

## BOOK REVIEW

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# The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy

By Stephen Walt

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In his resounding book, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, Stephen M. Walt, Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University, scrutinizes the flaws and weaknesses of the U.S. contemporary foreign policy establishment. Walt is a member of the neorealist school of thought in the International Relations discipline, alongside leading scholars such as John J. Mearsheimer, Barry Posen and Christopher Layne. Whilst these realist theorists believe that great powers' behaviors are characterized mainly by systemic variables, they are strict opponents of liberal hegemonic strategy, which is based on norms, beliefs and ideas. They eschew approaches such as promoting democracy and liberal values in foreign policy behaviors. In line with these views, Walt's core motivation in *The Hell of Good Intentions* is to criticize the liberal hegemony policy that the U.S. has pursued since the beginning of the 1990s. According to Walt, the U.S., from then onward, has sought to spread liberal internationalist values and beliefs such as democracy, freedoms, institutions and a liberal economic system based on free-market strategy. Walt asserts that this strategy has caused the U.S.'s mutual relations with various countries to deteriorate, prolonged wars and exacerbated conflicts in many regions and led rivals to obstruct U.S. initiatives in international politics.

Walt divides his book into seven main chapters to test liberal hegemony strategy. In the first, "A Dismal Record," Walt explores the political attitudes of the administrations that took power after 1990 and fiercely criticizes the liberal foreign policy establishment. In the second chapter, "Why Liberal Hegemony Failed," Walt classifies the reasons behind the failed strategy and further clarifies the grounds that have led to undesirable results for the position of the U.S. in world politics during the last three decades. In the third and fourth chapters, "Defining the 'Blob': What is the 'Foreign Policy Community?'"

and “Selling a Failing Foreign Policy,” Walt focuses on the formal/informal organizations and individuals that shape the American foreign policy agenda and explains the relations between the foreign policy community and American society on foreign policy issues. In these chapters, Walt investigates how different political tools used by the foreign policy community have created change, and how they have influenced the American society's foreign policy interpretation. In the last three chapters “Is Anyone Accountable?” “How Not to Fix U.S. Foreign Policy” and “A Better Way,” Walt discusses Donald Trump's unsuccessful foreign policymaking, offers a new grand strategy formation, namely offshore balancing, for U.S. foreign policy and explains why this strategy is the best way to maintain the interests and hegemonic position of the U.S. in international politics.

In the first chapter, Walt substantially assesses Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama's foreign strategy and policy formation. Walt indicates that the U.S. was the sole superpower in world politics at the beginning of the 1990s, and that no country then had the economic and military power to challenge U.S. hegemony. Both China and Russia, as possible challengers, were quite weak both militarily and politically, and U.S. relations with them were acceptably good and stable at the time. Furthermore, Walt analyses power indicators, noting that the U.S. had the largest economic power with approximately 60% GDP rates, and produced nearly 25% of total services and goods in the world during this period. In addition to its huge economic power, the U.S. was also a unique power that had a military presence in many parts of the world. Walt argues that all of these circumstances situated the U.S. in a special position in political history.

From the 1990s onward, President Clinton adopted a national security strategy based on “engagement and enlargement,” Bush declared a period of “democratic peace” and Obama supported liberal international values. Despite their positive attitudes, Walt deems that the strategies implemented by these presidents exacerbated global and regional problems, such as the Israel-Palestinian issue, North Korean nuclear armament and the challenges posed by Iran and Al-Qaeda, making these problems much worse and more complicated and leaving the U.S. with intractable problems.

In the second chapter, Walt explains why the liberal hegemonic strategy that has been implemented since the beginning of the 1990s has failed. According to Walt, liberal hegemony based on misguided strategic calculations has many visible shortcomings. He argues that there are several important reasons why the liberal hegemony strategy has failed. Liberal theorists and policymakers suppose that this strategy can effortlessly spread democracy and intensify mutual economic interdependence among states. In contrast, Walt claims that

economic interdependence, economic globalization and democracy have limited explanatory power in understanding world politics. Walt maintains that the wisdom put forward by liberals does not eliminate uncertainty and rivalry among states. Similarly, Walt contends that liberal theorists exaggerate the ability and importance of institutions to prevent international conflicts or wars. Institutions such as NATO, the WTO and the World Bank may work well if states have clear motivations to support them. Since states' intentions are uncertain, they use institutions as a foreign policy tool in order to protect their vital interests and/or to increase their sphere of influence.

In the third chapter, Walt addresses the "Foreign Policy Community," which consists of formal/informal organizations and individuals that directly or indirectly shape the foreign policy agenda of the country. As Walt states, the community involves many actors, such as international relations professors, think tank members, senators, interest groups, lobbies, media, CIA analysts and officers of the U.S. Foreign Service. Walt considers that many of the community members defend the idea that the U.S. should implement a liberal hegemonic strategy to be more prosperous and more secure, and deduce that for this reason, the U.S. should take on a leadership role in solving international problems and keeping the liberal international order established by the U.S. alive. Nonetheless, Walt stresses that the U.S. public has a totally different opinion when compared to the community's policy approaches; many American citizens are uncertain about the country's deep liberal engagement with global issues.

The fourth chapter deals with the subject of the previous chapter in more detail. Walt insists that since there is a strict difference between the community and the public on foreign policy problems, the community employs various arguments and rhetoric in order to convince American society to support liberal hegemony. In that respect, the first considerable step taken by the community is to overstate the international dangers that the U.S. faces. This step is recognized by Walt as "Threat Inflation." Inflaters view the world as full of threats and dangers and they absolutize that the U.S. must always act rapidly against any threats. By exaggerating antagonists' capabilities and manipulating international uncertainty, threat inflators generally attempt to convince the public. They also overstate the advantages of liberal hegemonic strategy.

In the last chapter, Walt offers an alternative strategy for U.S. foreign policy in light of the constant failures of the past administrations. According to Walt, the strategy that the U.S. should implement is offshore balancing in order to maintain its hegemonic position in global politics. Walt, as an offshore balancer, claims that few regions in the world have crucial significance for the U.S. position and security. These regions are the Western Hemisphere,

the Persian Gulf, Europe and Northeast Asia. Offshore balancing depends on the theory of the distribution of power, which asserts that if there is a potential hegemonic power that can challenge the status quo in these regions, the U.S. should directly deploy its forces there in order to preserve the balance of power and to prevent the actions of threatening rising powers. Walt reckons that this strategy has several noticeable advantages and gains for the U.S. By implementing offshore balancing, Walt asserts, the U.S. can reduce its defense expenditure and can cut unnecessary military costs as well. Thus, it can increase its spending in other important areas such as education, health, R&D and infrastructure within the country.

*The Hell of Good Intentions* may be classified as a crucial book for readers interested in recent trends in American foreign policy. The book is written appropriately enough for any casual reader to enjoy, and is deep enough to benefit international relations scholars too. Anyone who intends to comprehend the past and contemporary foreign policy strategies of the U.S. and their outcomes will find the book satisfying and well-organized. In a similar vein, the book is an outstanding critique of liberal hegemony. Walt's critical assessment that the U.S.'s attempts to promote liberal values globally since the end of the Cold War period have caused the U.S. to become less safe and prosperous is timely and relevant. And it should not be forgotten that the alternative foreign policy strategy Walt proposes, namely offshore balancing, is a grand strategy with growing influence on the U.S.' future policy approach to international politics.

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