

# Conservatism, Realism, and Restraint: Kissing Cousins If Not Soulmates<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Introduction

President Trump is provoking much discussion about what it means to be a conservative, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. The President's ham-handed approach to our allies and unseemly partiality toward our rivals aside, a more robust conversation about what constitutes a conservative approach to the world has been a long-time coming given the U.S.'s failures in the Iraq War, the nation-building project in Afghanistan, the intervention in the Libyan civil war, and the quixotic effort to create a democratic opposition in Syria.

Throughout the Cold War, conservatives may have talked like hawkish anti-communists blustering about the "rollback" of Communism but for the most part they wisely exercised Taftian prudence by settling for the "containment" of the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era, in contrast, many conservatives - flush with victory in the Cold War and besotted with predictions of the end of history - turned this rhetoric into reality and embraced an activist, militarized, and highly assertive stance toward the rest of the world.

Of course, not all conservatives drank deeply of this Neoconservative foreign policy Koolaid. Remember the Buchananite challenge to George H.W. Bush's internationalism and George W. Bush's early skepticism about nation-building which didn't exactly square well with the Neo-conservative approach that subsequently came to dominate his administration. President Trump's skepticism of Cold War relics like NATO also suggest that conservative thought on foreign policy is not monolithic.

In light of this on-going conservative foreign policy debate, and with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight about the results of our recent activist foreign policy projects, it is worth considering which approach going forward is most compatible with conservatism's fundamental principles?

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<sup>1</sup> This essay substantially expands our essay "Conservatism, Realism and Foreign Policy: Kissing Cousins if Not Soulmates," *The National Interest*, July 30, 2018 at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/conservatism-realism-and-foreign-policy-kissing-cousins-if-not-soulmates-27242?page=0%2C1>

In our view, conservatives should embrace a foreign policy of restraint not only on practical grounds (the neoconservative approach of the past quarter of a century has been a failure) but also based on principle. A realist, rather than neoconservative, approach to the world is more in line with the core tenets of the conservative cannon.

Conservatives and Classical Liberals subscribe to many of the following premises: That war is a necessary evil at times but that engaging in it should always be a last resort. Given that, America's normal mode of engagement with the rest of the world ought to be through trade and diplomacy. That military power is a blunt instrument that cannot solve every foreign policy problem we face. That preparation for war comes at a cost to our economy. That war centralizes executive power and imperils civil liberties. That given the limits of human reason and the "crooked timber of humanity," we need to be modest about the prospects for human perfection, both in ourselves and in others. That social engineering, whether at home or abroad, is a difficult and fraught undertaking, often derailed by unintended consequences, and so should only be undertaken when markets and voluntary efforts fail or are overwhelmed by natural or man-made disasters. That the more we do for others, the less they will do for themselves. In short, the conservative watch words are humility and prudence.

Given these premises, a conservative foreign policy would have the United States exercise greater caution in using force abroad, limiting it to ensuring America's homeland security and command of the seas. It would eschew the role of world policeman or global social worker committed to grand schemes such as regime change or promoting liberal democracy around the world. It would remain committed to engaging the world, but not using the big stick of brute force but rather with the velvet glove of diplomacy, free trade, and the powerful example of our liberal democracy and free market system at home. As conservative thinker William Graham Sumner sagely warned a century ago, war and hegemony constitute "a grand onslaught on democracy."

Conservatives should recognize in realism – an approach to the world that traces its lineage over two millennia from Thucydides and St. Augustine to George Kennan -- a kindred mindset. Admittedly our argument that modern-realism and American conservatism are kissing cousins may strike some as counter-intuitive because the latter has recently embraced neoconservatism.<sup>2</sup> And neoconservatism, in turn, partakes more of American Liberalism than does realism.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, well-known Christian realist thinker Reinhold Niebuhr, explained that American conservatism, unlike the European variety, absorbed many Liberal tenets which made it incompatible with realism. "If American conservatism lacks realism's virtues," Niebuhr observed, "the reason for this defect can be given in one sweeping generalization: American conservatism is not conservative at all in the traditional sense; it is part of the

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<sup>2</sup> For a recent example, see Mike Gallagher and Colin Dueck, "The Conservative Case for NATO," *National Review*, January 30, 2019 at: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/01/nato-western-military-alliance-bolsters-american-interests/>.

<sup>3</sup> Keith L. Shimko, "Realism, Neoliberalism, and American Liberalism," *Review of Politics* Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring, 1992): 281-301.

traditional liberal movement and it exhibits the defects of its creed.”<sup>4</sup> In making this observation, he echoed his contemporary Louis Hartz.<sup>5</sup> Unlike realism, which would set a steady course by the pole star of the national interest, American conservatism, in Niebuhr’s judgement vacillated between two unproductive extremes: isolationism or remaking the world. Moreover, in a famous essay, Harvard Government professor Samuel Huntington maintained that American conservatism was “situational,” as opposed to a reactionary or principled, and that is why it took on the defense of American Liberalism and thereby became so closely aligned with it.<sup>6</sup> While this tension between realism and Liberalism constitutes an important complication to our argument, which we will engage at length below, we conclude that realism and conservatism are ultimately compatible, at least in terms of American foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

In the next sections of this essay, we first draw a genealogy of realism which both recognizes its diversity but also highlights its general compatibility with restraint. Next, we show that restraint is reconcilable with both American conservative thought as well as the practice of U.S. diplomacy since the Founding. We conclude with a brief discussion of how realism and restraint can constitute the basis for a new and more productive American internationalism.

## II. A Genealogy of Realism and Restraint.

Kenneth N. Waltz, one of the leading modern realist thinkers of the XXth Century, described his earlier conceptual work on international relations as consisting largely of “essays in political theory,” reflecting upon developments in proto-realist thought from Thucydides through Jean-Jacques Rousseau. We share Waltz’s assumption that “political philosophy provides insufficiently exploited clues to the understanding of international politics.” Indeed, he is absolutely right, in our view, that “the great political philosophers demand being read and read again, and one finds that each rereading brings an enlarged and deepened understanding.”<sup>8</sup> Given that, it makes sense to undertake an exploration of the interrelationship between power and prudence in realist thought from its inception. We call this examination a genealogy, which provides in Nietzsche’s words the “knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which [realism] grew, under which [it] evolved and changed.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems: Essay on Political, Social, Ethical, and Theological Themes* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 54-5.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “Conservatism As An Ideology,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 51, No. 2 (June 1957): 456.

<sup>7</sup> For a typical example among international relations of linking realism and conservatism, see Richard K. Ashley’s characterization of the former as part of the “tragic tradition” in his “The Poverty of Neorealism,” *International Organization* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984): 281.

<sup>8</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), 2, 161, and 212.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1967), 20. (Nietzsche re: genealogical approach. Really = history of political thought.)

Before we trace the evolution of realism and restraint, we need to define the former. Reinhold Niebuhr defines realism as “the disposition to take all factors in a social or political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”<sup>10</sup> This is a fair summary but it needs to be unpacked.

Realism is an approach to international relations that is both explanatory and prescriptive. On the former, it offers a theory of how the world works that focuses on two clusters of factors: The system’s ordering principle and how its constituent units interact.<sup>11</sup> Realists maintain that the international system is anarchic, meaning that there is no overarching power above them. Other approaches, in contrast, maintain that the international system can be hegemonic (dominated by a single unit) or collaborative (managed by a set of cooperative institutions).

For realists, the anarchical nature of international relations forces the constituent units to be constantly preoccupied with their own security, which is primarily determined by material power. Some defensive realists conclude that this requires the constituent units to simply try to maintain a balance of power. Other offensive realists suggest that these actors will try to achieve and sustain a relative power advantage, at least close to home, in order to ensure their security. But neither version of realism believes that the essentially unmanaged and hence competitive nature of international relations can be overcome; it can only be mitigated for each actor by its own efforts to ensure its security.

On the latter, realism also offers prescriptive advice to statesmen and women for how to ensure the security of their state. When we say “prescriptive” we need to be careful to distinguish that from two related concepts: prediction or normative guidance.<sup>12</sup> We do not

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<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 119.

<sup>11</sup> The realist canon often includes more “principles of political realism” than this. Han J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* [7<sup>th</sup> edition revised by Kenneth Thompson and David Clinton] (Boston: McGraw Hill 2006 [1948]), 4-16 has six: 1) the primacy of human nature in politics; 2) interest defined as power; 3) the impotence of ideals which conflict with political reality; 4) the tension between morality and interest; 5) the denial that particular morality is coequal with universal morality; and 6) the autonomy of politics in driving state action. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 30-32, ground his theory on five “bed-rock assumptions:” 1) anarchy, 2) the ubiquity of offensive military capability; 3) inscrutability of state intentions; 4) survival is the key state motive; and 5) leaders are rational in their responses to the challenges and the opportunities of the international environment.

We are closer to the spare approach of Waltz, *TIP*, 88-99, who restricts himself to three: 1) the ordering principle [anarchy]; 2) the nature of the units [functional homogeneity]; and 3) the distribution of capabilities [polarity], his key variable. Elsewhere (117), however, Waltz however “exhaustively” lists the elements of *realpolitik* as 1) “interest” is the motive of state action; 2) responding to anarchy defines this interest; 3) optimal state policies will take this into account; 4) the definition of “optimal” is the preservation and strengthening of the state.

<sup>12</sup> An example of this confusion is Rodger A. Payne, “Neorealists as Critical Theorists: The Purpose of Foreign Policy Debate,” *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Sep., 2007): 503-514. More defensible is Michael Joseph Smith’s recognition that most modern realists combine both a descriptive and prescriptive agenda. See his *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 143. Also see Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of International Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond” in Ada W. Finifter, ed., *Political Science: The state of the Discipline* (Washington, DC: The American Political Science Association, 1983), 521.

believe that one can deduce from realism's description of international relations what exactly individual statesmen and women will do in every particular circumstance.<sup>13</sup> The best that we can do is suggest what a "prudent" policymaker would do in a given situation. This is what we regard as realism's prescriptive element.

What a statesperson "ought" to do in a moral or ethical sense is also beyond the realm of realist theory, though we do think that realism most often leads to outcomes that are morally superior to those derived from other bodies of international relations theory, including those with an explicit moral and ethical agenda.<sup>14</sup> As E.H. Carr succinctly put it, "politics are not (as the utopians pretend) a function of ethics, but ethics of politics."<sup>15</sup> Recognizing this reality, however, does not mean that we endorse his moral relativism. Indeed, the possibility that recognizing the truth in Carr's statement, without endorsing its ethical implications, is clear from the fact that Reinhold Niebuhr came to the same conclusion based in part upon his deep engagement with St. Augustine.

Our prescriptive claim is simply that anarchy and the primacy of material power counsel "prudence" for statecraft. Such prudence involves, on the one hand, a pessimism about our ability to permanently transform the ordering principle of international relations from anarchy to some form of hierarchy or collaboration. On the other hand, realism, in our view, has an optimistic element in that it allows for states to not only survive, but even thrive in the international system the way it is. Defensive realists are self-identified optimists based on their assessment of the stabilizing features of certain military technologies and geographic situations.<sup>16</sup> But even offensive realists, who generally lament the tragic elements of great power politics, nonetheless believe that prudent actors can manage to survive and thrive in the dog-eat-dog world of great power politics.<sup>17</sup>

The prudent policy for most, if not all, realists is one of grand strategic restraint. Restraint is a grand strategy that focuses on protecting "vital national interests" (e.g., those places through control or denial to an adversary can materially affect the global balance of power). Restraint eschews defining areas of the world as important to a great power on other grounds such as reputation, ideology, or the promotion or protection of world order principles

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 121-22. For an effort to challenge Waltz (and us) on this point see Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (1996): 7-53.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Forde, "Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli," *The Journal of Politics* Vol. 54, No. 2 (May 1992): 373. But realists are not completely insensitive to the ethical and moral implications of state policy. See Michael C. Desch, "It Is Kind to Be Cruel: The Humanity of American Realism," *Review of International Studies* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 2003): 415-26. Also see Valerie Morkevičius, *Realist Ethics: Just War Traditions as Power Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* Vol. 38, No 2 (Spring 1984): 303.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), 64.

