Interview - Stephen Walt

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E-IR met with Prof. Stephen Walt at Aberystywth University, where he delivered the prestigious E.H. Carr Annual Memorial Lecture on "US Grand Strategy after the Cold War: Can Realist Theory explain it? Should realism guide it?" Stephen M. Walt is the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he served as Academic Dean from 2002 to 2006. He previously taught at Princeton and at the University of Chicago, where he was Master of the Social Sciences Collegiate Division and Deputy Dean of Social Sciences. He is a contributing editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine, co-chair of the editorial board of *International Security,* and co-editor of the *Cornell Studies in Security Affairs* book serie*s.* He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in May 2005 and received the International Studies Association's Distinguished Senior Scholar award in 2014.

His books include *The Origins of Alliances*, which received the 1988 Edgar S. Furniss National Security Book Award, and *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy ,* which was a finalist for the Lionel Gelber International Affairs Book Award and the Arthur Ross Book Prize. His most recent book,*The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (co-authored with John J. Mearsheimer) was a *New York Times* best-seller and has been translated into more than twenty foreign languages. This is the second E-IR interview with Stephen Walt. His first can be read here.

Which of your books do you feel most proud of and why?

The Origins of Alliances is probably my most significant contribution to IR theory and the basis for much of my reputation as a scholar, but the book I am proudest of was *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy ,* co-authored with John Mearsheimer. The book took on a taboo subject and helped make it possible to talk openly about an important topic. It attracted an enormous amount of criticism—much of it personal—but our critics never challenged our logic or evidence in a serious way and subsequent events have largely vindicated our core argument. I didn't enjoy the controversy or the efforts that were made to smear Professor Mearsheimer and myself, but it is still the professional contribution of which I am most proud.

You are currently writing a book about how to make US foreign policy more restrained and the impact of domestic political institutions. How does it depart from your *Taming American Power*?

My current book project seeks to explain why U.S. foreign policy under Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, was mostly a failure. It argues that America's position of primacy allowed it to pursue an unrealistic strategy of "liberal hegemony." The foreign policy establishment embraced this strategy despite repeated failures for two reasons: 1) because doing so enhanced its power and status and 2) key institutions inside and outside the government were deeply committed to spreading democracy, open markets, and other liberal ideas. I also explore whether President Trump will fix the situation, and I argue that he is more likely to make things even worse. *Taming American Power,* by contrast, focused on the different strategies that other states adopted in order to counter or exploit U.S. dominance. This new book focuses on why the United States has pursued an unsuccessful grand strategy and has continued to do so even after its failures were apparent.

How embedded is realism in American political institutions?

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I believe America's political institutions do not favour a "realist" foreign policy, and certainly not a restrained one. As noted above, most of the key institutions in the foreign policy establishment—the government agencies, think tanks, media, public policy schools, etc.—are all in favour of "liberal hegemony" and believe the United States is still the "indispensable power" that must run the world.

Do you agree with the concerns of Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama about the change and decay of political institutions?

Where I agree with Huntington and especially Fukuyama is the growing dysfunction in these institutions. Policymakers are no longer held accountable when they blunder, and we seem increasingly unable to learn from our mistakes or to adjust rapidly to changing conditions. These recurring failures helped open the door for Donald Trump, but his own attacks on "Fake News," his disdain for long-standing political norms, and his erratic, self-serving, and divisive policies are making this problem even worse. It is possible that our constitutional order will prove resilient and correct itself, but it is not going to be easy.

You have previously argued in favour of the *demilitarisation* of U.S. foreign policy and the attenuation of its 'addiction to war'. Do you think the American people would be willing to accept a policy of demilitarization?

Americans respect the military as an institution, probably more than they should, because no organisation in a democracy should be exempt from criticism. Nonetheless, I think it is also clear the American people would support a less militarized and more restrained foreign policy. Every one of the last four presidents ran for office promising to correct the excesses of their predecessor and to focus on problems at home. In 1992 Clinton said "it's the economy, stupid"; in 2000 Bush promised a "humble foreign policy" and criticised Clinton's nation-building; in 2008 Obama promised to end our foolish wars, and in 2016 Trump said our foreign policy was a "complete and total disaster" and vowed to end nation-building and to stop allies from free-riding. Yet once in office, every one of these presidents did the opposite of what they had promised, in good part because the foreign policy establishment persuaded them to keep trying to run the world.

Do you see a difference between past empires/hegemons and the U.S. in its need or drive for *primacy*?

Primacy is a very desirable condition, because it maximises one's security and freedom of action. For that reason, I'd like the United States to remain the world's dominant power for as long as possible. But the best way to do that is not to squander U.S. wealth and power in fruitless crusades in distant lands, but to focus on upholding the balance of power in a few key regions and doing more to strengthen the U.S. economy and improve social conditions here at home.

Can Realism shield us sufficiently from the pernicious effects of power, arrogance and sense of exceptionalism?

One great virtue of realism is that it encourages us to try to see how things look from other state's point of view. Realism emphasises that security is a problem for all states, and that most countries are usually driven by fears and largely defensive motivations, even when they are using military force or behaving assertively. Recognizing this fact helps us guard against demonising our adversaries, and also warns us to be wary of the unintended consequences that typically accompany the use of force. If the United States took the insights of realism more seriously, its foreign policy would be far more successful.

Prof. Stanley Hoffmann had argued that Realism appears to be taking the Athenian side in Thucydides' Melian dialogue. For Hoffman, Realism has a relentless focus on "*a superpower perspective*" and focuses on a high correlation between might and achievements. Do you see any merit in Hoffman's concern?

Stanley was a brilliant scholar and valued colleague, and while he understood the virtues of realist theory, he was

never very comfortable with some of its implications. There's no doubt that realism tends to focus on the interests and strategies of the major powers—after all, it is a theory that puts power at the centre of political life—but it also emphasises the tragic qualities of political competition, especially in the international system. And it is worth remembering that while Athens was the dominant power in the Greek system, its hubris, arrogance, and insensitivity to others' interests eventually brought about its defeat. "The strong do what they can," according to Thucydides' recounting of the Melian Dialogue, but his history also teaches us that the strong sometimes succumb to their own mistakes.

In your previous interview with E-IR, in 2013, you told us you have "acquired a greater appreciation for the role that *avarice* and *folly* play in world affairs: lots of countries do a lot of rather stupid things, and often for very selfish reasons." Do you think that a Realist theory or your own Balance of Threat theory could incorporate these insights?

Perhaps, but to be frank I don't see how. Realist theory is essentially rationalist in orientation: it is about the constraints that states face in a world of anarchy and the incentives this situation creates for the conduct of foreign policy. In a sense, realism lays out a baseline for how states *should* respond in such a world, but leaders in the real world often misjudge their situation, lack sufficient information to make correct choices, or succumb to other political forces or their own personal pathologies. If international politics is mostly a combination of fear, greed, and stupidity, I place more weight on the latter two than I did when I was in graduate school.

How should we introduce young undergraduates to IR theory?

As I tried to emphasize in an old *Foreign Policy* article ("One World, Many Theories"), it is important to expose students to many different theoretical approaches, partly so they are familiar with how the field has evolved, but also because most of these ideas make some contribution to our understanding. In the messy world of international politics, we need all the analytic tools we can get. Moreover, we should want our students to think hard about these problems and then decide for themselves which theories are most useful or illuminating. Being a teacher is not about teaching people *what* to think, but helping them learn to think for themselves.

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This interview was conducted by Alexandros Koutsoukis. Alexandros is a Commissioning Editor for IR Theory at E-IR.