

# WAR ON THE ROCKS

## BLAME IT ON THE BLOB? HOW TO EVALUATE AMERICAN GRAND STRATEGY

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**Stephen M. Walt**, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018)

What makes for good grand strategy? Containment, as laid out in the famous 1947 X article, is often held up by experts as the gold standard. By the end of 1950, however, America's postwar grand strategy crafted by George Kennan and other "wise men" was in shambles. The United States was close to losing a war on the Korean Peninsula. Worse, steep military demobilization left more important areas, especially Western Europe, completely exposed. Combined with the loss of its atomic monopoly, the United States would be unable to prevent the Red Army from marching to Paris if it chose to.

Over the next few years, the United States transformed its grand strategy. American policymakers decided, controversially, to neither abandon Korea nor escalate to win the war. The United States signed mutual security treaties with Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. A unified military command was established in NATO, buttressed by almost 300,000 American soldiers, an unprecedented overseas engagement for a nation that obsessively avoided any permanent commitment to the European continent. The military budget almost tripled. The United States also moved forcefully, often over the complaints of allies and serious risks of war with the Soviets, to politically rehabilitate West Germany and allow it to rebuild its army. To defend Europe against larger Soviet conventional forces, the United States and NATO developed a military strategy based on massive, preemptive use of nuclear weapons. Kennan — and his ideas — were sidelined.

Was this reformulated grand strategy successful? By peacefully integrating a democratic, divided Germany into Western Europe's defense and economy, the United States resolved the vexing, explosive issue of German power and European stability, which had caused two world wars. The United States built a powerful nuclear force while preventing the use or widespread proliferation of the bomb. America's allies in Western Europe and East Asia stabilized, integrated, and prospered under U.S. protection. It is easy to draw a link between this grand strategic shift in the early 1950s and the U.S.-led alliance's prevailing in the Cold War decades later.

There were also great costs. The ugly stalemate in Korea left a bitter domestic and global legacy. While nuclear weapons were never used, their centrality to America's military policies was both

dangerous and expensive. Specific decisions to support this grand strategy generated terrible if unintended consequences. To provide just two examples: To convince France to swallow the bitter pill of West German political and military integration, American statesmen reluctantly provided massive aid to support disastrous French imperial policies in Southeast Asia, eventually helping to pull the United States into this conflict. And while an American decision to back the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh may have prevented Iran's falling into the Soviet orbit, it also generated deep resentment that poisons relations to this day.

Study history seriously, and you quickly recognize that making grand strategy is hard and evaluating it little easier. There are few heroes or villains in white or black hats. The same people in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration who blundered into the disastrous war in Vietnam concurrently crafted innovative and successful policies that inhibit nuclear proliferation to this day. History also reveals that who is in charge matters enormously. Take the mental exercise of switching the president and vice president in 1954 and 1965 — Nixon for Eisenhower, and Humphrey for Johnson — and you likely get the opposite policy choices toward Vietnam: U.S. military action in 1954, restraint in 1965.

Exploring these complex, consequential questions surrounding grand strategy requires rigorous analysis about causality and agency, unintended consequences and second-best solutions, the nature of power, time horizons, and what matters in the world and why. Serious research on these important, consequential issues should be most welcome, with the hope that it could help improve strategy and statecraft.

Does Stephen Walt, a chaired professor at Harvard with a widely read *Foreign Policy* column, offer this quality of analysis in his book, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

## **Trump and Walt**

During the presidential election of 2016, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump declared that “our foreign policy is a complete and total disaster.” Walt agrees. Trump was simply “telling it like it was.” Furthermore, both Trump and Walt directed much of the blame for this mess at the same source — a sprawling, self-interested, and often clueless foreign policy clique, otherwise known in some circles as the blob.

In his book, Walt makes four important arguments. First, American foreign policy has been an unmitigated disaster over the past three decades — a tale of missed opportunities, ruin, and woe — “a dismal record.”

Second, this catastrophe has been caused by America's consistent and misguided pursuit over the past three decades of a grand strategy that Walt labels liberal hegemony — “an ambitious effort to use American power to reshape the world according to U.S. preferences and political values.” This liberal hegemony is at odds with his preferred grand strategy, offshore balancing: in which a great power withdraws its forwardly deployed military capabilities, promotes regional balances of power, and seeks to avoid military interventions unless absolutely necessary.

Third, the people responsible for crafting, critiquing, and implementing America's grand strategies — individuals who move in and out of government, think tanks, and the academies — have consistently pushed their preferred policy of liberal hegemony, even as it failed time and time again.

