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Unrealists

Dimitri K. Simes

HAVING AN honest and serious foreign policy debate is not an easy thing in contemporary American political culture. Television sound bites, bumper-sticker clichés passing for ideas, single-issue interest groups and highly partisan politics all work against a thoughtful evaluation of realistic U.S. options. Yet even for the sole superpower, acting in a state of delusion is not a prescription for a successful foreign policy.

Take Iraq. It should be apparent by now that the United States went into Iraq without a serious foreign policy debate. There was little critical examination of intelligence justifying the war, what the war was supposed to accomplish, or what postwar planning would be required. How did this happen?

Beginning in the late 1990s, a highly vocal group of neoconservatives—many involved in the Project for a New American Century—started a crusade for regime change in Iraq. In letters, articles and speeches, they argued that there was no other way to deal with Iraq than by wholesale regime change—and they did not hesitate to attack those who disagreed with their assessment as unpatriotic or cowardly. Removing Saddam Hussein was deemed to be such a priority that, almost immediately after 9/11, then-Deputy

Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz was arguing that the United States should attack Iraq before dealing with Al-Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan.

Champions of regime change in Iraq were certainly not limited to Jewish Americans or, even more generally, to supporters of Israel. But it is also clear that many of those who were vociferous proponents of the Iraq invasion were also those who enthusiastically endorsed and even encouraged policy proposals advanced by the segment of the Israeli political spectrum in Benjamin Netanyahu’s corner of the Likud Party—essentially requiring the United States to promote permanent revolution in the Middle East as the only way to ensure Israel’s security and survival. Those who disagreed with this agenda were accused of being soft on terror and, in more recent years, of being “enemies of democracy”, unsympathetic to Israel, or worse.

The important yet troubling discussion of the Israeli lobby this spring is a dramatic illustration of our difficulty to have an honest conversation about U.S. foreign policy among ourselves. The “scandal” started when two professors—John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago (who is also a valued member of *The National Interest’s* Advisory Council) and Stephen Walt of Harvard University—published a “working paper” that concluded that U.S. foreign policy has been twisted by the “Israel Lobby” to such

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a degree that it no longer reflects fundamental American interests and values.

I disagree with many points in the paper, beginning with its first footnote, which asserts that the very existence of an Israel lobby suggests that a pro-Israel policy “is not in the American national interest.” Policy in the modern American system is not determined by a council of the learned and the disinterested. Fundamental to our democracy is the notion that those with an interest in shaping decisions should organize, advise and advocate—and anyone who wants a role needs a lobby.

Also, although they acknowledge that what they call “the Lobby” is in fact a “loose coalition of individuals and organizations”, Mearsheimer and Walt never made sufficient distinctions among the many groups and individuals who support Israel to varying degrees for varying reasons. Being committed to Israel’s secure existence does not necessarily make someone a member of “the Lobby”, and grouping together organizations and individuals with very different philosophies and agendas only confuses both who Israel’s supporters are and how they exercise influence in Washington. Some groups, like the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, are clearly lobbyists and would not deny it. Others have strong affection for Israel but act entirely on their own without any direction from anyone inside or outside the United States. And there are people like me, who disagree with specific Israeli policies on many occasions, particularly on the settlements, but are not prepared to dictate to Israel how to protect itself while it is subject to regular terrorist attacks and menacing threats from Iran. (And here I must note that Mearsheimer and Walt might have had greater credibility if they had acknowledged that Israel never had a credible Palestinian partner willing and able to assure the security of the Jewish state in exchange for territorial concessions.)

One can also fault Mearsheimer and Walt for a lack of nuance or sensitivity. They do not express any special sympathy for the Jewish predicament in the Middle East or in Europe, the Holocaust notwithstanding. On a personal level, as someone who experienced anti-Semitism firsthand in the Soviet Union, I would have welcomed a little more understanding on their part—but there is a great difference between not being particularly sympathetic to a person or group and expressing bigotry or hatred such as anti-Semitism. Nothing in Mearsheimer and Walt’s paper merits the latter accusation.

