



Can Neocons Learn?

[Justin Logan](#)

Dec. 8, 2014

[*America in Retreat: The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder*, by Bret Stephens, Sentinel, 263 pages, \\$27.95](#)

The Republican Party's misfortunes in the 2006 and 2008 elections had a lot to do with the unpopularity of neoconservative foreign policy. Yet the GOP's success in the 2014 midterms has made the party more neoconservative, with Republican hawks taking over major Senate committees and, perversely, a lot of libertarian money helping bring pro-war authoritarians like senator-elect Tom Cotton of Arkansas to Washington.

Much of the blame for this lack of accountability belongs to the conservative media and the conservative donor class. While foreign-policy dissidents exist among conservative donors, the issue tends not to be as important to them as it is to the neocons. The wealthy conservative realists refuse to fight on the issue, so the wealthy neoconservatives retain their dominance. Meanwhile, conservative media outlets that produced Iraq war propaganda have generally declined to evaluate or even acknowledge their mistakes. As the University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer [remarked](#) in 2004, on foreign policy "the *Wall Street Journal* is like *Pravda*. You don't want to underestimate the importance of the Leninist model. They don't tolerate dissent."

America in Retreat—the new book from the *Journal's* chief foreign affairs writer, Bret Stephens—shows perhaps even less introspection than *Pravda* did. In one interview promoting the book, Stephens [reports](#) "having thought very seriously about my support for the Iraq War, and I've concluded it was still worth supporting." Even *Pravda's* editorial line changed over time.

Stephens agreed with the primary justification for invading, Saddam Hussein's nonconventional weapons programs, which he now concedes didn't exist. He then laments that a second justification, Bush's "freedom agenda," became central. With the rationale he supported gone and the one he now opposes left standing, he still deems the war "a military, moral, and strategic triumph." We invaded "for our own sake," he writes, and "the justifications for it were, and remain, abundant."

Stephens just can't let it go, pushing forward a gaggle of zombie arguments—He gassed the Kurds at Anfal! Remember Osirak? Even Bill and Hillary Clinton supported the war!—that do nothing to warrant a man-made catastrophe whose central justification he now rejects. The simple and by-now-obvious claim that nothing about the 2003 Hussein regime warranted thousands of American dead and wounded seems to escape him entirely.

But the book's real trouble begins with its subtitle: *The New Isolationism and the Coming Global Disorder*. There is no "new isolationism," and if there were Barack Obama would not be its leading advocate. (Obama has bombed seven or eight countries, depending on how one counts, compared to George W. Bush's four or five.) Without making an argument why more killing is necessary, Stephens complains that "we are dramatically curtailing our use of drones in Pakistan." In fact, Obama has racked up [roughly four times](#) the drone body count in Pakistan that Bush did.

The book's arguments against the "new isolationism" rely on silly historical comparisons. While Stephens concedes that "analogies to the 1930s, or any other period in history, "have their limitations and need to be made with humility and care," he does not take his own advice, pushing the Hitler/Nazi/Chamberlain/Munich/America First Committee buttons over 20 times. Stephens repeatedly suggests that if we fail to adopt his preferred strategy, some new equivalent of the Third Reich and/or Imperial Japan will emerge, although he does not precisely identify who the candidates for these roles might be. Repeatedly invoking the Nazis in this way hardly qualifies as humble or careful.

Readers discover not only that the Obama doctrine is a "Retreat Doctrine"—capital letters—but that "[Robert] Taft and [Henry] Wallace have returned" in his person. We are also informed that the "general Obama rule" is that "the more America removes itself from the domestic controversies and travails of other countries, the less they can hurt us, cost us, embroil us, and be blamed on us." Exhibit A for why Stephens disagrees with this view? The killing of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three aides in Benghazi after the Obama administration's war in Libya pushed the country into chaos.

Stephens cannot bring himself to grant even an inch to libertarian or conservative critics. Take, for instance, his eyebrow-raising claim that civil libertarian concerns about permanent war are unwarranted, since save for J. Edgar Hoover and Joe McCarthy, "civil liberties were not...'restricted' by the Cold War." Bracketing away Hoover and McCarthy is a neat debating trick, but even allowing it, the claim is ridiculous. During the Cold War, the CIA reviewed more than 28 million pieces of Americans' mail based on their suspicions about the owners' political views. The IRS selectively audited critics of the government. FBI agents firebombed left-wingers' cars to sow factional dissent among radical groups. There is [a long list of reasons](#) for advocates of limited government to worry about civil liberties during wartime.