Fourth, these foreign policy professionals — the so-called blob — have done this because they have a vested interest in seeing the United States pursue liberal hegemony, even as the strategy has failed, because it creates work and opportunities for them. Nor are the members of this group held accountable. In other words, the so-called blob rejects other grand strategies — offshore balancing — because if such a grand strategy were implemented, they would lose their influence and cushy sinecures.

These are serious claims. What should we make of them? To answer that question, I first focus on Walt's assessment of American grand strategy and his argument that the United States would have been better off if it had embraced his preferred grand strategy, offshore balancing. Next, I examine his claims about what he sees as the causes for this failure, the blob.

### **Is American Foreign Policy “A Complete and Total Disaster”?**

How should we evaluate Walt's claims, and in general, judge whether any grand strategy is a success or failure? We might compare America's performance with other states in the international system. What other state, despite all the mistakes Walt chronicled, has done better than the United States? Have other countries pursued smarter policies, with better outcomes? International politics is often a brutal, competitive arena, and grand strategy is all about relative and comparative performance.

The simple fact is that the United States remains, 30 years after the end of the Cold War, far and away the most important player in international politics. America's recent share of global gross domestic product is almost the same now as it was at the start of the Clinton administration, while its monetary and financial power have actually increased. It remains a dominant military power, with far more friends than enemies. U.S. technology is widely sought after, its universities are the envy of the world, and American cultural products are widespread. Entities that were identified as potential Western competitors in the 1990s, like Japan and the European Union, receded even further into the strategic background. Even promising middle powers, ranging from Turkey to South Africa to Brazil, have done little to improve their general power status in the world. Russia has no doubt increased its ability to project military power, even as those capabilities remain far short of what the Soviet Union could bring to bear during the Cold War. The socioeconomic base of this corrupt, deeply troubled petro-state is weak, and over the long term, worsening. And as scholar Sergey Radchenko reminds us in his own analysis of this book, “resilient quasi-imperialist impulses continue to drive Russian foreign policy, and it is not at all self-evident that Moscow would behave more responsibly on the international stage even if it operated in a less threatening environment.” The “grand strategy” of that great chess master, Vladimir Putin, has resulted in crippling sanctions, pariah status, making irresponsible nuclear threats, aiding some of the world's most repressive regimes, and occasionally begging its most geopolitically threatening neighbor, China, to be Russia's friend.

And China? On the one hand, its economic growth and increase in power in such a short time has been one of the most remarkable stories in human history, as hundreds of millions of people have been lifted from deep poverty to create a technologically advanced, sophisticated economy in record time. But how would we assess China's grand strategy? Massive internal problems plague the country, including corruption, a debt-fueled and unregulated shadow banking system, demographic inversion, some of the worst income inequality in the world, increasing authoritarianism and alarming human rights violations, and looming ecological and environmental disaster. Much of China's security apparatus is devoted to keeping its own citizens in check, including putting an estimated 1 million Uighurs in concentration camps. It is surrounded by countries that don't trust its motives, including Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and India. China's only friends are North Korea and Pakistan. Its untruthful and heavy-handed response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began on its territory, has further eroded its global image. Europe is increasingly rethinking its relationship with China. And it has managed to anger the United States, generating a rare consensus among Democrats and Republicans that the primary goal of American grand strategy should be to deal with China's rise. Chess master Xi Jinping's grand strategy has succeeded in mobilizing the only country that can serve as a real check on China — the United States — while rallying once friendly countries from Australia to India to join the cause.

In other words, it is not clear that the decision-makers and statesmen from other countries were wiser or more effective than their American counterparts over the past three decades. Perhaps Putin and Xi could benefit from having their own blob to advise them.

One could reasonably suggest, however, that given the centrality of the United States to the international system, comparisons to smaller powers or different periods of history are of limited value. So, how does the American record look on its own terms in the three decades since the end of the Cold War? The first place to look is at Europe, far and away the most consequential and challenging region for the United States not so long ago. It is easy to forget that the greatest concern three decades ago was how to manage the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification and reintegration of Germany into Europe without unleashing World War III. Mismanagement of the German question had led to catastrophic bloodletting twice earlier in the century. The Russian collapse as World War I drew to a close spawned violent revolution, civil and interstate war, and tyranny that killed millions. Another lesson from history was that power vacuums in Central Europe generated profound challenges and dangers. In a world with nuclear weapons, policymakers focused like a laser on managing this profound transition without the great-power war and violent upheavals of the past. These challenges explain why the United States not only stuck with NATO, but over time, reformed and expanded it.