<sup>16</sup> Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995): 50-90

<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 114-26 on the "stopping power of water" and 358 on nuclear weapons and the absence of great power war since the nuclear revolution.

that often require large and persistent U.S. military commitments to achieve their objectives.<sup>18</sup> Restraint aims to defend U.S. interests, narrowly defined, with the fewest U.S. forces possible and only for as long as absolutely necessary. Contemporary restrainers differ on how active the United States needs to be to protect its vital interests, with off-shore balancers advocating a more active U.S. posture while others think that geography, nationalism, and defensively oriented military technology often combine to make possible a less direct U.S. role in maintaining the balance of power.<sup>19</sup> We distinguish restraint from, on the one hand, isolationism, which tends toward the view that the United States would never have to use military force overseas and “selective engagement,” which often advocates open-ended commitments of U.S. military forces abroad.<sup>20</sup>

This restraint takes the form of pursuing military technologies that favor the conventional defense or deterrence over offensive or coercive strategies and postures.<sup>21</sup> In a world in which the defense trumps the offense, conventional security is plentiful and international actors can make do with smaller and less broadly and frequently employed military forces.<sup>22</sup> For defensive realists, perhaps the most consequential technological development has been the nuclear revolution, which has virtually eliminated the use, if not the threat of use, of force among nuclear powers.<sup>23</sup> Prudence dictates that in a defense dominant

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<sup>18</sup> This definition follows Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 69. For a helpful overview and typology of the various grand strategies, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter, 1996-1997): 5-53.

<sup>19</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. ?, No. ? (July/August 2016): ?

<sup>20</sup> In the seminal statement of post-Cold War restraint, Eugene Gholtz, Daryl G. Press and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997) define restraint as “a modern form of isolationism” (5) but admit that such a posture was not always appropriate for the United States (6). We maintain that they are not really advocating isolationism as traditionally understood. For a full-blown case for isolationism, see Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Key proponents of Offense/Defense Balance Theory include: Sean M. Lynn-Jones, “Offense-Defense Theory and its Critics,” *Security Studies* Vol. 4, No. 4 (Summer 1995): 660-94 and Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, “What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4. (Spring, 1998): 44-82. Moderate and less compromising critics include: Stephen Biddle, “Rebuilding the Foundations of Offense-Defense Theory,” *Journal of Politics* Vol. 63, No. 3 (August 2001): 741-74 and Keir A. Lieber, “Grasping the Technological Peace: The Offense-Defense Balance and International Security,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000): 71-104

<sup>22</sup> On the numerical advantages of the defense in conventional operations, see John J. Mearsheimer, “Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3:1 Rule and Its Critics,” *International Security* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Spring 1989): 54-89.

<sup>23</sup> The theoretical foundations of the Nuclear Revolution were laid in Jacob Viner, “The Implications of the Atomic Bomb for International Relations” in *International Economics* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1946), 300- 9 and Frederick S. Dunn, Bernard Brodie, Arnold Wolfers, Percy E. Corbett, and William T.R. Fox, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946). Among the most influential modern applications of it are Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better,” *Adelphi Papers*, Number 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981) and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

world, and especially one in which the relations among nuclear armed great powers is one of mutual assured destruction (MAD), restraint is the optimal grand strategy for great powers.<sup>24</sup>

Even offensive realists, skeptical of the more ambitious claims of theorists of the offensive/defense balance, nonetheless favor more restrained grand strategies such as “off-shore balancing.”<sup>25</sup> Given the nuclear revolution, the stopping power of water, and the general inclination of international actors to balance against power and threats, great powers can assume a far less proactive grand strategic stance than those advocated by policymakers and scholars who look at international relations through different theoretical lenses.<sup>26</sup> While realists are not monolithic in their grand strategic preferences, they tend to cluster toward the restrained end of the grand strategy spectrum; conversely, Liberals of various stripes tend toward the more activist strategies of Primacy and Deep Engagement.<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, as Robert Keohane notes, the modern structural approach of neorealism is different from Thucydides or classical realism.<sup>28</sup> And by no means do all realists reach the same policy conclusions. As Michael Joseph Smith cautions, “it cannot be said that realism leads necessarily to wise and moderate foreign policy, or even that those calling themselves realist will agree on the content and means of such a policy.” Still, as he admits, realism led Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and Reinhold Niebuhr to all oppose Vietnam.<sup>29</sup> Given that, we maintain that there is if not a straight line, there is nonetheless a constant current in the genealogy of realism of in the direction of restraint from the very beginning.

### *Thucydides*

Where do we find the well-springs of contemporary realism? Niebuhr declares that St. Augustine was “the first great ‘realist’ in western history.”<sup>30</sup> He overlooks earlier thinkers on the ground that the Classical Greeks were too enamored of human reason to recognize how

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<sup>24</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Politics of Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (September 1967): 199-211.

<sup>25</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 134 (January/February 2003): 51-59.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*: (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987). Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 157-62 maintains that the main problem is the propensity of states to try to pass-the-buck to each other as part of their balancing strategy.

<sup>27</sup> Posen and Ross, Table 1. On the theory of “hegemonic stability,” that collective action and other forms of cooperation are facilitated by dominant powers willing to bear the costs, see Arthur A. Stein, “The Hegemon’s Dilemma: Great Britain, the United States, and the International Economic Order,” *International Organization* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984): 355-86 and Duncan Snidal, “The Limits of Hegemonic stability theory,” *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 1985): 579-614. Hegemonic stability theory has had realist adherents – Stephen Krasner, Robert Gilpin, and more recently Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, but it has always shaded toward Liberalism given its emphasis on free trade and the maintenance of cooperation through bolstering international institutions.

<sup>28</sup> Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 166.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, 130 and 234. But also see 231-32.

<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 120-21.

flawed humans were the tap-root of his tragic realism. But Niebuhr's view is hard to square with the deeply pessimistic realism of Thucydides, the consensus all-American in the realist cannon.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, such is his stature in the genealogy of realism that it is hard not to share former General and then-Secretary of State George C. Marshall's skepticism in his February 1947 speech at Princeton about whether "a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding ... the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens."<sup>32</sup>

Some contemporary scholars deny that Thucydides was really a realist. Social constructivists claim him as a proto-critical theorist on the grounds that he saw the root of the conflict between Athens and Sparta as ultimately reducible to competing ideas about the role of justice in relations among polities.<sup>33</sup>

Other scholars of the history of political thought, who come from a very different political position than the social constructivists, nonetheless agree that Thucydides was in fact a critic of realism – or at least the brutal realism of the Athenians of the Melian Dialogue -- inasmuch as he links it with the subsequent disasters which befell the leader of the Delian League.<sup>34</sup> In this vein, Thucydides scholar David Bolotin suggests that "Thucydides invites us to think about both the plague and the Sicilian disaster, along with the ultimate defeat of Athens in the war, as the destined punishments for its insolence and injustice."<sup>35</sup>

Finally some neoconservative scholars try to recast Thucydides' message to their own liking. Yale classicist Donald Kagan, scion of one of American neoconservatism's first families, criticizes Athenian leader Pericles' strategy of moderation and restraint early in the Peloponnesian War. Later he suggests that had Athenian neoconservative Alcibiades had a free hand in the planning and execution of the Sicilian Expedition, the war could have turned out differently for democratic Athens.<sup>36</sup> Victor Davis Hansen, another classicist turned neoconservative pundit, even denies that Athens lost the war at the end of the day pursuing its ambitious imperial policy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 13.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002), 13-14. Also quoted in Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 50.

<sup>33</sup> See, *inter alia*, Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides the Constructivist," *American Political Science Review* Vol. 95, No. 3 (Sep. 2001): 547-60; Hayward Alker, "The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides Melian Dialogue," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (September 1988): 805-20; Daniel Garst, "Thucydides and Neorealism," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. ? (? 1989): 3-27; and David A. Welch, "Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides," *Review of International Studies* Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 2003): 301-19..

<sup>34</sup> Paul A. Rahe, "Thucydides' Critique of Realpolitik" in Benjamin Frankel, ed., *Roots of realism* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 105-41.

<sup>35</sup> David Bolotin, "Thucydides" in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15. Also see 13.

<sup>36</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking, 2003), 30-63 and 254-61.

<sup>37</sup> Victor David Hanson, *A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and the Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Random House, 2005), 290-91. But see his more measured view on 292.

To be sure, Thucydides is a complex thinker who does not rest easily on the Bed of Procrustes of modern realism. Still, a straighter path leads there from him than it does to social constructivism or neoconservatism. First, Thucydides, like modern realists, points to the primacy of power in relations among ancient city-states and modern nation-states. For him, the ultimate cause of the Peloponnesian war was quite simply “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta.”<sup>38</sup> And whatever the conflicting demands of justice, power was the determining feature of relations among polities. As the Athenians famously reminded the hapless Melians, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”<sup>39</sup>

But recognition of the importance of power does not mean that Thucydides endorsed the Athenian neoconservatives who celebrated her empire and sought to spread her “democracy” to the rest of the Greek world. “Thucydides,” according to Peter Ahrensdorf and Thomas Pangle, “nourishes in his readers a resigned realism, one that perceives the necessary weakness of justice among nations but does so without exulting in that insight.”<sup>40</sup> In our reading, Thucydides’ message is a cautionary tale in which the prudence and restraint of Pericles was replaced by the immoderate ambition of subsequent figures like Cleon and Alcibiades to Athens’ eventual ruin.

Admittedly, not all scholars conceded that Thucydides’ realism leads to restraint. Stephen Forde, for example, argues that Thucydides’ “notion that power prevails over justice in international politics points not simply toward realism but toward imperialism.”<sup>41</sup> And indicting Athenian democracy in a form of ancient Liberal imperialism, Kagan, reports that “the people of Athens connected the growth and flourishing of the democracy with the benefits of empire.”<sup>42</sup> But many of the Athenian leaders ultimately recognized that its empire was unjust and tyrannical at the end of the day.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, the fairest reading of Thucydides is that he is at best ambivalent about the Athenian Empire. Efforts to make him an apologist for it commit two mistakes: They confuse Thucydides with his fellow Athenians and neglect his prudential, as opposed to moral, case against Athenian imperialism. The tragic hero in Thucydides’ account is Pericles. He is the hero because he advocated a policy of prudence and restraint; the tragedy is that after his death, no comparable leader evinced those same traits. In his brief eulogy for Pericles [Bk. II, para. 65], Thucydides could not be clearer: “For as long as [Pericles] was at the head of state during peace, he pursued a moderate and conservative policy; and in his time its greatness was at its

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<sup>38</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian war*, Robert B. Strassler, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1996), Bk. I, para. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. 5, para. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Pangle and Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 31.

<sup>41</sup> Forde, “Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli,” 387. Also see 378.

<sup>42</sup> Donald Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 98.

