Critical Dialogue

The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities

The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities. By John J. Mearsheimer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 328p. $30.00 cloth.
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John Mearsheimer's *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* is an important and fascinating addition to the ongoing debate about the future of US grand strategy. Mearsheimer offers a lucid critique of the US post–Cold War grand strategy of "liberal hegemony," focusing especially on its central, as well as most futile and destructive, tenet of trying to make "as many countries into liberal democracies as possible" (p. 1). Mearsheimer attributes liberal hegemony's failure to the incompatibility between the universality of modern liberal ideology—a function of liberalism's commitments to individualism, inalienable rights for all humans, and state-led social engineering—and the more powerful and abiding forces of nationalism at the center of international relations. People are social beings first, individuals second. Therefore, nationalism is their highest form of identity, globally pervasive in a way that individualism is not. When the two collide, "nationalism wins almost every time" (p. 82). More specifically, nationalism leads targets of liberal hegemony to resist forced liberalization (e.g., recent US failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya) and other great powers to balance against the United States (e.g., Russia's aggression in Ukraine). Nationalism also unmasks the democratic peace, therefore weakening a central theoretical underpinning—that spreading democracy abroad leads to a more peaceful, cooperative world—of liberal hegemony.

In light of liberal hegemony's failure, Mearsheimer calls for a new grand strategy of restraint, marked chiefly by an end to democracy promotion. Restraint can come, he argues, either by choice through building a new US counter-elite committed to restraint, or it will be forced on the United States someday with the rise of a peer competitor, like China.

In general, Mearsheimer is right about many points: nationalism is powerful; spreading democracy by force rarely works; and more restraint makes sense for the United States moving forward. That said, Mearsheimer's analysis still raises several questions.

First, although I agree about the limitations of the democratic peace and the misguided policy lessons drawn from it, does liberal democracy have *no* cooperative effects on states? If not, what explains European bandwagoning and participation in liberal hegemony with the United States since 1990, something Mearsheimer references at several points? Where is the nationalism and fear about survival that should lead Europe, like Russia, to balance against the United States?

Without taking away from Mearsheimer's larger point, cases such as US–European relations today seem to support the more modest scholarship that claims that the democratic peace exists, at most, between robust, long-standing liberal democratic states that *perceive* one another as liberal (John Owen, *Liberal Peace, Liberal War*, 2000). In fact (and somewhat ironically), Mearsheimer's take on nationalism seems to lend support to this argument. If nationalism leads states to constantly compare themselves to one another (sometimes with hostility, other times not) and liberal nationalism in democratic states serves as a "kind of glue" or common bond holding liberal societies together, it makes sense that when robust, long-standing liberal nation-states look abroad and perceive others to be liberal, the so-called glue of cooperation extends across borders (pp. 19–20, 90,118). Mearsheimer may retort with the realist argument that the anarchic nature of the international system prevents this cooperation. But this still leaves cases like post–Cold War US–European cooperation puzzling in ways that remind us of the limits that permissive/structural causes face in explaining foreign policy (Kenneth Walt, *Man, the State and War*, 2001).

Second, is Mearsheimer arguing that US restraint will make Russia and China more docile actors in the international system? I assume not. Yet, from Mearsheimer's account it sounds as if these states have little agency, that their aggression is solely a function of US behavior. By extension, if the United States changes its posture, they will too.

Historically, this kind of messaging (whether intended or not) always presents dangers for restrainers, because docile-expectant actors generally turn out far less docile than expected. A late 1970s surge of Soviet aggression in the third world crushed the United States' détente-based

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expectations of Moscow behaving as a status quo stakeholder in the existing order. Under intense public pressure, President Jimmy Carter was forced, as a result, to jettison restraint and return to standard Cold War politics. Similarly, the unanticipated 2014 rise of the Islamic State (IS) stood in sharp contrast to Obama administration promises of a docile, stable Iraq that accompanied his restraint-based 2011 decision to remove troops from that country. He too scrambled to reverse course. In short, history tells us that if restrainers today are not careful, they run the risk of creating unrealistic expectations that could leave them outside the policy process looking in.