The results were, by any fair historical standard, impressive: a Germany peacefully reunified that has not created geopolitical challenges in three decades. Central Europe is, compared to its past, stable and aligned with the West, a feat accomplished without having to rely on the kind of post-World War II "spheres of influence" settlement that consigned tens of millions of Eastern Europeans to totalitarian tyranny. Russia, while not especially happy, does not pose an existential threat to Central and Western Europe. Imagine this exercise: Bring any reasonable person from the early 1990s to the present and ask them how they would feel about a world in 30 years where NATO is still around and America is engaged, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not unleash

great-power war, the French and the Germans remain close friends and allies, Central Europe is stable, and Europe has no new nuclear weapons states. This person would have lamented the Russian takeover of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, while being impressed that the Baltic states and Poland were unmolested and that Germany was a stable and constructive economic power.

The same question could be posed for U.S. grand strategy in East Asia over the same period. Again, the reasonable person from 30 years ago could not help but be impressed with a grand strategy that strengthened the alliance between the United States and a peaceful Japan, prevented war on the Korean Peninsula, and employed skilled diplomacy to prevent the Taiwan issue from spiraling into a war, all while successfully promoting the region's continued economic rise, political liberalization, and alignment with the United States. They may also have been impressed that these goals were achieved at historically modest budgetary costs. As Robert Jervis suggests:

[W]hile the international system seems unruly and dangerous compared to the hopes of the 1990s, it does not look so bad compared to most eras, and the belief that alternative American policies would have led to a much better world would seem to fly in the face of the general realist outlook that great power competition is inevitable and that a high level of strife is the normal outcome of clashing foreign policies in a world of national loyalties, uncertainties, and anarchy.

While Walt's arguments about American grand strategy fall short when applied to the world's two most geopolitically important regions, Europe and East Asia, he is correct about the failure of American grand strategy in the Greater Middle East, especially since the early 2000s. This is an important issue and he is absolutely right to flag it. The military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have been a disaster and continued long after it was clear these missions had failed. Perhaps the kindest thing one can say about the 2011 military intervention in Libya is that it did not produce the desired results. However one describes U.S. policy in Syria — some think it too interventionist, others think it nowhere near interventionist enough — it has had terrible consequences. Understanding the root causes of this unfortunate record would be a very important contribution. Why did U.S. grand strategy fare so poorly in the Middle East, especially compared to its efforts in Europe and East Asia? What alternative policies would have produced better outcomes? And does Walt identify convincing causes for this failure?

### **Counterfactual History**

One way to assess a policy is to imagine a world where different choices were made. What might the world look like today if the United States had pursued offshore balancing since the end of the Cold War? Walt provides a set of counterfactuals in his book, but let me provide my own, and encourage readers to compare the two and make their own judgements.

First, imagine a Europe under offshore balancing. A reunified Germany without a strong American military presence might have sought its own nuclear weapons. Poland, Czechoslovakia (which split peacefully into two countries in 1993), and Hungary, all of which deeply desired association and integration with the West, would have found themselves, once again, caught

between two great powers that had harmed them in the past. It would have been natural for them to seek the bomb. Russia, undeterred by the United States or NATO, may have tried to exploit traditional rivalries and power vacuums in Central Europe, as it had done for centuries, and reclaimed territory, through invasion or coercion. Few great powers in history have ever accepted such a rapid decline easily, and there was little in Russia's history to hope it would be the exception, regardless of how the United States treated it. Stabilizing Europe, integrating a unified Germany and reassuring its neighbors, and locking in geopolitical gains against what was at some point bound to be a revanchist Russia seemed like the kind of smart grand strategy any Bismarckian-type realist should appreciate. Offshore balancing would have relinquished these gains.

Offshore balancing in East Asia could have produced equally concerning outcomes. Without a strong American military and diplomatic presence, one can plausibly imagine the People's Republic of China would not have been deterred from moving on Taiwan. China may not even have had to use force: The mere shadow of Chinese power and Taiwan's isolation could have forced it into China's orbit, with profoundly unsettling consequences for the balance of power in the region. Japan, facing a rising China without an American presence, might have felt the need to acquire its own nuclear weapons. The risk of war on the Korean Peninsula would have been much higher, as would have been the odds that South Korea resumed its quest for its own nuclear weapons. The general geopolitical insecurity of an offshore balancing policy may have undermined the conditions that led to such impressive economic growth and political development in the region over the past three decades. In short, it is easy to imagine profoundly worse outcomes for both American interests and international stability than what actually happened.

The Middle East provides a more interesting case for a counterfactual. A detailed counterfactual analysis where the United States did not invade Iraq in 2003 would have no doubt been better for U.S. interests. What is less convincing is whether the 2003 war was the inevitable result of liberal hegemony and the blob, or whether a different presidential administration could have made different choices. Even here, however, as Jervis points out in his review of Walt's book, the answers are not necessarily simple or obvious. "The invasions of Afghanistan and, even more, Iraq, went badly, but we should not assume happy outcomes had the United States behaved differently." The point is not "that alternative policies would not have been wiser, but only we need to argue rather than assume them."