<sup>43</sup> This observation is made by both Pericles in *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. 2, para. 63 and Cleon in Bk. 3, para. 37.

height.” Pericles would certainly not have launched the disastrous Sicilian expedition, in Thucydides’ view.<sup>44</sup> Pericles’ later Roman biographer Plutarch agreed, recounting that he “gained a great reputation for his wariness; he would not by his good-will engage in any fight which had much uncertainty or hazard; he did not envy the glory of generals whose rash adventures fortune favored with brilliant success, however they were admired by others, nor did he think them worthy of his imitation, but always used to say to his citizens that, so far as lay in his power, they should continue immortal and live forever.”<sup>45</sup>

Restraint, for Pericles, was not so much a moral imperative but rather the prudent policy given the role of Athenian power in consolidating the Spartan alliance. Its empire was certainly not popular outside Athens.<sup>46</sup> Pericles therefore hoped that by laying low and not taking the offensive early in the war, Athenian restraint would undermine the Peloponnesian League and bring to power more moderate figures in Sparta itself.<sup>47</sup> As Thucydides recounts (or perhaps invents) Pericles explanation, “I have many other reasons to hope for a favorable outcome, if you can consent not to combine schemes of fresh conquest with the conduct of the war, and will abstain from willfully involving yourselves in other dangers; indeed, I am more afraid of our own blunders than the enemy’s devices.”<sup>48</sup>

With Pericles’ untimely death from the plague two years into the war, his successors in Athens could never quite measure up to his rare combination of talent and prudence.<sup>49</sup> The most talented of the next generation of Athenian leaders were not prudent. And the few voices of prudence were dull and gray figures like the hapless Nicias, who unsuccessfully opposed the Sicilian Expedition and then died ignominiously leading it.

The first Athenian challenger to Periclean moderation was Cleon. He is most famous for his role in the Mytilene debate, in which he argued that justice demanded that Athens should massacre a rebellious ally following its defeat. It was only Diodotus (likely a fictional character serving as Thucydides’ mouthpiece), who saved the Mytilene at the eleventh hour by making the pragmatic case that sparing them would better serve Athenian interests.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. II, para. 65. Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: AMS, 1967), 132.

<sup>45</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, 131

<sup>46</sup> Donald W. Bradeen, “The Popularity of the Athenian Empire,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* Bd. 9, H. 3 (July 1960): 257-69 and Christopher Bruell, “Thucydides’ View of Athenian Imperialism,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 68, No. 1 (March 1974): 11-17..

<sup>47</sup> Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking, 2003), 63.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. I, para. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*, 260.

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed discussion of Thucydides’ nuanced view of the relationship between interest and justice, see the discussion of the Mytilene debate in David Cohen, “Justice, Interest, and Political Deliberation in Thucydides,” *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* [New Series] Vol. 16, No. 1 (1984): 35-60 and Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 110 and 113.

It was also Cleon who, after victories at Pylos and Sphacteria, urged his fellow Athenians to spurn a Spartan peace offer.<sup>51</sup> Victory hardly sated Cleon's appetite for war.<sup>52</sup> Foreshadowing the debate ten years later, Cleon urged Athens to expand the war to the Greek colonies of Sicily in 425.<sup>53</sup> Athens' near-run success in Sicily in preventing pro-Spartan Syracuse from dominating the island was interpreted by the Athenian public as great victory that with more ambitious leadership could have achieved even more.<sup>54</sup>

Despite dubious victory in the first Sicilian Expedition, Athenian luck ran out at the Battle of Delium (424). This defeat took the starch out of Cleon and the war party.<sup>55</sup> And after almost seven years of war, Athens, under the leadership of Nicias, negotiated a truce which held for much of the next decade would be called the Peace of Nicias.<sup>56</sup> While the Athenian war party was down during this period, they were by no means out of the game entirely. Indeed, it was during the truce that the infamous Melian Dialogue took place as the war party urged Athens to settle various scores incurred, but never paid, during the active hostilities. Among the unbowed hawks were a younger generation of figures who would take the stage and play leading roles in subsequent acts of Thucydides' tragedy.<sup>57</sup>

Cleon's most important successor as leader of the Athenian neoconservatives was a former protégé of Pericles and the Philosopher Socrates by the name of Alcibiades. Alcibiades was indisputably a very attractive and talented individual. But unlike his mentors, he lacked prudence and restraint; indeed, he was ruled almost entirely by his "vanity and ambition."<sup>58</sup> Plutarch recounts that he was among those behind the slaughter of the Melians.<sup>59</sup>

Alcibiades real claim to infamy, at least in Thucydides' chronicle, was his role in persuading the Athenians to break the Peace of Nicias and return to Sicily in 414. As Plutarch explains, "Alcibiades was the person who inflamed this desire of [the Athenians'] to the height, and prevailed with them no longer to proceed secretly, and by little and little, in their design, but to sail with a great fleet and undertake at once to make themselves masters of the island. He possessed the people with great hopes, and he himself entertained yet greater; and the conquest of Sicily, which was the utmost bound of their ambition, was but the mere outset of his expectation."<sup>60</sup> Alcibiades labored to completely overturn Pericles' policy of restraint.

In the debate with Nicias about the second Sicilian Expedition, Alcibiades warned his fellow Athenians that "we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have

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<sup>51</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 144.

<sup>52</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 155-56.

<sup>53</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 160-61.

<sup>55</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 169-70.

<sup>56</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 192-94.

<sup>57</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 247-49.

<sup>58</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, 157

<sup>59</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, 162

<sup>60</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, 162

reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it for, if we cease ruling others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves.”<sup>61</sup> Like modern proponents of America’s “forever wars,” Alcibiades could not rest content with peace. For Thucydides, Alcibiades is a complex figure; the brilliant protégé of Pericles and Socrates but also a venal and self-serving demagogue ruled by *eros* rather than prudence. He anticipates more contemporary “reckless minds” like Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger in which intellectual lustre without prudence led to disaster.<sup>62</sup>

Sensing that the brilliant, charming, but imprudent Alcibiades needed some restraint, the Athenians voted in favor of restarting the war and expanding it to Sicily but also named his dull and uninspiring rival Nicias as co-commander hoping that by doing so they would get the best of both leaders.<sup>63</sup> Instead, they got the worst of them.<sup>64</sup> Suffice to say that like neoconservative icon Winston Churchill’s similarly misguided effort to break the stalemate of World War I by sending a Commonwealth force to defeat the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli on the Dardanelles, the Sicilian Expedition ended badly, with a disgraced Alcibiades defecting to Sparta and later Persia and the hapless Nicias dying a horrible death in captivity in the quarries of Syracuse. “Of all the Hellenes in my time,” Thucydides laments, Nicias “least deserved [a horrible death], seeing that the whole course of his life had been regulated with strict attention to virtue.”<sup>65</sup> His greatest virtue was moderation unfortunately not matched by Pericles’ other virtues.

That the Sicilian Expedition was a blunder, even hawks like Kagan concede.<sup>66</sup> One question is whether it could somehow have worked, perhaps under the continuing co-command of Alcibiades? Another is who is to blame; Alcibiades for his immoderation, Nicias for his lack of brilliance, or the Athenian *demos* for its fickleness?<sup>67</sup> Thucydides blames all three.

While the Peloponnesian War continues for almost another decade, with Athens not finally being defeated until 405 at the Battle of Aegospotami, the Sicilian debacle is clearly the apogee of the narrative arc of Thucydides’ tragedy.<sup>68</sup> Even Kagan, whose sympathies for

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<sup>61</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. VI, para. 18.

<sup>62</sup> The cautionary literature on these two “dangerous minds” is voluminous. On Heidegger, see Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Martin Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, Ewald Osers, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism Into Philosophy*, Michael B. Smith trans., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); and the various essays in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), Part III. On Schmitt, see *inter alia*, Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), chap. II and Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, 162

<sup>64</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 254-56.

<sup>65</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. VII, para. 87. This “charitable” view of Nicias is surprisingly shared by Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, Bernard Crick, ed., (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1970), 240

<sup>66</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 296.

<sup>67</sup> Bolotin, “Thucydides,” 24.

<sup>68</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 471-78.

neoconservatives both ancient and modern is palpable, concedes as much: “It is both legitimate and instructive to think of what we call the Peloponnesian War as ‘the great war between Athens and Sparta,’ as one scholar has designated it, because, like the European war of 1914-18 to which the title ‘the Great War’ was applied by an earlier generation that knew only one, it was a tragic event, a great turning point in history, the end of an era of progress, prosperity, confidence, and hope, and the beginning of a darker time.”<sup>69</sup>

It is hard to read Thucydides and not see contemporary analogies in his ancient history. Nicias reminds us of the dull but sensible Dwight Eisenhower who delivered a sage but uninspiring “Farewell Address” less than a week before a modern Alcibiades – John F. Kennedy – would give a brilliant but disastrous “First Inaugural” speech that would immoderately challenge his countrymen to “pay any price, bear any burden” in the Cold War.<sup>70</sup> More recently, we have heard echoes of Alcibiades and Nicias in the debate between U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki and Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz about the 2003 Iraq War, with the former, like Nicias, trying to stop the rush to war by inflating the number of troops necessary.<sup>71</sup> And like contemporary neoconservatives who after the war in Iraq devolved into a quagmire blamed Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and L. Paul Bremer, the ?? of the Coalition Provisional Authority, for the faulty implementation of a brilliant plan, Kagan intimates that Alcibiades’ original plan (and subsequent brilliant generalship) would have produced victory that Nicias’ inept implementation let fall into the jaws of defeat.<sup>72</sup>

To be sure, there are important differences between realism, ancient and modern. Probably the most important is that where Thucydides unabashedly proffers a great man theory of politics, modern structural realism focuses more on structural factors such as the distribution of power. But in other respects, ancient and modern realism evidence continuity, particularly in the area of restraint. Morgenthau, for example, read the ancient Greek philosopher Plato to advocate “inactivity in foreign affairs” in favor of the domestic cultivation of virtue inside the *polis*.<sup>73</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf agree that “a foreign policy inclining toward disengagement or even isolation is the preference of classical republican teaching.”<sup>74</sup>

Finally, presaging contemporary realist skepticism that democracy invariably leads to wiser foreign policy,<sup>75</sup> Thucydides highlights twin paradoxes: That democratic Athens was far less restrained than autocratic Sparta.<sup>76</sup> But that Spartan moderation was rooted not in

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<sup>69</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 489-90.

<sup>70</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 250.

<sup>71</sup> *The Landmark Thucydides*, Bk. VI, para 20 ff.

<sup>72</sup> Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War*, 256-61 and 322-23.

<sup>73</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 44.

<sup>74</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Michael C. Desch, *Power and Military effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>76</sup> Christopher Bruell, “Thucydides and Perikles,” *St. John’s Review* Vol. 32, No. 3 (1981): 28. Also see, Donald Kagan, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Viking, 2003), 4 and 7.

superior virtue or justice but rather fear of a slave revolt.<sup>77</sup> This is no doubt why the political philosopher Leo Strauss, whom some consider the intellectual inspiration for modern neoconservative foreign policy, in fact said little about U.S. foreign policy. As his students Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle observe, “Strauss was too deeply penetrated by Thucydides’ dissection of all that is implied in the immoderation of Pericles’ funeral oration to be able to celebrate the splendor of imperialistic Athens.”<sup>78</sup>

### *Machiavelli:*

While most people regard Thucydides as the founder of realism, a few – most notably E.H. Carr and Friedrich Meinecke -- would bestow that honor on Nicollò Machiavelli.<sup>79</sup> It is not so much that they would deny Thucydides a place in the realist pantheon but rather they regard the XVIth Century Florentine as the first modern realist. Specifically, it is with Machiavelli, that the interest of the state trumps the cultivation of individual virtue as the purpose of political life.<sup>80</sup> As political theorist Laurence Berns, puts it, “Machiavelli’s ‘realism’ consists in a conscious lowering of the standards of political life, taking as goals of political life not the perfection of man but those lower goals actually pursued by most men and most societies most of the time.”<sup>81</sup>

The bigger challenge that Machiavelli poses for our argument is that he was an unabashed proponent of imperialism and therefore at first glance seems less committed to restraint than other realists. To be sure, one can find elements of imperialism in Machiavelli, both in his definition of the particular virtue of the Prince (“it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and make use of it *or not* according to necessity”<sup>82</sup>) and also in his sympathy for the notion that an aggressive foreign policy can under certain conditions provide better protection for a principality.<sup>83</sup>

Still, it is important to acknowledge that despite this, Machiavelli does not advocate the pursuit of “unchecked” hegemony.<sup>84</sup> Rather, Machiavellian realism ultimately recognized the importance of the “balance of power.”<sup>85</sup> But pursuit of power is not necessarily unlimited in Machiavelli’s view.<sup>86</sup> Rather, “prudence” limits when power is expanded or just maintained.

