

# Rethinking America's posture

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy**  
By Stephen M. Walt. 384 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$28.

BY JACOB HEILBRUNN

Stephen M. Walt, who teaches international relations at Harvard's Kennedy School and writes a column for Foreign Policy magazine, is no stranger to controversy. In September 2002, at a moment when both liberal hawks and neoconservatives were cheering for the George W. Bush administration to topple Saddam Hussein, he helped organize an open letter signed by over two dozen international relations scholars that appeared as an advertisement on the New York Times Op-Ed page, declaring "War With Iraq Is Not in the U.S. National Interest." Next, in 2006, he and John J. Mearsheimer published a lengthy essay in *The London Review of Books* that was called "The Israel Lobby." It caused an international furor, and an expanded version became a best-selling book. Now, in "The Hell of Good Intentions" — the title seems to take aim at the former United Nations ambassador Samantha Power's impassioned book about the historical failure to prevent genocide, "A Problem From Hell" — Walt denounces America's pursuit of a "liberal hegemony."

Like Edmund Burke, who warned, "I dread our own power and our own ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded," Walt views America's recurrent bouts of missionary zeal with consternation. Others, like the foreign policy writer Robert Kagan, may fret about an encroaching jungle invading the gardens of the West; Walt's attitude is to forget about trying to trim it back. As a longstanding member of the realist school of foreign policy, which has traditionally subordinated considerations about human rights and morality to a balance of power, Walt might be expected to wax enthusiastic about Donald Trump, who has espoused a "principled realism" and condemned the foreign policy establishment. Walt, however, exhibits as much disdain for Trump's bellicosity as he does for the liberal internationalists that he indicts here. Walt's book offers a valuable contribution to the mounting debate



A United States soldier watching a statue of Saddam Hussein fall in Baghdad in 2003.

GORAN TOMASEVIC/REUTERS

about America's purpose. But his diagnosis of America's debilities is more persuasive than his prescriptions to remedy them.

According to Walt, the dominant narrative after the conclusion of the Cold War was that history was on America's side, even, as Francis Fukuyama put it in a famous 1989 essay in *The National Interest*, that so-called history had ended and all that remained was economic materialism. Globalization would lead to what Karl Marx had called in the Communist Manifesto a "universal interdependence" among nations; warfare would become a thing of the past. America's mission was to push other states to protect human rights and to help them transition to democracy.

In Walt's view, "despite minor differences, both liberal and neoconservative proponents of liberal hegemony assumed that the United States could pursue this ambitious global strategy without triggering serious opposition." But the very steps that America took to enhance its security, Walt suggests, ended up undermining it. He reminds us, for instance, that George F. Kennan warned in 1999 that NATO expansion eastward was a "tragic mistake" that would, sooner or later, ignite Russian nationalism. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia became a revanchist power that launched cyber attacks on the Baltic States, seized Crimea, invaded Ukraine and interfered in the 2016 American presidential election. In

**Walt exhibits as much disdain for Donald Trump as he does for liberal globalists.**

Walt's telling, "the energetic pursuit of liberal hegemony was mostly a failure. . . . By 2017, in fact, democracy was in retreat in many places and under considerable strain in the United States itself."

Walt reserves his greatest ire for what Barack Obama's adviser Ben Rhodes dismissively referred to as the "Blob," or Washington's foreign policy elite. Some of his vexation is personal. He reports that the advertisement he signed attacking the invasion of Iraq has disappeared into the foreign policy memory hole: "In the 16-plus years since the ad was printed," Walt observes, "none of its signatories have been asked to serve in government or advise a presidential campaign." Walt's own zest for intellectual combat, though, can lead him into rhetorical overkill. "Instead of being a disciplined body of professionals constrained by a well-informed public and forced by necessity to set priorities and hold themselves accountable," Walt writes, "today's foreign policy elite is a dysfunctional caste of privileged insiders who are frequently disdainful of alternative perspectives and insulated both professionally and personally from the consequences of the policies they promote."