History does provide an intriguing example of what happens when the United States pursues a grand strategy of offshore balancing: the interwar period. The United States left World War I with similar if not greater military and economic primacy as at the end of the Cold War. What was the result? After the Senate's rejection of Woodrow Wilson's vision for an American-led League of Nations and collective security, the United States retreated from the world. Germany and the Soviet Union cooperated on secret arms deals and exploited the power vacuum in Central Europe. The Treaty of Versailles went unenforced. The Western democracies lost confidence and the weak, newly independent countries to the east embraced nationalism and rejected liberal democracy. China weakened and Japan rose, unchecked. The global economy collapsed, with little trust or institutional capacity to repair the damage or coordinate a recovery. Democracy

faltered, and authoritarian governments became emboldened. Another world war, more lethal and devastating than the first, was unleashed. As Adam Tooze suggests,

When all is said and done, the answer must be sought in the failure of the United States to cooperate with the efforts of the French, British, Germans and the Japanese to stabilize a viable world economy and to establish new institutions of collective security. ... only the US could anchor such a new order.

But the United States chose not to, and we know how that worked out. As Walt himself once pointed out in an earlier work on alliances, “History suggests that a major war is more likely when the United States withdraws from world affairs.”

### **How to Assess Grand Strategy?**

Grand strategy is not about finding what is perfect in the world. Perfect does not exist. Grand strategy is about making difficult, consequential choices, and facing radical uncertainty about a largely unknowable future, where states often compete ruthlessly in pursuit of their national interests. All grand strategies will, over time, produce both successes and failures. Walt spends a good deal of time on America’s failed efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, while spending scant attention on the remarkable efforts to bring peace to Northern Ireland or the successful management of the complex, explosive issues in the Taiwan Straits. The same George W. Bush administration that disastrously led the country into the Iraq War also implemented the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which has saved millions of lives abroad. Both were driven by experienced experts going beyond narrow conceptions of self-interest and possessing a belief that a deeply engaged United States benefited not only itself but others around the world. Ideally, American policymakers would only pursue successful policies and avoid failures, but that naively overlooks the complexity and profound uncertainty involved in any grand strategic choice.

As scholars, we have an obligation to avoid retrospective bias and acknowledge that it is much easier to dissect an outcome than to provide guidance about an unknowable future. It is convenient to forget how worried the United States was about a range of issues in the early 1990s, from America’s own economic health to the reemergence of geopolitical rivalry in the heart of Europe to widespread nuclear proliferation. Part of this was because of the predictions of neorealism, Walt’s theoretical perspective, which said that the fortunate position the United States found itself in after the end of the Cold War was both unnatural and unsustainable. Decline, increased nuclear proliferation, and balancing coalitions against the United States were likely. Some even predicted we would miss the stability and predictability the Cold War provided. As Paul Kennedy’s magisterial tome, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, warned, most leading powers, at best, decline (Britain), or at worst, disintegrate (Rome). From the Habsburgs to Napoleon’s France to late 19th-century Britain, history demonstrates how hard it is to stay number one. Even the United States, under the grand strategic tutelage of Cold War “wise men,” endured a precipitous slide in power from the commanding heights of 1945 to the sense of decline and disarray of the 1970s, before recovering in the mid-to-late 1980s. That the United States avoided the predictions of decline, widespread nuclear proliferation, and

balancing coalitions is compelling evidence that American statesmanship, for all its mistakes, was effective when compared to both history and its contemporary rivals.

There are other critical issues where Walt's analysis falls short: Consider his handling of historical chronology. In his book, he takes no clear position on whether the United States pursued liberal hegemony during the Cold War, and if so, if that was a good or a bad grand strategic decision. The book is also unclear on *when* the post-Cold War era began. Most experts believe the existential struggle with the Soviet Union ended in 1989 or even 1988 or 1987. Curiously, Walt spends little time on the administration of George H.W. Bush, and focuses his critique of liberal hegemony beginning in 1993 with the Clinton administration. Was the Bush administration not pursuing liberal hegemony when it reunified Germany within NATO, laid the foundations for NATO expansion, invaded Panama to overthrow the regime of Manuel Noriega, and assembled a multinational coalition to expel Iraq from Kuwait, among other forward-leaning activities? This administration also provided many members of the blob who were to populate the George W. Bush administration, so Walt's lack of attention to this critical period is, at the very least, odd. And given that offshore balancing would increase nuclear proliferation pressures, does Walt agree with his mentor that "more may be better"? Nor does his preferred "grand" strategy offer much to think through arguably the greatest, most pressing transnational challenges of our time, such first order issues as global public health, climate change, migration, inequality, cyber operations and other emerging technologies, and international economic and financial volatility.

