

REVIEW OF *THE HELL OF GOOD INTENTIONS*

1. Liberal hegemony

This book argues that the Clinton, Bush, Obama, and to a large extent Trump administrations all followed the same fundamental approach to foreign policy, an approach called “liberal hegemony” which “rests on two core beliefs”:

(1) the United States must remain much more powerful than any other country, and (2) it should use its position of primacy to defend, spread, and deepen liberal values around the world.¹

Walt thinks this approach has disastrously failed to achieve its own goals and has caused enormous harm and waste—and is doomed to continue failing. He argues that this approach is unpopular among voters, but that the “foreign policy community”—defined to include a broad range of government institutions, think tanks, academics, and others—does not allow dissent from it, and that the members of that community are insulated from facing any consequences for the approach’s failures. (The book names a whole lot of names, of both individuals and organizations.)

I don’t feel anywhere *near* knowledgeable enough to form much of an opinion on this. I do appreciate the reminder that point #2 above should at least be made explicit and questioned; it’s very easy for it to be implicitly assumed in political discussions.

2. Credibility

Walt notes that “[a] time-honored method for selling an ambitious foreign policy is to exaggerate foreign dangers”², and one way of doing this is to raise fears that our nation will lose its *credibility*. I hadn’t really thought about the dubious nature of this fear before:

...threat inflators believe that U.S. credibility is extremely important and inherently fragile. ... Any time the United States chooses not to respond to some external event, threat inflators warn that this decision will destroy U.S. credibility, undermine allies’ resolve, and embolden America’s opponents. ... When the United States does respond, however, the effects are fleeting, and Washington has to demonstrate its will and prowess again the next time a potential challenge arises.

Repeated scholarly studies on reputation and credibility show that the world does not work this way: states judge how others will respond primarily based on the interests at stake and not on how the country acted in a radically different context. To take an obvious illustration, how the United States responds to a crisis in a minor power far away says little or nothing about how it would respond to a direct attack on the U.S. homeland or against an important U.S. ally. Yet threat inflators argue the opposite, implying that the United States must respond in places that don’t matter in order to convince adversaries it will act in places that do.³

3. Offshore balancing

The book is more about describing a problem than providing a solution, but the final chapter does explain Walt’s preferred alternative to liberal hegemony, called “offshore balancing”:

Instead of trying to remake the world in America's image, offshore balancing is principally concerned with America's position in the global balance of power and focuses on preventing other states from projecting power in ways that might threaten the United States....

In particular, offshore balancers believe that only a few areas of the globe are of vital importance to U.S. security or prosperity and thus worth sending Americans to fight and die for....⁴

Those areas are “the Western Hemisphere”, “Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf”, which sounds like a rather broad net to me, but offshore balancing also entails a much lower level of meddling in the regions of interest: the US would not try to play savior or push its vision of democracy onto others. Its goal would only be to prevent concentrations of power, and it would pursue this goal by means other than direct military intervention as much as possible.

Part of me is uncomfortable with this proposal because it seems to have an amoral flavor to it: we'd be giving up on even *trying* to do what's good/right in general, and explicitly adopting the goal of protecting our own power. Some ways of pursuing this goal would be morally unacceptable—you can't justify harming someone else just because you want them to stay weaker than you. On the other hand, if we see some nation rising in power *faster than* the others in a region, *some* ways of helping those others keep up may be not only acceptable but commendable, insofar as we'd be enabling them to protect themselves from domination and abuse by the rising power. As long as it's not interpreted as a license to ignore ethical constraints, it seems plausible to me that the “offshore balancing” approach would both benefit the US and reduce the harm we cause others through misguided paternalism.

1. Stephen M. Walt, *The hell of good intentions: America's foreign policy elite and the decline of U.S. primacy*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 54.
2. *Ibid.*, 147.
3. *Ibid.*, 149.
4. *Ibid.*, 261.

Posted 2024-09-29 by Jacob Williams on brokensandals.net. If you have feedback, email me!