

Jude P. Dougherty

*The Great Delusion:
Liberal Dreams and International Realities*
by John J. Mearsheimer*

As President Donald Trump tries to extricate the United States from the Middle East, the book is relevant review of policy taken by previous administrations and what continues to be at stake. Mearsheimer is a political theorist and international relations scholar who holds the Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professorship at the University of Chicago. The book is an indictment of post-Cold War United States foreign policy.

In an opening passage Mearsheimer tells us, “When I began working on this book ten years ago . . . I was interested in explaining why post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy was so prone to failure, sometimes disastrous failure. I was especially interested in explaining America’s fiascos in the greater Middle East . . .”¹ Mearsheimer finds that in the aftermath of the Cold War, the U.S. adopted a profoundly liberal foreign policy dedicated to turning as many countries as possible into liberal democracies, that is, to remake the world in its own image. It was

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* John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), 328 pages, ISBN 978-0-300-23419-0.

¹ *Ibid.*, “Preface.”

driven by an idealistic assumption: “[F]reedom—the freedom we prize—is not for us alone, it is the right and the capacity of all mankind.”²

Unfortunately, in implementing that policy under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, Washington has played a key role in sowing death and destruction throughout the Middle East. Far from promoting cooperation and peace, liberal policy has brought instability and conflict.

Exploring the foundations of liberalism, Mearsheimer contrasts liberalism and its assumptions with what he calls nationalism (the recognition that there are nations each with its own culture).

First principles are important, he says. It matters how one understands nature and human nature. Rhetorically, he asks, “[A]re men and women social beings above all else, or does it make more sense to emphasize their individuality?”³ Nation states, he answers, reflect the fact that human beings are primarily social beings who have fundamental views on what constitutes the good life. Liberalism plays down that social nature to the point of almost ignoring it by treating individuals as atomistic players. Furthermore, liberals ignore the geographic element which creates a social milieu that is foreign to others.

Jeremy Bentham may have called natural rights “rhetorical nonsense,” but nationalists, embracing the concept of “natural rights,” are skeptical of positive rights, which can be both conferred and taken away by a rudderless state. Nationalists (perhaps better called “realists”) maintain that the state should involve itself as little as possible in personal and family life. In common, they resist government attempts at social engineering in contrast to the liberal propensity to do so.⁴

² *Ibid.*, Chapter 1 (“Impossible Dream”), Section: “The American Embrace of Liberal Hegemony.”

³ *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, Section: “The Centrality of Human Nature.”

⁴ See *ibid.*, Chapter 1, Section: “Political Liberalism.”

Mearsheimer presents himself as personally committed to liberal democracy. “I define democracy,” he writes,

as a form of government with a broad franchise in which citizens get to choose their leaders in periodic elections. Those leaders then write and implement the rules that govern the polity. . . . A liberal state privileges the rights of its citizens and protects them through its laws.⁵

In the course of the book, Mearsheimer pursues the limits and perils of social engineering, the costs of ignoring geopolitics, and liberal blindness. He shows that the liberal world view that dominated the thinking of the Bush and Obama administrations has had disastrous consequence for the Middle East. Under their administrations, U.S. foreign policy supported the expansion of the European Union and NATO into Eastern Europe. The United States and its allies, he finds, are mainly responsible for the ongoing crisis in the Ukraine. “The taproot of the trouble is NATO expansion, the central element in a larger strategy to move all of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West.”⁶

George Kennan, historian and diplomat, who supported “containment policy” during the Cold War, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, advised against the expansion of NATO to Russia’s frontiers. In a 1998 interview, as quoted by Mearsheimer, he said. “I think it is a tragic mistake. There is no reason for it whatsoever. No one is threatening anyone else.”⁷

In short, in Mearsheimer’s view, Russia and the West have been operating with totally different handbooks. Putin and his compatriots

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6 (“Liberalism as a Source of Trouble”), Section: “The Costs of Ignoring Geopolitics.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, Section: “Liberal Blindness.”

have been thinking and acting as realists, whereas Washington remains adhered to progressive liberal ideas about United States hegemony.