It appears Walt would have preferred that the United States never sought or possessed primacy, an odd position for a realist to take. He acknowledges that American grand strategy was effective during the Cold War, when the United States was restrained by the power of the Soviet Union (40-plus years), and a consistent failure when the United States had far more freedom of action (30 years). This would indicate that primacy, and not the blob, is the *cause* of America's terrible grand strategy (many of the same people were in the blob in both periods). Logically, this means that Walt's preferred grand strategy should be one where the United States never has primacy and is instead balanced by other powers, in order to be restrained and avoid the foolishness made possible by unipolarity and liberal democracy. At the very least, he appears to prefer a world marked by balancing between great-power rivals to one where the United States is unchecked. It is hard to imagine any policymaker or American citizen would prefer that outcome. Which points to another problem: Why didn't liberal hegemony ever produce the balancing coalition against the United States that Walt's own defensive realism would have predicted? Presumably, if American behavior was so egregious over the past 30 years, we would have seen alliances form against it, as often happened in the past when one power grew far stronger than others.

It is also puzzling that pursuing a grand strategy that was so bad for so long would escape the scrutiny of the American voter. Over the past 30 years, the United States has held seven presidential elections and at least twice as many congressional contests. Presumably, the American public was weighing in on U.S. grand strategy, among other issues, during these contests. Why hasn't restraint or offshore balancing done better when tested during the electoral process? Does Walt believe that, despite disagreeing on much else, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama possessed the same views on America's interests and role in the world? Or is he suggesting that each administration was filled with advisers who



consistently undermined the preferred grand strategy of the elected president to pursue their shared vision of liberal hegemony? This dark view of the American political process, where either the American people aren't wise and don't know what they are voting for, or their expressed interests are subverted by an insular cabal, would seem to be an even greater crisis for U.S. democracy than its failed foreign policy. As Jervis said in his review, Walt never makes clear how the blob “exerts influence. ... Indeed the thin portrayal of domestic politics in these books misses many of the pressures that bear in on policymakers.”

*The Hell of Good Intentions* leaves other important conceptual questions unanswered. Policymakers often focus on preventing disasters, which are rare, whereas social scientists concentrate on probabilistic analyses of recurring phenomena, with consequences for understanding how each views and assesses risk and reward. Which approach makes the most sense when evaluating grand strategy? Also, much of Walt's condemnation of liberal hegemony appears to rest on the disastrous decision to invade Iraq in 2003, much the same as earlier critiques of Cold War grand strategy rested on compelling critiques of America's war in Vietnam. Defenders of America's grand strategic performance might tout how well the United States dealt with great powers, regional powers, and transnational threats, over a longer period, while acknowledging serious mistakes in particular policies and implementation. Critics will focus on these mistakes and indict the larger grand strategy as fundamentally flawed. Should we evaluate a state's grand strategy in the aggregate or in the particulars, and over what time horizons? Plausible arguments can be made for both perspectives.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that America's grand strategy has been perfect or shouldn't be criticized. We desperately need good scholarship to understand the critical choices made by American statesmen while rigorously evaluating competing hypotheses. How should we understand America's mistakes in Iraq? The most recent analysis makes it clear that the decision to invade the country in 2003, as well as the decision to surge forces in 2007, was driven and shaped primarily by President George W. Bush, not the blob. There are also important questions to be asked about America's larger grand strategic failures in the Greater Middle East, which arguably go back further, to the late 1970s if not earlier. My own longstanding view is that the Middle East should never have been a strategic priority on par with American interests in Europe or East Asia and that the United States should have long ago lessened its footprint. That is a minority opinion, however. Even the foundational scholarly argument for the restraint school — Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky's influential 1996 *International Security* article, “Come Home, America” — argued that the Persian Gulf was the only area in the world where American military power remained relevant (while calling for withdrawals from Europe and East Asia).

What does this all amount to? As the early wise men of the Cold War discovered, making grand strategy is hard. Often, the best that can be done is managing the intractable, volatile, and dangerous circumstances that mark international history and, in the nuclear age, avoiding catastrophe. Analysts should responsibly consider and assess the terrible things that might have happened but were prevented by wise grand strategy. Using this standard, and recognizing the United States faced a world marked by great uncertainty and complexity, a case can be made that it has done reasonably well in the period Walt covered. The past 30 years have seen unprecedented increases in economic and political well-being. Great-power war has been

avoided, as have balancing coalitions, and the overall number of nuclear weapons in the world has been sharply reduced.