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<sup>77</sup> Bolotin, “Thucydides,” 17.

<sup>78</sup> Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle, “Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy” in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* [3<sup>rd</sup> ed.] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 928.

<sup>79</sup>Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1939), 63.

<sup>80</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> Laurence Berns, “Hobbes” in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 370.

<sup>82</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 22. Also see Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 132 and 515.

<sup>83</sup> Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, 96.

<sup>84</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 141-44.

<sup>85</sup> Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, 107-9.

<sup>86</sup> Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism*, 2-3.

The conventional view of Machiavelli is that his core teaching is that “the end justifies the means.” But for Waltz, Machiavelli’s real message actual message is more subtle: “if you want to preserve your power in the state and your state among others, then you may be justified in doing things often termed unscrupulous. Not all, but some, ends justify the means.”<sup>87</sup> In other words, Machiavelli did not teach unconditional evil but rather advocated a pragmatic rationale for good rule.<sup>88</sup>

Machiavelli’s main contribution to modern realism was his introduction of the notion *raison d’état*, or interest of the state, as the guiding principle of state behavior. As Friedrich Meinecke notes, “it was in the spirit of the time to delight in tracing precise and rectilinear paths; and in opposition to the straight path of Christian morality Machiavelli laid down another path, just as straight in its own way, a path which was directed exclusively towards the goal of what was useful for the State.”<sup>89</sup> He posits that “*raison d’état* is the fundamental principle of national conduct, the state’s first Law of Motion.”<sup>90</sup> It is, his words, “permanent and common to all States,” and thus is the core of any science of politics.<sup>91</sup>

Prudence, for example, would caution that founding new orders is a daunting task. As Machiavelli famously warned, “it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of the new order of things.”<sup>92</sup> And like doing evil, fighting and not fighting or going on the offensive versus remaining on the defensive, are all conditional on situation.<sup>93</sup> So another of the Prince’s virtues is knowing when to do one or the other.

Two other Machiavellian precepts favor caution as well. First, he claims that one of the causes of the fall of the Roman Republic was the rise of a small military class that ultimately undermined the republic. This, in turn, was the result of their having sent their armies “further ... afield.”<sup>94</sup> Imperialism, in other words, can have serious domestic consequences. Second, Machiavelli famously warned that “a ruler ... should be slow to take up an enterprise because some exile has told him, for more often than not all he will get out of it is shame or most grievous harm.”<sup>95</sup> Readers of Thucydides will have learned this lesson from the ill-fated Sicilian Expedition. Unfortunately, many American policymakers and pundits failed to heed Thucydides and Machiavelli and were seduced by the siren-songs of anti-Castro Cubans before Bay of Pigs, Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress in 2003, or the MEK in Iran in Iran today. In

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<sup>87</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 212. Similarly, see Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 368.

<sup>89</sup> Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism*, 40-41.

<sup>90</sup> Friedrich Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism: The Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in Modern History*, Douglass Scott, trans. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 1.

<sup>91</sup> Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Nicollò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, W. K. Marriott, trans., *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 23. Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed. (Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Chicago: 1952), 9.

<sup>93</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 308-10 and 366.

<sup>94</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 473-74.

<sup>95</sup> Machiavelli, *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, 377.

short, the virtue of the Machiavelli's Prince is prudence, which sometimes leads to empire and evil but often fosters restraint and moral behavior. The key is which better serves the national interest given the particular geostrategic context.

*Hobbes:*

The 17<sup>th</sup> Century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes is also regularly placed among the seminal thinkers of realism. In some respects, this is not surprising. Hobbes first major work was an English translation of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War.<sup>96</sup> Hobbes also famously used the relations among sovereigns as an illustration of what life in the "state of nature" was like for individuals. The state of nature, in Hobbes' famous rendering, was "state of warre." But this "warre consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known."<sup>97</sup> In his formulation, the individual in the state of nature lives in constant fear of violent death and so only escapes it by joining the commonwealth.<sup>98</sup> This domestic focus has led some political theorists to regard Hobbes as "the founder of liberalism" as he was one of the original social contract theorists.<sup>99</sup>

To be sure, there are limits to squarely placing Hobbes in the realist genealogy. To begin with, Hobbes only used international anarchy as a metaphor for the individual in the state of nature but acknowledged that international anarchy is by no means so perilous for sovereigns and states that they need to join a global commonwealth to escape it.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, Hobbes' interest in Thucydides was less focused on the inter-*polis* war between Athens and Sparta and more on the various civil wars that also erupted and destroyed those ancient commonwealths, returning many Greeks to the state of nature.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Hobbes cautioned that "one of the most frequent causes of [civil war] is the reading of the books of policy and history of the ancient Greeks and Romans; from which young men, and all others that are unprovided of the antidote of solid reason, receiving a strong and delightful impression of the great exploits of war achieved by the conductors of their armies, receive withal a pleasing idea of all they have done besides ..." <sup>102</sup>

Nonetheless, Hobbes deserves a part in any genealogy of modern realism. In him Machiavellian imperialism is completely replaced by "security" as the objective of the state. As Pangle and Ahrens Dorf explain, for Hobbes "the prudently timorous, not the bold and proud, are the more reliable source of peace, order, stability, and civilization."<sup>103</sup> Hobbes also

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<sup>96</sup> Robin Sowerby, "Thomas Hobbes's Translation of Thucydides," *Translation and Literature* Vol. 7. No. 2 (1998): 156.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 23. Robert Maynard Hutchins ed. (Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Chicago: 1952), 85.

<sup>98</sup> Berns, "Hobbes," 373.

<sup>99</sup> Leo Strauss, "Notes on *The Concept of the Political*" in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, George Schwab, trans. and intro. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91. Also see Berns, "Hobbes," 375.

<sup>100</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 86. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, 117.

<sup>101</sup> Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*, 80-81.

<sup>102</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 150.

<sup>103</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 148.

maintains that prudence is common among men, explaining that it “is but experience, which equal time equally bestows on all men in those things they equally apply to themselves.”<sup>104</sup> In combination with the fact that states are not as vulnerable as individuals in the state of nature, prudence in the pursuit of security is ironically likely to result in a more stable world. It is therefore not unreasonable to conclude that “Hobbes is a realist of peace.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, after Hobbes modern realism begins to bifurcate into two branches, Offensive and Defensive Realism.

### *Clausewitz:*

No complete genealogy of realism and restraint could omit the philosopher of war, Carl Maria von Clausewitz. While his inclusion in the realist cannon would not strike everyone as appropriate, his fundamental argument for restraint of military force does in our view. Skeptics might disagree on the grounds that Clausewitz’s key theoretical proposition was the tendency of war to move toward its absolute. Indeed, Clausewitz himself declares at one point that “to introduce the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity.”<sup>106</sup> Given that Clausewitz’s professional and intellectual lives were inextricably connected with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which married democracy and nationalism to produce total war,<sup>107</sup> it is understandable how some have confused Clausewitz’s theory of war with his practice of it.<sup>108</sup>

What this caricature of Clausewitz misunderstands is that in his view the theoretical tendency toward the absolute in war was in practice limited by political considerations. To use a natural science analogy, an object in motion in the vacuum of outer space beyond the pull of the Earth’s gravity behaves very different from how it would in the atmosphere. Similarly, war in theory may tend toward the absolute but war in reality is limited by the political objective it serves. “Were [war] a complete, untrammled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require),” Clausewitz observes, “war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment that policy had brought it into being; it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature, very much like a mine that can explode only in the manner or direction predetermined by the setting.” “But in reality,” he points out, “things are different, and this view is thoroughly mistaken.”<sup>109</sup> Rather, Clausewitz recognizes that war is the continuation of politics by other means. “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.... Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.”<sup>110</sup> The consequence, in his view, is that

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<sup>104</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 84.

<sup>105</sup> Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt*, 246.

<sup>106</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and eds., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 76 and 78.

<sup>107</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 174-79.

<sup>108</sup> Among the most egregious is Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982).

<sup>109</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

<sup>110</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 87 and 605.

“the political object – the original motive for the war – will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”<sup>111</sup> Most often, the political objective will limit the appropriate use of military force which makes Clausewitz also a philosopher of military restraint.

### *Morgenthau’s Offensive Realism*

What some refer to as Offensive Realism finds its most prominent exponent in Hans J. Morgenthau. Morgenthau’s is a realism which locates the source of the enduring struggle of international politics in human nature, specifically man’s innate will to power. Certainly, Morgenthau’s realism owes much to Machiavelli’s. Indeed, he reportedly considered writing book on Machiavelli but after reading Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism* decided he did not have to.<sup>112</sup> But Morgenthau, an exile/émigré, was most deeply influenced by XIXth and XXth German thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt.<sup>113</sup>

From the former, Morgenthau imbibed a “tragic” view of human nature and of the human condition. As Morgenthau put it, “to act successfully, that is, according to the rules of the political art, is political wisdom. To know with despair that the political act is inevitably evil, and to act nevertheless, is moral courage. To choose among several expedient actions the least evil one is moral judgement. In the combination of political wisdom, moral courage, and moral judgement, man reconciles his political nature with his moral destiny.”<sup>114</sup>

From the latter, he absorbed a powerful critique of the Liberal/social contract theory of the state.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, a growing number of scholars have detected a “hidden dialogue” between Morgenthau and Schmitt about the latter’s “concept of the political.”<sup>116</sup> As Schmitt puts it, and Morgenthau seems to agree, “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy.”<sup>117</sup> Whereas for Hobbes, the ultimate objective of the social contract was to ensure individual “survival,” Morgenthau, following Nietzsche and Schmitt, replaces it with the “will to power” as source of state behavior.<sup>118</sup> Of course, neither Nietzsche, nor by extension Morgenthau, were German

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<sup>111</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 81. Emphasizing this is H. Rothfels, “Clausewitz” in Edward Meade Earle, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought From Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), 105.

<sup>112</sup> Christoph Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau: An Intellectual Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 218. The treatment of Machiavelli that Morgenthau regarded as definitive was Meinecke’s *Machiavellianism*.

<sup>113</sup> Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 93-108.

<sup>114</sup> Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 203.

<sup>115</sup> On the former, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Marianne Cowan, trans. (Chicago, IL: Gateway/Regnery, 1962); on the latter, see Hugo Drachon, *Nietzsche’s Great Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>116</sup> William E. Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt: The End of Law* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) 227. Also see Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 173.

<sup>117</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

<sup>118</sup> Frei, *Hans J. Morgenthau*, 127, fn. 53.

nationalists in any traditional sense.<sup>119</sup> Rather, their tragic view of politics was rooted in a permanent political struggle to designate “us” versus “them” that transcended traditional categories of political order and ultimately could not be done away with.

One of their key philosophical targets was Liberalism and the social contract approach to escape the state of nature by ending politics in the Schmittian sense. Not only was that goal infeasible, in their view, but the very Liberal effort to remake the world was ironically likely to lead to more frequent and more vicious wars.<sup>120</sup> As Schmitt famously explains, Liberal wars are “considered to constitute the absolute last war of humanity. Such a war is necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed.”<sup>121</sup> The moral imperative of statesmanship, for Morgenthau, was to avoid wars to end all wars by accepting the reality of the world the way it is.

