

**Realist Foreign Policy:
Containing the Romance of Nationalism and Nationalistic Universalism**

By

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Abstract

Realism is an approach to formulating foreign policy. It does not prescribe which goals should receive priority but provides a way to evaluate the prudence of actions taken to achieve them. Expecting tradeoffs between competing goals, realism anticipates the political and psychological routes likely to be taken to avoid and ease the pain of these tradeoffs. Two of these run through nationalism and nationalistic universalism. Both provide people with a sense of significance and lead to constructions of reality characterized more by taboo tradeoffs, moral self-righteousness, and stereotypes than compelling analyses and estimates of likely outcomes. To work against these inclinations, Hans Morgenthau suggested ways both to infer the motives driving foreign policies and to estimate relative power the strategic judgments he argued were most important. Parts 2 and 3 in this paper focus on those two tasks respectively, using U.S. policy as an illustration. Part 4 turns more directly to strategies designed to countervail against the predictable political and psychological distortions introduced by nationalism and nationalistic universalism, focusing in particular on recognizing stereotypes, keeping track of predictions, spelling out downstream scenarios, and containing the romance in heroic narratives.

Introduction: Realism and Formulating Foreign Policy

Hans Morgenthau argued that realism does not endow the concept of interests with a meaning that is fixed once and for all. To the contrary, he argued that interests were determined in particular periods of history depending upon the political and cultural context and that “the goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policies can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.”¹ What is essential in realism, is not whether the goals are driven by material concerns or normative ideals but that whatever action is taken to pursue them is prudent. It must judge action from the consequences not the aspirations. In Morgenthau’s words, “There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism then, considers prudence –the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions –to be the supreme virtue in politics.”²

Prudence requires that before acting and when learning from the consequences of action careful distinction be given to what Morgenthau described as “truth and opinion—between what is true objectively and rationally, supported by evidence and illuminated by reason, and what is only a subjective judgment divorced from the facts as they are and informed by prejudice and wishful thinking.”³ The realist aspires to a rationalist ideal that rests decisions on the best evidence, carefully assembled, and rigorously analyzed along with inferences constrained by reason and science. Unlike rational choice theorists that followed

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* Fifth ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973). 9

² Ibid. 10.

³ Ibid. 4.

him, Morgenthau did not believe this was how decisions were made.⁴ Rather, he set it out as an ideal to strive toward. To make his point, he described U.S. policy in Indochina identifying five features that he described as “irrationality.” By implication, these were features of actual foreign policy realists should aim to reduce. They were:

- 1) “the imposition upon the empirical world of a simplistic and *a priori* picture of the world derived from folklore and ideological assumptions,”
- 2) “the refusal to correct this picture of the world in the light of experience.”
- 3) “the persistence in a foreign policy derived from the misperception of reality and the use of intelligence for the purpose not of adapting policy to reality but of reinterpreting reality to fit policy,”
- 4) “the egotism of the policy makers widening the gap between perceptions and policy, on the one hand, and reality on the other,”
- 5) “the urge to close the gap at least subjectively by action, any kind of action, that creates the illusion of mastery over a recalcitrant reality.”⁵

⁴ In this regard, he is more in tune with contemporary behavioral economists and decision scientists identifying the way humans do make decisions and trying to push them in the direction of greater care and prudence. See Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); R. H. Thaler, “Behavioral Economics: Past, Present, and Future,” *American Economic Review* 106, no. 7 (2016).

⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* . 7.

Perhaps for some Americans the gap between the realist ideal and the five features of irrationality Morgenthau describes fluctuates with the alternation of presidents.⁶ Judging from the outcomes and consequences, however, there is a lot of continuity over the past twenty-five years. The outcomes in the Middle East capture most attention but those with China and Russia also seem to move persistently in worrisome directions. Moreover, without denying there have been some successes, it seems fair to conclude that all five of the features of irrationality Morgenthau identified persist, oftentimes appearing to be the standard fare more than daily specials. Given the high and sometimes lethal costs, narrowing the gap is a compelling objective for both moral and practical reasons. Doing so, however, requires tackling the tough analytic tasks of inferring motives and estimating the relative power of countries. Parts 2 and 3 turn to those respectively but there are political and psychological pressures working against the realist ideal in both those endeavors that are explored first in the section below. Part 4 suggests several strategies designed to countervail against these pressures.

Part 1: The Character of Politics that Makes Realist Analysis Difficult

It might seem that it should be easy to move toward a foreign policy that aligns interests and power in a sensible way, that is well informed by facts, not exaggerations, and that benefits from lessons drawn from events in a reasonable manner as opposed to an ideological one, and that faces tradeoffs with prudence more than wishful thinking.

Many people want this. Translating these goals into concrete settings, however, is

⁶ On current partisan differences see Pew Research Center, "Conflicting Partisan Priorities for U.S. Foreign Policy," (Washington D.C.: PEW, 2018). Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "America Engaged: American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy," (Chicago, Ill. : CCGA, 2018).

complicated. Reading the intentions of other actors is notoriously difficult. Some think estimating power is easier but it too is vulnerable to subjective biases.⁷ Drawing lessons from history involves so many conjectures that multiple interpretations are the norm. Recognizing the uncertainty inherent to the central analytic tasks may explain why debates persist but does not adequately explain the irrationalities Morgenthau points to.

Painful tradeoffs: The feature of politics that Morgenthau thought drove analyses away from the realist ideal is the inevitable moral significance of the decisions made. He assumed there would be an “ineluctable tension between the moral command and the requirements of successful political action.”⁸ He did not think facing these tradeoffs would be easy. A good bit of subsequent research suggests he was right about that.⁹ While Morgenthau expected people to deny and evade tradeoffs, he insisted that realists must be “unwilling to gloss over and obliterate that tension and thus to obfuscate both the moral and the political issue by making it appear as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is.”¹⁰

Avoiding tradeoffs sits at the center of theories explaining motivated reasoning.¹¹ People facing painful choices make the problem easier by reframing it in ways that ease or erase the moral tension. This can be done by constructing a

⁷ Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁸ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 10.

⁹ John D. Steinbruner, *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). 177.

picture of the situation that justifies opening the escape clauses almost all moral prescriptions have.¹² For example, do not kill unless the danger in the situation justifies it, or help people, even save them, unless the risks and cost to you that doing so entails justifies standing aside. Wanting to open these escape clauses, of course, can drive the picture of adversaries that form, exaggerating their danger, even demonizing them.¹³ It can also affect estimates of power that determine the likely risks and costs. Another way to avoid the tradeoff is to introduce a value that supersedes and reframes the hard decision as an easy one. By turning what appears to be a tragedy into a choice between what is sacred and what is profane, the choice is made simple.¹⁴ For Morgenthau, this is what making the nation sacred did.