Third, although useful and insightful, Mearsheimer's framework and understanding of liberalism are limited in ways that could hinder—or at least result in missed opportunities—for restrainers moving forward. For starters, Mearsheimer's definition of liberal hegemony—notably, *any* US policy from a diplomatic statement to full combat invasion in support of democratization—is so broad and applied (by restrainers generally) in such a rigid, ironclad way that it largely ignores important recent *trends* toward restraint in US foreign policy. By Mearsheimer's definition, US policies toward Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq in the last two decades are indistinguishable manifestations of liberal hegemony (p. 164). The exclusive definitional focus here on policy in kind entirely misses important differences in substance. Based on the latter, restraint is undeniably on the rise today.

Take forceful regime change as an example. The United States last initiated a combat invasion for regime change seventeen years ago (Iraq, 2003). That stretch is nearly four times the average length between US invasions of this type from World War II to 2003 and is comparable in length to interwar isolationism (Walldorf, *To Shape Our World for Good*). Recent high-profile cases of US nonmilitary action in Venezuela and Iran exemplify this trend. Restraint is showing up in other areas too. In the last decade, global US troop levels have decreased more than 50%, returning to levels of the late 1990s. Again, that trend lines up with restrainer goals.

How do we explain these substantive trends toward restraint? The answer has little to do with a new foreign policy elite or global competitor like China. Instead, these trends have come about, in large measure, through the contested nature of liberal democratic politics in the United States. My research finds, for instance, that a broad public narrative of restraint, resulting from the collective trauma of the Iraq War especially, has created a certain kind of politics of restraint that has helped curb the impulse of US presidents to use costly force, in particular, for regime change ends. Mearsheimer's conceptualization of liberalism is too narrow to capture these kinds of important restraint dynamics. His elite-centric explanation downplays the contested nature of democratic politics, especially the role that public pressure plays in affecting policy decisions. Since public opinion is easily manipulated by elites, Mearsheimer indicates it is not worthy of much attention (pp. 129–30, 228). He misses, therefore, an important source of restraint.

This reflects, in fact, a broader shortcoming in Mearsheimer's understanding of liberalism. Although Mearsheimer rightly notes that liberalism causes liberal states to constantly analyze and criticize other (especially nondemocratic) states in the international system, he misses the fact that liberal states also frequently turn that criticism on themselves (pp. 50–56). Liberal states are constantly asking and debating how they measure up to their own liberal standards. This kind of self-reflection in democratic states creates powerful movements at times (such as the civil rights movement) that bring about change and adjustments. In foreign policy, one manifestation of that kind of self-critical learning comes in the form of restraint narratives, such as the Vietnam and Iraq syndromes, that I discuss in my work.

All of this is important. An overly stringent definition of liberal hegemony and an incomplete understanding of liberalism/liberal democracy mean that restrainers like Mearsheimer fail to, first, recognize opportunities and important means to expand current trends toward restraint. Second, restrainers run the risk of not properly managing obstacles ahead, especially China's rise. Drawing again on realist logic about power politics, Mearsheimer argues liberalism will matter only "in small ways" with China's ascension as a counterhegemonic power to the United States (p. 228). If the Cold War history of US competition with the last counter-hegemon it faced is any guide, the opposite will be the case, however. By Mearsheimer's definition, the worldwide program of security assistance, arms sales, and covert and overt uses of force to stop communism (i.e., the liberal-ideological bedfellow to promoting democracy) represented a far more expansive effort at liberal hegemony than US behavior in the post–Cold War period. A fuller understanding of the liberal democratic politics that allowed this to happen is critical for curbing the same in the future. *The Great Delusion* starts us down that path, but we still need more. One additional and potentially important place to look is at trauma, discourse, and identity—the politics of master narratives.

Response to C. William Walldorf Jr.'s Review of *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*

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— John J. Mearsheimer

I appreciate Professor Walldorf's positive words about *The Great Delusion.* He also offers some thoughtful criticisms, which I address in this response.

