

***A Pact With The Devil:
Washington's Bid for World Supremacy
and the Betrayal of the American Promise***
Roundtable Review



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Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Robert Jervis, Bruce Kuklick, Doug Macdonald, Jeffrey Taliaferro

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Review by Robert Jervis, Columbia University

Tony Smith has written a vehement, stimulating, and important book. In the end, I think it succeeds better as intellectual history than as international history, but even if I am right it can be read with benefit by all students of international relations (IR) and diplomatic history. Those in many schools of thought will not only disagree, but respond with fervor equal to the author's: Marxists will think he fails to understand the interests that drive U.S. foreign policy; realists will think he misses part of the larger picture (I will return to this below); neoconservatives will accept some of the description but reject the negative judgment, and, most of all, liberals will think their positions (an in a few cases, their individual writings) have been distorted and defamed. The first three groups are such common targets for criticism that they may hardly react, but liberals on the other hand should find the experience challenging.

Robert Jervis is Adlai E. Stevenson Professor of International Politics at Columbia University. His most recent book is American Foreign Policy in a New Era (Routledge, 2005), and he is completing a book of essays on the politics and psychology of intelligence. He was President of the American Political Science Association in 2000-01 and in 2006 received the National Academy of Sciences' tri-annual award for contributions of behavioral science toward avoiding nuclear war. He is a co-editor of the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs and currently is chair of the Historical Review Panel for the CIA.

In a way that is more typical of much international history than of IR, Smith mixes analysis and judgment, including moral judgment.¹ For Smith they are inextricably linked because current U.S. foreign policy is hard to explain by standard rational theories and is leading the U.S. and the world to ruin. In form but not in substance, his book is a bit like Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas?* dealing with American politics or the recent book John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt about American foreign policy in the Middle East.² Because he believes that the war in Iraq and linked Bush Doctrine are dreadful mistakes, he needs to explain why the U.S. is deviating from any reasonable conception of its self-interest.

Most IR realists strongly opposed the war, arguing that it was unnecessary and counter-productive. Even if Iraq was developing nuclear weapons, the threat could have been contained and turning Iraq into a democracy, although desirable, was not neither necessary nor likely to be possible given the constraints of Iraqi history and society. But realism,

¹ Paul Schroeder and I have explored the differing stances of the two disciplines toward moral judgments in our essays in Colin Elman, and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2001).

² Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

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although popular in the post-World War II academy, never had deep roots in American public or elite opinion, and Smith joins several other scholars in arguing that liberalism, broadly conceived, has always played a large if not dominant role in American foreign policy. This outlook, contrary to realism, is optimistic, believes in solving problems rather than managing them, and most importantly in this context is what Kenneth Waltz would call a “second image theory” in believing that the basic sources of a state’s foreign policy stem from the nature of its regime, not its position in the international system.³ Woodrow Wilson is the most obvious example, but one finds this thinking before and after him. Many critics of the Bush Doctrine see American foreign policy as being hijacked by the neoconservatives, and although Smith is unsparing in his criticisms of them, his fundamental point is that much of their outlook has a long pedigree and is shared by many contemporary liberals.

Smith sees what he calls liberal democratic internationalism as having proceeded through three stages. “Pre-classical” liberal internationalism flourished in the 19th century, a period when American ideals were tempered by the limits on its power. This began to change at the end of the century and by the time of Wilson turned into “classic” liberal internationalism, which sought “to support the expansion of democratic governments abroad as a way of strengthening national security” (63). This phase involved harnessing American nationalism to the vehicle of liberalism and providing significant leadership and unilateral actions, even if the policies were often ill-advised and did not produce democracies abroad. But isolationism and the limits on American power meant that the policy was often more restrained than was the case after World War II, which witnessed “liberal international hegemonism.” Here the U.S. was much more assertive and supported democracy in West Europe and a few other places, although the anti-communist imperative led it to not only work with dictatorships, but to undermine fledgling but hostile democracies on several occasions. Support for democracy also came in at the end of the Cold War, when Reagan resisted embracing Gorbachev until he embarked on wide-ranging reforms that eventually brought his regime down. Its fall saw the emergence of “liberal internationalist imperialism.” Because the end of the Cold War was seen as stemming at least in part from democratic pressures in the USSR and the states in Eastern Europe and some of the former Soviet Republics seemed on the road to democracy, even before George W. Bush took office liberal ideals and American power were becoming more firmly yoked together and were under fewer restraints.