Nationalistic Universalism: As popular sovereignty and democracy rose across the Nineteenth Century, people put increasingly higher value on the nation. As it became, for many, their most valued community, tradeoffs were inevitable. People would need to choose between pursuing its interests and abiding by universal ethical commands. Morgenthau argued that a few might live with the continuous psychological discomfort and a few might side with the universal ethics. The majority, however, he wrote, “in order to overcome that conflict identifies the morality of a particular nation with the commands of supranational ethics. It pours,

¹² Richard K. Herrmann, "How Attachments to the Nation Shape Perceptions of the World: A Theory of Motivated Reasoning," *International Organization* 71, no. S1 (2017).

¹³ Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10, no. 3 (2006); Emanuele Castano and Roger Giner-Sorolla, "Not Quite Human: Infrhumanization in Response to Collective Responsibility for Intergroup Killing," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006).

¹⁴ P. E. Tetlock, B. A. Mellers, and J. P. Scoblic, "Sacred Versus Pseudo-Sacred Values: How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs," *American Economic Review* 107, no. 5 (2017).

as it were, the contents of a particular national morality into the now almost empty bottle of universal ethics. So each nation comes to know again a universal morality—that is its own national morality—which is taken to be the one that all the other nations ought to accept as their own.”¹⁵ He called this phenomenon “nationalistic universalism.”

For Morgenthau, nationalistic universalism was morally indefensible. For him it was the “very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedians and the Biblical prophets have warned rulers and ruled.”¹⁶ He saw it as also “politically pernicious for it is liable to engender the distortion in judgment which, in the blindness of crusading frenzy, destroys nations and civilizations—in the name of moral principles, ideal, or God himself.”¹⁷ He also saw no easy way to defuse it. He was convinced that the “the human mind in its day-by-day operations cannot bear to look the truth of politics straight in the face. It must disguise, distort, belittle, and embellish the truth—the more so, the more the individual is actively involved in the processes of politics, and particularly, in those involved in international politics. For only by deceiving himself about the nature of politics and the role he plays on the political scene is man able to live contentedly as a political animal with himself and his fellow men.”¹⁸

Although arguing your country’s moral system is universally valid is not the same as saying that its foreign policy success is therefore the anchor of moral reasoning, slipping between the two is easy. After the recent killing of Saudi Arabian journalist

¹⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 252.

¹⁶ Ibid. 11

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. 14.

Jamal Khashoggi, for instance, value tradeoffs came into sharp relief and defenders of the relationship were quick to insist that despite the “brutal and grotesque” act, the “Saudis are not the moral equivalents of Iranians and the Russians.”¹⁹ Saudi Arabia is not morally equivalent, they argued, because it plays a pivotal role in American economic strategies and “actively supports the American regional order that the Iranians openly seek to destroy.” Putting the American preferred regional order at the top of the strategic agenda might be compatible with realism but arguing that it determines what is moral is not. As Morgenthau put it “There is a world of difference between the belief that all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind, and the blasphemous conviction that God is always on one’s side and that what one wills oneself cannot fail to be willed by God also.”²⁰

Contemporary social psychologists find strong evidence that people are drawn to causal stories that identify agents and assign them personality traits and specific intentions.²¹ Tetlock, Mellars, and Scoblic conclude also that they “are incorrigibly attracted to moral frames;” the “shared sense of sacredness,” they explain, infuses “otherwise meaningless lives with significance.”²² People’s membership in groups contributes to their quest for significance and, for most people; there is no more important group than the nation. The feeling of belonging to the nation connects them in a story that presents their acts as carrying on the mission of their ancestors and

¹⁹ Michael Doran and Tony Badran, "Trump Is Crude. But He's Right About Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2018 2018.

²⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 11.

²¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 76-77.

²² Tetlock, Mellars, and Scoblic, "Sacred Versus Pseudo-Sacred Values: How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs." 98-99.

contributing to those that will follow.²³ Attachment to the nation often leads to a preference for storylines about the nation that bolster personal self-esteem.²⁴ When perceived threats and perceived opportunities give rise to emotional desires to act, attachment can also lead to the belief in stereotypes that license the otherwise morally objectionable behavior. In extreme cases, individual's identities can become fused with the group, leading to acts of self-sacrifice, even martyrdom.²⁵

Quest for significance: In politics people are typically encouraged to commit themselves to causes larger than themselves. The result can sometimes be breathtakingly positive collective action; at the same time this quest for significance can drive radicalization that is not simply imprudent but immoral. Arie Kruglanski and his team at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism find it to be the leading cause of violent extremism.²⁶ Surely, most people will not feel the quest as strongly as the people Kruglanski's team studies but even in milder versions it can push analyses away from the realist ideal.

²³ J. Greenberg, S. Solomon, and T. Pyszcznski, "Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology Vol. 29* ed. Mark Zanna (San Diego: Academic Press, 1997); Jeff Schimel et al., "Is Death Really the Worm at the Core? Converging Evidence That Worldview Threat Increases Death-Thought Accessibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92, no. 5 (2007); E. Castano et al., "Ideology, Fear of Death, and Death Anxiety," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 4 (2011).

²⁴ Herrmann, "How Attachments to the Nation Shape Perceptions of the World: A Theory of Motivated Reasoning."

²⁵ W. B. Swann et al., "What Makes a Group Worth Dying For? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 6 (2014); Jocelyn J. Bélanger et al., "The Psychology of Martyrdom: Making the Ultimate Sacrifice in the Name of a Cause," *ibid.* 107, no. 3.

²⁶ A. W. Kruglanski et al., "The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism," *Political Psychology* 35, no. S1 (2014).

For Morgenthau, it was the leaders closest to the decisions that were the most vulnerable to motivated reasoning. The public, however, is not immune. They too feel attached to the nation and quite often use their imagination to fill-in their picture of the situation -- not having at their ready command the information Morgenthau's realism calls for. Petersen and Aaroe find that among Americans, a person's ability to imagine associates with decoupled cognition, that is with the generation of highly explicit mental representations of others, that are created without direct sensory input from outside stimuli and which are vivid and emotionally engaging.²⁷ They explain this is how so many people who are not well informed come to have strong policy views. Lloyd Etheridge, in a study of State Department Foreign Service Officers, found that the inclination to imagine the world in romantic morality plays with the United States in the heroic role went a good distance in explaining who leaned more toward realist analyses and who did not.²⁸ Recently, Sarah Ward and Laura King found that a faith in intuitive judgment over explicit analysis is associated with the "binding values" of community and authority and also with substantially harsher moral judgments.²⁹

The mission to implement: Although various individual differences may explain why some Americans incline toward storylines that are consistent with nationalistic universalism, there are political pressures pushing most of them in this direction. Leaders use the institutions and instruments of government to marshal support for their policies.

²⁷ M. B. Petersen and L. Aaroe, "Politics in the Mind's Eye: Imagination as a Link between Social and Political Cognition," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013). 276.

²⁸ L. Etheridge, *A World of Men: The Private Sources of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978).

²⁹ S. J. Ward and L. A. King, "Individual Differences in Reliance on Intuition Predict Harsher Moral Judgments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 5 (2018).

Professionals working for departments, agencies, and the military take up the foreign policy mission assigned. A key part of that involves mobilizing support for it. This often involves strategies for selling that are designed to evoke emotions and short-circuit thinking by assuring people the choice is necessary and the only one decent and patriotic people can make. There is a reason truth is oftentimes the first casualty of war. Shaping how people think about it is a central part of the battlefield.