For Morgenthau, philosophy was not just metaphysics; it was ultimately a guide for concrete political action. “The dominance of a philosophy over its age and its fecundity for the future are not determined by the standards of the seminar in logic or metaphysics but by its relation to the life experience of the common man,” in his view. Rather, “that philosophy wins out in the competition of the market place which, with greater faithfulness than any other, makes explicit and meaningful what the man in the street but dimly perceives yet strongly feels.”<sup>122</sup>

Like Lord Acton, Morgenthau feared that absolute U.S. power would corrupt America absolutely.<sup>123</sup> But it would do so in Vietnam and in countless other peripheral battles of the Cold War through its marriage with Liberalism. In Morgenthau’s view, America’s Vietnam “failure could not have been avoided by changes in personnel and strategy and tactics. We failed because our conception of foreign policy as a noble crusade on behalf of some transcendent purpose clashed with the reality of things that not only refused to be transformed by our good intentions but in turn corrupted our purpose.”<sup>124</sup> In this sense, as Alfons Söllner observes, “Morgenthau’s political realism should be understood as a counter-paradigm. One might even call it a conservative reformulation of a ‘prudent’ liberalism ...”<sup>125</sup> In other words,

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<sup>119</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1974), 305-10.

<sup>120</sup> Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt*, 236-37 and 244-45. On Nietzsche’s skepticism about that project, see Drachon, *Nietzsche’s Great Politics*, 106-7.

<sup>121</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 36. Morgenthau clearly echoes this sentiment: Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics*, 51.

<sup>122</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965 [1946]), 7-8.

<sup>123</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, “Explaining the Failures of US Foreign Policy,” *The New Republic*, October 11, 1975, 16-17.

<sup>124</sup> Morgenthau, “Explaining the Failures of US Foreign Policy,” 21.

<sup>125</sup> Alfons Söllner, “German Conservatism in America: Morgenthau’s Political Realism,” *Telos* No. 72 [Special Issue on Carl Schmitt] (Summer 1987): 165. Also see Pangle and Ahrensdoerf, *Justice Among Nations*, 222.

for Morgenthau, restraint could only come from outside the Liberal paradigm, a view some Offensive Realists share.<sup>126</sup>

### *Waltz's Defensive Realism*

The other branch of modern realism is Neo-, Structural, or Defensive Realism. The exemplar of this version of realism is Kenneth Waltz. To be sure, in some places Waltz sounds a lot like Morgenthau and Offensive Realism in critiquing Liberalism. As Waltz wrote in the late 1950s in his seminal work *Man, the State, and War*, "The projected Crusades of the liberals, as of Dostoevsky and the Communists must, if implemented, lead to unlimited war for unlimited ends. They may lead to perpetual war for perpetual peace.... Wars undertaken on a narrow calculation of interest are almost certain to be less damaging than wars inspired by a supposedly selfless idealism."<sup>127</sup> And in opposing growing U.S. intervention in the war in Vietnam, Waltz sounded a Schmittian note in which he asked rhetorically: "which is the better basis of policy – to kill people in order to free them, or to undertake war only out of apprehension for one's own security.... Statesmen of the nineteenth century, it has been said, 'fought, necessary wars and killed thousands; the idealists of the twentieth century fight, just wars and kill millions.'"<sup>128</sup>

But in his subsequent work, especially his *magnum opus Theory of International Politics*, many see in Defensive Realism elements of major Liberal arguments derived from thinkers like Hobbes and even Immanuel Kant.<sup>129</sup> One might conclude from reading Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, the most trenchant and influential statement of contemporary neorealism, that his approach was merely a thoroughly modern intellectual framework that like Athena sprang spontaneously from Zeus' (Waltz's) head as a result of developments in contemporary philosophy of science – particularly logical positivism – and modern economics.<sup>130</sup> One would never know it just by looking at the notes and bibliography of Waltz's *magnum opus*, but the influence of some of the most important political philosophers – especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant -- on neorealism is quite clear from reading Waltz's other work.<sup>131</sup>

From Hobbes, Waltz took the assumption that what states wanted was not superiority but rather security and survival. A world made up of states seeking those more minimal goals is one in which conflict comes about most frequently as a result of accident or misperception.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08): 7-43. Also see Posen and JJM new books?

<sup>127</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 113-14.

<sup>128</sup> Waltz, "The Politics of Peace," 206 quoting A.J.P. Taylor.

<sup>129</sup> Pangle and Ahrens Dorf, *Justice Among Nations*, 239.

<sup>130</sup> See especially Waltz, *TIP*, chapter 2.

<sup>131</sup> See especially his "Kant, Liberalism, and War," *American Political Science Review* Vol. Vol. 56, No. 2 (Jun., 1962): 331-340. In an "Interview with Ken Waltz," *Review of International Studies* Vol. 24, No. ? (1998): 379, Waltz proclaims that "I consider myself to be a Kantian ..."

<sup>132</sup> Jervis? OD/SD literature?

The challenge in such a world, in Robert Gilpin's view, is that "if peace were the ultimate goal of statecraft, then the solution would be easy. Peace may always be had by surrender to the aggressor state. The real task for the peaceful state is to seek a peace that protects and guarantees its vital interests and its concept of international morality."<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, competition in such a world has, as in Kant's well-known system of perpetual peace, the unintended consequence of producing stability. In his eponymous essay, Kant posits that "the mechanism of nature, in which self-seeking inclinations naturally counteract each other in their external relations, can be used by reason as a means to prepare the way for its own end, the rule of right, as well as to promote and secure the nation's internal and external peace."<sup>134</sup> Compare that with Waltz's own formulation: "Intensity and breadth of competition and recurrence of crises limn a picture of constant conflict verging on violence. At the same time, the relative simplicity of relations within a bipolar world, the great pressures that are generated, and the constant possibility of catastrophe produce a *conservatism* on the part of the two great powers."<sup>135</sup>

Waltz's Defensive Realism suggested at least three additional ways that great power politics could produce peace. The first was his famous argument about the stability of a bipolar world, one dominated by just two powers, in which states avoided misperception (they had only one adversary to monitor) and they engaged in balancing each other mostly by internal means (because the rest of the world was irrelevant to them) which combined tended to reduce the opportunity for great power military conflict.<sup>136</sup> Subsequently, Waltz would posit two additional reinforcing tendencies toward peace. The Nuclear Revolution, in which the great powers had a secure second strike capability, effectively ended great power war.<sup>137</sup> And the fact that when most other states faced threats, they were more likely to balance against these threats, rather than bandwagon with them, reinforced the stability of the bipolar world.<sup>138</sup> This view of the dynamics of the international system led Neorealists to advocate a more restrained approach to waging the Cold War.<sup>139</sup>

Admittedly, there are important differences between Offensive and Defensive Realism, largely the result of the latter's absorption of significant elements of Liberalism. For example, many proponents of the grand strategy of Selective Engagement turn out to be pretty unselective in terms of what they regard as legitimate U.S. foreign policy interests involving nuclear proliferation, maintenance of alliances, and managing the consequences of violent

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<sup>133</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 8.

<sup>134</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, Ted Humphrey, trans., (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), 124-25.

<sup>135</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* Vol. 93, No. 3 (Summer 1964): 903-4. [emphasis added]

<sup>136</sup> *TIP* chapter 2?

<sup>137</sup> *Adelphi Paper* + *FA* re: Iran

<sup>138</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985): 3-41.

<sup>139</sup> Barry R. Posen and Stephen W. Van Evera, "Overarming and Underwhelming," *Foreign Policy*, No. 40 (Fall 1980): 99-118.

domestic conflict.<sup>140</sup> Nonetheless, Defensive Realism overall remains more friendly to restraint than do other approaches to international relations.

As with Morgenthau, for example, Waltz recognized that “the possibilities of action, by military and other means, are thus made large for any state that disposes of a surplus of power. Under such circumstances, national impulses shape foreign policy with lesser constraint than prevails when power is more evenly balanced.”<sup>141</sup> For Defensive Realists, the way to counter malign “national impulses” such as Liberal hegemony is to embrace realism. Indeed, Robert Gilpin finds the resources for restraint in the deepest wellsprings of the realist tradition: “Thucydides in fact provides us with a set of policy prescriptions that could have prevented or at least have moderated the conflict. States, he advises, should always act prudently and keep their objectives modest; great powers should not retreat into isolation and should not permit their minor allies to manipulate them. Great powers should always attempt to keep their options open and the stakes in any confrontation limited. States should seek to avoid actions that escalate conflicts of interest into conflicts of honor and prestige; whereas the former can frequently be negotiated, compromises and solutions to the latter cannot easily be found. Above all else, states should respect and not unnecessarily infringe upon the fundamental security or vital interests of other states. If Athens and Sparta had followed such advice the war known as the Peloponnesian war could possibly have been avoided ...”<sup>142</sup> If modern America had done so as well, the last quarter of a century of American foreign policy would have looked very different, to the advantage of America and most of the rest of the world.

### III. American Conservatism and Restraint.

The realist tradition clearly contains within it a general outlook that guides its adherents towards restraint, as we have shown above. Admittedly, the exact contours of how this realism and restraint will be exercised in practice has depended on the security environment in which the state finds itself. Therefore, realism’s particular cautions in the early Cold War context consisted not in advocating for the avoidance of peacetime alliances or standing by in the face of Soviet political moves in Italy and Greece but in not allowing advocates of rollback to push the United States into World War III via Hungary or other flashpoints in superpower relations.<sup>143</sup> Today, a realist-inspired restraint requires something much different given the

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<sup>140</sup> See, for example, Robert J. Art, “Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement,” *International Security* Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter, 1998-1999): 79-113 and Stephen Van Evera, “Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Winter, 1990-1991): 7-57.

<sup>141</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Politics of Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 11, No. 3 (September 1967): 202.

<sup>142</sup> Robert Gilpin, “Peloponnesian War and Cold War” in Richard Ned Lebow and Barry Strauss, eds., *Hegemonic Rivalry: From Thucydides to the Nuclear Age* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 36.

<sup>143</sup> As noted in Robert Landa’s now declassified Pentagon examination of the U.S. response to the Hungarian Revolution, Eisenhower – more than others around him - was worried “that a more active approach might lead to war with the Soviet Union.” Landa concludes that the administration’s “cautious response, in part because of the Suez crisis, managed to avert an East-West military clash whose consequences would likely have represented a far greater disaster than the snuffing out of a nascent Hungarian democracy. Eisenhower and Dulles envisaged the demise of communism over a long period of time. In the end their patience earned its reward.”

vastly different geostrategic and technological context the U.S. faces. But what about the connection between conservatism and realist restraint? We argue that there are commonalities across periods that show that restraint has a fundamental connection with a conservative mindset about the nature of political and economic life. But it does mean that while there can be foreign policy approaches that are consistent with conservatism – such as avoiding social engineering projects abroad – there is not a one-size-fits-all conservative foreign policy for all ages such as “non-interventionism.”

In this section of the paper, we show that restraint is reconcilable with both American conservative thought as well as the practice of U.S. diplomacy since the Founding. We also note that realism and restraint should not be seen as immoral or amoral, and thus potentially corrosive of conservative values and to be avoided.