Walt points to the Council on Foreign Relations, the Atlantic Council and the Center for New American Security, among others, as constituting a kind of interlocking directorate that fosters groupthink and consists of mandarins intolerant of dissenting views. But

Walt's depiction of these organizations misses the mark. There's plenty of debate in Washington; whether it amounts to much is another question. He also focuses excessively on several rather obscure academic projects that he believes epitomize the sterile moribundity of American strategic thought. It would have been more illuminating had he zeroed in on those few organizations that really do exercise outsized influence in Trump's Washington, like the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which is helping to shape Iran policy.

Walt persuasively contends that Washington's bungled interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya helped propel Trump, who has consistently derided foreign policy experts, to the presidency. But so pervasive is the influence of the foreign policy elite, Walt argues, that it has managed to capture Trump himself. In Afghanistan, Trump ditched his campaign vows and bolstered American force levels, claiming that they would engage in counterterrorism rather than nation-building. Trump has presided over an approach toward Russia and China that is driving them into each other's arms, precisely as realist doctrine would predict. Walt also drubs Trump for his embrace of foreign autocrats, which amounts to a pursuit of illiberal hegemony: "The United States still sought primacy and its global military role was undiminished, but it was no longer strongly committed to promoting liberal values." With foreign policy hawks like the

national security adviser John Bolton and the secretary of state Mike Pompeo on the White House team, Walt perceptively observes that, far from being an isolationist, Trump has enabled a return to the confrontational unilateralism of Dick Cheney.

So how to rescue the superpower from its own miscues? Walt advocates what is known as offshore balancing. Offshore balancers, he says, believe that only a few areas of the globe are worth fighting to protect, with the Western Hemisphere paramount among them. When it comes to Europe, Northeast Asia or the Persian Gulf, America would intervene to uphold a balance of power only in extremis, and preferably after a war had already begun. Walt notes that while this may sound like a radical idea, it once was the guiding precept for American foreign policy.

In truth, any president who announced such a strategy would immediately initiate a free-for-all around the globe as local potentates tested Washington's resolve. Walt also makes the easy assumption that America can remain a pre-eminent power, but the mounting national debt and Trump's steady conversion of the country into what amounts to a rogue state could lead to a very different outcome. Soon Americans may discover that the only thing more vexing than exercising dominance is forfeiting it.

Jacob Heilbrunn is the editor of *The National Interest*.

## By the Book

John Sandford

The author, most recently, of the *Virgil Flowers* novel "Holy Ghost" devotes specific spots to reading: "I like a good light, a good chair and a good book more than anything I can think of, except my wife."

### What books are on your nightstand?

The last (but one) of the Bernie Gunther novels by Philip Kerr. They brought me the closest of any books, including nonfiction histories, to understanding Germany during the Hitler years. The last Bernie Gunther novel will be published next April — Kerr died this past spring — and I'm eagerly looking forward to it.

### Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

I like books that are both historically and technically aware. I treasured the "Flashman" novels by George MacDonald Fraser, Derek Robinson's novels about the British flying corps in World War I — "The Goshawk Squadron" is a minor masterpiece — and as a sometime Civil War buff, "Killer Angels" by Michael Shaara, which shows an astonishing depth of research. As a card-carrying liberal, I even have a sneaking soft spot for Newt Gingrich's alternative Civil War histories, though I draw the line at his politics. I dislike much of the current strain of war thrillers, because I regard most of the heroes as murderous psychopaths; I have too much respect for the American military to accept that portrayal. I read so much that I actually have had dedicated reading chairs for most of my life. I like a good light, a good chair and a good book more than anything I can think of, except my wife, Michele.

### What's your favorite book of all time?

An impossible question. If you put a gun to my head — say a .40-caliber Walther PPK, or maybe a .45 ACP Colt Gold Cup — I'd say "The Once and Future King," by T. H. White.