Framing the choice at hand as involving a taboo tradeoffs is a common strategic move. It cuts off debate by suggesting there is nothing decent people have to decide. There is a sacred value at stake. To even contemplate alternatives is moral equivocation. Of course, adversaries are engaged in the same contest competitively framing the choice as a different taboo tradeoff. The result is what Tetlock, Mellars, and Scoblic call “mutual assured moral destruction.”³⁰ It may be an effective tactic for mobilization and diplomatic jujitsu but undermines realist analyses as it shapes the way leaders subsequently talk and think about the situation.

As time passes, the polemic seeps into the discourse of the policy community. Interests are treated as obvious and the conversation turns to how best to advance them. Other countries are judged in terms of whether they contribute positively to U.S. preferences or complicate them. Seeing other actors as helpful good guys or troublesome bad guys, leads to propaganda designed to discredit and out maneuver the troublesome bad guys and to justify working closely with the good guys. Estimates of power can get caught up in the contest too. In efforts to point the fingers of blame or to take credit, assertions about what was possible or impossible follow from the polemical mission

³⁰ Tetlock, Mellars, and Scoblic, "Sacred Versus Pseudo-Sacred Values: How People Cope with Taboo Trade-Offs."

rather careful analysis. Rather than learning from history, cases are cherry-picked to sell decisions already made.

Part 2: Inferring the Intentions of Countries

Morgenthau expected the government to sell their preferences in terms of “ethical and legal principles or biological necessities” but argued against the idea that national interests are fixed or objective or rooted only in material gain as opposed to normative values.³¹ Countries were not seen as having permanent interests and persisting ambitions. These were seen as changing as constructions of reality and associated interests prevailed in the political process inside of states. Whatever interests were granted priority; the most important judgments a leader had to make in pursuing it revolved around determining the type of other foreign actors he or she was dealing with. They could be on balance either mostly defensive driven by perceptions of threat or mostly offensive driven by perceptions of opportunity. Morgenthau offered some ideas on how to detect one from the other but left no doubt that telling the two apart was difficult and judgments on this score should never be definitive. Instead, they should be continually reevaluated.³²

Analysis not Assumption: Because inferring intentions is so difficult, there is often a temptation to presume what they are by assumption.³³ Theories of defensive and

³¹ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 89.

³² Ibid. 69-72.

³³ S. Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (2014).

offensive realism do this to some extent.³⁴ For Morgenthau, making the distinction was the most important judgment a leader made because the success or failure of the strategy following from it depended on it.³⁵ He did not advise resting it on an assumption. Instead, he suggested that realists should study what “statesmen have actually done, and from the foreseeable consequences of their acts we can surmise what their objectives might have been.”³⁶ This would be an ongoing endeavor with deliberate efforts made to constrain the biases of the observer.

There are no perfect ways to infer intention but there are strategies that can help. One is to start with a hypothesis about what a defensive state would do to protect what it has. This would be the minimum a state would be expected to do.³⁷ It also helps to look at a sequence of actions rather than just one. Gamson and Modigliani illustrated years ago how more about motives can be can be inferred from a series of moves and especially interactions where patterns of reciprocity, or not, emerge.³⁸ In addition, inferences drawn from actions should pass a turn-around test; that is, the same inference is drawn when a similar act is taken by another country. Morgenthau argued realists needed to use similar metrics when judging other countries and their own. With governments mobilizing support by

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 64.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 4.

³⁷ Richard Karl Herrmann, *Perceptions and Behavior in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

³⁸ William Gamson and Andre Modigliani, *Untangling the Cold War: A Strategy for Testing Rival Theories* (Boston: Little, Brown, , 1971).

framing taboo tradeoffs and demonizing or whitewashing other actors, Morgenthau did not expect the realist's evenhandedness in this regard to be popular.

Another strategy is to propose diplomatic offers designed to reveal the other country's preferences. Charles Glaser provides an example of this by proposing a deal on Taiwan for China.³⁹ It offers terms to China that a defensive country would accept but offensive country would reject. If China accepted, this could head off an unnecessary round of escalation. If it China rejected, then the United States could use that to mobilize countervailing measures at home and abroad. The focus on revealed preferences is not only in line with Morgenthau's advice to look for empirical evidence but also in line with his advice not to search in the statements made by leaders or their agents.⁴⁰ He concluded that was futile and deceptive because the "actors on the international scene rarely present the foreign policy they are pursuing for what it is, ...the true nature of the policies pursued disappears behind a veil of ideological disguises."⁴¹ This did not simply apply to other countries but to the United States too.

Inferring U.S. global motives: In explaining U.S. foreign policy, many Americans have emphasized the motivating power of liberal ideals and the belief that as democracy spreads globally so will peace. This is a common interpretation among liberal internationalists who argue this aspiration is a sensible one.⁴² It is also a popular view

³⁹ Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (2015).

⁴⁰ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 5

⁴¹ Ibid. 72.

⁴² G. John Ikenberry, "Woodrow Wilson, the Bush Administration, and the Future of Liberal Internationalism," in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. G. John Ikenberry, et al. (Princeton: Princeton

among critics who argue the aspiration leads to an overly ambitious conception of U.S. interests.⁴³ There is not space here to join this debate properly delving into the costs versus benefits region-by-region and choice-by-choice. It is possible though, to offer a broad observation and a question that follows from it. The observation is how few people outside the United State share this view of the motives driving American foreign policy. The question this raises is why so few others see it this way?

Pointing to a specific contrast may be a useful way to start. In 2004, early in the Iraq War, the Pew Global Attitudes Project in nationally representative surveys found that in France 75% of the public believed the United States invaded Iraq to control Iraq's oil, only 21% thought it invaded because the U.S. saw Saddam Hussein as a threat.⁴⁴ In Germany, a smaller majority 54% believed the same thing as the French. In the United States, by contrast, only 22% believed oil was the motive and more than two-thirds thought the U.S. was driven by fear of Saddam Hussein. When asked to rate the importance of several motives, oil was the one that majorities in France (58%) and Germany (60%) rated number one, only 18% of Americans did. For Americans, only 11% said they thought protecting Israel was a key motive, more than twice that many in France and Germany thought this was an important motive driving U.S. policy. At the

University Press, 2009); Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century," *ibid.*

⁴³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 2018); Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007/08).

⁴⁴ PEW, "Global Attitudes Project, 2014," (2014).

same time, 69% of Americans saw the United States as motivated by a desire to bring democracy to Iraq while only 16% in France and 24% in Germany did.⁴⁵

These attitudes in France and Germany were not unique to the general public but also evident among the elite.⁴⁶ Clearly, the Iraq War was unpopular but it also presented a tradeoff that revealed preferences. Supporting liberal values in Western Europe has been a long-standing feature of U.S. policy but it has roots in both strategic and normative considerations. Allying with governments that had the support of their people lent strength to NATO in ways the Soviet Union never enjoyed in the Warsaw Pact. In many situations, geostrategic and normative considerations push in the same direction. Once in a while, however, they do not. Then the tradeoffs Morgenthau argued were inevitable become painful and, at the same time, revealing to observers. For many Europeans, the war against Iraq played that role. It came on the heels of the genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent war in Congo that was killing millions as the 21st Century opened. The relative lack of U.S. attention paid to these two African cases compared to the attention paid to the Middle East, led many non-American observers to conclude oil and Israel, despite American protestations to the contrary, were the more likely motives driving U.S. policy, not an excessive zeal for democracy, human rights, and the importance of international rules.

