A Pact With The Devil: Washington’s Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise

Roundtable Review

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More than forty years ago, Hans J. Morgenthau complained that too much of what passes for cutting edge research in political science in the United States hides in “the trivial, the formal, the methodological, the purely theoretical, the remotely historical—in short, the politically irrelevant.”¹ Since then, it has become routine for prominent political scientists in international relations (IR) and comparative politics subfields to call for greater “policy relevance” in the development of research questions and the construction of theories or to criticize the widening gap between the career incentives of the academy and the day-to-day needs of policymakers. This is particularly true among IR scholars who specialize in security studies and United States foreign policy.²

Tony Smith’s *Pact with the Devil* is a provocative book that illustrates how scholarship in the IR and comparative politics, as well as in field of international law, can actually impact the content (if not the actual conduct) of foreign policy. Unfortunately, that contribution has led the United States into its worst foreign policy debacle since the Vietnam War. Smith begins the book with a confession, “When I arrive at

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the Pearly Gates, the question from Saint Peter I most fear will be how, given the evidence from the war in Iraq, I myself could have been so naïve as to put so much intellectual stock into supporting Liberal Democratic Internationalism... (ix).” His examination of the intellectual origins of the Bush Doctrine confirms the continued relevance of two old sayings. The first, attributed to figures ranging from Samuel Johnson to Saint Francis de Sales, is “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The second is from the Book of Proverbs, 16:18 (NRSV): “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before the fall.”

In the months following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration articulated a bold grand strategy in a series of presidential speeches culminating in the release of the National Security Strategy of the United States (NSS) in September 2002. To effectively confront new dangers emerging from the intersection of jihadist radicalism and technology, President Bush said in his June 2002 commencement address at U.S. Military Academy, America must reject moral relativism, boldly side with the forces of individual liberty, and, if necessary, “preempt” (that is, initiate preventive wars against) states and terrorist groups suspected of possessing or seeking to acquire WMD. It must use its tremendous military and economic power, not just to defend the “Free World” as it did during the Cold War, but instead to expand that “zone of liberty” around the world.

Contrary to conventional wisdom which attributes the so-called Bush Doctrine and the ensuing Iraq war exclusively to the neoconservatives in the Bush administration and on the staffs of The Weekly Standard and the American Enterprise Institute, Smith argues that many of the doctrine’s core elements originated with liberal (or neoliberal) internationalist scholars and activists. Specifically, he identifies three strands of neoliberal IR theory and ideology in the 1990s and 2000s that directly influenced the Bush Doctrine: (1) the democratic peace literature and related efforts to elevate liberal theories of international relations to status of empirical laws; (2) philosophical and international legal scholarship on sovereignty; and (3) comparative political analysis on democratic and economic transitions.

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Of course, the Bush administration sold the 2003 Iraq invasion to the Congress and the American people as a preventive war—a conflict ostensibly launched to prevent Saddam Hussein from acquiring or reconstituting weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, from the outset, Bush and others were quite clear that “Operation Iraqi Freedom” had grander objectives. By toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime and turning Iraq into a liberal democracy, the U.S. could fundamentally transform state-society relations in the Arab world, eliminate the sources of jihadist terrorism, send a message to other rogue states, and consolidate America’s hegemonic position in the international system. Moreover, the risks of such an undertaking would be relatively low and the benefits would be quite high. Each of those lofty war aims can be directly traced to writings of self-identified liberals in the fields of IR and comparative politics subfields of political science, international law, and journalism in the previous decade.

According to Smith, “neoliberals were the functional equivalent for the Democratic Party of the neoconservatives within the Republican Party, a pro-war faction able to articulate in seemingly persuasive fashion why America’s moment of unrivaled power meant embracing a mission that would echo through the ages for its vision and its courage (p. xvii).” Therefore, prominent liberal scholars such as Larry Diamond, Michael Doyle, Bruce Russett, John Oneal, Paul Berman, Ann-Marie Slaughter, and Andrew Moravcsik, and as well as pundits such as Thomas Friedman, are just as culpable for the ongoing Iraq war as neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Richard Perle, William Kristol, Robert Kagan, Frank Gaffney, Charles Krauthammer, and James Woolsey. For Smith, the Bush Doctrine is a pact with the devil in two respects: The U.S. succumbed to the temptation to exploit its overwhelming military superiority and the ideological primacy of liberal democracy and market capitalism to dominate the international system for generations to come. And perhaps more tragically, Smith’s fellow liberal internationalists consummated an “unholy” union with the neoconservatives in order to influence the direction of U.S. foreign policy.

