Review of Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*
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Structural realism, a sub-discipline in International Relations pretty much invented by Kenneth Waltz and for awhile one of the most dominant fields in all of social science, lays out a clear vision of the international. The condition of anarchy – the simple absence of an authoritative world government – permits the possibility of war and so violent national death, which in turn puts pressure on all states, though most notably the major powers, to seek security in any way they can. While these states, as Waltz memorably put it, might pursue any 'damn fool' policy they choose, the anarchical structure of the international system inexorably pushes them toward strategies of security-seeking, of adopting foreign policies that maximise their chances of survival at minimal cost, just as a market forces firms to adopt policies of economic efficiency or go bankrupt. The constant and stark nature of this structural pressure – look after your security, or pay the price! – allows structural realists to predict how states are likely to respond to their security environment without paying much, or any attention to the ideology of their governments or the motivations of their leaders, which is precisely what makes it a structural theory. Indeed, many successors to Waltz, including John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, the author under review here, stipulate that we must regard states as 'rational actors' which can always be expected to pursue security over everything else if the theory is going to work.[1]

By their own admission, structural realists have had a very difficult time explaining US foreign policy over the last 25 years with this kind of theorising. During this period the US has embarked on costly and often disastrous adventures overseas, above all of course the catastrophic war in Iraq, against weak states that posed no serious threat, and often no threat at all, to American security. American leaders and influential opinion-leaders have conspicuously rejected realist principles in favour of a broader idealistic discourse focused on spreading liberal values worldwide. The US has (or will have) spent trillions of dollars on foreign policies and military campaigns which have almost certainly had the cumulative result of *damaging* American security rather than enhancing it.[2] It is not just that prominent structural realists agree that these policies are destructive and have prominently opposed them; it's that they are at a loss to explain what the United States, the most powerful state in the world and, in relative terms, perhaps ever, is doing. States, and especially major powers, are supposed to be rational actors that pursue their own physical security at minimal cost. One can make many arguments about what the US has been really up to since the end of the Cold War, but no one could possibly claim that it has been doing that.

In his new book *The Hell of Good Intentions*, Stephen Walt provides the most powerful explanation of America's disastrous foreign policy record since the end of the Cold War that I have seen. He shows, in ruthless detail, how the foreign-policy establishment in Washington, what Ben Rhodes famously called 'the Blob,'[3] has successfully pushed for an activist foreign policy of 'liberal hegemony' over the past 25 years despite its repeated and costly failures. Liberal hegemonists, Walt demonstrates, have ruthlessly excluded alternative foreign policies from consideration by American leaders, and, even more exasperating, continue to be rewarded with key government posts, prestigious academic positions, and top media jobs despite their dismal record.

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1 See John Mearsheimer, 'Reckless States and Realism,' *International Relations* 23 (2009); for a critique of this approach, see James Fearon, 'Rationalist Explanations for War,' *International Organization* 49 (Summer, 1995)

2 For a recent and dire report, see Daniel R. DePetris, 'The War on terror's total cost: $5,900,000,000,000' *National Interest* 12 January 2019, at https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/war-terrors-total-cost-5900000000000-41307

3 See David Samuels, 'The Aspiring Novelist who became Obama's Foreign-policy Guru,' *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 May 2016.

As I will argue later, I do not think that Walt reckons sufficiently with the inconsistency between his demand that fixing this policy requires a change in American political discourse and structural realism's dismissal of such 'unit-level' factors. Furthermore, and related, I find his preferred foreign policy, 'offshore balancing,' difficult to reconcile with the impassioned, radical critique he makes of the liberal establishment. However, these are the complaints of an IR scholar. The main contribution of Walt's book is not a theoretical one: it is his devastating exposé of an American liberal foreign policy establishment that has brought so much harm to the world over the past few decades.