That said, I could be wrong. Excellent analysts such as [Emma Ashford](#), [Barry Posen](#), [Christopher Layne](#), [Patrick Porter](#), and [Chris Preble](#), among many others, have produced powerful, deeply researched, and compelling scholarship arguing that U.S. grand strategy has been and remains deeply flawed and that restraint is the better option. Even when I am not convinced by such analyses, I am smarter for engaging their arguments.

If *The Hell of Good Intentions* were simply about evaluating past American grand strategies and advocating a future course for the United States, the book would be unproblematic. Walt, however, makes another argument in this book. The systemic failure of American grand strategy, he claims, can be placed at the feet of a small group of self-interested national security officials, think tankers, and pundits — what he and others have termed the blob — who drove U.S. policy in directions that harmed the nation but benefited themselves. It is this part of the book that is the most troubling.

### **Whither the Blob?**

In many ways, I should be a receptive audience for Walt's claims about nefarious influence and motives of the blob. I have never worked in government, held a paid job with a think tank, consulted for the private sector, or served on a political campaign. I do not have a Twitter account, appear on television, or write a column for *Foreign Policy*. I believe scholars have a responsibility to separate policy prescription from their historical reconstruction and social science evaluation. One could find grist for both mills — restraint and liberal internationalism — in my work, but I tend to see such frames as unhelpful to understanding the complexity and context that shapes foreign policy and international relations. If I am a member of the blob, or any particular paradigm team, it would be news to me.

I point to my biography for two reasons. First, I am an easy audience. If Walt cannot convince me, a nonpartisan historian of American foreign relations literate in international relations theory, then others should be skeptical of his claims. Second, and more concerning, Walt's book calls out various individuals in the national security community for their affiliations and career choices in personal, troubling ways. Instead of scholarly insight, *The Hell of Good Intentions* contributes to the polarization and personal recrimination that impedes the honest debate these critical, complex issues demand.

Walt makes three claims about the blob and debates over grand strategy. First, the blob supports liberal hegemony as an American grand strategy — less because members of the blob think it is the best grand strategy on its merits, but because it provides more opportunities for advancing their careers. Second, the blob suffers no consequences when its policies and predictions are wrong, which according to Walt occurs far more often than not. Third, Walt's preferred — and to his mind, superior — grand strategy of offshore balancing is systematically sidelined in debates.

In reverse order: Do those interested in foreign policy and international affairs ignore Walt's preferred policies? This seems an odd claim for a professor who holds a prestigious chair at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, hardly an uninfluential backwater. Unlike many professors, Walt's position at Harvard provides him with regular access to former, current, and future American policymakers who visit or are in residence, and are no doubt interested in his views. In addition to teaching at Princeton University and the University of Chicago, he has had affiliations and consultancies with various think tanks and federally funded research centers, and regularly presents his ideas in blob-like environments. *Foreign Policy* has, for years, provided a prestigious, influential platform that allows his ideas and opinions to reach far more people than arguably any other international relations professor in the United States. Walt has over 73,000 followers on Twitter, which I am told is a lot for an academic. He is to be applauded for building such an impressive outreach beyond the ivory tower. I doubt there is a member of the so-called blob who is not aware of his biography or his views.

The influence of the offshore balancing school, or restraint, as it is sometimes called, on grand strategy debates is not limited to Walt. Many of the most prestigious Ph.D. granting programs in security studies — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago, the University of Notre Dame, George Washington University, and Texas A&M, to name a few — are populated with scholars who are sympathetic to restraint/offshore balancing perspectives, guaranteeing that professors familiar with this worldview have been and will continue to be placed widely in America's colleges and teach numerous undergraduates. The prestigious Cato Institute has long proselytized on behalf of restraint. In recent years, the Charles Koch Foundation, which advocates a grand strategy of restraint and offshore balancing, has made several multimillion-dollar grants to a wide range of institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, Notre Dame, Catholic University, Texas A&M, and Tufts, while helping to stand up, in cooperation with George Soros' Open Society Foundations, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. They also support a foreign policy debate program with the Brookings Institution and *Politico* that brings the restraint viewpoint to cities around the country and recently stood up a new effort in the Atlantic Council. In 2020, it is hard to argue the restraint position does not have a seat in the academy, the think tank world, or depending on how you view the grand strategies of the Obama and Trump administrations, the White House.

Does offshore balancing not get a fair hearing, as Walt claims? The truth is that all intellectual viewpoints struggle and compete to win influence and affect policy (presumably this goal is what is driving the Koch Foundation's effort, just as it drives the efforts of other foundations in this space). If these ideas are not being implemented into American grand strategy, could it be that the voting public and decision-makers have evaluated the ideas and simply found them unsuitable or wanting? If your preferred policies are not adopted, there are likely more compelling explanations that don't involve something nefarious. As Kori Schake explained in her review of the book, "It isn't a conspiracy, it is that the simplistic ideas proposed by Walt have been weighed in the policy balance by president after president and found wanting."