In the interests of full disclosure, let me make two admissions before continuing. First and most obviously, Smith and I have been departmental colleagues for the past decade. We have talked frequently about this book project since its inception. I provided comments on several draft chapters and on the complete manuscript. He acknowledges me in the preface as one of several long-time friends (the others being historians Ronald Steel and David Fromkin) who “never had the slight truck with liberal internationalism” and who saw the “conceits and misuse of this ideology within months of 9/11 (p. xviii).” Therefore, unlike the other contributors to this roundtable, I cannot purport to offer a “detached” scholarly review of A Pact with the Devil.

Second, although Smith and I are colleagues, we have always “agreed to disagree” about international relations theory and the proper role of power versus principle in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. His 1994 book, America’s Mission makes that case that the promotion of liberal democracy aboard has been a recurrent feature of U.S. foreign policy since the
presidency of Woodrow Wilson and efforts to promote democratic governance in other
countries have generally enhanced U.S. national security.\(^5\) As a political realist, I have
always been deeply skeptical of the sweeping empirical and theoretical claims made by
liberal international relations scholars, especially by proponents of the liberal democratic
peace thesis and liberal institutionalism.

In the remainder of this review, I advance a single argument about *A Pact with the Devil.*
Despite his stated desire to rescue Wilsonian internationalism from its own excesses Smith,
in effect, advances a quintessentially “realist” critique of recent U.S. foreign policy.

Smith argues that, in the wake of the Cold War and the triumph of liberal democracy and
capitalism in Eastern and Central Europe, South Africa, and elsewhere, self-described
liberal scholars and activists began to adopt a more militant posture in world affairs
toward democracy promotion and the protection of human rights. The United States, flush
with an overwhelming preponderance of power and yet threatened by the rise of jihadist
terrorism after 2001, thus succumbed to the temptations of pursuing hubristic and utopian
grand strategic aims and over-estimating the efficacy of military force and the universal
appeal of its own ideology. On this point, many realists would agree.

For the past sixty years, realist scholars and pundits have repeatedly warned against what
they perceive to be the idealistic impulses in U.S. foreign policy. For example, Morgenthau,
while appreciating the mobilization potential of nationalism and ideology, feared the
Truman administrations failed to see the Cold War with the Soviet Union as “not a struggle
between good and evil, truth and falsehood, but of power with power.”\(^6\) George P. Kennan,
the father of containment, observed, “A good deal of our [the United States’] trouble seems
to have stemmed from the extent to which the executive has felt itself behold to...what we
might call the erratic and subjective nature of public reaction to foreign-policy questions,”
in particular the prevalence of the “legalistic-moralistic approach to international
problems.”\(^7\) It is no accident that three of the earliest and most vocal critics of the Vietnam
War and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ “nation building” exercise in South
Vietnam were Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Kenneth Waltz.\(^8\) Even Henry Kissinger,
a realist who supported the Vietnam War (who escalated the level of U.S. military
involvement during his tenure as President Richard Nixon’s national security adviser), later

\(^5\) Tony Smith, *America’s Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the

\(^6\) Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign

\(^7\) George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1985), 93.

\(^8\) For a recent analysis of Morgenthau, Niebuhr, and Waltz’s opposition to the Vietnam War see
Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Morgenthau, Niebuhr, and Waltz*
lamented, “...America’s journey in international politics is the triumph of faith over experience.” Waltz was extremely critical of the Clinton administration’s tendency to preach to China and Russia about the importance of democracy and human rights, especially given the fact that those great powers already had strong incentives to balance against the United States. More recently, Christopher Layne observed, “…the inclination to universalize liberal democracy puts the United States on a collision course with others who ideologies, institutions, and values differ from America’s...” Likewise, it is no accident that the earliest and most vocal critics of the Bush Doctrine and the Iraq adventure were John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, and Andrew Bacevich.

Successive generations of American realists have recognized that when different administrations (both Republican and Democratic) embark upon campaigns to spread democratic governance to particular states or preach about the universal values of freedom and democracy they invariably expose the United States to what Smith’s and my mutual colleague, Kelly Greenhill, calls hypocrisy costs, “symbolic political costs that can arise when there exists a gap between one’s normative and juridical commitments and one’s demonstrated actions.”

The truth is that the United States has never and will never hold all states accountable to the same standards of international and domestic conduct. Various administrations’ categorization of other countries as fellow liberal democracies or autocracies, whether of the Communist, Islamist, fascist, absolute monarchist, or a military dictatorship variety, tends to change whenever U.S. strategic or economic interests are at stake. It is not surprising that Woodrow Wilson, who as a young political science professor in the 1890s hailed Wilhelmine Germany as model constitutional state, would as later as president come to identify it as the principle threat to international stability and American interests after 1915. Although Wilson took the country into World War I pledging to make the “world safe for democracy” and to end balance-of-power politics, his decision was perfectly consistent with (and explicable through) realism.