Although it is the neoconservatives who have had the most publicity, for Smith the sources of liberal internationalism come strongly from the left. It was Jimmy Carter, after all, who put human rights front and center. Even more strikingly, Smith stresses the importance of three key ideas that liberal academics have propagated: democracies do not fight each other (the “democratic peace theory”), the argument that, contrary to earlier research, there are no important pre-conditions that are necessary for democracy to be established, and the normative claim that states have the right and indeed the duty to override other’s sovereignty in cases of extreme human rights violations. While these pillars rested on

³ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

foundations of earlier liberal thinking, they pointed much more strongly to the need to and possibilities of spreading democracy throughout the world. The idea of democracy as a universal value, implicit in much earlier thinking, became more prominent and critics could be dismissed as ethnocentric if not racist. If democracies never fought each other--and this proposition was the subject of an enormous amount of IR research in the 1990's, most of it confirmatory--then a route if not the route to peace and security was through making countries democratic. The liberal jurists provided the rationale for intervention, with force if necessary, against countries that tyrannized over their own people.

Of course this would be pointless if the new regimes were as bad as the old. So it was important that research on democratization in the 1990's implied it was not only desirable, but possible. Theories that stressed that democracy was a difficult project, one that required favorable social and economic conditions and generations if not centuries of trial, error, and maturing, were replaced by theories that predicted that democracy could be established when the tyrannical obstacles to it were removed. Democracy then came to be seen as the "natural order," to take the concept developed in the context of natural science by Stephen Toulmin, meaning that it was what would occur unless something unusual happened to prevent it.⁴

The neoconservative contribution to this worldview was more political than intellectual, but it did add three elements. First, many in this group argued that America needed a mission abroad to stave off the sort of decadence that had come to characterize Western Europe.⁵ Second, although democracies did not fight each other, rivalries might emerge unless one of them (i.e., the United States) established its hegemony and so inhibited dangerous rivalries. Third, force was a legitimate tool of statecraft. Although of course prudential calculations were necessary, moral qualms were not and there was no need to worry about unpredictability and unintended consequences following its use.

All of this was in place before 9/11. Although it had obviously not led to adventures like invading Iraq, the U.S. had used force to overthrow dictators in Panama and Haiti and had liberated Kosovo on human rights grounds. Furthermore, although realism remained powerful (but not dominant) in the academic community, neither it nor any other coherent worldview posed a serious threat to the liberal consensus. So contrary to the common claim that September 11, 2001 "changed everything," U.S. policy grew out of its traditional and established worldviews.

One obvious new element was the greatly heightened sense of threat. Less obvious but equally important was the conception of the "war on terror" as a war of ideas, which Smith

⁴ Stephen Toulmin, *Forsight and Understanding: An Inquiry into the Aims of Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

⁵ For an excellent discussion, see Michael Williams, "What is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 11 (September 2005): 307-37.

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stresses is superficially similar to Samuel Huntington's well known "clash of civilizations," but is actually quite different from it because it can and must be won by changing others' beliefs and values. Thus Muslim fundamentalists hate us for what we are, not what we do, and, conversely, in the words of Tony Blair, "our ultimate weapon is not our guns but our beliefs" (147). The fact that the U.S. (or the West, to the degree that allies have the appropriate vision and courage) is engaged in such a struggle helps explain why the attacks on domestic critics have been so bitter: no matter how patriotic their intentions might be, those who put forth a different view are serving as a fifth column because they are undermining the struggle on its central front.

With the apparent failure of the war in Iraq, won't this crusading liberalism collapse? Smith doubts it, and indeed fears it may become even more virulent, transforming into "liberal fundamentalism" which in many ways is the mirror image of the Muslim enemy that Bush and his supporters see, perhaps leading to "utopian violence" (209). Overall, then, the U.S. has made "a pact with the devil: the proud assertion that this country had a formula it was prepared to implement by military force for world freedom, prosperity, and peace" (4).