### *Is Restraint Conservative?*

Americans of a certain age recall that 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern campaigned on the slogan of “Come Home, America.” In his Democratic Party convention speech accepting the nomination, McGovern made a far-reaching case for greater restraint in our foreign policy. As might be expected during the Vietnam War, he argued that we should get our troops out of that country and stop bombing in Indochina. But McGovern argued more broadly that we should “resolve that never again will we send the precious young blood of this country to die trying to prop up a corrupt military dictatorship abroad. This is also the time to turn away from excessive preoccupation overseas to the rebuilding of our own nation. America must be restored to a proper role in the world.” He also took on Pentagon budgets, exclaiming: “From military spending so wasteful that it weakens our nation; come home, America.”<sup>144</sup>

Of course, McGovern was an arch-liberal – indeed his reputation as one haunted the Democratic Party for decades following his shellacking by Nixon.<sup>145</sup> Conservatives, on the other hand, have long been perceived as foreign policy hawks and supporters of an active, deeply interventionist vision for America’s role abroad. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era, many conservatives have embraced primacy by way of neoconservatism and found its boldest public articulation in George W. Bush’s second inaugural. Of course, it can surely be said that Kissinger and Nixon’s realist-inspired moves were obvious exception here, and Reagan’s case is also more complicated and suggestive of restraint than some would have us believe today (remember, this is a president who today would stand accused of cutting and running for his withdrawal from Lebanon after the Marine barracks bombing and who did stand accused of

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<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3711005/The-1956-Hungarian-Revolution-A-Fresh-Look-at.pdf> pg 84 and 86.

<sup>144</sup> <http://www.4president.org/speeches/mcgovern1972acceptance.htm>

<sup>145</sup> See Joshua Mound, “What Democrats Still Don’t Get About George McGovern,” *New Republic* (February 29, 2016); <https://newrepublic.com/article/130737/democrats-still-dont-get-george-mcgovern>: “For the past 40 years, whenever a Democratic presidential hopeful has given off the slightest whiff of leftist anti-establishmentarianism, party leaders and mainstream pundits have invoked McGovern’s name.”

appeasement by Newt Gingrich and the neoconservatives).<sup>146</sup> But the supermajority of American conservative thought leaders, institutions, and journals of public opinion (e.g., AEI, Heritage, Hudson, *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, the recently deceased *Weekly Standard*, etc) and the major conservative politicians of the last 25 years (George W. Bush, John McCain, etc) have all been thoroughly embracing of primacy. Thus one might be forgiven for thinking that modern liberalism rather than conservatism is sympathetic with restraint.<sup>147</sup> But quite the contrary, restraint rather than primacy is most consistent with the principles and mindset of conservatism. Indeed, it is well-grounded in the conservative canon. This presents a powerful opportunity politically for restrainers to advance their agenda by stressing conservative themes with Republicans. It also provides a bit of a puzzle for why conservatives would be so willing to embrace something that seems so at odds with their fundamental approach to the world.

So what are the key principles or premises of conservatism that also apply to foreign policy and that should lead conservatives to embrace realism and restraint? Most important, perhaps, is that conservatives believe that human nature matters deeply to both what is necessary and what is possible in human affairs, including foreign policy. Conservatives hold that mankind has a “constant” nature which is flawed, self-interested, imperfect, or even (for Christian conservatives) prone to sinfulness. As Russell Kirk noted, “Human nature suffers irredeemably from certain grave faults.”<sup>148</sup> Or as Kant famously described, humanity is a “crooked timber” out of which “no straight thing was made.” Conservatives also hold that human reason is limited. These features of our nature are constraints that must be worked within and a limitation on what is realizable. They lead to the conclusion that conflict and war are constant features of the world which can’t be fully overcome by any man-made schema. Therefore, states will need to prepare for war and at times, fight wars. So restrainers properly reject any naïve turn to pacifism. On the other hand, it provides limits on what conservatives believe is possible out of human institutions and a check against plans that are rooted in overly optimistic assumptions about how people will act.

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<sup>146</sup> As Jim Antle recently noted, “Newt Gingrich described a meeting between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev as ‘the most dangerous summit for the West since Adolf Hitler met with Neville Chamberlain in 1938 in Munich.’” W. James Antle, III., “The War Inside Trump,” *The American Conservative* (March/April 2019), 19. As George H.W. Bush, he is sometimes claimed by realists given his decision not to go to Baghdad during the first Gulf War and for his handling of the end of the Cold War.

<sup>147</sup> Especially since one of the most prominent and early articulations of post-Cold War era restraint was titled “Come Home, America.” See Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky. While restraint in foreign policy isn’t necessarily inconsistent with all aspects of modern liberalism (especially those elements it shares with classical liberalism, the true font of a distinctly American conservatism), it otherwise springs in modern liberalism either from a two-spheres argument (e.g, there are different principles that govern how we should think about domestic politics and foreign policy) or an inability to see how conservative principles should be embraced at home as well as abroad (even if those principles – like the knowledge problem – bite harder against social engineering abroad as opposed to social engineering at home, it is still a powerful argument against large projects to reengineer society).

<sup>148</sup> Russell Kirk, “Ten Conservative Principles.” <https://kirkcenter.org/conservatism/ten-conservative-principles/>

The connection to realism here could not be clearer given classical realism's emphasis on human nature as one of the two primary causes of outcomes in international affairs. For example, Hans Morgenthau stressed in his classic book *Politics Among Nations* that human nature "has not changed" and that "the world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. To improve the world one must work with those forces, not against them."<sup>149</sup>

Given the limits of human reason and the "crooked timber of humanity," conservatives believe that we must be modest and humble about the prospects for human perfection, both in ourselves and in others. This means that social engineering, whether at home or abroad, is a difficult and fraught undertaking, often derailed by unintended consequences. It is one reason why conservatives prefer limited government and eschew grand projects. Of course, this isn't a recipe for inaction in the face of human needs and wants. Whether through government or private action, conservatives believe that the best outcomes of social action will be in circumstances where those making the decisions have the greatest knowledge and greatest incentive to act consistent with the outcomes desired. This is why one scholar has noted that "For conservatives, individuals and local communities are better assessors of their own needs and problems than distant bureaucrats."<sup>150</sup> Friedrich Hayek provided the seminal statement of this "knowledge problem" faced by society in his "The Use of Knowledge in Society." There, he captured the challenge of central planning and how it could be bested by harnessing the power of "local knowledge." Hayek argued:

The peculiar character of the problem of a rational economic order is determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. The economic problem of society is thus not merely a problem of how to allocate "given" resources—if "given" is taken to mean given to a single mind which deliberately solves the problem set by these "data." It is rather a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or, to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge which is not given to anyone in its totality. Hence conservatives give at least two-cheers to capitalism since it relies on local knowledge generated by the price system to work. Moreover, conservatives look to bottom-up solutions generated by civil society or governing institutions closer to the problems being addressed since those actors have both greater information and will have to internalize the costs of failure.

This provides a critical argument for why conservatives should be skeptical of foreign policy approaches that by their nature require distant (either geographically or culturally) centralized planning in conditions of limited information. In particular, it suggests that nation-building and other grand enterprises to reshape other societies that are not like ours will be

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<sup>149</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Page 3-4.

<sup>150</sup> Hamilton, Andy, "Conservatism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/conservatism/>. 5/32.

met with fatal challenges under the best of circumstances. But it is difficult to uproot the tendency that Hayek called the “fatal conceit,” namely “that man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes.”<sup>151</sup> And American foreign policymakers since the end of the Cold War has been filled with this hubris about the ability to control events in far-away lands. It is also why the neo-conservative argument that “everything depends on what we do now” is a recipe for disaster since it suggests that we must do all of the complex things required to meet what it is believed our wishes demand.<sup>152</sup> This was seen most fundamentally in the famous complex Powerpoint slide with boxes and arrows going every which way that was produced during the U.S. war in Afghanistan titled “Afghanistan Stability/COIN Dynamics – Security.”<sup>153</sup>

Conservatives are also committed to limited government. They see government as a necessary institution given their view of human nature and thus what life in anarchy could mean. But they also worry about the threat to individual liberty and civil society posed by government power, especially when centralized and rationalized like it is in the modern state. Moreover, they – like their public choice cousins – appreciate that the people who inhabit government have the same natures as those they are meant to contain. No one is an angel. Therefore, conservatives wish to see government powerful enough to protect against the violation of individual rights domestically and against coercion from abroad while limited so as not to so powerful or have such scope that it is a danger to our liberty. Moreover, they recognize that government also faces the knowledge problem despite its vast capability to capture data and information in the modern world. Therefore, it is incapable of making better decisions about the allocation of resources or trade-offs than individuals, civil society groups, or even local units of government closer to problems.

This concern for limited government should tip conservatives to embrace foreign policy restraint. As Randolph Bourne long-ago noted, “War is the health of the state.” This means that war should be a rarely used tool of statecraft only drawn when absolutely necessary and as a last resort since it is likely to lead to greater state power and control. If war carries with it the unintended consequence of increasing the threat to liberty that government is designed to protect in the first place, then it should be treated with great caution. Conservatives should also recognize that war and preparing for war comes at a great cost to our economy since it is not a directly productive activity and these costs can undermine the incentive to work. As Robert Taft noted, “We cannot adopt a foreign policy which gives away all of our people’s earnings or imposes such a tremendous burden on the individual American as, in effect, to destroy his incentive and his ability to increase production and productivity and his standard of living.”<sup>154</sup> They understand that past the point at which we and our property are reasonably secure, military spending is a net negative on the economy. War also aggrandizes executive power, something that is a threat to democratic representation and the idea behind it of the

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<sup>151</sup> F.A. Hayek. *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), X.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds. *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in America’s Foreign and Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2000), X.

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html?>

<sup>154</sup> Robert A. Taft, *A Foreign Policy for Americans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 14.

wisdom of the many. And wartime increases the likelihood that our civil liberties will come under pressure, both because it produces overreaction and hysteria (as it did after Pearl Harbor in regards to Japanese Americans) and because there become real concerns about sabotage, attack, and terrorism.

Conservative also understand the dangers of unintended consequence, moral hazard being foremost among them. Indeed, they are quick to talk about the problem of incentivizing free riding and reckless behavior in social policy. Thus they should recognize the same unintended consequences exist in foreign policy where foreign commitments can lead to others not doing enough to protect their own security or engaging recklessly thinking the United States will ride to the rescue. The problems of welfare don't stop at the water's edge.

Finally, one of the clear areas where conservatives, realists, and restrainers agree is on the virtue of prudence and the danger of idealism and radical change. Russell Kirk noted that "Burke agrees with Plato that in the statesman, prudence is chief among virtues. Any public measure ought to be judged by its long-run consequences. . . . Sudden and slashing reforms are as perilous as sudden and slashing surgery."<sup>155</sup> For conservatives, this means an aversion to untested idealism and towards careful thinking about likely costs and benefits. These are also foundational principles of realism that restraint stands upon. Thus the restrainer looks askance at foreign policy projects that have heroic assumptions or ideological foundations, as we have seen to our detriment when it comes to nation-building in Afghanistan or revolutionary designs for reshaping Iraq and the greater Middle East. In short, the conservative and the realist restrainer preach humility and prudentialism.

*Is restraint compatible with America and the American foreign policy tradition?*

Given conservatism's stress on the importance of tradition and its caution about enacting policies that aren't in harmony with a society's political culture, it is worth asking whether restraint is consistent with the American way and American history. Fortunately for restrainers, American history provides plenty of evidence that it is. Indeed, for much of its history, the United States followed a policy of restraint in foreign affairs. The U.S. avoided political connections with outside powers for much of its history, not concluding a permanent peacetime alliance until the post-World War II period, and it largely avoided foreign wars outside its sphere of influence until at least 1898. Moreover, it has always been difficult for policy elites in Washington to convince Americans of the opposite - that we need to be deeply and militarily engaged abroad. We are a people founded in the idea that we could create a new order for the ages in the New World and that this experiment would be corrupted if we didn't maintain distance from the Old World and its ways. And for most of our history we have either operationalized that in our grand strategy or seen its tug even when our interests or our leaders propelled us back into that Old World. As one of us noted previously, "a more restrained approach – rather than being something foreign, exotic, idealistic, or untested – is in fact a very

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<sup>155</sup> Kirk. Ten Conservative Principles.

