

## Review Feature – The US Foreign Policy Consensus in Crisis

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, OCT 9 2019

**The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World**  
by Robert Kagan  
Knopf, 2018

***The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy***  
by Stephen Walt  
Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018

Both Robert Kagan's *The Jungle Grows Back* (2018) and Stephen Walt's *The Hell of Good Intentions* (2018) were written in response to the election of Donald Trump. Kagan's book is an attempt to defend and renew the battered US foreign policy consensus of liberal hegemony. For the sake of definition, liberal hegemony is about the establishment of an international liberal order whose security is guaranteed by the global projection of American power. The establishment of liberal hegemony in the wake of World War Two was, for Kagan, a world historical transformation which signaled a break with the history of perpetual war between states, an order that he sees unraveling with the election of Trump. Walt is less horrified by the outcomes of the 2016 elections – not because he supports Trump, but because he sympathizes with the widespread exasperation with the liberal hegemony that Trump's election, in part, signified. Where Kagan warns that declining US power will bring about a return of great power competition, insecurity, war and disruption of economic growth, Walt counters that it is precisely the US pursuit of liberal hegemony that has eroded the position of primacy the US had achieved in the world following the end of the Cold War.

Kagan and Walt are rehearsing an old debate in IR – the clash between realism and liberalism/idealism. What is new and important about these books is how they renew this debate in the context of changing historical circumstances, both domestically and internationally. The realist/idealist debate persists because the fundamental questions it poses about history, sovereignty and anarchy remain unresolved. Is there any meaning or pattern of history? Kagan is skeptical about this: he does not believe that liberalism can be understood in terms of any sort of unfolding teleology which transforms the world into the liberal ideal. At the same time, he does espouse a strong distinction between a realist and liberal order. Immanuel Kant's language in *Articles for a Perpetual Peace* describes Kagan's disposition: "When we see the attachment of savages to their lawless freedom...we regard it with deep contempt as barbarity, rudeness and brutish degradation of civilization" (1795). Kagan similarly views liberal hegemony in terms of a struggle between civilization and barbarism.

### Jungle and Garden

Because we do not live in a teleologically arranged world, liberalism cannot grow of its own accord. It needs an external patron to carry out its requisites. This has been the historical role of the United States, which, as Kagan explains, took up the cause of liberal empire from faltering Great Britain during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kagan crafts a narrative of redemptive American power, described and justified by the very people who formulated and implemented these policies: Walter Lipmann, George Kennan, Dean Acheson, George Marshall, Paul Nitze and

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others. Kagan describes these titans of American statecraft as “sober and unflappable people” (Kagan 2018, p. 64) whose statements we should accept at face value. A favorite quote from Acheson, cited twice by Kagan, is that the US “is a locomotive at the head of mankind” (Kagan 2018, p. 35 and 91), pulling humanity into a new liberal era of world history marked by trust and cooperation rather than perpetual conflict between states. American power sublimated by liberalism acts as the guarantor of this order.

Kagan depicts liberal hegemony as a post-historical paradise, insulated from the history of perpetual war by the capacity of the US to order international relations. Outside of this American sponsored liberal order is, to use Kagan’s term, “the jungle” in which particular national identities emerge, desire greatness for themselves (usually in the form of mastery over others) and engage in ceaseless struggles for power. Kagan unfolds a Manichean logic of difference in which the forces of light and dark are starkly opposed – the liberal garden vs. the anarchical jungle.

Kagan refuses to consider how differences are interactively produced. Consider a contemporary articulation of difference featured in Kagan’s text. Here is Bill Clinton contrasting the domain of liberal globalization associated with legitimate trade, investment and travel (of authorized persons) with a recalcitrant external environment of “outlaw nations...an unholy axis of terrorists, drug traffickers, and organized international criminals” (quoted in Kagan 2018, p. 97). Like all the other liberal elites Kagan cites, Clinton’s words are taken at face value. Kagan’s logic of difference locates aggression, violence and danger as forces that are external to liberalism and which, therefore, cannot have been produced by liberalism. We have not had a hand in creating any of the monsters that we seek to destroy. Never mind that the US led globalization has shaped the security environment in which all of these actors have emerged. This is a point demonstrated by Ioan Grillo’s (2016) account of gangster warlords in Latin America: they have emerged not as an exception to the good, decent liberal order championed by the US, but rather as a result of the violent exclusions that its implantation, via structural adjustment policies, free trade agreements and ongoing security cooperation policies, have engendered.

