



# ACCURACY in ACADEMIA

## The Road To Hell Or Good Intentions?

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On October 17, the Cato Institute hosted Stephen Walt, a professor of international affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Walt wrote a new book titled *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* in which he argues that our current foreign affairs problems were caused by U.S. primacy after the Cold War. This primacy involved discouraging others from challenging U.S. power and attempting to spread democracy and other liberal values. Liberal hegemony is another term to describe this type of foreign policy. A Visiting Assistant Professor in History at Columbia University, Stephen Wertheim, also spoke, commenting on Walt's ideas.

Walt believes that the liberal hegemony policy coarsens when the United States tries to liberalize other countries and make a web of alliances. He said: "For starters it inflates our defense requirements. By 2016, the U.S. was formally committed to defending more countries around the world than at any time in our nation's history... It also allows our allies to free-ride or in some cases act recklessly because they know Uncle Sam will bail them out if they get into trouble. Second, by definition trying to spread liberal values inevitably threatens non-democratic regimes who found lots of ways to thwart our aims. It also assumes that we know how to create democracies in the wake of regime change, but toppling foreign governments led to failed states and costly occupations instead."

He said that liberal hegemony is supported by most of the foreign policy 'elite' in Washington, but most American citizens do not want the U.S. as involved in foreign countries as the politicians do. Walt argues that the foreign policy elite gets the public to go along with liberal hegemony through a four-step process:

"One is threat inflation, exaggerate foreign dangers to justify going all over the world.

"Two, exaggerate the benefits of liberal hegemony: it will spread values, it will increase stability in the world

"Step three, conceal the costs, pay for wars by borrowing the money rather than through taxes

"And then step four, don't hold anyone accountable."

The ideal foreign policy for Walt involves reducing the U.S.' presence in the Middle East, placing more emphasis on diplomacy, and promoting American values by being a good example domestically.

Wertheim said that by the end of the 1990s, groups that favored little foreign intervention had decreased and there were more politicians who supported increased foreign intervention,

including some liberals. This is different from Walt's view, as he said that liberal hegemony took hold in the early 90s after the Cold War ended.

Wertheim questions the idea that U.S. primacy in the past was effective or successful: "So perhaps that perception of success needs to be questioned or the successes more precisely separated from the excesses..." He also said that Walt may be exaggerating the power of liberal hegemony: "Perhaps primacy is less a strategy than an assumption. In good times that assumption might go unquestioned, but in bad times that assumption is thrown open. Primacy might in such times be aggressively reasserted, as the current administration is attempting. Yet primacy might also prove easier to dislodge than we might think."