American approach to foreign policy and one that has deep, deep roots in American ideals and history.”<sup>156</sup>

Americans in their colonial period knew greatly about the dangers of becoming enmeshed in the power politics of the Old World. They were deeply impacted by Britain’s imperial policies, often suffering economically from its mercantilism or touched by its great power wars. Indeed, some of the “long train of abuses” that caused our forefathers to break with Britain had their roots in the French and Indian War that was part of the wider Seven Years War. And while desirous of their independence, the United States once declared realized they would need allies to be successful. Thus its new leaders set about quickly to gain foreign support, ultimately finding it in the form of an alliance with France. Although this alliance was critical to American success in its War of Independence, it soon proved to be a burden that threatened to enmesh the young United States in foreign conflicts that were not of its interests and to wreck domestic unity within the Washington administration and around the country. It came to a head in the clash between the pro-French idealists who wanted to honor its alliance commitments during the War of the First Coalition and the more realist Hamiltonian wing of the administration who saw great danger in doing so. The Hamiltonians won out, and Washington set the course for the next hundred plus years of American foreign policy with his Proclamation of Neutrality and his masterful Farewell Address.

Washington’s farewell called upon the United States to follow an independent course in its foreign relations, steering clear of dangerous political commitments and emotionalism for or against other regimes. On the former, he laid out what came to be known as Washington’s Great Rule: “The Great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign Nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.” Therefore, “’Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” He understood “that ‘til folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another – that it must pay with a portion of its independence for whatever it may accept under that character.” To Washington, this non-entanglement approach was grounded in our uniquely fortunate geographic position and very different interests:

Europe has a set of primacy interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. – Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. – Hence therefore it must be unwise to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities: - Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.

But Washington wasn’t just concerned about formal commitments but emotional attachment for anything but the American cause. He counseled: “Excessive partiality for one nation and excessive dislike of another, cause those whom they actuate to see danger on only one side, and serve to veil and even second the arts of influence on the other side.” Washington also saw the danger of military interventionism abroad, and thus was no mere unilateralist but a restrainer through and through. He asked: “Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a

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<sup>156</sup> Ruger, 135.

situation? – Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? – Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, Rivalship, Interest, Humor, or Caprice?”

While realistic and depressingly prescient, Washington’s farewell is most important for the purposes of this paper because it defined America’s approach to foreign relations for generations after him. As historian Manfred Jonas claimed, “Since the foreign policy of Washington and Jefferson proved serviceable, it was followed consistently until the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>157</sup> The United States had minimal commitments abroad until the Cold War – over a century and a half after Washington’s farewell. Moreover, it largely disdained even getting involved in political issues with other countries that didn’t touch directly on U.S. concerns, preferring instead commercial relations and a benign neglect. The U.S. simply did very little outside of North America for most of its history.

Of course, Washington’s Great Rule and his warning against military intervention abroad were eventually overcome. The latter was breached by the Spanish-American War, during which we also gained an overseas empire, then more dramatically in 1917 when Wilson joined the Great War. The former was ended in 1949 with the creation of NATO. And both were violently violated in the post-Cold War era when the United States fought wars across the globe and expanded its commitments beyond anything we had seen before. But the caution Washington and those who followed him in American politics showed for so long evince that there is indeed a long-standing American tradition of restraint that flows from a realistic appraisal of international politics and America’s geostrategic position.

It is also worth noting that even after the United States abandoned its twin commitment to non-entanglement and anti-interventionism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, restraint maintained a major pull on American conservatives. During the Spanish-American War and the Filipino War that followed it, there were major voices who joined the anti-imperialist cause. Historian Robert Beisner notes that the anti-imperialists “viewed the world from a conservative framework . . . in general they all shared the same biases and for the most part cherished the same conservative vision of an ideal American society.”<sup>158</sup> For example, William Graham Sumner stood firmly against the imperial turn, claiming that by charting this course we were essentially allowing the Spanish model to conquer the American one. In opposition, Sumner stood for a commitment to liberty that has been a hallmark of conservatism in the U.S:

The great reason why all these enterprises which begin by saying to somebody else, We know what is good for you better than you know yourself and we are going to make you do it, are false and wrong is that they violate liberty; or, to turn the same statement into other words, the reason why liberty, of which we Americans talk so much, is a good thing is that it means leaving people to live out their own lives in their own way, while

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<sup>157</sup> Manfred Jonas, “Isolationism” in Chatfield, C. and DeConde, A., eds. (Scribner’s, 1978). 498.

<sup>158</sup> Robert L. Beisner, *Twelve Against Empire: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York; McGraw, 1968), 222.

we do the same. If we believe in liberty, as an American principle, why do we not stand by it?....<sup>159</sup>

A decade later, American anti-interventionists held out for a long time against those who wanted the U.S. to enter World War I. And the backlash against it was swift and sure, ushering in nearly two decades in which “isolationist” sentiment dominated public opinion. During that time, Americans rejected the League of Nations and tried to stay out of active involvement in World War II until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war made that impossible.

The Washingtonian approach was largely dead after World War II, especially when U.S. elites committed themselves to a thorough-going internationalism as the answer to preventing another world war and militarizing containment as the solution to the menace posed by the Soviet Union. But absent the rise of the Soviet threat and how the U.S. structured its response, it isn't clear that we would have witnessed such a complete rejection of the traditional American approach to foreign policy. The militarization of containment didn't occur right away; it required the war in Korea to propel it. And the idea that Americans would naturally turn inward again was a consistent worry of the foreign policy establishment, hence why it made concerted efforts to maintain the case for engagement abroad. This included broad educational endeavors and policing the boundaries of acceptable discourse (including frequent ad hominem attacks on those who advocated a different path, especially by charging them with “isolationism”). Even then, voices of greater restraint such as Robert Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, George McGovern, and Henry Kissinger in politics were not without their supporters, especially as the Vietnam War showed what its opposite could mean (indeed, as Robert Kagan has noted, wars like Vietnam and later Iraq aren't aberrations or errors of doctrinal interpretation but “followed naturally from a foreign policy doctrine that successive administrations had embraced and justified.”)<sup>160</sup> And George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Robert Tucker, and other thought leaders outside of politics cautioned America from the ivory tower. And once the Cold War ended, a conservative opposition to George H.W. Bush and then Bill Clinton's foreign policies erupted with Pat Buchanan at its main spear carrier in politics. But this wasn't a one man show. There was serious conservative intellectual opposition to what the U.S. was doing with its unipolar moment and who saw the post-Cold War era as one in which the U.S. could return to normalcy and realize the fruits of its success against the Soviets. And it is unsurprising that their arguments were implicitly or explicitly rooted in the historical tradition that Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, J.Q. Adams, Monroe, Cleveland, and others had bequeathed to them.

*Three Cases in Point from the Modern Foreign Policy Tradition:*

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<sup>159</sup> William Graham Sumner, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” 1898; <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/oll-reader-11>

<sup>160</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018), ?.

It would be impossible to describe the thought of all of the conservative realists from the post-World War II era in order to show that even in the modern period there wasn't significant restraint even within an unrestrained era. But it is useful to discuss three key cases in point: Eisenhower, who while presiding over the early Cold War, nonetheless practiced significant restraint; Kennan, whose complicated history as the father of containment was ultimately redeemed as a critic of its excesses; and Kissinger, whose arguments with the left and the neo-conservatism suggested a brand of conservative realism.

### *Eisenhower*

[Placeholder: 1) I shall go to Korea 2) Hungary; 3) U.S. commitment to NATO; 4) Farewell Speeches?]

After two years in office, President Trump finally made his first trip to visit U.S. forces in the field in Iraq. Having announced the withdrawal of American troops from Syria and a draw down in Afghanistan, going to Iraq, where he is likely to maintain a U.S. military presence, probably made political sense. By now dragging on ten years longer than our second longest war in Vietnam, the war in Afghanistan appears to have come to a similarly inconclusive stalemate: Our adversaries the Taliban cannot win while American troops are on the ground but our efforts to Afghanize the war and rebuild the Afghan government and nation, the only road to victory, have also come to naught.

This situation is strikingly similar to that facing the United States in 1952 in Korea. There, military stalemate settled in with the frontlines roughly tracing the original dividing-line between North and South Korea. The American public, scarcely recovered from the titanic efforts of the Second World, quickly tired of the frozen quagmire on the 38th Parallel. Senior civilian and leaders in Washington were plagued by a gnawing fear that Korea might be "the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy," in Chief of Staff of the Army General Omar Bradley's alliterative phrase.

Into that strategic morass stepped another distinguished former soldier, General Dwight Eisenhower, who campaigned for the Republican nomination and then the presidency on a platform that included ending the Korean War. In what many presidential scholars regard as one of the most decisive presidential campaign speeches ever delivered, on October 24, 1952, the former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe pledged in Detroit, Michigan that if elected, he would go to Korea himself to end the fighting and start bringing U.S. forces home. Ten days later, Ike defeated Democratic nominee Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, whose campaign team grudgingly admitted that the old soldier's "I Shall Go to Korea" speech helped to turn the electoral tide.

Almost 69 years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower delivered his "Farewell Address" in which he famously warned his fellow Americans of the pernicious influence of what he termed "the military-industrial complex." This was, to be sure, an important speech for many reasons, not the least of which were its prescience about the challenges that American preeminence

would pose for our domestic liberties and the prudent counsel of restraint he proffered to protect them.

Not content merely to celebrate the American “pre-eminence” that he had fought for as a soldier and then helped consolidate as President, Eisenhower cautioned that the country needed to be careful in how it used its growing might. Recognizing the dark side of such unrivaled power, the retiring President warned against America’s “recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties” and instead pointed to the need to strike some balance so as to become a military super-power while not undermining our free-market economy and the liberty of our private citizens, both current and future.

The danger, in the old soldier’s view, was that we would give in to “the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.”

But the speech’s central contention – that the root of the growing imbalance between our capabilities and interests, on the one hand, and our aspirations, on the other, was the unholy alliance between militarism and capitalism – strikes us from the perspective of half a century later as misguided, not only because its most oft-quoted phrase has become a staple of the anti-American Left. It was, after all, not generals and plutocrats who impelled us upon that imperial trajectory that Ike so presciently warned against. For that, we will have to look to the vital center of our political culture in leading America to become a quasi-imperial power.

We are also approaching the 60th anniversary of John F. Kennedy’s first, and only, inaugural speech, which contained many stirring phrases that would crystallize the bipartisan consensus in favor of an overly ambitious American foreign policy. In it, the new President promised to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty” and enthusiastically welcomed the “the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger.” These noble sentiments would seduce Americans from across the political spectrum from human rights liberals to the Neoconservatives and lead them to coalesce behind a series of foreign policy debacles from Vietnam to Iraq.

So on every anniversary of Eisenhower’s “Farewell Address,” we should re-read the speech (or better yet watch it on You Tube) and celebrate it as one of the seminal conservative warnings against foreign policy mission-creep and as the Right’s most eloquent brief on behalf of a posture of strategic restraint.