⁴⁵ "A Year after Iraq: Mistrust of American in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists," (The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004).

⁴⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

Many Russians were reaching that same conclusion not only from the decision to conquer Iraq but also from the previous U.S. decision to bomb Serbia.⁴⁷ In that case, there was a humanitarian argument but it ran parallel to any lingering desires to contain Russian influence. It did not present the sort of stark tradeoff that Iraq did but it, nevertheless, signaled to Russians that the U.S. would not be constrained by international rules and procedures. In that same year, 1999, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined NATO and as that process continued adding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia by the end of 2004 many Russians came to see the expansion of democracy as coterminous with the expansion of U.S. geostrategic power and had trouble disentangling the relative importance of the two motives, although judging by the increasing anti-American sentiments expressed in public opinion, Russians have been giving increasing weight to the geostrategic motives.⁴⁸

Judging by the change in tone and direction of Russia policy beginning in roughly 2007, it appears Russian leaders had concluded that the U.S. was using the talk of democracy as an ideological disguise. Its real motives, as described by Russians, were to further contain Russia, protect the nationalist interests of Russia's neighbors, and to push for change in Russia that might bring leaders to office who would accommodate American preferences. Although the subsequent wars in Georgia and Ukraine were portrayed in the United States as struggles for democracy threatened by Russian imperialism, the situation on the ground in both cases was more complicated than that. In

⁴⁷ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Whose World Order?: Russia's Perception of American Ideas after the Cold War* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Elena Chebankova, "Russia's Idea of the Multipolar World Order: Origins and Main Dimensions," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017); Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Russia in the Post-Western World: The End of the Normalization Paradigm," *ibid.* 25, no. 4 (2009).

Georgia, ethnic differences traditionally recognized by Soviet autonomous districts made the unification of the independent Georgian state difficult and in Ukraine the struggle between West-leaning and Russian-leaning parties had defined the back-and-forth of post independent Ukraine. It is not possible here to retrace the details of these cases but those experts who have paint a dramatically different picture than the dominant storyline offered by the U.S. government and those selling the Atlantic alliance policy.⁴⁹ It would not be surprising if plenty of Russians were familiar with these alternative perspectives and concluded that the United States was motivated more by a desire to bring pro-American leaders to power than by a commitment to liberal values and democracy.

The situation in Asia is more similar than different. In the relationship with Japan, national security, economic, and normative considerations push U.S. policy in mostly the same direction. They do South Korea and Taiwan as well, although for decades they did not and the United States gave priority to security and economic considerations and supported authoritarian regimes there. Currently, the countries of ASEAN have the fastest economic growth rates in the world and represent America's fourth largest trading partner.⁵⁰ The change in U.S. relationships with the ASEAN countries may not have lived up to the billing of a "pivot" to Asia that was advertised by the Obama Administration but by this point every country in ASEAN except Myanmar participates in the United States' International Military Education and Training program

⁴⁹ Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses : The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Adelphi Series, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017); Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad : Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); D. Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea the Gambler in the Kremlin," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (2016).

⁵⁰ D. Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018).

and every ASEAN member except Cambodia and Laos and Myanmar participate in Washington's Foreign Military Sales and Financing arrangements. In 2016, the United States upgraded its relationship with ASEAN to a "strategic partnership."

Of course, among the ASEAN countries only Indonesia and the Philippines are democracies and even they have weak civil institutions, patronage politics, and plenty of corruption. Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore are all authoritarian states, Brunei and Thailand are monarchies led by a sultan and king respectively. Although there is a tradition of democracy in Thailand, there is also a tradition of praetorian military politics and in Vietnam the communist party rules with no pretense of democracy. President Obama, who some of his American critics see as too much wedded to liberalism, hosted the Sultan of Brunei at the White House and presided over the development of the best relations with Vietnam ever. U.S. arms sales to Malaysia increased as they did to Indonesia and the Philippines.⁵¹

The United States in the Middle East: It may not be Asia that Americans are thinking about when some of them contend the United States is motivated by an evangelical commitment to democracy and liberal internationalism.⁵² It is the Middle East where the U.S. has been at war for eighteen years. As mentioned above, even by 2004 nearly 70% of Americans already believed the U.S. went to Iraq to promote democracy.⁵³ The centrality of the argument about weapons of mass destruction was quickly forgotten. The War on Terrorism was not but as Peter Liberman's finds, a desire

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*.

⁵³ PEW, "A Year after Iraq: Mistrust of American in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists."

for revenge more than even security, never mind democracy, was driving that.⁵⁴ The quest for vengeance did not discriminate between national differences within the Arab world, swept up numerous types of Muslims with little distinction, and came to settle on Iraq as close enough.

Of course, leaders in the United States channeled popular emotions toward Iraq and they may have been keen to seize this opportunity to spread democracy. That is a popular story in the United States. It is not compelling, however. The initial plan appears to have been to topple Saddam Hussein's regime quickly, to establish a government that would accommodate U.S. interests in terms of not threatening the Gulf Cooperation Council states or Israel, and then to leave. That was overtaken by events, as establishing stability proved more difficult than expected. The occupation authority made matters worse by disbanding the military and state bureaucracies, thereby necessitating building new institutions in the midst of chaos and near civil war. The route from there has been rugged and there is no reason to diminish the efforts to promote democracy. At the same time, there is no reason to downplay the continuing priority granted to security considerations. It was not a lack of democracy that kept the United States in Iraq in 2006 when the Iraq Study Group led by former Secretary of State James Baker and Congressman Lee Hamilton suggested it pull back.⁵⁵ It was chaos and a near civil war in which the groups American leaders thought might cooperate with the United

⁵⁴ Peter Liberman, "An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War against Evildoers," *International Organization* 60, no. 3 (2006); "Punitiveness and U.S. Elite Support for the 1991 Persian Gulf War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 1 (2007). Also see R. M. Stein, "War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 3 (2015).

⁵⁵ James A. Baker and Lee H. Hamilton, *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward -- a New Approach* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

States could lose and, of course, it was also concerns about the Bush Administration losing the war it had started.

The surge that followed was advertised as creating another chance for an Iraqi government to form by providing stability or at least suppressing what otherwise threatened to escalate into full-scale civil war. There was an interest in promoting democratic institutions in the hopes these would help to navigate the intractable political conflicts in the country but the anchoring consideration was stability. By this point, the American public and most of its government was determined to pullback from Iraq pretty much regardless of how democratic the institutions left behind were. President Obama did just that in 2011 and there was no clamoring to go back until ISIS reared its head in 2014. The concern then again had little to do with democracy or liberal internationalism. It had a clear security motivation with a dose of humanitarianism. Neither the U.S. government nor media showed much interest in how democratic the institutions in Baghdad were. The criteria that mattered were their abilities to defeat ISIS and stand as bulwarks against terrorism.