Still, Mearsheimer and Walt are serious people raising serious issues in a serious way. They—and by extension all Americans who want a rational discussion about U.S. foreign policy—deserve better than the virtual lynching to which they were subjected by some influential pundits. A former Israeli official commented that it is “certainly time for a debate. Sadly, if predictably, response to the Harvard study has been characterized by a combination of the shrill and the smug”—including charges of bigotry, hatred and anti-Semitism.¹

SO WHAT made Mearsheimer and Walt’s critics so mad? Their lack of nuance and subtlety hardly explains the fury—and their main points can be easily substantiated. There is a powerful pro-Israel lobby in the United States, which together with its allies has a major impact on U.S. policy toward Israel and the Middle East in general. Critics of Mearsheimer and Walt, who are having a good time ridiculing their suggestion that the very presence of the Israel lobby demonstrates that supporting Israel is not in the national interest, should also admit that lobbies are created to influence policy and Israel’s lobby is no

¹Daniel Levy, “So Pro-Israel that It Hurts”, *Ha’aretz*, March 25, 2006.

different. Likewise, it is hardly controversial that the Israel lobby is probably the most influential ethnic lobby in America. As Nicholas Goldberg wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*: “It seems silly to deny that a powerful lobby on behalf of Israel exists. The real question is how pernicious it is. Does it, in fact, persuade us to act counter to our national interest—or is it a positive thing?”² This is what reasonable people should debate.

Since the interests of no two states completely coincide, it is a legitimate question to ask what the costs and benefits are of supporting another state that finds itself in a difficult fight against many opponents and what might be the price of making its enemies our enemies. Israel’s opponents control enormous oil reserves and have used them in the past to penalize U.S. support of Israel, as during the 1973 oil embargo. Today, widespread hostility toward Israel in the Middle East and among Muslims in general contributes to hostility toward the United States, including, but not limited to, terrorism. Simply raising these points should not be grounds for vitriolic attack. And ignoring facts because they are inconvenient is irresponsible and offensive.

But this is exactly what Martin Peretz, the editor-in-chief of the *New Republic*, did. He attacked Maryland University professor and Brookings scholar Shibley Telhami for being a “simpleminded person” for his observations, cited by Mearsheimer and Walt, that “no other issue resonates with the public in the Arab world, and many other parts of the Muslim world, more deeply than Palestine. No other issue shapes the regional perceptions of America more fundamentally than the issue of Palestine.”³ A “pathetic citation”, Peretz says, even though Telhami has drawn this conclusion from extensive and vigorous polling in the Arab and Islamic world—and his assessments are substantiated by U.S. government studies.

But pointing out that U.S. support for Israel complicates America’s standing in the Arab and Muslim world does not mean that one believes that abandoning Israel would be a net positive for the United States. Abandoning a long-standing ally costs credibility—and credibility is one of a great power’s most important assets. Any perception that American support for Israel could be jettisoned—particularly as a result of hostile pressure—would embolden the Jewish state’s enemies and other extremists, destabilizing the whole region. Moderate, pro-American Arab regimes would be their next victims. Finally, U.S. moral commitments to Israel (as the land of the long-suffering Jewish people and a fellow democracy) are not to be discounted.

But critics of Mearsheimer and Walt are offended by the very idea that American support of Israel could ever be to America’s disadvantage—just as they were offended by those who questioned the magnitude of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein or who pointed out that constant calls for regime change (as embodied in the 1998 bipartisan Congressional resolution) and ongoing military strikes might create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their response was to attack the credibility and character and even the patriotism of those who think otherwise. Even Brent Scowcroft, who as national security advisor in the George H. W. Bush Administration played a key role in defeating Saddam during the Gulf War, was the victim of a vicious and highly personal assault. Predictably, the bulk of the character assassination directed at Mearsheimer and Walt has come from individuals who bear the lion’s share of responsibility for our predicament in Iraq, yet who want to use name-calling as a way of precluding any honest examination of how it happened.

²“Who’s Afraid of the ‘Israel Lobby?’”, March 26, 2006.

³“Oil and Vinegar”, *New Republic* (April 10, 2006).