### Which books got you hooked on crime fiction?



JILLIAN TAMARI

I can't remember. I began reading "boy detective" novels when I was a child and never stopped. Later, starting in high school, I read all of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels and all of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels, which are about as different as you can get. Ross Thomas was my favorite — he really taught me, in detail, how to write thrillers. Right now I probably read 50 or so crime thrillers a year. I'm still hooked.

### Who's your favorite fictional detective? And the best villain?

I'm a fanboy. There would be several candidates for each. Right now, I'd favor James Lee Burke's Robicheaux, although Michael Connelly's Harry Bosch is right up there. When I was teaching myself to write thrillers, I closely studied Sara Paretsky's detective V. I. Warshawski. My main character in the *Prey* series, Lucas Davenport, even though he's male, carries a good deal of Warshawski's literary genetics. Favorite villain is Hannibal Lecter.

### What makes for a good thriller? Intelligence and velocity.

### What books might we be surprised to find on your shelves?

I was an American history and literature major in college and have always had a deep interest in history, particularly in art history. I have about 1,500 books on painting and photography and even wrote an art book one time,

published by Rizzoli under my real name, John Camp, on the American watercolorist John Stuart Ingle. I also have a large collection of books on Bible-era archaeology, and for 15 years sponsored and also worked as a digger and photographer at a major archaeological dig in Israel. The Tel Rehov dig focused on the 10th century B.C., the time of David and Solomon, at the very beginnings of proper history.

### Who is your favorite overlooked or underappreciated writer?

He's probably not overlooked, because a lot of serious people read his books, and Don Winslow does make *The Times* best-seller list, but he should go to No. 1 every time out. He doesn't. He's one of the best contemporary American writers of any kind.

### What's the best book you ever received as a gift?

Here's an odd one. Probably "On Thermochemical War," by Herman Kahn, not so much for what it said as for the ways that the arguments were made. That you could subject even the unthinkable to analysis. That served me well as a reporter, when you'd be looking into some complicated situation, and you'd have to step outside yourself to discover what was really going on. The book was very expensive at the time, and I was in college with no money, and it was given to me as a gift by the woman I would later marry. (She knew I was reading it a few pages at a time in a local bookstore.)

### You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

Charles Baudelaire ("Les Fleurs du mal"), Frida Kahlo (for her diary) and Robert Hughes (for his several books of cultural criticism). If he were still alive, I'd allow Hilton Kramer to stand on the lawn and shout in through an open window from time to time, as long as he didn't do it too often. And I wouldn't feed him.