*Kennan*

George F. Kennan was a career Foreign Service Officer who while posted in Moscow after the Second World War drafted an unprecedentedly long telegram back to Foggy Bottom that was subsequently published anonymously in *Foreign Affairs* under the pseudonym Mr. X. entitled the sources of Soviet Conduct.” In it, he sought to explain why cooperation between the wartime allies was faltering and proposed a strategy of “containment” in response. Unfortunately, The X article was not as clear about Kennan’s restrained position as it could have been sparking a debate with other restraint-included realists like Walter Lippmann.<sup>161</sup> One problem was Kennan’s use of the term “counterforce” to describe U.S. response, which suggested that the Cold War struggle would be primarily military.<sup>162</sup> Another was Kennan’s evident concern with maintaining U.S. “credibility” as an important consideration. Credibility concerns would also inadvertently globalize containment far beyond what Kennan originally had in mind.<sup>163</sup>

Kennan’s December 1948 National War College lectures convey a clearer reflection of his conception of containment. In them, he urged the United States to focus its defense on the five largest centers of industrial power, pay less attention to the domestic character of other countries, and recognize that principle and interest not incompatible. As his biographer John Lewis Gaddis documents, containment, in Kennan’s original conception, was actually limited in scope and application.<sup>164</sup> It was, in other words, a restrained policy which he presciently anticipated would lead to the eventual “mellowing” of the Soviet regime and ultimately setup the United States for victory without war in the Cold War.<sup>165</sup>

While Kennan was not a philosopher or theorist of international relations, he could still trace his intellectual genealogy to the well-springs of realism. Had had, for example, a tragic Thucydidean view of international politics which identified “fear, ambition, insecurity, jealousy ... as prime movers of events.”<sup>166</sup> Moreover, as Gaddis shows, Kennan’s approach to U.S. grand strategy was grounded upon “a concept of interests based on a pessimistic view of the international order, but on a degree of measured optimism as to the possibilities for restraining rivalries within it. This could be done, not by relying on artificial sanction and constraints, but by making use of the organic equilibrium maintained by the very tensions inherent in the system.”<sup>167</sup>

Like many realists, Kennan was ambivalent about unrestrained power, even in the possession of his own country the United States. While most of his compatriots celebrated the

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<sup>161</sup> Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1947), 19-20. For an updated version of this critique, see Walter L. Hixson, *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 44.

<sup>162</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “Containment: A Reassessment,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 55, No. 4 (July 1977): 877.

<sup>163</sup> Hixson, *George F. Kennan*, 37-8, 60, 61, 68-9, 94, 101, 105, 152, 153, 205, and 300.

<sup>164</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 29-30.

<sup>165</sup> Mr. X, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 24, No. 4 (July 1947): 566-82.

<sup>166</sup> George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 6. Also see 4.

<sup>167</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 32.

ascension of America to the world stage after 1989, Kennan highlighted its downside.<sup>168</sup> Looking back on the Spanish-American War and the subsequent occupation and nation-building exercises in Cuba and especially the Philippines, Kennan cautioned that “there are many things we Americans should beware of, and among them is the acceptance of any sort of a paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it even in the form of military occupation, if we can possibly avoid it, or for any period longer than is absolutely necessary.”<sup>169</sup>

Kennan was also restrained about great power wars. He pointed out, for example, that had the United States not have intervened in the First World War, it is possible that Imperial Germany may have survived the war and not been replaced by the tumultuous Weimar Republic and the execrable Third Reich. A shorter and less intense WWI might also have not seen the Czar fall to the Bolsheviks in 1917, setting up the interwar failure to balance Germany and then the Cold War.<sup>170</sup> Kennan the historian was also far more measured about the consequences of the lack of U.S. “restraint” in its confrontation with Japan before WWII.<sup>171</sup> As a public intellectual, Kennan vigorously opposed the growing U.S. escalation in Vietnam on the grounds that America had no direct interest there, it was not a problem that military force could solve, and the cost to the United State’s global reputation of waging an increasingly brutal yet unproductive war was too high.<sup>172</sup>

Like Schmitt and Morgenthau, Kennan deplored that “moral” wars for lofty goals like spreading democracy invariably become “total” wars and with such ambitious objectives are likely to be difficult to win.<sup>173</sup> Instead, Kennan urged his countrymen to “have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding – and the courage to recognize that if our own purposes and undertakings here at home are decent ones, unsullied by arrogance or hostility toward other people or delusions of superiority, then the pursuit of our national interest can never fail to be conducive to a better world.... Whatever is realistic in concept, and founded in an endeavor to see both ourselves and others as we really are, cannot be illiberal.”<sup>174</sup>

### *Kissinger*

Aside from Kennan, one of the few realists to shape American grand strategy over an extended period of time was Henry Kissinger. A German émigré who like Morgenthau escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930s, Kissinger lackadaisically pursued an academic career at Harvard while positioning himself for a position in Washington, which he achieved in 1969 when he became the *eminence gris* for President Nixon, first as his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs and then as his Secretary of State. He was, according to his biographer Walter Issacson,

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<sup>168</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, vii and 3.

<sup>169</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 19.

<sup>170</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 55-90.

<sup>171</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 53.

<sup>172</sup> Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, 185-88.

<sup>173</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 102. Also cf. 100-1.

<sup>174</sup> Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, 103.

“one of the few realists – as opposed to idealists – to shape American diplomacy.”<sup>175</sup> Under his tutelage, the Nixon Administration embraced a grand strategy that represented in important respects a return to George Kennan’s original vision of commitment.<sup>176</sup>

His early idols were the architects of the XIXth Century Concert of Europe Castlereagh and Metternich. But his “Pericles” would prove to be the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the architect of modern Germany, who successfully “turned power into an instrument of self-restraint.”<sup>177</sup> Issacson argues that it was the Holocaust which swept up numerous family members and drove him from Germany that made Kissinger a “conservative in the truest sense.”<sup>178</sup> His ambition was to inject realism into the American body-politic in order to end its historical swings between isolationism and crusading.<sup>179</sup>

Issacson notes that “to Kissinger, an emphasis on realism and national interests – even though it might seem callous in its execution – was not a rejection of moral values. Rather, he saw it as the best way to pursue the stable world order that he believed was the ultimate moral imperative, especially in the nuclear age.”<sup>180</sup> One early example of this was his opposition to the creation of Israel on grounds it would alienate Arabs and thereby undermine U.S. interests in the Middle East.<sup>181</sup> But the quintessentially realpolitik move he engineered for the Nixon Administration was the dramatic opening to the People’s Republic of China, which in one fell swoop reordered the Cold War geopolitical landscape.<sup>182</sup>

While Kissinger’s battles with the Left – the result of his secretive style, his expansion of the Vietnam War, and his various Third World meddlings, including in Chile in 1973 -- were more visible during and immediately after the Nixon Administration, his true adversaries were the Neoconservatives on the Right who regarded *Détente* and the opening to China as not only immoral but also pusillanimous.<sup>183</sup> The power of the neoconservative critique, and the ultimately ephemeral result of their effort to nudge America toward realism, is due to the fact that Liberalism is so deeply entrenched in the vital center of American politics.<sup>184</sup>

Finally, America is, in addition to being a Liberal country, also a very religious and overwhelmingly Christian one. Given that, some might argue that it is doubly unlikely that it will embrace realism and restraint; Liberalism and faith both reject it. The root of the problem for the faithful Christian, one might argue, is that realism is an avowedly immoral approach to

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<sup>175</sup> Walter Issacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992[2005]), 10.

<sup>176</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 276 and 308.

<sup>177</sup> Kissinger, “The White Revolutionary,” 890. Also see 889.

<sup>178</sup> Issacson, *Kissinger*, 31. Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1957) and *idem.*, “The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (Summer 1968): 888-92.

<sup>179</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 278.

<sup>180</sup> Issacson, *Kissinger*, 766.

<sup>181</sup> Issacson, *Kissinger*, 60.

<sup>182</sup> Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 296.

<sup>183</sup> Issacson, *Kissinger*, 10.

<sup>184</sup> Issacson, *Kissinger*, 764-65.

statecraft. We have discussed at length the relationship between realism and Liberalism already and made clear that realism is not incompatible (though it is certainly in tension) with American political thought and tradition. It remains here to make the case for Christian realism against the skeptics.<sup>185</sup>

Perhaps the greatest exponent of American Christian realism was Reinhold Niebuhr. A Protestant theologian and prominent Cold War public intellectual, Neibuhr rooted his realism in Christian insight into the fallen nature of man.<sup>186</sup> Given that, “the highest morality possible for nations seems to be, not a sacrifice of its interests, but a prudent self-interest, which knows how to find the point of concurrence between its interests and the more universal interest.... These considerations must persuade one that the moral issue in international relations consists as much in moderating moral pretensions as in establishing moral norms for man’s collective life.”<sup>187</sup> Many contemporary realists sympathetic to restraint continue to find his approach compatible with dual citizenship in the Earthly and Heavenly Cities.<sup>188</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions: Realism, Restraint, and Conservativism as the Pillars for a Different American Internationalism.

Realists take seriously the threats we face in the international system, but they also put them in perspective. The fight against international terrorism is hardly World War IV and Vladimir Putin’s thugocracy in Russia is scarcely the Evil Empire redux.

Realists would prefer that rogue states like North Korea and Iran not obtain nuclear weapons but do not think that if they did it would be the end of the world. After all, despite Mao’s hair-raising rhetoric about the possibility of winning a nuclear war during the 1950s, even Communist China behaved rationally once it developed nuclear weapons. In other words, realism counsels prudent caution – not panic – in the face of the security threats the United States faces today.

Realists understand that nationalism is the most important –ism in world politics. While sometimes it manifests itself in ugly xenophobia it can, ironically, also help to make the international system more benign. Nationalism is the engine for balancing behavior among states, which helps maintain the balance of power and ensures that most states will make provision for their own defense if they have no other choice.

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<sup>185</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The End of Machiavellianism,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1942): 1-33. For a more recent, and more mixed, take on Niebuhr from a Roman Catholic perspective, see Jackson Lears, “American Oracle: The Uses and Abuses of Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Commonweal* October 11, 2011 at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/american-oracle>.

<sup>186</sup> Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 66.

<sup>187</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Moral Issue in International Relations” in Nicolaus Guilhot, *The Invention of International Relations Theory: Realism, The Rockefeller Foundation, and the 1954 Conference on Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 270-71.

<sup>188</sup> Andrew Bacevich, “Illusions of Managing History: The Enduring Relevance of Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Historically Speaking*, January/February 2008, 23-25.

Realism is sometimes caricatured as an amoral Machiavellian approach to world politics. While realists eschew ideological crusades, they are hardly disinterested in ethics in statecraft. It was, after all, the conservative realists in the U.S. military who have been most consistently committed to upholding the Geneva Conventions and maintaining the norm against torture than have civilians.

Realists, following Washington's counsel, are less likely than others to place our enemies beyond the pale of civilization. As Reinhold Niebuhr observed in a somewhat different context, realism "ought to persuade us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners. It ought to mitigate the self-righteousness which is an inevitable concomitant of all human conflict."<sup>189</sup>

Realists fear that as the United States struggles to maintain the dominance of the world it enjoyed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and before the rise of China, that effort will generate opposition around the world, resulting in greater international tension and conflict. Appreciating the force of nationalism and the preeminence of balance of power concerns, realists understand that the rest of the world does not see the United States as a benign hegemon despite our good intentions. "One reads about the world's desire for American leadership only in the United States," observed an anonymous British diplomat, but "everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism."

Most importantly, other foreign policy approaches vacillate between isolationism when they cannot change the world and messianism when they can. Realism, in contrast, provides the United States with the basis for a consistent and sustained policy of engagement with the rest of the world based on the principle that it can secure its national interests without having either to remake the rest of the world in its image or retreat to Fortress America entirely.

Therefore, conservatives should regard realists if not as ideological soul-mates at least as kissing cousins in the effort to craft a more effective foreign policy for the United States given their shared principles of prudence, humility and restraint which characterize their views of the world and America's role in it.

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<sup>189</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist" in Joseph Kip Kosek, ed., *American Religion, American Politics: An Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2017), 126.