First, Walldorf maintains that "post-Cold War US–-European cooperation" is "puzzling" for my theory, but can be explained by the fact that liberal democracy has "cooperative effects on states." This argument is based on democratic peace theory, which I challenge in *The Great Delusion*. Transatlantic relations were excellent during the unipolar moment for two reasons: (1) European leaders believed that the US military presence in Europe was a powerful pacifying force, and therefore they maintained close relations with Washington to keep American forces in Europe; and (2) the United States faced no meaningful threat from Europe, and thus there was no basis for hostility.

Second, Walldorf asks whether I expect China and Russia to be "more docile" if the United States adopts a foreign policy of restraint, as I advocate. Regarding China, the answer is no. If China continues its impressive rise, it will try to dominate Asia, which will cause the United States to act forcefully to contain Beijing. Concerning Russia, the answer is yes. In fact, restraint toward Moscow would have served Washington well during unipolarity, as the policy of liberal hegemony was principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis. Restraint would also work well in the future, because Russia does not seriously threaten US interests and indeed could help contain China.

Third, restraint is already "on the rise" in the United States, says Walldorf, and this policy is largely due to "public pressure," which arises in the context of "the contested nature of democratic politics." Regrettably, there is little evidence to support this claim. There are more troops in the greater Middle East today than when President Trump took office in January 2017. The United States is more hostile toward China and Russia under Trump than it was under President Obama. And despite Trump's rhetoric about abandoning regime change, he is working hard to topple governments in Iran and Venezuela.

Public opinion polls show that most Americans prefer restraint. Unsurprisingly, presidential candidates Obama and Trump promised to pursue a more restrained foreign policy if elected. Once in the White House, however, they reneged on their promise, and the public hardly protested. Walldorf also tells us that the elites in liberal democracies engage in "self-reflection" and "self-critical learning." I see hardly any evidence of such behavior in the US foreign policy establishment, which helps explain the recurring failures of liberal hegemony during the unipolar moment. This problem is compounded by the lack of accountability in liberal democratic America.

Finally, Walldorf challenges my claim that liberalism will matter little for US foreign policy in the coming Sino-American security competition. After all, he says that US policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War was heavily infused with liberalism. I disagree. Washington focused laser-like on the balance of power in its rivalry with Moscow, frequently acting in ways that contradicted liberal democratic principles. An ideology-based foreign policy is only feasible in unipolarity, but as the United States has shown over the past three decades, a powerful state can get into much trouble if it goes down that road.

To Shape Our World for Good: Master Narratives and Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1900–2011.

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C. William Walldorf offers a bold and provocative theory about the causes of war in his new book. He aims to explain why the United States pursued 27 cases of "forceful regime promotion" between 1900 and 2011. His universe of cases includes US involvement in World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the recent Afghanistan and Iraq Wars.

The core argument in *To Shape Our World for Good* is that ideas profoundly shape the decision to use force for regime change in accordance with two different models: "elite ideology" and "master narrative." Those two models are usually at play at the same time, but the "master narrative" model is clearly the dominant one. It drives policy in his story.

The story regarding "elite ideology" is a familiar one. Policy makers and their allies bent on regime change develop a narrative that they use to help sell their public on the need to use force. The governing elites have considerable agency in this process, and the narrative they formulate is essentially an instrument they employ to manipulate public opinion to achieve their goals. A realist like me has no problem with this view of how narratives might affect foreign policy.

The "master narrative" model offers a fundamentally different and actually quite radical perspective on how ideas influence the decision to go to war. According to Walldorf, there are two competing master narratives in the United States: the "restraint narrative" and the "liberal narrative." These are "collective beliefs" that are shaped largely by traumatic events and are wired deeply into the nation's culture. They are not merely the reflection of public opinion. Nor are they narratives spun by policy makers to help shape public discourse. The "restraint narrative" acts as a block on forceful regime change, whereas the "liberal narrative" encourages war.

These two master narratives, which vary over time in their relative influence, play the central role in determining whether states use force in the service of regime change. Policy makers in Walldorf's story have little agency and are effectively prisoners of the prevailing narrative. “Elites matter in certain ways,” he writes, “but the main driver and explanatory variable for policy outcomes are master narratives and the discourses, more specifically, that form around those master narratives” (p. 204). Policy elites are in this iron cage because the prevailing master narrative invariably enjoys widespread public support, and political leaders want “to avoid the electoral or political costs of appearing out of step with public expectations set by master narratives” (p. 3) In other words, the policy elites worry about audience costs, which stymies their efforts to do what they think is in the national interest. This bold claim about the power of master narratives to shape policy runs like a red skein through the book. The more familiar and much less controversial story about “elite ideology” takes a back seat.