Kagan does not spend time worrying about peripheral regions of the global economy or about marginalized people. He is more concerned with the pacification of power politics, marked by the post-World War Two conversion of Germany and Japan into pacifist states that disavowed the struggle for power and national greatness to instead dedicate their national energies to liberal progress within the context of an open world economy, which US power would secure. When the Cold War ended, Russia and China were offered a similar deal. The Soviets could withdraw from Eastern Europe (and renounce communism) without worrying about German reunification because of the US capacity to contain power politics. China could follow the positive example of Japan (and not the negative example of inter-war imperial Japan) and reject the pursuit of state power and focus instead on getting rich. Too bad that they did not take the message to heart. For its part, Russia cares more about its power than its security and, in any event, Russian security perceptions, warped by its great power aspirations, ought not matter (Kagan 2018, p. 89). What is important is that NATO expansion made Europe whole and free (Never mind, as well, that George Kennan warned, correctly, that the US driven expansion into the Eastern Europe would antagonize Russia. Kennan is an unquestionable authority when his views coincide with Kagan’s, but otherwise, he is quite dispensable). Russia could have lived with that, but it chose not to for reasons of national pride (Kagan 2018, p. 111). Similarly, China’s dream of empire is also a manifestation of pride rather than acceptance of liberal order as a context for national development (Kagan 2018, p. 117). Apparently only the United States, suggests Kagan, can aspire to greatness because only its aspirations are worthwhile.

This double standard illustrates Kagan’s contempt for diplomacy. Why bother with diplomacy when adversaries are always morally wrong? Having rejected diplomacy, the American project of liberal hegemony must rely on the constant exertion of American force against the constant counter-pressures of the jungle. For Kagan, the present is always Munich, 1938 – always a world-historical clash of wills. The triumph of liberal freedom is never complete and never final. Donald Rumsfeld clearly depicts Kagan’s views: “People have to recognize,” said Rumsfeld to a gathering of Central American Ministers of Defense, “that freedom is under challenge fairly continuously in many parts of the world, and that...those that oppose it have to be discouraged and ultimately lose heart” (quoted in Stokes and Raphael 2010, p. 55). What counts as a challenge to freedom? What it almost always comes down to is the defense of property rights, often of transnational corporations, against the social and economic demands of impoverished and marginalized peoples. The centrality of this point can be inferred from George Kennan’s remark in

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1948, that the US “has 50% of the world’s wealth and 6.3% of its population,” and that “our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security” (quoted in Grandin 2018, p. 195). Obviously, challenges to “freedom” emerge from the economic disparities that Kennan noted.

But that is not how Kagan sees it. For Kagan, challenges always come from outside the liberal order. The jungle invades the garden from all points. Being invaded from all points means that efforts to distinguish between vital and non-vital security interests are misguided. Realist commentators like Hans Morgenthau (1965) or Walt (2018) can suggest that US wars in Vietnam and Iraq were policy blunders because they were not focused on vital security interests. But this realist distinction fails to discern – as Kagan does – that all threats to liberal hegemony are tests of US resolve. The US cannot be a hegemonic power unless it is perceived as such. At play here a balance of power measured not in terms of military, economic or even political capabilities, but rather perceptions of credibility and resolve. For Kagan, this psychological balance of power supersedes any realist balance of power because liberal hegemony depends on not only the power of the United States, but on the constant exertion of its will. Never mind that scholarly research demonstrates that states judge other states on the basis of their interests rather than their credibility (Walt 2018, p. 149). Kagan is unencumbered by the burdens of the scholarly evidence and bases most of his assertions on the testimony of like-minded foreign policy elites. For example, Kagan cites a US general in Vietnam about US intentions in Vietnam, which were not for victory, but only “to restore stability with the minimum of destruction so that society and lawful government may proceed in an atmosphere of justice and order” (2018, p. 79). Here, as elsewhere in Kagan’s book, statements from respected authorities (in this case, a general) substitutes for any careful examination of the historical record.