This is a real tour de force, but is it right? I think there is quite a bit to it. The pre-9/11 history is covered very briefly, but I think Smith's general discussion of the phases of liberalism is supportable, and he has previously done in-depth research on many of the episodes in which the U.S. used force to try to establish democracy and has shown how important this impulse has been.⁶ The argument that the invasion of Iraq is not an aberration but an extreme example of values and behavior that has characterized the U.S. from the beginning can I think be sustained and stands as the liberal counterpart to the more realist argument for preventive war as a continuing theme in American history developed by John Gaddis.⁷ But there are difficulties, of course. I think Smith exaggerates the role of ideas and minimizes the corrupting nature of power. American leaders may not be realists, but realism can explain more than he thinks. Like Gaddis, he is correct to see continuities in American history, but also like Gaddis he is too quick to attribute these to particularly American characteristics because he does not look at the behavior of other countries, which in fact show important similarities to what the U.S. has done.

Before pursuing this line of argument, I want to present some related objections, several having to do with the importance of the motive of democratization in the Bush Doctrine. First, I think Smith exaggerates the degree to which political science in the 1990s concluded that democracy was the natural order. While it is true that much analysis focused on the roles of institutions, guarantees, and coalition-building, all factors that in principle are more subject to change and design than are level of income, social structure,

⁶ Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Strategy, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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and ethnic differences, the shift was not complete. Smith is also correct that many analysts and public figures were deeply impressed by the democratic transitions in South Africa, Eastern Europe, and many portions of the Soviet Union. These cheering events were not easily explained by theories stressing pre-conditions and did indicate that democracy could take root in what was previously seen as infertile soil. Neoconservatives were particularly impressed by what happened in the former Soviet bloc; liberals were particularly heartened by South Africa. But while the academic community did move, it did not move as far or with as much unity as Smith implies. Democratic peace theory did indeed get enormous traction in the 1990s, and so Smith is on firm ground in arguing that it was “in the air” and easily absorbable by foreign policy elites. This was not as true for theories arguing that democracy could be readily exported, especially to the Middle East, however. Furthermore, a degree of measured optimism was perhaps warranted. The earlier view that stressed the preconditions for democracy would not have led us to expect the degree of democratization we have seen in the past two decades.

Second, I am not convinced that the belief that establishing democracy in Iraq would be easy and would transform the Middle East played as central a role in the decision to overthrow Saddam as Smith does. My skepticism is fed by several streams of analysis and evidence. While some of the neoconservatives, especially Paul Wolfowitz, did have a strong commitment to the democratization agenda, this was not true of all of them. There is no evidence that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Rice saw democratization as the answer to the world’s ills before 9/11. In the run-up to the war they did talk about democratization, but it is far from clear that this was a driving concern. The problem here is that the members of the administration put forward many more reasons for their policy than would have been necessary to reach their conclusion that Saddam had to be overthrown.

To simplify, they professed to see both threat (Saddam’s WMD programs and his links to terrorism) and opportunity (establishing a better regime and transforming the Middle East) even though the war would have been appropriate if either threat or opportunity was high. This is an example of the common phenomenon of “belief overkill.” This makes me suspect that one of the rationales was driving and the other was put forward for the political purpose of maximizing support and the psychological purpose of making the person more comfortable with his or her views. After all, it would have been very stressful to have believed that while Saddam presented a high threat, the post-war situation would be as bad as it has turned out to be. There is massive evidence from psychology that people try to avoid perceiving painful value trade-offs, and there are innumerable cases where this pattern appears in political judgments.⁸

My argument is compatible with and indeed reinforces Smith’s if it was the perceived opportunity that drove policy. I cannot prove otherwise, but my sense of the debate and my conversations with people on the fringes of policy-making indicate that it was threat

⁸ For examples and documentation, see Robert Jervis, “Understanding Beliefs,” *Political Psychology* 27 (October 2006): 641-64.

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that was the more powerful force. This I believe fits with many other cases, as well as with standard psychology. Furthermore, until 9/11 Cheney had argued that Iraq would be hard to rule, let alone turn into a democracy, after a U.S. invasion. Although 9/11 could and I believe did rationally affect his sense of threat, without invoking psychology it is hard to see how it could have led him to change his mind on the prospects for an easy occupation. One obvious reply is that it was the perception of threat that was exaggerated if not manufactured (although this would not explain Cheney's change), something that looks plausible now that we know that Saddam had put his WMD programs in abeyance. But this is hindsight; intelligence did not have to be pressured into estimating that Saddam had active WMD programs, which was the conclusion of the intelligence services of other countries, even those in countries that opposed the war.