Finally, Walldorf maintains that the two master narratives usually drive US policy makers to act foolishly and pursue policies that are not “good for U.S. security and the common good.” Policies based on the liberal narrative, which obviously promotes regime change, are “especially” likely to fail (p. 210). This conclusion, I may note, seems at odds with the book’s title, which emphasizes that the United States shapes the world in positive ways.

There are a number of problems with Walldorf’s core argument that raise doubts about its explanatory power. First, it is difficult to accept his claim that America’s foreign policy elites have had so little influence in making decisions about war and peace and instead are beholden to master narratives that they do not create and that are likely to produce failed policies. For example, he maintains that in the run-up to the Iraq War the elites mattered, “but they did so in a way that was highly determined by the robust liberal narrative” (p. 167). There is abundant evidence, however, that President George W. Bush and his lieutenants had significant agency, which they used to fashion their own highly effective narrative that allowed them to take the United States to war. Indeed, Walldorf’s discussion of the Iraq case provides substantial evidence of their agency.

To take another example, President Franklin Roosevelt played the central role in maneuvering the United States into World War II, and to the extent there was a master narrative at play, it was isolationism, which he ultimately beat back. These cases of elite influence are not anomalies by any means.

Walldorf might respond by claiming that his theory can accommodate this criticism because it allows for the “elite ideology” and “master narrative” models to operate at the same time, and foreign policy leaders have significant agency and influence in the former model. This contention makes little sense, however, because these two models are logically at odds with each other. After all, leaders either have agency or they do not, and those two models tell a different story on that count. Walldorf actually appears to support my point, when he notes that “elite ideology” is one of the “two leading alternatives” to his “master narrative argument” (p. 199). Furthermore, he consistently maintains that a “master narrative” will dominate an “elite ideology” when they clash, which means that policy elites ultimately have no choice but to act in accordance with the prevailing master narrative.

Second, one wants to know how master narratives bubble up from below at critical junctures to drive the policy-making process. In other words, who is pushing the master narrative forward? Walldorf maintains that there are “promoters” who drive the “liberal narrative” forward and “moderators” who do the same for the “restraint” narrative. In fact, these individuals are the key actors in his theory, because they ultimately manipulate the master narratives that overwhelm the policy elites and determine whether or not a state goes to war. This important line of argument, which would seem to necessitate a theory of domestic politics, is theoretically underdeveloped. It also does not square with the cases in the book, where policy elites appear to play a more important role in the decision-making process than either “promoters” or “moderators.”

Third, international politics matter little in Walldorf’s theory, as in his telling, American decisions for or against forced regime change are driven largely by master narratives that are deeply embedded in the culture. In particular, policy elites are hardly influenced by balance-of-power logic or geopolitical considerations. Walldorf’s efforts to dismiss realism are unsurprising, because it is the other alternative theory (besides “elite ideology”) that he is attempting to knock down. Nevertheless, this approach does not fit well with the evidence.

For sure, the United States has sometimes ignored realist dictates and gone to war mainly in pursuit of regime change. This pattern of behavior was at play during the unipolar moment (1990–2016), when the United States was so powerful that it could largely ignore balance-of-power logic and instead topple regimes for the purpose of spreading liberal democracy around the globe. But that was not the case regarding the United States’s entry into either World War II or the Korean War, which Walldorf categorizes as examples of forceful regime promotion. Realist calculations underpinned Washington’s decision to enter both of those conflicts. Roosevelt was determined to prevent Nazi Germany from dominating Europe and Imperial Japan from establishing hegemony in Asia. President Harry Truman intervened in the Korean War in June 1950 to prevent North Korea, an ally of the Soviet Union, from overrunning South Korea and creating a unified Korea that would be a serious threat to Japan.