Walt first lays out the case that the record of US foreign policy since 1991 has indeed been a disaster. This is kind of a slam-dunk. The expansion of NATO in the 1990s, while welcomed by many states in Eastern Europe with vivid memories of Russian oppression, violated a pledge by the first Bush administration that NATO would not move 'an inch' eastward after the Soviet retreat,[4] and had the predictable effect of accelerating traditional Russian fears of the West as well as stoking Moscow's suspicions that the Americans were exploiting its many concessions. Democracy promotion policies undertaken by the US, in the Middle East particularly, have mainly produced failed states and radical extremism. Similarly, the aggressive spread of free-market capitalism by the US and international institutions dominated by it often ended up enriching a handful of elites while impoverishing everyone else, triggering a backlash against globalised capitalism which we are witnessing today.[5]

Of course, the case for the prosecution rests overwhelmingly on the war in Iraq (and the associated 'war on terror' undertaken at the same time) unleashed by the second Bush administration, along with important backing from the UK, in the early 2000s. This war, publicly opposed by many prominent American realists, including Walt, before it began (not in hindsight, as has been the case among other scholars), is widely regarded as the biggest blunder ever made in the history of US foreign policy, and it is not hard to see why. The conflict persists some fifteen years on in Iraq, and also in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Thousands of US and UK soldiers have been killed, many more grievously wounded, and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and others have died, many of them civilians. The war has fomented anti-Western terrorism and led directly to the formation of ISIS. Estimates of its ultimate cost are in the *trillions*: in adjusted dollars, the wars in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East may well end up costing more than what the US spent to wage World War Two. If one set out to devise a disastrous foreign policy for the United States, it would hard to top this one.

Walt might have focused more exclusively on the war than he does, because it is the *sine qua non* of any wholesale critique of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War: take it away, and while we might still have issues with NATO expansion and globalisation, I do not think anyone would regard the last 25 years as a disaster. Thus Walt I think unfairly lumps the Clinton and Obama administrations with the Bush one in his attack; nothing the two Democratic presidents did (and the same could be said for the current Republican president) were remotely as catastrophic as the decision made by Bush in 2002-03.

Moreover, by zeroing in more squarely on Iraq, Walt might have contended with an argument that is currently making the rounds in IR: that the war is to be blamed on realism, not liberalism. Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry argue that the motivations behind the war were the realist ones of aggressive military coercion of a state that threatened US and western security interests, and that right-wing nationalists like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, two figures who could not be called

4 Mary Elise Sarotte, 'A Broken Promise: What the West Really Told Moscow about NATO expansion,' *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2014)

5 I write this sentence in Bordeaux, where the 'Gilets Jaunes' have taken to the streets.

liberals, really were the ones responsible for the fiasco. Patrick Porter has recently put forward an effective rebuttal of their claim, showing how Deudney and Ikenberry write a selective history of the decision for war that suits their purposes. Nevertheless, it is an important debate, and an engagement with it would have enhanced the argument here.[6]

Next, Walt demonstrates why the ideology of liberal hegemony caused such problems. His argument can be boiled down to a couple of key points. First, liberals failed to understand that victory in the Cold War and the apparent triumph of liberal capitalism did not mean that states and peoples around the world would simply accept US primacy. Making a typical realist argument, Walt shows that traditional political impulses such as autonomy and nationalism would lead states to reject American coercion, even if accepting it might be in their rational 'interests.' The inability of US liberal hegemonists to even conceive of the possibility that other societies 'wouldn't want to become like us' (p. 80) created a blindness in American foreign policy. The classical realist Hans Morgenthau stated that a key tenet of effective foreign policy is to try to understand the perspective of the adversary. In the dark days of the early 2000s especially, this wise advice was not only ignored, but often characterised as treasonous.

A second problem lay in the evolving debate between the two camps of liberal hegemonists. Traditional liberals stressed that the United States should emphasise soft forms of hegemony, such as spreading democracy, strengthening western international institutions, and supporting the expansion of markets. In the visceral climate following the 11 September attacks, however, these liberals lost ground to the neoconservatives, who also supported the policy of liberal hegemony but argued, in a receptive Washington, that it needed to be carried out more brutally and unilaterally than traditional liberals believed. It was at this moment that American liberalism faced a moment of decision, and, as Walt shows, many traditional liberals saw where the wind was blowing and sided with the neoconservative hawks. He suggests that their embrace of neoconservative hawkishness may have been decisive in tipping the political scales toward war, and I believe this is correct – not only with respect to American liberals, but perhaps even more decisively, to the British Prime Minister Tony Blair.[7]