Walt argues that advocates of liberal hegemony, like Kagan, minimize the internal costs of US foreign policy. There are, for example, tradeoffs between military and domestic priorities, which have become increasingly salient in the wake of repeated foreign policy failures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other internal costs of liberal hegemony include the negative impacts of globalization on existing patterns of the employment in the United States. These have been exacerbated by the way in which different programmes of the neoliberal economic reform (such as NAFTA) have unleashed large scale immigration flows to the United States (Judis 2018). Trump has successfully managed to get a large segment of the electorate in the United States to interpret the discontents of globalization through the lens of an aggrieved nationalism. For his part, Kagan has little interest or sympathy with any of these issues. None of them change in any way the overarching problem of the present, which is the encroachment of the jungle of power politics on the garden of the liberal hegemony. If things are bad now, they will only get worse if the jungle is allowed to grow. The liberal garden may be turning brown because of inequality, climate change and other systemic problems, but the liberal garden is the only alternative that we have, so we should “pay any price and bear any burden” (to cite John F. Kennedy’s Cold War rhetoric) to defend it.

Indeed, people who criticize liberal hegemony (like Walt, for example) impede the capacity of the US to order international relations and maintain hegemony. Criticisms of US foreign policy in Vietnam or Iraq undermine public confidence in US foreign policy and thereby weaken the foundations of liberal hegemony (Kagan 2018, p. 80). Wouldn’t it be useful to have some apparatus of foreign policy opinion and analysis that could instruct the public? Such an apparatus would serve, to use Thomas Hobbes’ language, “as prospective lenses of moral and civil science”, helping the public “to see from afar the miseries that overhang them” (quoted in Robin 2004, p. 44). But wait, such an apparatus already exists and is, moreover, the subject of Walt’s book. Kagan might sound like a solitary voice crying out within an increasingly anti-liberal jungle, but he is part of this much larger assemblage of foreign policy expertise and opinion referred to by Ben Rhodes, a former member of Barack Obama’s National Security Council, as “the blob” (Samuels 2016).

### Pathologies of the Blob

One way to think about the blob is in relation to Max Weber’s essay, “Politics as a Vocation.” Whoever wishes to exercise power is dependent on either building up or maintaining an existing apparatus of power. But this apparatus is not wholly subject to the will of whoever governs. Rather, argues Weber, the reverse is the case: “[h]e [the leader] is dependent on *its* motives. And he is dependent, therefore, on his ability to guarantee...rewards to his

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followers...whom he needs, *over a long period of time*" (Weber 1996, p. 508). The policy apparatus in question – the blob – has its own policy culture, its own inner dynamics. The blob conflates its interests with the national interest in ways that have proven to be deeply damaging to the United States. When the Cold War ended, the US had achieved a position of primacy in world politics in terms of its wealth, security and power. These attributes of primacy have enabled the US to pursue liberal hegemony even in the face of continuous foreign policy failure.

Kagan might acknowledge some of this policy failure but attribute it to the lack of will on the part of the United States. The United States might have prevailed in Iraq if Bush senior had crushed Saddam's regime in the first Gulf War. It might have avoided the disastrous rise of ISIS if it had maintained an armed presence in Iraq after 2011. Europe might not have been destabilized by mass migration from Syria if the Obama administration had stood up to Bashar Assad following his use of chemical weapons against his own people in 2013. For Kagan, policy failure always results from insufficient resolve backed by an unwillingness to use force.