## THE SUNDAY CROSSWORD

Portmanfaux

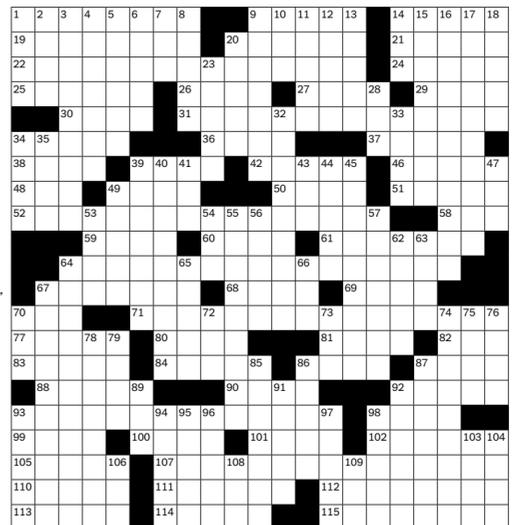
Edited by Will Shortz

### Across

- 1 Era of ignorance  
9 Elevators in an office building?  
14 Houston squad, casually  
19 Eaglelike  
20 Mississippi River bottom feeder  
21 "Wouldn't that be nice!"  
22 Satchel for a homicide detective?  
24 Joe of "GoodFellas"  
25 Something found at the top of many a Google search page  
26 Manufactured  
27 Baking soda has many of these  
29 Tush  
30 Danny Ocean's ex-wife in "Ocean's Eleven"  
31 Unseasonal wear on a winter vacation?  
34 Map  
36 Parisian waters  
37 Jewish mourning period  
38 Zoom, e.g.  
39 Baseball stats sometimes called 39-Down  
42 Jerk  
46 Static  
48 Swiss canton that was home to William Tell  
49 Variety of stud poker, familiarly  
50 Berry with two diacritics in its name  
51 "Get \_\_\_\_!"  
52 Late-morning meal for a TV family?  
58 Dorm overseers, for short  
59 Sports event with two diacritics in its name  
60 Cry after "Company"  
61 Who wrote "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king"  
64 One way to buy mustard cheaply?  
67 Like the number i, mathematically  
68 Burns writing  
69 Strong bond  
70 A pillar of Islam  
71 Emails such as "Click this link to become an Apollo astronaut!"  
77 Erie Canal city  
80 \_\_\_\_ Spiegel, co-founder of Snapchat  
81 "Darling, won't you \_\_\_\_ my worried mind" ("Layla" lyric)  
82 Peter's chief of staff on "The Good Wife"  
83 Down-on-their-luck sorts  
84 Hit the hide off the baseball  
86 Beatus  
87 Backgrounds in theater  
88 Tempur-Pedic rival  
90 Seawater compound  
92 Neophytes  
93 Collection of Yule-centric posts?  
98 Boxing venue  
99 Nasty Hungarian history  
100 Wooded valley  
101 Bird on Walden Pond in "Walden"  
102 Like services covered by a health insurer  
105 Drops  
107 Utensil for eating some cured meat?  
110 Link with  
111 Brainpower  
112 See to it  
113 When a happy hour might start  
114 Haven  
115 Seizure cause

### Down

- 1 Deaden acoustically  
2 Blue shade  
3 Kingdom in "The Prisoner of Zenda"  
4 Leg-pullers  
5 Div. for the Red  
6 Secures with a band  
7 S.A.S.E., e.g.: Abbr.  
8 They require stitches  
9 What the rotator cuff rotates  
10 School extension?  
11 Neutral shades  
12 Word from the Latin for "noose"  
13 One caught by a 12-Down  
14 Nurse  
15 Can-can dancing?  
16 Formula for slope in math  
17 Costa Rican president who won the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize  
18 Stuffed \_\_\_\_  
20 Clay and oil, for artists  
23 "For heaven  
28 Some ways on Waze: Abbr.  
32 Split personality?  
33 Branch of Islam  
34 Appurtenance for a cartoon Neanderthal  
35 Mannheim mister  
39 Delmonico steak cuts  
40 Document listing technical specifications  
41 TV network with a science-y name  
43 Prefix with puncture  
44 More sensible  
45 One is roughly a speck of dust  
47 Festoons with Charmin, for short  
49 Charged up  
53 Laura of "Big Little Lies"  
54 Confucian philosopher \_\_\_\_ Hsi  
55 Really trendy  
56 Hit just beyond the infield  
57 Hightail it, saltily  
62 Ocean froth  
63 "The Simpsons" bar  
64 Asian fruits used in Western alternative medicine  
65 Norwegian king near the end of the first millennium  
66 Non-\_\_\_\_ (food label)  
67 Western powwow held every year or so  
70 "Come again?"  
72 Limit  
73 "Fancy that!"  
74 People like you  
75 Orfeo in Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice," e.g.  
76 Not catch  
78 Crescent-shaped Italian pastries  
79 Piedmont wine town  
85 Alternatives to gelcaps  
86 Semiliquid stuff  
87 Neural junction  
89 So-so filler?  
91 Lunkhead  
92 Holiday glitter  
93 Flora and fauna  
94 Plaster for painting  
95 Animal used to guard sheep and goats  
96 Spanish crockery  
97 Munchkin  
98 "\_\_\_\_ Tikki-Tavi"  
103 Misrecounts  
104 "It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is \_\_\_\_": Churchill  
106 See 5-Down  
108 Numerical prefix  
109 Much Top 40 music now



PUZZLE BY BYRON WALDEN AND JOEL FAGLIANO / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

THE NEW YORK TIMES