One of Walt's evident aims in the book is to make it accessible to general audiences and not get too tied up in IR theorising, but here again he might have allocated a bit more space to a larger critique of liberalism as a political theory. The debate between realism and liberalism rests at the centre of political inquiry, and the case he makes against liberal hegemony would have been strengthened by engaging more specifically with what he regards as the core philosophical misconceptions of liberalism. Perhaps he declined to do so in order to clear space for his colleague John Mearsheimer, whose book on precisely that topic was published at the same time.[8]

Walt then moves to the last and most interesting component of his main argument. Namely, how have the liberal hegemonists pulled this off? How did they win in the struggle to define US foreign policy after the Cold War, and why on earth are they still so influential today?

Walt begins with an argument familiar to this reviewer: the effects of American 'free security.' According to this approach, since the United States has faced few threats to its existence over its

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6 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Realism, Liberalism and the Iraq War,' *Survival* 59 (2017); Patrick Porter, 'Iraq: A Liberal War After all; A Critique of Dan Deudney and John Ikenberry,' *International Politics* 55 (November 2017)

7 On this see Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

8 See John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (Yale University Press, 2018)

history, especially when contrasted with major powers in Europe and Asia, a foreign policy culture has taken hold in America that is substantially different from that of other great powers. Because the stakes of foreign policy have been relatively low, American leaders have been more free than those of other countries to be 'capricious,' as Kenneth Waltz has put it, in their decision-making. A state like Poland eighty years ago or Iran today must be very careful in developing its foreign policies, because the consequences of making the wrong move could be existential. The United States has not normally had to worry about that kind of danger.[9]

What free security does, in other words, is invite a much more wide open domestic political struggle to define foreign policy than is feasible elsewhere. With the stakes low, political interests at home wield comparatively more power in their attempts to shape this policy, and objections that a misguided policy imposed by these interests could put American survival at risk become far more politically contestable, because everyone implicitly understands that US security is unlikely to be endangered no matter what the government does. When there is 'no compelling danger to focus the national mind,' Walt writes, 'policy makers are freer to act as as they see fit or as domestic pressures dictate.' (p. 92) There have been exceptions, of course, most notably during and immediately after World War Two and the debate over nuclear weapons in the 1950s and 1960s, but these only prove the rule.

At the end of the Cold War, this condition moved into overdrive. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the collapse of global communism, and the fact that almost every other powerful state in the world was an ally of the US, Americans were presented with an almost infinite range of foreign policy possibilities. There was almost nothing the US could have done, other than to decide one day to initiate a nuclear war against Russia or China, that would have put its security at risk.

With free security moving into overdrive, so then did the political struggle to define and control US foreign policy in a post-Cold War world. I am old enough to remember demands from the left that the US 'come home' after its great Cold War victory, and deliver a peace dividend to the American people in the form of radical cuts in military spending and another New Deal at home. With the Soviet Union vanquished and no plausible challenger on the horizon, what could possibly justify continuing to spend hundreds of billions on the military and on a vast foreign-policy apparatus? Why not come home?

Walt's answer to this question represents the most compelling and radical part of the book. In his view, the 'blob' emerged out of the Cold War primed to support an activist and open-ended hegemonic strategy because this is how it could continue to exist, and thrive. Effectively deploying a sociological model of modern bureaucracies, Walt suggests that foreign policy professionals in Washington gravitated quickly to an ideology that would permit them to keep their jobs, engage in meaningful decision-making, and experience the frisson of power. Liberal hegemony, whose goal is the triumph of liberalism worldwide and whose means is endless American action to achieve this, provided the ideal blueprint for the nascent blob, and soon after the end of the Cold War other conceivable American grand strategies were pushed aside. Aspiring foreign policy professionals quickly learned that veering too far from the liberal mainstream was a bad career move, and so the contours of acceptable debate in Washington compressed even further. A hegemonic discourse took over the American foreign policy mind very quickly after 1991, and even more thoroughly after the 11 September attacks, with more critical perspectives on US policy and world politics routinely discussed elsewhere almost absent from American debate. This is something I am immediately struck by whenever I travel to the US.