Given Mearsheimer's analysis, it is clear that the liberal hegemony of the past twenty-five years does not work. It has left a legacy of futile wars, failed diplomacy, and diminished prestige for the United States. The people who have paid the greatest cost for Washington's post-Cold War foreign policy are the foreigners who have had the misfortune of living in countries that American policy makers targeted for regime change.

Mearsheimer would prefer to remain on the theoretical or abstract level, addressing social engineering abroad and the failure U.S. foreign policy in a general way, but he can't avoid illustrating what he is talking about. The U.S., he charges, has been operating in countries its policy makers know little about. He finds that few government officials speak Arabic or even know the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, let alone in its extreme form in Wahhabism.

Perhaps the most egregious failure of the Obama administration was its attempt to bring down the legitimate government of Syria. Taking the side of a rag-tag group rebelling against the government of Bashar al Assad, the United States demanded that Assad step down. Duly elected by his people, he chose to honor the mandate accorded him by the electorate. The United States then provided military and other support to so called "moderate" rebel groups. The CIA and the Pentagon spent more than \$ 1.5 billion on weapons and the training of the dissidents. The strategy failed completely. Assad is still in power. More than 400 thousand have died as a result of the U.S. intervention in the so called "civil war." Almost half the population of Syria has been forced to flee their homes.⁸

⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, Section: "Even Weak States Are Tough Nuts to Crack."

Another example of ill-conceived U.S. foreign policy is the State Department's meddling in the internal affairs of the government of the Ukraine. The trouble began when President Yanukovich rejected a major economic deal he had been negotiating with the European Union and decided, instead, to accept a counter offer from Russia. That decision led to protests against the government in Kiev. The United States immediately backed the coup. Senator McCain and other U.S. officials participated in the Maidan Square demonstrations. A U.S. government official later publicly admitted that the U.S. had spent \$ 5 billion to bring about the removal of Yanukovich and provide support for the civil war that followed.⁹

The Great Delusion does not end on a happy note. The case for a realistic foreign policy is straight forward, writes John Mearsheimer,

and it should be compelling to a large majority of Americans. But it is still a tough sell, mainly because many in the foreign policy elite are deeply committed to liberal hegemony and will go to enormous lengths to defend it.¹⁰

On 11 November 2019, speaking with a correspondent for Russian Television News, President Assad claimed that he and his Russian allies are fighting against U.S.-supported terrorist groups. In their support of ISIS, Americans fail to recognize that it is not a state, but represents the extremist Wahhabi mindset. Insofar as "it relies on the imagination, not even science fiction, just mere imagination," Assad goes on to say that U.S. policy resembles Hollywood fiction.¹¹

Assad has made the point about ISIS before. In a 2015 interview with Charlie Rose, broadcast on 60 Minutes, he said,

⁹ See *ibid.*, Chapter 6, Section: "The Immediate Causes."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Chapter 8 ("The Case for Restraint"), Section: "Where Is the United States Headed?"

¹¹ "Assad: US operation a trick, Baghdadi may be hiding," *Press TV* (Monday, 11 November 2019); available online—see the section *References* for details.

As to U.S. intervention in Syria, I don't care about it as long as I have the support of the Syrian people. That is my legitimacy. The conflict is not about war in the usual sense, not about expanding territory. It is about winning the hearts and minds of the Syrians. With respect to ISIS how much heart and mind has it won?¹²

Responding to further questioning, he goes on to say, "The West and especially the U.S. do not accept partners (in a dispute or in negotiation): they only accept followers. They demonize Putin because he says no."¹³



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018). Mearsheimer observes that in the aftermath of the Cold War, the U.S. adopted a profoundly liberal foreign policy dedicated to turning as many countries as possible into liberal democracies. Mearsheimer concludes that the liberal hegemony of the past twenty-five years does not work: it has left a legacy of futile wars, failed diplomacy, and diminished prestige for the United States.

KEYWORDS

John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, Cold War, USA, liberalism, liberal democracy, liberal hegemony.

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¹² "President Bashar al-Assad," *Charlie Rose LLC* (Tuesday, 31 March 2015); available online—see the section *References* for details.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“President Bashar al-Assad.” *Charlie Rose LLC* (Tuesday, 31 March 2015). Available online at: <https://charlierose.com/videos/28390>. Accessed Nov. 12, 2019.