One of the most shameless responses to Mearsheimer and Walt came from Johns Hopkins professor Eliot Cohen, who—without providing any evidence—accused them of being anti-Semites. He was offended that Mearsheimer and Walt mentioned him in passing—in one of their footnotes—as part of the neoconservative network eager to use U.S. power to reshape the Middle East. How dare they even imply (which they did not) that his loyalty might be questioned when the American flag flew from his porch and his oldest son—the third generation of his family to serve as an officer in the U.S. Army—was about to return from duty in Baghdad?⁴

Of course, Cohen's fellow neoconservatives have never had any shame in painting their opponents as would-be traitors. (Remember the “unpatriotic conservatives”?)⁵ They are now shocked to receive a tiny dose of their own medicine. But this is not about name-calling; it is about accountability for the policy positions one has articulated. Cohen had a long record of public advocacy in favor of regime change in Iraq, years before 9/11. He also called for the overthrow of the Iranian government in 2001, when the moderate and pro-reform, if ineffective, President Khatami was in charge rather than the current firebrand Ahmadinejad. And Cohen was not just an outside advocate; as a member of the Defense Policy Board, he directly contributed to deliberations that led to the current American debacle in Iraq. His book *Supreme Command* (2002) publicly celebrated Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's tendency to disregard the advice and assessments of the professional military in planning for the Iraq campaign and its aftermath—and we know the results.⁶

All of us can make mistakes, particularly policy analysts. I myself did not think that Mikhail Gorbachev would be both bold and blind enough to undertake reforms that would destroy his own sys-

tem. Afterward, I thought and even wrote about the reasons for my—and others'—errors in judgment about Gorbachev and hopefully learned some useful lessons. What is particularly repugnant about polemicists like Cohen is that instead of taking a decent interval to analyze their mistakes, they move at full speed to wrap themselves in the American flag to attack others.

Lawrence Kaplan, in attacking realists and other pragmatic conservatives in 2000, opined: “Were foreign policy intellectuals held to the same standards of accountability as doctors and lawyers, a substantial slice of the commentariat would have been sued for malpractice or disbarred”—commenting on the “declinists” at the time of the Soviet collapse. But many neoconservatives don't want that standard applied to them. This is precisely what Mearsheimer has been doing for the last two years. In these pages last fall, he wrote:

Neoconservatives and realists have two very different theories of international politics, which were reflected in their opposing views on the wisdom of invading and occupying

⁴“Yes, It's Anti-Semitic”, *Washington Post*, April 5, 2006.

⁵“Guess Who Hates America? Conservatives” was the tag line of a piece by Lawrence F. Kaplan in the *New Republic* that attacked people like James Schlesinger, Brent Scowcroft, Senator Pat Roberts, Richard Haass and others, including me, as “false prophets” with a “yearning to see U.S. power erode” and with a “reflexive sympathy for America's detractors abroad”, (June 26, 2000).

⁶Benjamin Schwarz's review made this telling point: “Cohen disguise[s] his policy advocacy as objective history. . . . Cohen resurrects the old saw that war is too important to be left to the generals. But it's equally true that history is too important to leave to policy advocates” (“The Post-Powell Doctrine”, *New York Times*, July 21, 2002).

Iraq. Actually, the war itself has been a strong test of the two theories. We have been able to see which side's predictions were correct. It seems clear that Iraq has turned into a debacle for the United States, which is powerful evidence—at least for me—that the realists were right and the neoconservatives were wrong.

Is this, perhaps, the real source of the vehement response to the Mearsheimer and Walt paper?

Quite a few realists, starting with Henry Kissinger (and including me), reluctantly supported the war in Iraq. We believed the assurances presented about his alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and were concerned that in combination with Saddam's reckless behavior and the U.S. commitment to regime change, they made a policy of containment unsustainable, especially after September 11. But no realist was in favor of the almost unlimited goal of transforming Iraq and the Middle East, especially with the limited resources envisaged at the time.

Let me make one final observation: Israel is an important friend and ally of the United States, but that does not mean that there is anything inappropriate about discussing openly and seriously not only the advantages, but also the challenges, with which this relationship presents the United States. Israelis do it all the time. Unless one thinks that Israel's case for American support is weak, or that most Americans are secret anti-Semites who are just looking for an excuse to abandon the Jewish state, talking honestly about the U.S. relationship with Israel should be unobjectionable. We may, and sometimes clearly should, decide to stand by Israel no matter what—like we did with our NATO allies. As a democracy, however, we should be allowed to make this and other foreign policy decisions with open eyes and on the basis of a free debate. Unfortunately, some of the loudest advocates of spreading American liberty to the far corners of the world seem distinctly intolerant of freedom at home. □

It takes a special brand of heroism to turn total dependence into defiance; to insist on support as a matter of right rather than as a favor; to turn every American deviation from an Israeli cabinet consensus into a betrayal to be punished rather than a disagreement to be negotiated.

—Henry A. Kissinger
Years of Upheaval (1982)