Throughout the book, Stephens refuses to engage with scholarship on the subjects he discusses. In his chapter examining whether America is in decline, Stephens writes that "national decline has to be measured against your *past*, your *peers*, and your *prospects*" (italics in original). No it doesn't. Nobody writing about international relations measures decline in that way. Relative decline is a question that pertains only to a country's peers. A country's prospects, or its competitors' prospects, may temper the findings about decline, but relative decline is an empirical question about a state's standing compared to its competitors. Although Stephens firmly declares "America is *not* in decline" (italics in original), [Josh Shiffrinson has shown](#) that the United States does indeed have relatively less economic and military power compared to other states in the international system, although the implications of this are hardly catastrophic.

The fact that Stephens is unaware of this discussion in the literature, or sees fit to ignore it, is unfortunate but revealing.

The book offers a number of interesting theoretical claims that the author does nothing to support. For example, in thinking about U.S. allies and client states, it might be true that "America is better served by a world of supposed freeloaders than by a world of foreign policy freelancers," but one would like to see some sort of argument in defense of the assertion. Similarly, it might be right that the idea of a liberal peace in which trade helps stifle war is wrong, but one would like to see some engagement with the work of [Erik Gartzke](#), or [John Mueller](#), or any of the dozen or so scholars debating the subject. It may also be the case that all that stands between the present and a world where a cascade of nuclear proliferation happens is the spider web of American security guarantees, but one would want to see someone making such a claim engage with [Philipp Bleek](#), or [Frank Gavin](#), or [Gaukhar Mukhatzkhanova and William Potter](#), or [Jacques Hymans](#), or [Nicholas Miller](#), or any of the other scholars who would at the very least claim that Stephens' assertions are too pat, and in many cases would say he's flatly wrong. Why would an author of a book about international politics ignore scholarship about international politics? To read Stephens' various declarations and remonstrations is to watch Narcissus peer into the pool, and about as edifying.

When Stephens moves from rhetoric and polemic to clear policy prescriptions, his radical views become clear. America needs a "global 'stop-and-frisk' policy." The military budget needs to go north of 5 percent of GDP: roughly \$850 billion compared to today's roughly \$600 billion. It is "a depressing testimony to how warped the U.S. foreign policy debate has become" that we can't talk openly about bombing Syria and Iran without mentioning the disaster in Iraq. If democratic Colombia is threatened by its autocratic neighbor Venezuela, Stephens claims, "America is threatened." It goes on like this.

Stephens endorses the United States' role as world policeman, but expands the metaphor by making the police into judge, jury, and executioner. Washington, Stephens writes, needs to "walk the beat, reassuring the good, deterring the tempted, punishing the wicked." Even with the pretense of oversight and due process, our own cops manage to [choke a guy to death every now and then](#). Imagine if the cops themselves were tasked with "punishing the wicked." What are we, the [Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice](#)?

Perhaps before embarking on a trillion-per-year world-policeman campaign, we ought to ask that theoretical logics be clarified and evidence be presented. For example, since Stephens considers the [broken windows theory](#) a useful metaphor for how to conduct foreign policy, perhaps we could find criticism of that theory in the literature. One scholar who looked at the subject for decades remarked in 2004 that "I still to this day do not know if improving order will or will not reduce crime. People have not understood that this was a speculation." That scholar? [The late James Q. Wilson](#), originator of broken windows theory.

Thinking, learning, and writing about international politics is hard, as Stephens demonstrates. But for American foreign policy to improve, one or the other party needs people in charge of that portfolio to take greater care with their research, to be more judicious in their reasoning, and more prudent with the use of American power. Stephens' continued prominence in the

conservative foreign policy establishment suggests that if such a change is to happen, it will not be in the GOP.

Justin Logan is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He is an expert on U.S. grand strategy, international relations theory, and American foreign policy.