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BOOK INFORMATION

The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy

Stephen M. Walt

Farrar, Straus & Giroux Publishing, 2018, 384 pages (Hardcover), \$28, ISBN: 0374280037



In *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, Stephen M. Walt, who is a professor of international affairs at Harvard University, makes a critical review of the United States foreign policy from the start of post-Cold War era until the book was published in October 2018. Walt is one of the pioneers of Neo-Realist approach in the field of international relations theory and questions liberal hegemony strategy throughout his work, especially focusing on the current situation in the US politics.

The author defines the US liberal hegemony in the world politics after the Cold War as “filled with visible failures and devoid of major accomplishments (p. 7)”, but this is a highly debated claim; especially considering the mainstream premises, in accordance with the political, economic and cultural trends of the world. Furthermore, he goes forward and explains failures of the US foreign policy elaborately by giving examples, missed opportunities as we have seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, self-inflicted wounds such as Iraq and Afghanistan wars, political acts like premeditated, authorized tortures, massive electronic surveillance or support to brutal authoritarian regimes, which all backfired.

In order to explain the nature of this problematic and insistent strategy, Walt reviews the foreign policy making process and handles with it in a systematic perspective, but not underestimating the Presidents' role on this subject. From this perspective, Walt looks with a skeptical eye at important parts of this community and tries to prescribe the wound of liberal hegemony, by caring about the US primacy in world politics, rather than rest of the world. The analysis of this community and their role on foreign policy was explained illuminatingly. These parts were followed by the interpretation of “illiberal hegemony” and Walt's recommendation at last.

Chapter one takes us to post-Cold War era after 1991, when the Soviets collapsed and “the United States found itself in a position of global primacy unseen since the Roman Empire (p. 24).” This was also where the film of liberal hegemony was started, different visions, perspectives and strategies were brought to the agenda in order to shape not only the US foreign policy, but also creating a new world order. After the threat of red scare of the Soviets, spreading the US core values like individual liberty, free elections, and open markets across the world would be a vindication, but also establishing a liberal hegemony across the globe became the utmost goal for the US. However, the responsibility of the task was such a great burden on the US, so that it failed in many ways in terms of strategic partnership, international terror or



even liberal democracy, according to the author. By considering the dismal record of the US foreign policy, Walt seeks the main reason of the failures of liberal hegemony strategy that lately paved the way of Donald Trump's "populist backlash." After the assessment of flawed foreign policy after the Cold War, the author concludes the main consistency is a long string of failures, rather than liberal norms and set of institutes in the wake of different presidents, so he identifies the very roots of this missionary and misguided strategy, which is the foreign policy elites.

Chapter two discusses how come the US ambitious attempt to shape regional and world politics ended up unsuccessfully, despite costly efforts for decades. The author takes liberal hegemony in his hands and reviews fundamental reasons behind the failure of the strategy. After making a critical interpretation of the prominent terms and theories of liberal hegemony, he demonstrates the practical deficits of the strategy in terms of preserving U.S. primacy, expanding the U.S. sphere of influence, promoting liberal norms of democracy and human rights. For the failure of liberal hegemony, Walt concludes that the attempt to create a new world order leaned on fragile foundations, problematic relationship between the states and societies and exaggeration of the American power, and then it caused deepening of the crises like in Afghanistan. On the other hand, easing tensions in Bosnia, the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan or the relations with China were accepted as successful examples. However, the author underlines that these cases are the outcomes of deviation from liberal hegemony strategy, not implementing of it. The author later states the following take clearly: "When the United States abandoned liberal hegemony and adopted a more realistic and flexible approach, its ability to achieve specific foreign policy goals increased significantly (p.67)."

Chapter three investigates the aforementioned ambitious foreign policy by focusing on the actors who influence the decision-making process of the US foreign policy. Making of the US foreign policy strategy is a result of competitive forces, rather than a president's vision, is a normal being of a democratic country with formal separation of powers and freedom of speech. On the other hand, the flourishing of the foreign policy community, during the US' ascendance to the leadership of the unipolar world, caused the US commitment to the failed strategy of liberal hegemony after the Cold War. The author identifies this notorious foreign policy community as "individuals and organizations that actively engage on a regular basis with issues of international affairs (p. 73)" that includes state institutions, think tanks, interest groups and lobbies, the media, and academia. The members of the foreign policy community are



tightly knit, mutually supportive to each other and they are professional insiders of the high politics, since they are expected to shape the ambitious global agenda of the US foreign policy. Otherwise, a more restrained foreign policy would give the entire foreign policy community less to do in terms of importance, employment or funding.

