in the post-Cold War period.

Wohlforth's second major criticism has to do with the absence of realism in my explanation of post-Cold War American foreign policy. Wohlforth is amazed that a self-described realist like me does not "probe realism's rich theoretical tradition to make more systematic sense of the behavior under scrutiny." Indeed, he notes that U.S. foreign policy between 1989 and 2017 appears to fit "with the theory Mearsheimer presented in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, which predicts endemic power seeking under anarchy." Moreover, Wohlforth emphasizes that "even a cursory review of international history reveals that efforts to impose institutions on other states often are a handmaiden to balance-of-power politics." Thus, the U.S. policy of regime change in unipolarity fits neatly with standard realist behavior. In short, realism is a much better

⁹ He cites John M. Owen, "The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions," *International Organization* 56:2 (2002): 375-409; John M. Owen, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

explanation than liberal hegemony for explaining Washington's super-ambitious foreign policy in the wake of the Cold War.

It is worth noting that Wohlforth's first and second criticisms complement each other. Specifically, he opens his response by arguing that all states, regardless of their ideology, expand whenever they have the opportunity. This claim fits well with at least my version of realism, which largely ignores a state's ideology and treats states as power maximizers.

Let me begin my response to these two lines of criticism by recapitulating what I write in *The Great Delusion* about the circumstances under which liberalism and realism drive a country's foreign policy. My claim is that when the international system is either bipolar or multipolar, all great powers—including the United States—have little choice but to act according to realist dictates and engage in security competition with each other. Their ultimate goal, I argue, is to achieve regional hegemony, not global hegemony. When the system is unipolar, however, there are no great powers for the unipole to compete with—by definition—which means that a liberal sole pole is free to ignore realist dictates and pursue liberal hegemony. In other words, the realist arguments I make about great power behavior in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* apply in bipolarity and multipolarity, but not in unipolarity.

What this synopsis tells us is that John Owen's examples of states pursuing expansionist foreign policies and interfering in the politics of other countries are not a problem for my argument, because those cases took place in a multipolar world. The same is true of the two cases Wohlforth singles out—Napoleonic France, which operated in a multipolar system and the United States during the Cold War, which operated in a bipolar world. In fact, all of these cases are consistent with my realist theory of international politics. Moreover, they are largely irrelevant for helping us understand how a great power acts in unipolarity, when it is so secure that it does not have to play by the realist playbook.

My argument is that a liberal sole pole will engage in remarkably ambitious social engineering for purposes of remaking the world in its own image, in large part because liberalism is a universalistic ideology. It is important to emphasize that liberal hegemony does not involve simply interfering in the domestic politics of other states, which great powers have always done—often paying little attention to the ideology of the target state. Instead, it calls for making every state on the planet a liberal democracy. Of course, I maintain that this is the policy that the United States pursued after 1989 and it was a colossal failure.

But, one might ask, how would a sole pole governed by a different ideology than liberalism behave? As noted, this is the only case of unipolarity in recorded history, so it is impossible to answer that question by examining the empirical record. One might argue that I should have made a comprehensive list of all the other important isms and analyzed whether there is an impulse to expand built into their underlying logic chains. I did not pursue that route, however, because I was primarily concerned with examining the relationship between liberalism, nationalism, and realism and how it moves international politics, which was a daunting task that left little space and time for examining a host of other isms.

Nevertheless, I did examine nationalism and realism in detail and it should be clear from my discussion of those two isms that they do not by themselves promote the ambitious sort of social engineering that is at the core of liberal hegemony. Furthermore, I emphasized that communism, like liberalism, is a universalistic ideology; therefore, like Wohlforth, I believe that the Soviet Union would have behaved much the way the United States did if it had won the Cold War. In essence, any state with a universalistic ideology is likely to attempt to reconstruct the world in its own image.

Finally, let me turn to Wohlforth's claim that realism—indeed, the realist theory that I expounded in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*—explains in good part U.S. foreign policy during the unipolar moment. I thought long and hard about this line of argument when I wrote *The Great Delusion*, as it seems like a neat way to extend the explanatory power of my theory of realism into unipolarity and thus allow me to argue that offensive realism explains American foreign policy in both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.

There are two problems with this approach, however. First, my argument in *Tragedy* is that great powers pursue regional hegemony, not global hegemony, and should they try to dominate the planet—which is akin to what happens with liberal hegemony—they are likely to fail. The United States certainly was not content with merely being a regional hegemon after 1989, which is not what my theory predicts. Second, the available evidence regarding the calculations that motivated American policymakers during the unipolar moment shows that they were thinking like liberal hegemonists, not realists. Indeed, many of them made clear their disdain for realism, which they considered an outdated way of thinking about international politics.

As I noted in my response to Jennifer Pitts’s review, the three key policies that best illustrate the influence of liberal thinking on U.S. policymakers are 1) Washington’s “engagement” with China; 2) the Bush Doctrine, which aimed to spread democracy across the greater Middle East; and 3) the American-led effort to expand NATO and the EU eastward, while also promoting the “color revolutions” in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. To be clear, these were not cases of realist actions dressed up with liberal rhetoric. In fact, most realists opposed these policies, arguing that they would ultimately fail, which they did.

In his discussion of the influence of realism on U.S. policy, Wohlforth poses an important question: “Why would a unipolar U.S. not seek to expand and lock in gains when it had the opportunity to do so?” The answer is simple: because it will not work, which proved to be the case with liberal hegemony.

If Wohlforth’s belief that realism can explain much of U.S. foreign policy during the unipolar moment is correct, he is effectively saying that realism is a deeply flawed theory. After all, consider the disastrous results of that policy. I wonder whether Wohlforth, who speaks of “realism’s rich theoretical tradition,” really believes that it is responsible for the failed policies of the post-Cold War period. I do not. And if he does not believe realism is the culprit, what explains the bankruptcy of American foreign policy during the unipolar moment?