There is no way to know if the leaders planning the Iraq War believed what proved to be fanciful delusions about the likelihood of an Iraqi liberation scenario – paralleling the memories of liberated Italy in the 1940s. It is possible they did. Those memories are more popular in the United States than the grittier pictures of U.S. post-war occupations in Europe and Japan.⁵⁶ Just as likely, however, is that they were committed to toppling Saddam Hussein regardless and were downplaying the possible costs to win

⁵⁶ See William I. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2008); John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War Two* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000).

the domestic fight about going to war. Manipulating the picture of expected costs is a standard page in the playbook of Washington insiders. To understand the geostrategic logic here requires returning to the closing days of the Cold War.

In 1989, the United States was aligned with the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). It was an alliance of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. There was enthusiasm for the prospects of Iraq providing both leverage against Iran and economic opportunities for all. As part of the ACC, Iraq threatened neither of Washington's two primary interests, Israel and oil, with oil operationalized in the Gulf Cooperation Council states. With Iraq in the ACC, Syria was left as the last of the major Arab rejectionist states vis-à-vis Israel. The ACC did not survive Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and over the next thirteen years Iraq was not the lever against Iran once hoped for and certainly not the economic bonanza either. At the same time, however, it was at worst a pale shadow of the threat it once represented to Saudi Arabia and Israel. What the public furor caused by 9/11 provided the leaders in the Bush Administration was an opportunity to put Iraq back on track with the prospects once seen in the ACC. Of course, in the ACC the last thing on anyone's mind was democracy, which surely was not an attribute of the brutal regime in Baghdad, the military dictatorship in Cairo, or the Kingdom in Riyadh.

Attacking Iraq was a gamble. No one needed to be thinking about democracy, however, to take it. If the attack led to the Italian liberation script then great, if not then conquering Iraq would eliminate any chance of Saddam Hussein freeing Iraq from the sanctions regime and joining it once again with the rejectionist front. With a regime the United States put in power in place, Iraq might evolve into a stronger lever to use against Syria and Iran. The risk was not that the United States might lose the war. Iraq had been

defeated in a matter of hours in 1990 and was the target of this sort of attack-at-will thinking precisely because it stood no chance to prevail. The risk was that it would evolve into a quagmire, another Vietnam. Advocates rejected this analogy as the public was mobilized. The risk, of course, was less the sort of guerrilla war that the Vietnam metaphor evoked but the endless political wrangling and attachment to local allies that would not be able to win over broad based legitimacy. That would enmesh the United States in Iraq and in the Middle East more broadly in a fashion that would be hard to extricate it from. Of course, if one goal behind the invasion was to accomplish that, then this was not a great risk.

In the waning days of the Vietnam War, George McGovern ran for president on the campaign slogan “America Come Home.” No one understood the risk this represented for states like Israel better than the leading intellectuals who became the founders of the neoconservative movement.⁵⁷ The gamble in the Iraq case was that if things went very badly a similar sentiment might emerge. Of course, by then the United States would be wrapped into the local contests in ways hard to untangle and face new threats difficult to leave behind. The invasion and occupation was almost surely going to stoke anti-American sentiments in Arab and Muslim populations. This turned much of the debate to questions over how much more anti-American and anti-West regional opponents could be (advocates suggested Arabs and Muslims more broadly were immutably hostile in any case), and over how much power the Arab or Muslim street

⁵⁷ Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also see Norman Podhoretz, *Norman Podhoretz Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

could exercise if they could organize themselves at all.⁵⁸ There was a fairly common understanding that liberal democracy would potentially unleash these populist sentiments. U.S. support for authoritarian governments that kept them in check in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan never wavered.

No one anticipated the Arab Spring. At the same time, most everyone saw the problem facing Arab regimes that rely heavily on coercion and do not enjoy the popular support of their citizens.⁵⁹ Once it began, the Arab Spring presented a painful tradeoff. The United States could support movements demanding democracy and human rights or stand with the authoritarians.⁶⁰ Of course, the authoritarians kept anti-American and anti-Israeli populist sentiments in check and ever since the Iranian revolution few American leaders were keen to see those unleashed. Critics of President Obama often say he went too far in siding with the democrats in Egypt and naively contributed to the brief success of the Muslim Brotherhood there. Of course, they have less to say about Washington's acquiescence and eventual accommodation to the military coup d'état and repression that followed. They also point to Washington's support for NATO's intervention in Libya and its declaration early in the Syrian civil war that Bashir Assad must go as evidence of the democratic motive driving U.S. foreign policy. They say less about Washington's close and unwavering ties to Saudi Arabia or Saudi Arabia's occupation of Bahrain.

⁵⁸ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004). Also see Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2002).

⁵⁹ Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁶⁰ Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

I mention these cases not to prove Washington is uninterested in democracy but to suggest it supports it most when doing so is inexpensive. When there are painful tradeoffs the primacy of security and the economy are clear. I mention these cases for another reason as well. In none of them was the United States the primary mover, the dynamics and the outcomes were driven mostly by regional players. During the Cold War, many Americans read regional contest through a bipolar lens attributing causation to Moscow and Washington when it belonged anchored to regional players.⁶¹ This was partly a product of bipolar mindsets but also reflective of unfamiliarity with local actors and situations.⁶² The result was to exaggerate Moscow's control over events and to overestimate the power the United States had as well.

Part 3: Estimating Relative Power

As is clear in studies of partisanship, in-group identities and policy desires can motivate beliefs.⁶³ The emotional attractiveness of desired outcomes can lead people to inflate their estimates of power so as to believe they are achievable and when people are negatively disposed to the outcome or its cost, they may deflate estimates of power

⁶¹ See Richard K. Herrmann, "Regional Conflicts as Turning Points: The Soviet and American Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Angola, and Nicaragua," in *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation and the Study of International Relations* ed. Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow (New York: Palgrave - Macmillan, 2004).

⁶² See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

⁶³ I. G. Anson, "Partisanship, Political Knowledge, and the Dunning-Kruger Effect," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2018); D.J. Flynn, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, "The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs About Politics," *Advances in Political Psychology* 38, no. Suppl 1 (2017); P. Thibodeau et al., "The Wished-for Always Wins until the Winner Was Inevitable All Along: Motivated Reasoning and Belief Bias Regulate Emotion During Elections," *Political Psychology* 36, no. 4 (2015); Milton Lodge and Charles S. Taber, *The Rationalizing Voter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

thereby making the goal appear unobtainable. Assertions about the power available are standard fare in polemical arguments about the goals that could have been achieved or never should have been tilted at in the first place. The motivated arguments can include claims that appear to be contradictory. Recently, for example, Iran is presented by those mobilizing action against it as threatening and running roughshod over the Middle East, even aspiring to regional hegemony, while at the same time on the brink of economic ruin and regime change. Likewise, they emphasize the terrible threat Iran represents; yet see little value in an accord to limit Iran prospects for nuclear weapons -- confident that the United States can deal with that through direct military action if necessary.