For Walt, these very commitments are the basis of policy failure. This is because liberal hegemony does not anticipate the way in which other states respond to US power through combinations of balancing, free-riding and buck passing (2018, p. 71-4). Force generates counter-forces, which create resistance to the US's pursuit of liberal hegemony. Nor do advocates of liberal hegemony clearly understand the limits of the use of military force or appreciate the magnitude of the resistances that it provokes. They certainly do not get a key point made by Michael Mann, which is that nationalism is now the world's dominant ideology (2004). The project of liberal hegemony, exercised by the United States on behalf of a universal humanity that would like to escape the terrors of the jungle, lacks political support both at home and abroad. Most people do not regard themselves as part of this universal humanity.

In fact, those most willing to support the use of force in pursuit of liberal hegemony tend to be members of the US foreign policy elite. As Walt notes, this elite has changed in composition historically. It used to consist of bankers and lawyers from the corporate establishment of the Northeast. After World War Two, the scope of American foreign policy broadened, with the US becoming committed to ordering the international security environment. At the same time, the US university system expanded, educating more and more people to work as foreign policy professionals in the Foreign Service, Congress, the media, the military, academia or in the world of think tanks, lobbying groups and advocacy organizations. Unlike the old establishment, most members of the new establishment do not have livelihoods outside of it. The foreign policy establishment or, more colloquially, the blob, is a highly networked set of associations that opens career paths to aspiring professionals who are able to demonstrate their effectiveness and loyalty to higher-ups. For anyone to flourish within the blob, they must cultivate their reputation, which means that few people can afford to be contrarians. Critically, this also suggests how the foreign policy elite is hierarchically layered, with more established members acquiring worldviews and concomitant policy commitments associated with their ascent. To become part of the foreign policy elite is to be woven into a fabric of vested interests, which becomes sanctified in terms of ideas about American exceptionalism. These ideological commitments blend career ambitions and professional identity with patriotic service and duty, all of which congeals into a collective identity of insiders, a "we" that is entrusted with the nation's interests, which defines itself in relationship to outsiders who are ignorant, indifferent or hostile (Walt 2018, p. 91-137).

Walt lays US foreign policy failure at the feet of the blob. The argument he makes in support of this general conclusion is twofold. First, as suggested above, the prevailing foreign policy consensus incorrectly understands the world and thus acts incorrectly. But secondly, the blob is able to compensate for its external failures through its internal strengths. Among these is its capacity to rig the existing market place of ideas in its favor (Walt 2018, p. 138-42). Look at the editorial boards of the major newspapers of record in the US – the pundit class almost universally endorses liberal hegemony, albeit in different flavors – with liberals as multilateralists and conservatives as unilateralists. Politically what this adds up to is a highly constrained argument between centrists and conservatives that rarely questions first order principles.

One of the virtues of Walt's book is that he thoroughly dissects the rhetorical maneuvers of liberal hegemony (2018, p. 137-81). Threats are exaggerated. The United States will lose credibility if it does not respond with sufficient strength to the threats that confront it. Loss of credibility is also loss of face and national weakness. These assessments draw

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attention away from the real balance of power in favor of an imagined psychological balance of power. The reality of power, for liberal hegemony, is always brittle and evanescent. If threats are overblown, then so too are antagonists. Saddam Hussein or Iran's Islamic Republic are imagined as if they were a reincarnation of Hitler's Third Reich. Different adversaries are lumped together into artificial constructs of difference – such as George W. Bush's axis of evil – implying a unity of malevolence that does not exist. What happens to members of the foreign policy elite (aka, the blob) that debunk threat inflation? Other members of the community trash their reputation and undermine their career prospects. For this reason, critics who tend to be outsiders are rarely invited to speak on NPR, PBS or any of the major television states and cable networks and are rarely published in any widely read newspapers or magazines.