This leads to Walt's second point: The blob is not held accountable for its decisions. Those in the foreign policy decision-making world could be forgiven for seeing such a charge from a tenured academic as hypocritical. Tenured academics, like myself and Walt, suffer no consequences

when we are wrong. Nor do our decisions involve difficult choices involving a nation's blood and treasure. We should be critical and rigorous when we examine the choices made by statesmen, but our scholarship is always better when we demonstrate humility, epistemological modesty, and empathy when evaluating complex choices about an unknowable future. It would be tempting, for example, to assess every article, tweet, and public utterance Walt has made during his distinguished career. I have no doubt that he, like myself and others in the security studies field, has been wrong at times in his predictions and assessments. Frankly, one of the deep failings of the part of the academy Walt and I inhabit is that there is little incentive to self-assess, challenge our prior beliefs or assumptions, or admit when we are wrong. And are we so sure that we would perform better, if our decisions mattered, than the foreign policy professionals we criticize?

The truth is that what professors do is different from policymakers. Henry Kissinger — who had both roles — captured the differences well in a talk at Harvard. Commenting on the agonizing dilemmas presented to statesmen over issues of war and peace, he pointed out:

The difference of the perspective of an observer, like a professor or a journalist, and those of a practicing statesman. The outsider can pick his or her topic. He can work on it as long as he or she wants. He can choose the best possible vision of it. And he has the option of changing his mind. None of these elements exist for the statesman. Issues present themselves. They must be dealt with in a finite period of time. ... In government, at the end of each day, you know there are problems you cannot deal with. ... It is often a choice between the urgent and important. ... Then, as a professor or outsider, if things don't work out exactly as you visualized, you have the option of writing another book. For a statesman, the choices are irrevocable. So he must always balance the risks against the opportunities. ... Anybody in high office will want to make a contribution to peace. That is a given. It is not often recognized in the debate, but it is inherent in the job. ... once you postulate that, how do you do it?

This is not to say that policy professionals should not be held responsible if they are irresponsible, craven, or incompetent. My sense as a historian, however, immersed in the decision-making of foreign policy officials, is that most took their responsibilities quite seriously. They often appear anguished and torn, both about the decisions they made and the consequences that they can rarely foresee. This case may be more mixed for the broader community interested in American foreign policy. Walt lumps together journalists and public intellectuals, but this community seems more like the professoriate: They have no line decision-making decisions and enjoy far less influence on actual government decision-making than their outsized self-regard would suggest.

This leads to his first point: Members of the blob embrace an inferior grand strategy, liberal hegemony, over the superior policies that offshore balancing brings because it advances their narrow self-interest, or as Walt dubs it, a “full employment policy for the foreign policy elite.” This is a very serious charge. In effect, Walt is arguing that a small cabal of elites has ignored the interests and wishes of the American people, the oversight of Congress, and even the views of the presidents they serve to implement their preferred policies to benefit themselves. Is it true that foreign policy professionals advocate grand strategies by “manipulating the ‘marketplace of

ideas,” not because it advances the national interest as they understand it, but because it advances their career? It would be as if economists who worked on indigence wanted the misery of poverty to continue, or if cancer specialists feared pursuing research and therapies that would cure the disease because they would be out of a job. Claims of self-serving, elite conspiracies undermining the republic go all the way back to the nation’s earliest days, the paranoid style of American politics so keenly described by Richard Hofstadter six decades ago. If nothing else, if the goal is to better incentivize these professionals to listen to scholars and embrace better ideas for American grand strategy, labeling this community craven and corrupt from the protected perch of the ivory tower hardly seems the best way to go about it. Walt’s advice from 2011 is quite sound. “What if people with real-world experience were regarded not just as potential *consumers* of scholarship or as data points in a survey, but as a source of guidance about scholarly research agendas, methods, and modes of presentation?” This seems a more reasonable, productive research engagement than the one undertaken in the writing of *The Hell of Good Intentions*.

## Who Cares?

I wrote most of this review over a year ago, but, despite many entreaties to do so, decided at the time not to publish it. At a certain level, it is hard to imagine anything less important or interesting than one academic telling another that he doesn’t agree with his book. Walt would respond with a column at *Foreign Policy*, arguing I misconstrued or mischaracterized his arguments, and suggest because I live in Washington I am somehow in league with the power structure. Others would weigh in, and at most, what might happen is some kind of back and forth on academic Twitter (a platform that revels in such disagreements), where people do not change their minds and double down on their prior assumptions, until the discussion is forgotten once another controversy emerges. And I saw little point to pissing off Walt, whom I respect, like, and admire, especially for his decades-long record of mentoring rising scholars.