Capabilities and relative power: The analysis of Iran's power should concentrate on its resource base, the military and economic instruments at its disposal, and the levers it can employ. This needs to be done in context and relative to those instruments and levers countervailing against it. Too often the focus is on a weapon system or specific troops deployed. These stories are vivid but draw attention away from broader comparisons of capabilities relative to other countries. While capabilities are sensibly measured against fix metrics, for instance, how many weapons were available last year, power is relative and needs to be estimated against the difficulty of the task being undertaken. It is not only in the Iranian case that this is done too infrequently.

At the end of the Cold War, there was no doubt that the United States had more capabilities than Russia. It had always had more capabilities. This may have meant for theorists that it was the only superpower in a unipolar world but it did not mean that the United States could impose its will on regional actors. The ability to that would depend not a net assessment of capabilities but on instruments and levers as they pertained to the

regional context, the difficulty of what was being attempted, and both the instruments and levers other actors could use to countervail. This point was not always emphasized in the heady days of the early post-Cold War world perhaps because success oftentimes does not trigger the sort of causal analysis that failure does.⁶⁴ For many observers, it was obvious that superior U.S. power won the Cold War and it could now proceed to lead. What was overlooked was that in almost every conflict in the Third World where the United States had been embroiled, the local players who at one time were seen as pro-Soviet were still in power. That is still the case today in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Nicaragua, Angola, Namibia, South Africa, and even Syria. In Afghanistan, Najibullah fell three years after the Soviet Union withdrew, but the mujahedeen and Taliban that established control by 1996 was hardly pro-American. The United States enjoyed success in expelling Iraq from Kuwait but that was a far simpler task than the making and remaking of governments.

Estimating abilities to mobilize: There is nothing easy about counting capabilities. It might start with describing the number of military and economic instruments a country possesses but needs to turn quickly to gauging the quality of these too.⁶⁵ There are different ways to estimate the costs of producing these instruments and to evaluate the drag it represents on the economy. Providing a cumulative picture of a country's resource base means summing across incommensurate categories of natural and physical endowments, the number, healthiness, and education of people, the

⁶⁴ R. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

⁶⁵ For an example of how to do this see, S. G. Brooks and W. C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position," *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015).

technological infrastructure, and the capacity of people to use it, and much more. As complicated as this is, estimating what portion of these potential capabilities a government can mobilize is often even more difficult still. It requires estimating how costly the government's mobilization strategy is likely to be. This will depend on how much the government can rely on symbol manipulation, like flag waving and appeals to patriotic feelings of obligation, and how much it will need to rely on buying people off with side-payments or coercing them to comply.

A claim about the legitimacy of a government is often a shorthand way to summarize the mix of controls a government will need to rely on, with more legitimate governments relying more on symbol manipulation and the less legitimate ones relying more on cooptation and coercion. It says little, however, about why this is the case. To delve into that question requires a picture of the social and political landscape. A part of the answer rests in the structural factors such as the government's advantage in military instruments, the distribution of ethnic and religious groups, the social distance between them, and the distribution of the population across geographic terrain and income levels. As Philip Roeder's study of national secessionist movements make clear, however, these factors are rarely determinant of outcomes.⁶⁶ To understand power in these contexts, it is necessary to focus on the leaders, organization, and practices of the political campaigns being waged. The ability of leaders to coordinate across diverse and heterogeneous interests and types of participants, to rally populations, and to maintain both horizontal and vertical coordination within their organizations is key.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Philip G. Roeder, *National Secession: Persuasion and Violence in Independence Campaigns* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The political analysis of the situation reveals the bargaining levers competitors can pull; for example, Iran can try to exploit public dissatisfaction in the neighboring states even though it cannot create these dissatisfactions. It can also try to play Russia and West European states against the United States but does not create the divisions that make those levers available to it. Of course, how to weigh the strength of those levers against those the United States can pull, for example, drawing attention to the economic and strategic dependencies these countries have with the United States is a key part of the bargaining contest. So are efforts to manipulate the confidence others have in your rationality and your appreciation of the likely costs and your readiness to use force. Likewise, an assessment of relative leverage needs to take into account the likelihood that when faced with external pressure and efforts to exploit domestic cleavages the target country's population will rally and pull together as opposed to turning on one another and breaking apart.

Although many countries enjoy a widely shared sense of nationalism some states are comprised of multiple nations and numerous ethnic and religious groups. Exploiting those divisions is common in competitive relationships. In Pakistan, for example, there are stronger ethnic identities than national identity and the state has worked for decades to build unity around Islam. After India intervened to help liberate Bangladesh, Islamabad emphasized Islam as it sought to weaken the wedge of Pashtun nationalism that India might pound. This meant allying with the most religious of the Pashtun both in Northwest Pakistan and in Afghanistan, where the Pashtun are the majority in the south. When the United States intervened to overthrow the Taliban, who are beneficiaries of this Pakistani strategy (i.e. Pashtuns carrying the banner of Islam); it relied on the Northern

Alliance of Tajiks and Uzbeks. As the United States has tried to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, not surprisingly, it has split company with Pakistan that remains wedded to Islamic unity as way to close the door on foreigners stoking ethnic divisions.

The point here is not to delve into Pakistan but to suggest that power needs to be analyzed in context. Broad generalizations about the potency of social and political factors, like nationalism, for example, might help as a starting hypothesis but are not substitutes for empirical assessments in place and time.

Part 4: Strategies for pushing toward realist analyses

When faced with the tradeoffs that are inevitable in formulating foreign policy, decision makers and analysts alike may be drawn to Nationalistic Universalism as a way to reduce the tension. These tradeoffs can also fuel emotions that motivate reasoning in other ways. For instance, it can produce self-esteem bolstering pictures of your country's motivations, demonized pictures of other countries, and distorted estimates of power. This motivated process pushes thinking toward stereotypes that license acting as the emotions dictate. As institutions mobilize support those licensing stereotypical pictures crystalize and frame choices around taboo tradeoffs. Instead of prudence these encourage people to run with the emotional inclination. When reality finally intrudes, the consequences typically fall far short of the high-minded moral aspirations that were featured in the mobilizing stories.

Affective sentiments sit at the root of preference formation and cannot be avoided.⁶⁸ At the same time, they need not dominate reasoning. The analytic task might

⁶⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); Antoine Bechara et al., "Deciding Advantageously before Knowing the Advantageous Strategy," *Science* 275, no. 5304 (1997).

be pushed in more prudent directions by using the familiar stereotypes as warning devices, by keeping track of predictions, and by encouraging downstream scenarios. To push policy in more prudent directions will take more than this. It will require containing the political appeal of the heroic narratives in nationalism and nationalistic universalism.

