



Realism Redux: The Realists Strike Back!

Posted By [Daniel W. Drezner](#) ■ Monday, January 16, 2012 - 2:59 PM ■ [+](#) [Share](#)

Last week [I had a good rant](#) about the persecution complex of realist international relations scholars.

This is a discussion that needs to continue, however -- see the responses by [Justin Logan](#), [Alan Alexandroff](#) and [Steve Saideman](#), for example. So, I invited two of the smartest and least-likely-to-whine realists I know to respond. John Schuessler (an assistant professor in the Department of Strategy at the Air War College) and Sebastian Rosato (an assistant professor of political science at Notre Dame) offer their take below. I will respond later in the week:

Realists are Right After All

Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler

Dan Drezner [claims](#) that academic realists have a "strong, cultivated sense of victimhood." He is tired of what he sees as their unjustified griping that they are pariahs in the academy, among the general public, and in the foreign policy community. And he wants them to just come out and admit that they've failed to "popularize their own ideas."

As it happens, his post comes shortly after the publication of our [article](#), "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States" (*Perspectives on Politics*), in which we have a different take on these issues.

Let's start with whether or not people like realism. In our article, we ask what kind of policy the United States can pursue that will ensure its security while minimizing the likelihood of war. We then point out that IR scholars have tended to dismiss the possibility that realism has anything to contribute to the debate. The charge comes in a variety of forms, from 'realism causes war' to 'realism prevents progress.' This prompts critics to label realists as irresponsible or even immoral and to call for more 'enlightened' or 'morally acceptable'

alternatives. It is for good reason that Robert Gilpin has **said** that "no one loves a political realist." This hostility extends to the policy community. As we discuss in our article, U.S. policymakers have taken and continue to take their cues not from realism but from its main theoretical antagonist, liberalism. There is no need to take our word for it, however. **John Owen, Colin Dueck, and Michael Desch**, among others, have pointed out that American foreign policy has been guided by liberal principles since the Founding.

Our article describes and defends a realist foreign policy to guide U.S. decision makers. Our recommendation, which is logically derived from realist principles, is that the United States should balance against other great powers as well as against hostile minor powers that inhabit strategically important regions of the world, while otherwise practicing restraint. We then show that had the United States and other great powers followed our realist prescriptions, some of the most important wars of the past century—including the world wars, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War—might have been averted. Simply put, realism offers the prospect of security without war.

We wrote our article at least in part to popularize realist thinking. This would not count for much, and realists could still be accused of failing to spread their ideas, if we were the first realists to do so. But as we note, realists have been **vocal contributors** to the debate on U.S. foreign policy since World War II, even going so far as to oppose both the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Since the end of the Cold War, realists have been some of the loudest voices calling for restraint, with **John Mearsheimer, Chris Layne** and **Steve Walt** all urging the United States to adopt an "offshore balancing" posture, which overlaps considerably with our own preferred policy. On the merits, such an approach, and the realism that underpins it, *should* be popular. After all, if the United States had abided by its precepts, it likely would have been involved in fewer wars than it has been over the past few decades.

We did not write "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States" with Dan's criticisms in mind, but if we had we would also have noted the following.

For one thing, we have cited only some of the evidence that Americans dislike realism. Dan argues **elsewhere** that the public is not unsympathetic to realism, but **others** have claimed that public opinion is essentially liberal. As for the foreign policy community, we share **Justin Logan's** sense that there's a dearth or even a complete absence of bona fide realists inside the Beltway. Realism's approval ratings in the academy are hardly better. Dan's concession that realism is not the most popular paradigm among IR scholars is an understatement—indeed, if you ignore Marxism, it's the **least popular** approach in the field. As a **recent survey** concludes, "realism does not have the hold on the field it is often thought to have" and, in fact, it never did. Realist research has never made up more than 15% of published articles, for example. And although we agree with Dan that realism commands a lot of attention in the classroom, it is typically presented as a crude, dated, unscientific, amoral

approach that needs to be heavily amended or, preferably, jettisoned entirely. No other approach receives as much criticism.

This is unfortunate, as realists seem to turn up on the right side of history as often as not-the Vietnam and Iraq wars are prominent examples-and may do so again if the Obama administration stumbles into a foolish war with Iran (a war that prominent realists have **opposed**).

This is not to say that we feel victimized. But as card-carrying members of an academic approach that is excoriated and ignored despite being regularly vindicated by real world events and providing a better recipe for peace and stability than the alternatives, we admit to being confused.

Note: John Schuessler's views are his own and do not represent those of the Air War College, the Air Force, or the Department of Defense.