Why, a year later, did I change my mind? America’s disastrous response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated grave consequences when a government and a larger American culture scorn and diminish expertise, government service, and long-serving professional bureaucrats from “the blob” or the “deep state.” It is no coincidence that the advanced democracies that have handled the crisis better than the United States are those that invest in public policy and respect and reward those who follow the calling of public service. Is there anyone who doesn’t believe that the United States would be handling this crisis moment more effectively if more members of the so-called blob — be it from the Obama, Bush, or Clinton administrations — were crafting U.S. policies right now? America’s failure to lead during this crisis, as it has so many times in the past, has also exacted a deep cost. The United States will face similarly complex and daunting global challenges — from climate change to technological disruption to China’s rise — that demand smart debate and ideas, not name calling or conspiracy theories, and where I would prefer the United States, and not Russia or China, make the rules. With such high stakes, Walt’s wrongheaded views about self-dealing foreign policy professionals and America’s role in the world, which have great sway in the academy (especially among younger scholars), should be challenged.

Walt is right about something important: American grand strategy is much better when it is informed by new ideas from a broad range of sources. We are at a critical juncture both for the United States and the world, with great uncertainty about the future. There is a large population of smart, engaged young people who want to think about or help shape the world and America's role in it, and there is an even larger population of diverse voices that should be recruited into discussions of American grand strategy. These young people, however, are too often inundated with messages like Walt's: that American foreign policy has been uniformly terrible, that the United States is more harmful than helpful to the world, and that to join the world of foreign policy is to risk being corrupted by an elite, self-dealing cabal. Labeling all foreign policy professionals "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" hardly seems an appealing pitch to either engage current policymakers or recruit the new voices the United States needs. I prefer Walt's line from 2011: by "bringing the norms of academic discourse into the public sphere, academic scholars could help restore some of the civility that has been lost in recent years."

At the same time I read *The Hell of Good Intentions*, I also read and reviewed Ambassador William Burns' thoughtful memoir, *The Back Channel*. Burns is the consummate foreign policy professional — smart, dedicated, and patriotic, a career Foreign Service officer who devoted his professional life to advancing American interests for administrations led by both parties, often at great personal sacrifice and some personal danger. In other words, he is a member of Walt's blob. The book is humble and empathetic, not boastful, and he is not afraid to critique American grand strategy and his role in it. Yet even as he critiques decisions such as NATO expansion and the 2003 Iraq War, he is respectful of different perspectives and the difficulty of making hard choices in the face of an unknowable future. He passionately believes that U.S. foreign policy is and should be connected to the lives and livelihoods of everyday American citizens. What emerges from the book is how difficult it is to develop and implement careful statecraft, especially in the current American culture, where the modesty, empathy, curiosity, and thoughtfulness needed to be a successful diplomat are the very values that are in such short supply in the age of sanctimonious outrage, monocausal conspiracy, and shameless self-promotion engendered by Twitter culture. Americans should be thanking Burns and other professionals, not castigating them, and holding them up as a model to recruit the new, diverse voices Walt seeks in U.S. grand strategy debates.

America will need all the help it can get. The United States faces daunting questions about the nature of international relations and the best strategies to navigate a new world. Are transnational threats such as pandemics, climate change, and the challenge of new technologies the greatest threats facing the United States, or should policymakers focus more on the return of great-power military rivalry? Or will these phenomena interact in especially dangerous ways? In an age of rapid and profound technological change, what will count for the most important forms of power in this new world? Should the United States invest in international institutions, traditional alliances, or new, novel ways of cooperating, or continue the retreat that Trump initiated? How important is the increasing threat democratic governance faces worldwide, and is it in America's interest to do something about it? How should the United States structure its relationship with China?

These issues are as consequential as the answers to them are uncertain. Four things, however, are clear. First, we need to have an honest and rigorous debate about the past and future of American grand strategy, recognizing its complexity, and getting beyond simple-minded blame games and Monday morning quarterbacking. All should be encouraged to compete in a fierce competition of ideas, especially younger voices, without name calling. Second, the academy ought to do a much better job of meaningfully contributing to this discussion, both in terms of pedagogy and scholarship. Third, this debate is necessary if America has any hope of embracing a wise grand strategy that advances its interests, and to the extent it can, shapes an international environment that is most beneficial to its interests. Fourth, we should recognize and reward foreign policy expertise and professionalism, not rebuke it. If 2020 has shown us anything, we need ideas, experts, and professionalism for the United States to recover the best parts of a long tradition of thoughtful statecraft and strategy. On those points, I suspect Walt and I agree.