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9 See Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America's Cold War: the Politics of Insecurity* (Harvard University Press, 2009), and also Craig, 'The Not-So-Strange Career of Charles Beard,' *Diplomatic History* 25 (March, 2001), 'American Realism vs American Imperialism,' *World Politics* 57 (October 2004), and Logevall, 'A Critique of Containment,' *Diplomatic History* 28 (September, 2004)

Though he focuses more on Beltway professionals, think-tanks, and academia than arms manufacturers and war-mongering generals, Walt's attack is similar to President Eisenhower's warning about the 'Military-Industrial Complex.' In both cases, established interests have a strong incentive in inflating threats, 'securitising' anything they can get their hands on,[10] reaching for expensive solutions when cheap ones would do, and characterising their critics as either naïve or downright dangerous. More action is always the answer, and when things go wrong, no one is held accountable. Walt coldly narrates the foreign policy records of some of the most prominent members of the blob, catalogues their grievous mistakes and failed predictions, and then mentions their current prominent positions as heads of think tanks or named professors at elite universities. Once well inside the blob, it seems almost impossible to fail; indeed, it is almost as if the absence of a disastrous doctrine or colossally wrong prediction on your c.v. is somehow cause for suspicion.

A larger examination of the institutional power of liberal hegemony might indeed tie it more broadly to economic sectors of the US which also have an interest in an activist US foreign policy: joining Walt's takedown of the blob to a Eisenhowerian critique of the modern-day Military-Industrial complex would provide a more thorough (and radical) account of the domestic origins of contemporary US foreign policy. It also might have been useful for Walt to show why liberal hegemony prevailed over other activist policies, such as the more frankly aggressive policy of 'Primacy,' which now often involves the pursuit of nuclear superiority[11] (talk about a jobs programme!) and more overt coercion of other great powers than even the most hawkish members of the blob tend to endorse. But these are more suggestions than criticisms. Walt's depiction of the triumph of liberal hegemony is both clinical and outraged: a work of political indignation, it might well be compared not to other IR scholarship, but rather to the writings of industrial-age muckrakers like Ida Tarbell or Upton Sinclair.

It is in this light that the last main chapter, on his proposed alternative to liberal hegemony, lands with a bit of a thud. Walt has long been an advocate of the policy of 'offshore balancing,' whereby the United States would remove itself from most of the world, content itself with its domination of the western hemisphere, tolerate the emergence of regional balances-of-power, and maintain forces in reserve until another major power (read: China) begins to obtain preponderance over Europe and Asia. At that point, the US should rise up to confront this Eurasian hegemon, thus, presumably, initiating another great-power conflict much like the Cold War. This geopolitical approach, reminiscent in many ways of George Kennan's 'strongpoint' strategy of containment, reflects Walt's structural realist assumptions: competition among great powers in an interstate anarchical order is going to happen, and so it behooves the United States to marshal its resources and avoid needless provocation until contending with a China threat can no longer be avoided.[12]

Make no mistake: if it were only a choice between the two, the world would probably be a much less violent place and the US would certainly be in much better economic shape had the US adopted offshore balancing after 1991 instead of liberal hegemony. The problem here is that Walt's own argumentation undermines the structural realist assumption that the recurrence of great-power conflict is inevitable; moreover, the strategy he proposes seems acutely at odds with his anti-blob politics.

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10 Securitisation refers to the political process of attempting to transform an issue into a matter of security and thus shutting down dissent and debate. See Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner, 1998)

11 See Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of Nuclear Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

12 Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, 'The Case for Offshore-Balancing,' *Foreign Affairs* 95 (July/August 2016); on the inevitability of a new great-power rivalry with China, see Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great-power Politics* Norton, 2001)

On the first point, recall that structural realism posits a logic of great power competition, what Waltz called the 'third image' of international politics, that the actions of unit-level actors (i.e., people, their volition, their ideas) cannot, over the long run, affect. Great powers eventually gravitate into rivalry and conflict irrespective of the intentions or normative wishes of the citizens and leaders of these states, because whatever other aims they might have, they first need to survive. This claim, what Mearsheimer calls the 'tragedy' of international politics, is the essence of structural realism: take it away, and the theory becomes empty.