Recognize stereotypes as warning devices: The situations that have fueled the hottest emotions in U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War are relations with Russia and conflict in the Middle East. The perceived threats from Russia may be products of lingering Cold War memories and sentiments felt toward Russia and close affiliations felt with Polish and Baltic nationalists. They also surely derive from the actions Russia has taken but here the interpretations of those actions seem often to be driven by the pre-existing beliefs as much as by assessments of the moves in context. The threat and anger felt has led to desires to contain Russia. The stereotypical image that licenses that emphasizes the evil character of Russian intentions and denies its defensive concerns. This partial demonization inflates the danger posed by Russian capabilities and, at the same time, expects Russia to back down in the face of American resolve. It gives short shrift to the empirical analysis of Russian power relative to the tasks it is taking on and to the broader countervailing forces it would face if it expands those tasks.

A lot is known about enemy images.⁶⁹ Although the anxiety associated with them can open minds to new information, the anger evoked more often biases the processing of

⁶⁹ O. Holsti, "Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy," in *Enemies in Politics*, ed. O. Holsti D. Finlay, and R. Fagen (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967); Richard W. Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); Richard K. Herrmann, "Perceptions and Image Theory in International Relations," in *Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Jack Levy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

new information in confirmatory directions and bolsters confidence.⁷⁰ Knowing this is the pattern that is likely to be attractive psychologically but potentially misleading, realists ought to guard against it by taking a second look when their conclusions run entirely parallel to it. Of all the psychological patterns Daniel Kahneman has found the one he reports is most common is the tendency of people to believe that they do not fall prey to heuristic and motivated biases while concluding that everyone else does.⁷¹ The realist strategy here, consequently, should be to anticipate this reticence and as a matter of practice compare the conclusions they are reaching to the well-known stereotypes that license acting on the emotional desires. Prudence demands this.

In the case of Russia today, Americans should question interpretations that present only expansionist and revisionist motives and fail to explore the defensive concerns as part of the mix. This should include comparing Russian nationalist desires for respect and honor to similar motives that are common in the United States. When interpreting Russian interference in American elections they should also run a turn around test and compare this to U.S. efforts to shape foreign political landscapes. Russian interference in the form of open or black propaganda is unwelcome and a violation of sovereignty but not a move unique to Russia. Competitive interference is common in world politics.

The American reaction to Russia's interference is instructive as we turn to the stereotypes that are likely to afflict U.S. analyses of the Middle East. They downplay the

⁷⁰ E. Suhay and C. Erisen, "The Role of Anger in the Biased Assimilation of Political Information," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 4 (2018). For the important role confidence plays in shaping the effect of anger see P. Brinol et al., "Affective and Cognitive Validation of Thoughts: An Appraisal Perspective on Anger, Disgust, Surprise, and Awe," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 5 (2018).

⁷¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. 57.

importance of nationalism and license interference. John Mearsheimer notes that blindness to the importance of nationalism has been a persistent feature in contemporary U.S. foreign policy.⁷² This might seem odd given the sensitivity Americans display toward interference in their own country's process of self-determination but is not an accidental oversight. It is a motivated blind spot that is central to the stereotype that licenses acting on a desire to control other people and use them for instrumental purposes. Imaging the other country as backward and in need of tutelage and protection transforms the exercise of power over them into a noble endeavor. Part and parcel of the stereotype is a belief that nationalism in the other country has not yet formed, people there are so poor or interested in individual security that they will welcome foreign control as long as it brings with it both individual safety and economic payoffs.⁷³

The argument over whether local legitimacy depends more on good governance or identity politics cannot be settled here.⁷⁴ It is probably best to have both. For realists, however, arguments that gainsay the importance of identity politics should raise cautionary flags. They run parallel to the well-known licensing stereotype. By overlooking local nationalism the stereotype eases the tension between the desire to exercise control and moral qualms about interfering in the process of self-determination in the target country. The chance to take control of Iraq and press Syria and Iran in ways

⁷² Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*.

⁷³ Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivation: A General Theory and a Case Study*; Richard K. Herrmann and Michael P. Fischerkeller, "Beyond the Enemy Image and Spiral Model: Cognitive-Strategic Research after the Cold War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995).

⁷⁴ Michael Fitzsimmons, "Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008); J. L. Hazelton, "The "Hearts and Minds" Fallacy Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017).

that would benefit Israel and Saudi Arabia and the United States was a perceived opportunity that led to an underestimation of the likely nationalist sentiment in Iraq. Viewing it more clearly might not have led to a different decision. After all, today Iraq remains far weaker than in the days of the ACC, Syria is destroyed, there are no Arab states capable of threatening Israel or Saudi Arabia, and President Trump describes the U.S. bases left in Iraq as outposts from which to watch Iran. Viewing it more clearly, however, might have led to more and better planning when it came to the post-invasion phases of the operation.

Today, the opportunity to diminish Iran's influence is capturing attention in Washington. Not surprisingly, both Israel and Saudi Arabia encourage this by inflating Iran's capabilities to threaten while pointing to its vulnerabilities at home. Realist analyses should resist the temptation to picture the situation in Iran as sharply divided between radical Islamists and moderate responsible leaders ready to cooperate with Washington. This is the standard storyline of the stereotype. It is often fueled by emotions of hope for the former and contempt for the latter that lead to wishful thinking and the use of otherwise unacceptable means to isolate the contemptible.⁷⁵ Forty years after revolution, the domestic scene in Iran is complicated. The ruling regime faces domestic currents pushing for change and anti-American sentiments are not as wide spread as forty years ago. At the same time, a U.S. embrace can delegitimize domestic leaders. The realist can recognize that the weakness of Iran makes it a tempting target,

⁷⁵ On the role and impact of contempt see R. A. Schriber et al., "Dispositional Contempt: A First Look at the Contemptuous Person," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113, no. 2 (2017); K. R. Binning, "'It's Us against the World': How Distrust in Americans Versus People-in-General Shapes Competitive Foreign Policy Preferences," *Political Psychology* 28, no. 6 (2007).

one that once again some Americans speak of as if the United States could attack at will without great fear of negative consequences, and yet counsel caution. The mix of countervailing factors makes prediction more foolhardy than prudent.

Keep track of predictions: Beyond using the licensing stereotypes as warning signs, another way to push the analytic task in realist directions is to ask for predictions and to keep track of them. Philip Tetlock makes a strong case that foreign policy experts are often over confident.⁷⁶ He has found involving them in prediction tournaments reduces this.⁷⁷ It is a humbling experience but, just as importantly, it is a mental exercise that requires them to assign probabilities to alternative possibilities. The task of assigning probabilities, the more specific the better, has been found to improve both the calibration of confidence and the accuracy of predictions.⁷⁸ It also contributes to learning because people have a record of what they used to think and what has transpired, two necessary ingredients to learning. The Good Judgment Project is an example of this as is the Geopolitical Forecasting Challenge sponsored by the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that opened in February 2018.

Spell out downstream scenarios: Beside motivated reasoning and over-confidence, Aaron Rapport finds that focusing on short-term moves rather than long-term

⁷⁶ Philip Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁷⁷ Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2015).

