

How Neocons Banished Realism

The grip that neocons and liberal interventionists have on Official Washington's opinion circles is now so strong that "realists" who once provided an important counterbalance have been almost banished from foreign policy debates, a dangerous dilemma that James W Carden explores.

By James W Carden

In a widely remarked upon article for the online version of *Foreign Policy* last week, Harvard's Stephen Walt asked a very good question. Why, Walt asked, are elite outlets like the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* "allergic to realist views, given that realists have been (mostly) right about some very important issues, and the columnists they publish have often been wrong?"

Walt then went on to do something pundits are generally loath to do: he admitted that he'd didn't really know the answer. This is not to say that I do, but I think Walt's question is worth exploring.

Why indeed? My own hunch is that we realists are a source of discomfit for the Beltway armchair warrior class not so much because we have been right about every major U.S. foreign policy question since the invasion of Iraq, but because we dare to question the premise which undergirds the twin orthodoxies of neoconservatism and liberal interventionism.

The premise, shared by heroes of the Left and Right, is this: America, a "shining city on a hill" (John Winthrop, later vulgarized by Ronald Reagan) "remains the one indispensable nation" (Barack Obama) and deprived of America's "benevolent global hegemony" (Robert Kagan) the world will surely collapse into anarchy.

This strain of messianic thinking has deep roots in the psyche of the American establishment and so, in a sense, neoconservatism, which is really little more than a latter-day Trotskyist sect, is as American as apple pie.

Common though it is to trace, or conflate, the rise of American messianism to 1898 when the country first emerged as a global power, the cult of "American exceptionalism" has its roots in Puritan theology.

In his indispensable work, *The Irony of American History*, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cites a tract from 1650 in which the colonial leader Edward Johnson wrote that New England was "where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together." Niebuhr

wrote that the Puritans had a “sense of being a ‘separated’ nation which God was using to make a new beginning for mankind.”

This strain of American solipsism was also noted with distaste by that most perceptive chronicler of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville who, in 1840, wrote that it was “impossible to conceive of a more troublesome and garrulous patriotism.”

The historian John Lamberton Harper has observed that the strain of messianic thinking was evident throughout the Nineteenth Century, reminding us that Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge once claimed that the good Lord had “marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.”

And so on and so on.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, the messianic way of thinking became ever more firmly entrenched – particular among the governing class – as America continued what many felt was its inexorable rise to global supremacy. At the turn of the century prominent men of politics and letters such as Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt and the geopolitical theorist Alfred MacKinder enthusiastically subscribed to the notion that “all signs point to the approaching supremacy of the United States.” Indeed, that this was so was an “inexorable decree of destiny.”

America’s entry into the First World War only deepened that sense of singularity. Here’s Walter Lippmann, who later in life became something like the dean of American realists, writing about President Woodrow Wilson in the *New Republic* in 1917: “other men have led nations to war to increase their glory, their wealth, their prestige no other statesman has ever so clearly identified the glory of his country with the peace and liberty of the world.”

Decades later, during the Cold War, Lippmann regained his sanity, while *TNR* all but lost its. And indeed, it was during that 40-year-long “twilight struggle” between the U.S. and the USSR that the messianic consensus grabbed hold of the American mind and, to this day, has not let go. But the roots of that way of thinking, as we have seen, are deep and long predate the Cold War.

And so I would submit that the reason the three major American newspapers are “allergic to realism” is because they are part and parcel of an establishment that has, for well over a century now, been in thrall to a messianic vision of global supremacy.

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