Other crucial aspects of blob rhetoric are overstating the benefits of liberal hegemony and understating its costs. These are some of the ways in which a failing policy is sold to a reluctant public. Even so, policy failures occur because liberal hegemony is a flawed strategy. This raises the next question that Walt considers: how does the foreign policy elite manage to insulate itself from policy failure (2018, p. 181-216)? Part of the answer to this question is that the US is strong enough to absorb policy failure without having to undergo fundamental change. In the absence of fundamental change, existing hierarchies within the foreign policy establishment can resist calls for change. When bad things happen, more powerful actors can deflect blame and responsibility on to weaker actors, while the bad ideas that generated these negative policy outcomes remain sacrosanct. After 9/11, the George W. Bush administration was reluctant to convene the 9/11 Commission to look into the causes of the attack. Then they were unwilling to adequately fund its inquiries. When its findings were published, they largely exonerated members of the Bush administration and the CIA (Walt 2018, p. 188-90). A few years later, when the Abu Ghraib torture scandal broke, military officers escaped blame and pushed responsibility down the chain of command to “a few bad apples” in the National Reserve.

These are not isolated examples. Walt looks across the landscape of US foreign policy and sees the same pattern repeated over and over: diplomats, generals, intelligence officers and media pundits whose preferred policies failed, often repeatedly, have not experienced any of the consequences of that failure (2018, p. 190-216). Diplomats that failed to secure peace between Israel and Palestine during the 1990s get recycled into the new rounds of negotiation that likewise fail. General Tommy Franks, who failed to apprehend bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda leaders following the US invasion of Afghanistan, got put in charge of the US invasion of the Iraq, where he failed to anticipate the insurgency that Baathist forces would almost immediately launch. At the CIA, John Brennan's coverup of CIA administered enhanced interrogation (i.e. torture) and his public denial of any collateral damage from drone strikes against suspected terrorists did not disqualify him from becoming CIA director under Obama. Nor have many of the neoliberal pundits that pushed false intelligence to justify the war in Iraq suffered any lasting consequences to their careers and reputations. That prominent members of the foreign policy elite suffer no adverse consequences from their misjudgments and errors signals that the US foreign policy establishment learns little from the past. For members of the blob, the abiding lesson was summarized in the advice that Larry Summer's provided to Elizabeth Warren when she was elected to the US Senate, which was: do not criticize insiders and become an outsider that nobody listens to (Walt 2018, p. 215). And we might add: stay in the game, even if the game keeps moving in the wrong direction.

### Real Change

Was the 2016 election a moment of reckoning for the foreign policy elite and its preferred programme of liberal hegemony? While Trump sounded as if he might break with some of the central tenets of the liberal hegemony as he campaigned for the presidency, the first two years of his administration have represented a chaotic regression to a particularly militarized and unilateral version of the existing foreign policy consensus. In large part, argues Walt, this was a reflection of the continuing influence of the blob, which not only seeped into the new Trump administration in the form of key appointments, but also continued to dominate the media, think tanks, intelligence agencies, and academia (2018, p 217-54). The result is a series of surprising continuities in US foreign policy with regards to continued conflict with Russia, labeling China as a strategic competitor, breaking off security cooperation with Iran (something that a large segment of the foreign policy community argued for) and sending more troops to Afghanistan. Even the supposedly novel components of Trump's agenda do not represent a significant departure from previous

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approaches to US foreign policy. Trump was not the first president to complain about low levels of military spending by NATO partners; nor was he the first president to advocate the construction of a border wall with Mexico. Trump's relationship with Kim Jong Un of North Korea is novel, but Trump's insistence that North Korean nuclear proliferation is a problem for the US to solve rather than a regional issue for Japan and South Korea to contend with fits comfortably within the parameters of liberal hegemony.