⁷⁸ Ibid. 57. Also see J. A. Friedman and R. Zeckhauser, "Analytic Confidence and Political Decision-Making: Theoretical Principles and Experimental Evidence from National Security Professionals," *Political Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2018).

payoffs leads the desirable to overwhelm the feasible.⁷⁹ Rapport suggests the best way to work against this mistake is to encourage policy planners to run their scenarios through both the early and later stages of the advocated endeavor. In the Iranian case mentioned above, this would involve not the first two or three steps but the sixth and seventh ones with a careful focus on what payoffs would be long lasting. It has been the rapidly evaporating quality of the successes the United States has had in Afghanistan and Iraq that has perhaps been the most discouraging. Although the sacrifices were significant, the political payoffs were fleeting. Prudence requires the realist to draw attention persistently to the comparison of costs to lasting contributions.

Contain the romance in heroic narratives: Long before Morgenthau, John Locke wrote, “All men are liable to error; and most men are, in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it.”⁸⁰ The passions unleashed by nationalism and its great power offspring, nationalistic universalism, are formidable. They inflate threats and demonize adversaries while also encouraging the extension of control across the globe in the name of moral righteousness. They fuel heroic storylines of daring-do in the defense of the nation and of noble do-gooding for the betterment of humankind. The realist is at a disadvantage counseling prudence in the midst of these narratives. They offer lives of significance and glory and frame sacrifice as necessary for greatness; the wishful thinking, the downplaying of costs, and the attention drawn to aspirations rather than actual consequences all work against the prudence realism values.

⁷⁹ A. Rapport, "The Long and Short of It Cognitive Constraints on Leaders' Assessments of "Postwar" Iraq," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012).

⁸⁰ John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding: Collated and Annotated, with Prolegomena, Biographical, Critical and Historical, 1690.*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, 1959). Book IV, Ch.20, Sec.17, 457.

Beyond the passions, of course, there are interests that promote the perceptions of threat and the belief in opportunities for moral advancement. There are people and organizations whose stature and authority in society rises as the sense of danger from outside becomes widespread. They present themselves as the defenders of the country and its way of life.⁸¹ Not surprisingly, they are also better funded when defense spending is high and the state intervenes to tilt the market in their favor. As Stephen Walt points out, there are also people and groups that benefit from spending on the promotion of democracy, human rights, and humanitarian causes.⁸² Of course, there are groups from outside the United States promoting the narratives of threat and moral opportunity in hopes of tilting U.S. policy in ways that benefit them.

Pointing out that passions and interests can motivate reasoning may somewhat reduce the allure of the romantic narratives but realists will need to do more to countervail against their seductive appeal. One step in this direction is to recognize that although both threats to security and opportunities for moral advancement may be inflated, the risks in practice are not symmetrical. It is the security arguments that drive U.S. foreign policy. Even a cursory glance at the budgets of the Defense Department compared to those the U.S. Institute for Peace and the U.S. Agency for International Development will attest to that. We can throw in the budgets of the Department of State and of both the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute and the imbalance is still dramatic. The elite and public alike are drawn to the ideological storylines that feature democracy and the promotion of normative causes but

⁸¹ Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁸² Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: American Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

their readiness to pay for these pales in comparison to their readiness to pay for security. This makes the inflation of threat a larger concern. It has been the driver of the most costly post Cold War endeavors, leading the United States to ignore the interests of adversaries, intervene in the Middle East, and abandon moral principles we did not need to, for example, with the practice of extraordinary rendition.

As Morgenthau would have expected, these moves were often presented as moral crusades but to see them as driven by the cover story is to mistake the veneer for the load bearing structure. The inflation of threat granted leverage to other countries when it came to containing Russia, Iran and China, not the prospects for democracy in places like Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and most of the ASEAN countries. Actually, as perceptions of threat declined, for example, in the Obama Administration with regard to Iran, so did the leverage vis-à-vis the United States the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia enjoyed. The resurgence of perceived threat in the Trump Administration returned leverage to those regimes, which used it in ways to further enmesh the United States in their contests at home, and, in Riyadh's case, in Yemen. To see this as a product of an excessive zeal for liberalism or humanitarian concerns is not only divorced from what is happening on the ground but also exaggerates the influence of moral universalisms while ignoring their nationalistic application.

There is nothing in the realism Morgenthau calls for that suggests the United States should ignore moral concerns and kowtow to unsavory potentates. Realism calls for prudence in aligning ends and means. It does not prescribe treating only material or security self-interest as important and it certainly does not condone inflating threats to justify the pursuit of greed. Realism insists on facing tradeoffs in a straightforward way

and paying clear-eyed attention to the moral significance of the choices made. When compelled by necessity, realism prescribes triage and a concentration on what can be done to produce the best consequential and lasting outcomes. At the same time, it draws attention to the psychological temptations that distort perceptions of what actually is necessary and the relative power available. It does not allow self-serving inflations of threat, demonized pictures of others, and conveniently changing estimates of power to excuse immoral behavior.

While heroic national defense narratives may move more Americans and American dollars than heroic moral do-gooding stories do, the realist should be suspicious of both. Not so much because the latter are likely to extend U.S. interests beyond what the country can afford. Providing humanitarian relief and providing protection to those delivering this is not usually so taxing. It was not in Somalia, for example, until the nature of the mission evolved from one of limited peace keeping to one where the United States was taking sides in a civil war. The risk in the do-gooder stories is that they may be covering imperial ambitions. The advocacy of U.S. leadership can easily associate both with an underlying assumption that the world needs American tutelage and with perspectives that are arrogant.⁸³ The risk is compounded when the policies advocated involve intervention and interference in other societies with rather little detailed understanding of local conditions, the indigenous political landscape, or respect for the talent, knowledge, and leaders already there.

The appeal of the heroic stories is understandable, especially to Americans who may see a faster route to leadership, authority, and significance, in the overseas adventure

⁸³ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origins of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

than in the highly competitive domestic situation in the United States. People parachuting into complicated social and political contests, however, are not likely to sort them out and when they arrive without special technical skills and experience in business, health care, education, engineering and governance it is less likely still. An alternative narrative that emphasizes preparation, attention to success within the United States, and practice earning respect and authority in social communities at home is not a call for isolationism. It is a call for the development of the talent pool the United States will need to be more effective abroad. Likewise, having Americans concentrate first on what should change in U.S. policy and not simply in the behavior of others is also not a call for isolationism but for a measure of humility.

Realism is an approach to thinking about formulating strategy not a foreign policy strategy itself. According to Morgenthau, it should avoid one-size-fits-all generalizations about what motivates countries and how relative power is distributed. Instead, the realist should concentrate on more specific diagnoses rooted in place, time, and context. In realism, actions are judged by their consequences more so than by their aspirations. The priority is on contributions. These contributions can be to the advancement of security, economic, or normative goals but they need to be real, not simply figments of imagination fueled by romantic stories that inflate threats and then lance them or exaggerate moral achievements that evaporate quickly. Realism calls on us to face tradeoffs and anticipates the political and psychological routes often taken to evade that. It counsels us to take proactive measures to countervail against these pressures; otherwise it will be impossible to determine if the contributions claimed are in reasonable proportion to their costs. Prudence as a virtue demands this.

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