Throughout the Cold War, the liberal internationalist rhetoric of Democratic and Republican administrations alike was contradicted by their willingness to find common cause with autocratic regimes in the struggle against the Soviet Union and Communism.


11 Layne, Peace of Illusions, 121.


Washington's penchant for overthrowing democratically elected (but ideologically unacceptable) regimes in Iran, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile, and elsewhere further undermined its credibility. Likewise, the Bush administration's simultaneous proclamation of a “democracy agenda” in the Middle East in 2005-2006 and its continued support for autocratic rulers such as President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt are illustrative of hypocrisy costs. Regardless of whether Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and the other current or former administration officials actually believe their rhetoric about democracy promotion and the benign motives for U.S. policy, the fact is, hardly anyone in the Middle East or elsewhere does. If the administration's global war on terror (or more specifically, if its war in Iraq) is supposed to a contest for the “hearts and minds” of Islamic world, the U.S. is already losing.

Smith, however, challenges the view that the Bush Doctrine is simply an updated version of Wilsonian internationalism. To make the case that the doctrine and the role that neoliberal thought played in its formulation represented a radical departure from the past he traces the evolution of liberal internationalism from the War of Independence to the present. He posits five stages in the evolution of liberal ideology: pre-classical (from 1782 to the Spanish-American War), classic (the presidency of Woodrow Wilson), hegemonic (from the defeat of Nazi Germany until the collapse of the Soviet Union), imperialist (academic theory through the articulation of the Bush Doctrine in 2002), and fundamentalist (from 2002 to the present). The pre-classical, classic, and even the hegemonic incarnations of liberal internationalism all shared common assumptions about the United States' unique role as the first constitutional republic since antiquity, the superiority of liberal democracy to other forms of government, and the shared interests and pacific relations among liberal democracies. However, these incarnations were also cognizant of the limits of U.S. military and economic power. The liberal imperialist phase differs from its predecessors in both the scope of its ambitions and assumptions about the relative ease of democratic transitions. Finally, liberal fundamentalism completely abandons the caution about the ease of democratic transitions and the efficacy of U.S. military power found in previous incarnations. It is global in scope and unlimited in its ambition.

At the same time, Smith admits that it would not have been possible for the U.S. to pursue foreign policies consistent with liberal imperialism, let alone liberal fundamentalism, before the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar international system in 1989-90. For all of the rhetorical excesses and “good intentions” of successive administrations, the fact remains that the multipolar and bipolar international systems of the twentieth century did not afford the United States the luxury to actually pursue such ambitious and lofty aims. Dealing with the threats posed by Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, Japan, and later the Soviet Union always took priority. When push came to shove, as it often did, Realpolitik considerations always took priority over Idealpolitik. Before and during the world wars and throughout the Cold War, anticipated shifts in the balance-of-power, uncertainty about other states’ future intentions, and exogenous shocks tended to slap even the most
idealistic policymakers in Washington back to reality. After the Cold War, however, the United States's overwhelming preponderance of power and the absence of a existential great power threat insulated policymakers from the most dire consequence of pursuing hubristic and short-sided foreign policies—namely, the risk of inadvertent escalation to great power war. Unfortunately for the long-term interests of the United States (and perhaps the rest of the world), there are few signs that the Iraq debacle has slapped the idealists of both the liberal internationalist and the neoconservative persuasion back to reality.

Let me conclude with the following observations. *A Pact with the Devil* is an excellent book that should be required reading for IR and comparative politics scholars, as well as historians of U.S. foreign relations. Smith delivers a devastating indictment of the Bush Doctrine and the intellectual contribution of liberal scholars to it. This book provides both an intellectual history of the Bush Doctrine and the follies of academy in the decade after the Cold War. It has already generated tremendous controversy because the author, a self-described Wilsonian internationalist, has exposed both the hubris of his intellectual brethren and the inherent danger of their ideas.

In raising the above critique, I am not claiming that Smith has become a realist; a charge he would most vigorously reject. Nor do I wish to diminish the originality of his analysis. Indeed, only a scholar as versed in liberal internationalism as Smith could deliver such a devastating indictment of its excesses. However, I will close by saying that in writing *A Pact with Devil*, Smith has moved far closer to my conception of international relations and U.S. foreign policy than he might care to admit.