But the argument in Walt's book indicates that he does not believe this. His critique of liberal hegemony is based on the premise that the intentions and wishes of American leaders and analysts (including himself) do matter, not only because he is advocating that these intentions and wishes need to change, and that he presumably believes that his writing might help achieve that goal, but also, and more important, because a core assumption in his work is clearly that US foreign policy, driven as it is by unit-level domestic politics, could conceivably go in any direction. Walt is arguing that what will really determine what the US does in foreign affairs is the contingent decision-making of people rather than the tectonic pressures of structural anarchy.

To put it another way, a structural realist like Walt has to ask himself: *at what point* does the experience of the US over the past two decades put his theory into question?[13] When will his continuing focus upon domestic politics and use of normative argumentation in trying to redirect American foreign policy lead him to question the salience of structural realism? Whilst a purely structural approach may explain, say, the policies of France and Britain on the eve of the First World War, is it possible that it cannot account for US policy today? If the United States is inevitably bound to pursue a policy that is more in accord with the dictates of structural realism, why not sit back and wait for it to happen? If it is not bound to do so, and everything in Walt's book suggests that this is the case, does not the whole logic of structural realism come into question?

The point is not just academic. Walt's advocacy of offshore balancing derives from his conviction that structural realism is still operative and that it would be best for the US to turn to a policy more in accord with its logic. I have just pointed out that structural realism does not seem operative with respect to the United States after the Cold War and that therefore this conclusion may not follow. But the second point has to do more with politics.

Walt contends that the time is now for Americans to confront the liberal hegemonists and reform US foreign policy, and indeed points to the victory of Donald Trump as an early, if unsatisfactory, sign of this trend. At the end of the book, he even presents a manual on how Americans should rise up and overthrow liberal hegemony and its 25 years of failure.

But he then asks of them that they replace it with a new foreign policy that is devoid of idealism. Walt's version of offshore balancing identifies the Persian Gulf as one of the regions the United States must still regard as a vital interest because of the strategic importance of that region's oil, a debatable proposition at best, and hardly the kind of thing that Bernie Sanders supporters are going to rally to. He states that the United States and China are headed for an 'intense security competition,' one 'likely to shape great-power politics for many decades to come,' (p, 35) which would suggest that Americans had better shed any illusions about a brighter world order and get ready for another season of high-stakes geopolitical conflict and quite possibly a nuclear World War Three. Yet if an interminable future of grim power politics is the best that Americans can hope for, why would they drop what they are doing and take on liberal hegemony? Is a second cold war, and

13 This same question is also asked in explaining the absence of traditional military balancing against the United States after the Cold War: see William Wohlforth and Stephen Brooks, *America Abroad* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and Nuno Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

then a third, *ad infinitum* until the nuclear missiles fly, really that much better?

The liberal hegemonists got almost everything wrong after the end of the Cold War, but they were working from a valid starting point. This was their belief that the collapse of communism and apparent absence of any other global ideological challengers to liberalism signalled an end to the great conflicts of the twentieth century and the possibility of perpetual peace: the 'end of history,' Francis Fukuyama called it. Sophisticated liberals recognised, correctly, that great-power conflict during that century, comprising two devastating world wars and then a third rivalry that threatened nuclear extermination, was not only a mode of international politics absurd to return to if that could be avoided, but also that, in the nuclear age, it was not *sustainable*: the world could not survive an eternity of that.[14]

Structural realism has no answer to this problem, and is therefore unlikely to appeal to Americans looking for a more hopeful alternative to the liberal hegemonic model. Perhaps the structural realists are right and tectonic forces will shove America away from its liberalism eventually as the world inexorably drifts toward yet another era of great-power conflict. But if that is so, then there was no reason for Walt to write this magnificent book.

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14 See Daniel Deudney, *Bounding Power* (Princeton University Press, 2007). On classical realists like Morgenthau reaching the same conclusion, see Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan* (Columbia University Press, 2003)

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