One further point about realism. Walldorf writes, “Realism anticipates that robust forceful regime promotion is most likely when a state possesses a preponderance of power either globally or in a certain region(s) of the world” (p. 199). Realism, in his account, is primed for regime change, not restraint. Thus, he sees cases where the United States exercised restraint as evidence against realism. This portrayal of realism is wrong. Virtually all realists are opposed to the United States pursuing a foreign policy based on regime change. For that reason, they were among the toughest critics of liberal hegemony, which called for Washington to spread democracy across the globe, sometimes at the end of a rifle barrel. Indeed, realists frequently made the case that the United States should pursue a foreign policy that emphasizes restraint. Realists would not be surprised that Walldorf finds that most of the attempted regime changes failed.

Narratives matter in the making of foreign policy, but it is not the master narratives that are at the heart of Walldorf's story that matter. Instead, it is the narrative that the foreign policy elites formulate to help sell their policies that matter, although, ultimately, they also do not matter much, because other factors—especially those concerning the balance of power—are the principal driving forces behind a state's foreign policy.

Response to John J. Mearsheimer's Review of *To Shape Our World for Good: Master Narratives and Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1900–2011*

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— C. William Walldorf Jr.

Professor Mearsheimer's review is interesting but misses the mark on many points. First, through robust statistical tests and eight case studies, I repeatedly demonstrate the power of master narratives to shape war and peace outcomes in US foreign policy. Mearsheimer mentions almost none of the book's main case studies (China, 1950; Cuba, 1961; Vietnam, 1965; El Salvador, 1981–83; Grenada, 1983; or Libya, 2011) that demonstrate this, presumably because the evidence in support of master narratives here is largely uncontroversial. Instead, he focuses on one of the few overdetermined cases (World War II) in the data and misconstrues two others—Korea and Iraq.

On Korea, the realpolitik (or offshore balancing) move came in January 1950 when, in accord with George Kennan's realist strongpoint approach, President Truman drew Korea outside the US defense perimeter and withdrew all troops. Was there a strategic change in June that justified not only war but also a foolhardy (and far from realpolitik) bid at Korean unification? No, not at all: at the time, Douglas MacArthur again deemed the peninsula strategically irrelevant. So, what changed? Answer: the master narrative context. The evidence for this is overwhelming. Truman scrambled to get ahead of a robust liberal narrative discourse and avoid domestic losses from looking "weak on communism," even to the point of going against his better strategic judgment by crossing the 38th Parallel. Overall, realism cannot explain this case—master narratives can.

Were Bush and FDR important agents? Of course, they were, but both were also deeply constrained by narrative context. Bush never could have pursued the disastrous Iraq War without the robust antiterrorism narrative (something largely not of his making), and FDR had to wait on trauma events to build a narrative for war—and that delay mattered, costing Europe immeasurable destruction and millions of lives. My argument explains things like this. Mearsheimer's overly simplistic view (i.e., elites and geopolitics control everything) does not. Elites matter in *bounded*, not unfettered, ways (a view common to the literature on ideas). In some conditions, they play a major role in helping create dominant narratives; at other times they do not. Likewise, in certain narrative contexts—Truman with Korea, Johnson with Vietnam, Kennedy with Cuba, Reagan and military restraint with El Salvador—leaders sometimes get pushed into policy choices against their will. In other cases (e.g. China and Libya), that narrative-driven context allows space for leaders to create policy more to their liking. I offer a systematic theory based on cultural trauma and domestic coalitional politics to explain the binding role of narratives on elites (pp. 24–40): it's tempting to deem something "under-theorized" when we disagree with it.

Finally, I acknowledge that realists *normatively* oppose forceful regime change (p. 42). *Theoretically*, however, many realists (Mearsheimer included) observe that a preponderance of power *is* the most likely geopolitical condition for regime promotion. Mearsheimer even admits this in his critique when he claims that post–Cold War unipolarity made the United States "so powerful that it could largely ignore balance of power logic and instead topple regimes." Realists must decide if they really want to own this theoretical argument, rather than accept it when convenient and cast it aside when not.

Overall, I hope my "bold," "provocative," and "quite radical perspective on how ideas influence the decision to go to war" (i.e., Mearsheimer's claim) helps the United States become more sober and pragmatic going forward: there lies the real potential to shape our world for good.