A rebuttal is that the democratization agenda has been prominent after the invasion. Indeed, although Bush and his colleagues have backed off their pressure on countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan, they have done more in this regard than any previous administration, as Smith's analysis would lead us to expect. Again there is an explanation from political psychology: the fact that it is now clear not only to us but to the decision-makers that the level of threat was not high creates great cognitive dissonance, which can be reduced by an increased commitment to democratization.⁹ Thus current beliefs do not show what was believed previously.

None of this is evidence, of course. But we do have a bit. Most importantly, as Smith notes but does not stress (xxxvii, 225), the neoconservatives, far from pushing for democracy, wanted to install Ahmad Chalabi in power. How they developed such faith in him is not entirely clear, apart from the fact that both he and they were opponents of CIA, but what is crucial here is that they pushed for his taking power without any pretense of free elections. Much of the reason, I believe, is that they saw his taking over as a way to rapidly withdraw American forces, which was more important for many Pentagon civilians than democratization in part because their goal of transforming the military and making it smaller required this. On the other hand, Smith can argue that the fact that Bush vetoed Chalabi's installation shows that he was committed to democracy even if many of his more ideological subordinates were not.

This line of argument leads to a broader avenue of attack. Smith not only talks about the extent to which both liberals and neoconservatives see themselves as engaged in a war of ideas, to a significant extent this is his own perspective, not necessarily on international politics, but on the struggle to control foreign policy. He disputes both realism and Marxism because he sees U.S. foreign policy as being strongly influenced by its democratic ideals. (I suspect that he would agree with the old and important analysis of American

⁹ The classic study, which provides an eerie parallel with Iraq, is Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

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society and political thought propounded by Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition in America*.¹⁰) Material forces are not unimportant; the transformation of liberalism discussed above was made possible by the growth of American power. But the uses to which this power was put was strongly influenced by the liberal worldview. Liberalism is fairly capacious, however, and by itself did not produce the Bush doctrine. Instead for Smith the academic theories and neoconservative ideas noted earlier were crucial. Thus one purpose of his book is to persuade people that these ideas are flawed and, in combination, pernicious. This is not to say the he has any illusions that his book will single-handedly turn American foreign policy around, but he does see it as part of the war of ideas at home.

The rebuttals are obvious, although their validity is not. A Marxist would argue that liberalism and the Bush Doctrine simply are covers for imperialism that benefits what in the old days we called the ruling class (191-2). In parallel, Marxists and cynics note that now, as in the Cold War, the U.S. is much more prone to push for democracy in countries that are its adversaries than in those that pursue policies it favors. In *America's Mission* he explicitly took issue with such economic explanations; here he puts them aside. It was not the business interests that pushed hardest for overthrowing Saddam and, aside from Halliburton and some defense contractors, it is hard to see how they benefited from the war.¹¹

I have more sympathy with the second kind of objection that also sees the ideas as more rationalizations than rationales. This is standard realism. As I have argued elsewhere, this approach argues that state's conceptions of their interests expand as their power does, and that if states, like individuals, are not checked by external restraints they will eventually infringe on others.¹² Expansion by the powerful is as old as human history and has characterized democracies and dictatorships, capitalist economies and pre-capitalist ones, societies that embrace liberalism and ones that reject it. Without academic theories proclaiming the ease of democratization and the virtues of democratic states' foreign policies, would American policy really have been very different? It is a testimonial to the pervasiveness of liberalism that these theories were so readily accepted: decision-makers at least half believed them before the academic research was done. But without these rationales others might have been found. Similarly, the recent subordination of sovereignty to human rights may have eased decision-makers' consciousness, but the U.S. and other powerful states had not been slow to violate the sovereignty of smaller ones before.

¹⁰ New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955.

¹¹ For a realist critique on American foreign policy that sees economic interests as responsible for taking the US in its terrible direction, see Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹² Robert Jervis, *American Foreign Policy in a New Era* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 90-96.

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Some of Smith's argument fits with mine. He stresses the hubris and self-righteousness of American policy. The former and perhaps the latter flow more from success and power than from liberalism. They are perhaps particularly unattractive in a liberal society that values tolerance, self-awareness, and respect for others, which is one reason why so much of the current rhetoric is so disturbing. But, at bottom, these characteristics and American behavior are not particularly American. Over-reaching by the powerful would not surprise Thucydides or his heirs. The ideas might be American, but the pattern owes more to Lord Acton: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

In closing, I want to stress what I said at the start: even if I am right, *A Pact with the Devil* is an important and stimulating book. We and our students will borrow from and argue with it for years to come.

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