Chapter four explains the most prominent skill of the foreign policy community: selling a failing foreign policy. The author argues that the foreign policy community convinces the US citizens and administration to pursue an interventionist and ambitious agenda by the US is in charge to secure the world's threats, exaggerating the benefits and concealing the costs of liberal hegemony. Moreover, according to the author, this community transformed into a sector for the time being and distorted the facts to justify their ideas, focused their self-interests rather than the nation's. In addition, these were made in a professional way by using various apparatus like academia, media or famous institutions.

Chapter five evaluates the aftermath of liberal hegemony after Donald Trump's ascension to the White House in 2016. The author agrees with Trump's harsh criticism on liberal hegemony to some extent, but acknowledges Trump's presidency as a result of this failure rather than a success. Accordingly, the people constituting this policy caused a series of intricate problems from Somalia to Afghanistan and Iraq, Libya to Yemen and must be accounted for what they did for decades. So, Trump came up with an idea that foreign policy elites must be disregarded from the policy making process, since the failure of exporting democracy and nation-building efforts caused "considerable cost but with scant success (p. 133)" mainly to the US and then for the rest of the world.

,Chapter six assesses Trump's presidency from the perspective of his dealing with the liberal hegemony. After the years of conducting the same failed strategy, he promised "shake the rust off American foreign policy" but he demonstrated how not to fix it, according to the author. At the end of the day, "Trump ended up embracing the worst features of liberal hegemony—overreliance on military force, disinterest in diplomacy, and a tendency toward unilateralism—while turning his back on its positive aspirations, such as support for human rights and the preservation of an open, rules-based world economy (p. 157)" Trump's intended to shake up the status quo, his appointments to the top foreign policy posts went to outsiders who are controversial, unexperienced, transient figures such as Rex Tillerson, James Mattis, and Michael Flynn. Trump's assertive talks to NATO alliance, Russia or China turned out



to be the same manner like his predecessors. While looking at Trump's way of "ignorant, chaotic and inept management", also excluding the benefits and virtues of liberal hegemony, the author asserts that Trump accelerated the decline of the US primacy in world politics rather than "making America great again". On the other side, it might be a bit late to make a total judgment about Trump era from now on.

In the concluding chapter, the author turns back, makes a reassessment of the US foreign policy puts forward a series of ideas to repair them. Along with the criticism to the recent past of the reality, the author presents us "a better way" with offshore-balancing strategy. According to this alternative, a few areas of the globe are of vital importance to US security or prosperity, focusing on these regions and cooperation with local hegemony are required, taking lessons from the history and conducting diplomacy in a sensible way needed to be done. Nevertheless, making a rooted reform is obviously hard by challenging foreign policy elites, promoting peace, reassuring respect to the military and taming imperial ambitions. The author prescribes a restrained foreign policy to the US, instead of pretending to make the world safer, richer and democracy fortified place in line with liberal hegemony, which "destabilized key regions of the world, wasted thousands of lives and trillions of dollars in failed wars and conflicts" for decades.

It is worth to claim that the strength of this study is its level of analysis. Walt is capable of interpreting the US policy by retracing to the roots of its actors, theory and reality. The author's approach in this book is consistent with his former studies especially *Taming American Power* in 2005 and *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* in 2006. The assumptions and assertions of this book might be considered as exaggerated for those who are advocates of the liberal hegemony or the US superiority. However, the correctness of Walt's ideas will be clearly understood in the long term. This book makes an excellent read not only for political scientists, but also for all who wants to understand the trajectory of the US and world politics in an intellectual way.

All in all, the book skillfully handles with liberal hegemony as a grand strategy for the US. While depicting the US liberal hegemony, Walt considers it as an ambitious and failed grand strategy, focuses on the defects of the past quarter century and tries to prove that the US primacy is on the decline. The story of liberal hegemony was told by making a long list of failures and broken promises in an analytical way. Therefore, it provides deeper evaluation and critics to the recent past of the US foreign policy and world politics, along with the



advices to fix it. It might be accepted as a significant contribution to the literature in terms of the US foreign policy and world politics.