Kagan's views on Trump are more alarmist and stem from a sense of cumulative causation in which lapses in the liberal order tend to produce cascading effects that threaten its ultimate collapse. These began with the failures of Bush's wars in the Middle East, producing a deepened public unwillingness to tolerate US armed interventions. Criticisms of NAFTA similarly led Hillary Clinton to disavow her signature achievement as Secretary of State, the Transpacific Partnership, which might have worked to contain the growth of Chinese power. With the election of Trump, the crisis of liberalism metastasized. Trump actively undermined NATO, coddled dictators and stoked racial antagonisms. The very conception of what it means to be an American shifted from the Declaration of Independence's universalism to white nationalist conceptions of American identity and belonging. As Kagan observes, the jungle is not only outside of us, but also grows within (2018, p. 138-42). Similar turns to nationalism have emerged in Germany and Japan – the former axis-power adversaries that liberal hegemony supposedly rehabilitated after World War Two. Both are sick of the culture of guilt associated with their war-time atrocities and prepared to re-embrace national chauvinism (2018, p. 123-32). The contrast between Walt and Kagan here is notable: where Walt sees the continuity of liberalism, owing to the continuing power and influence of America's liberal foreign policy elite, Kagan discerns deeper patterns of the cultural change which threaten to overwhelm extant commitments to liberal hegemony.

What, then, is to be done? For Kagan, Americans must resist the temptations of nationalism and reassert American leadership in the world. The US confronted defeat in the Vietnam War and the cultural self-doubt associated with it. They persevered to reignite the Cold War under Ronald Reagan and induce the collapse of the Soviet Union (2018, p. 76-83). While Kagan calls for American cultural and political renewal, Walt focuses on the need for a different foreign policy strategy to serve the interests of the public rather than adapting the public to the requisites of liberal hegemony.

The strategy that Walt advocates is offshore balancing (2018, p. 255-92). Offshore balancing means that the US would withdraw its military forces from any sort of active deployment on the Eurasian landmass. Rather than ordering international relations through relentless power projection, the US would seek to use the balance of power strategically by encouraging wealthy allies to take up their own security burdens and transfer its own resources from military spending to different forms of domestic provision, such as education, research, infrastructure and development.

Two components of Walt's discussion here are especially intriguing. The first is that offshore balancing would revitalize diplomacy by making a more serious effort to address the interests of other states rather than to pathologize them, as Kagan does, as a recrudescence of the jungle. This represents a recognition of the fact that we live within a pluralistic world of difference that is not about to transform itself into liberal consensus via the forward march of American powered liberal hegemony. Secondly, Walt adds to this an important normative component of his alternative approach to foreign policy: the search for peace. But what does he mean by peace? Is it negative peace, where no state has an incentive to initiate armed conflict because of the way in which the balance of power between states is configured? This is the strategic peace of realism. Or does Walt mean a positive peace that flows from securing justice, both domestically and internationally?

Walt's focus on peace has little to say about justice. Relatedly, Walt also has little to say about the anti-imperialist perspectives of the left. In this sense, Walt's offshore balancing starts from the same premise as Kagan's liberal hegemony, which is that the basis of the US's security problems lie with exerting control over its external environment. What Walt and Kagan are advocating are merely different techniques of control. What they fail to consider are the domestic factors that drive external expansion and engender at least some major security problems and issues. This common security perception reproduces the same set of political constraints that Walt identifies with liberal hegemony – the same constrained dialogue between the political right and the political center, the same

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reticence to raise first order questions.

It is worth remembering a key point that the left has always emphasized: it is not analytically useful to separate politics (and, in particular, security politics) and economics in the way that both Kagan and the Walt do. What is always inextricably part of our politics are the growth imperatives that stem from capitalism. These growth imperatives have produced a climate emergency that threatens the future viability of human civilization, which both Kagan and Walt completely ignore. More generally, for both Kagan and Walt, economic processes are sealed off from how political security is conceptualized. Still, given these two perspectives, Walt's acceptance of the world as it is and his consequent rejection of "the threat driven, credibility obsessed, overly militarized world of the contemporary US foreign policy" (2018, p. 277) offers to scholars, policy makers and, most importantly, citizens, a means of disengaging from Kagan's – and the blob's – advocacy of endless conflict. If we can do that, then maybe we can also craft an internal social democracy that would diminish drives toward transnational economic expansionism and provide a genuine foundation for human security, both at home and abroad.

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