

# The AMERICAN INTEREST

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# Not with *My* Thucydides, You Don't

RICHARD K. BETTS

“**T**he devil can cite scripture for his purpose”, according to Shakespeare. This should not discredit scripture, but simply remind us that any text that is both hallowed and complex can be mined in different and sometimes disconcerting ways. Eliot Cohen is a bit devilish in the way he reminds us of this in his jaunty essay in the last issue of the *AJ* (“Thucydides, Really!” January/February 2007). Like many before him, he sets out to rescue Thucydides from the clutches of the realist tradition in international relations theory. This mission is reasonable to a point, but he charges beyond that point. It is also rather odd that he chooses this time to fuel the ageless feud between idealists and realists, since recent events hardly help his case.

Thucydides was above all an historian, so the richness of his reflections on the 27-year-long Peloponnesian War cannot be fully captive to any one theory, however powerful. The purpose of theory is to clarify and enable generalization, which requires focusing on patterns across a wide range of cases, putting aside particular exceptions; the historian usually emphasizes what is specific and unique rather than

general. Theory is necessary if any lessons are to be drawn from history, and history is necessary to keep theory honest. Cohen's celebration of Thucydides is a good reminder of this delicate relationship. But Cohen also cites scripture for his purpose, invoking Thucydides to discredit contemporary realists—and there the essay goes awry, lurching over the line from needling his targets to caricaturing them. It misstates what sensible realists argue. Pummeling a straw man, Cohen insinuates the moral superiority and wisdom of idealists who oppose them, in particular Wilsonians and neoconservatives he identifies as the objects of realists' “loathing, contempt, disgust.”

I am not provoked by personal pique. My own views are eclectic, and strike hard-core realists as wishy-washy. At least one realist scholar has referred to me in print as a non-realist. And I can hardly loathe Wilsonians, since my father was a staunch one. Nevertheless, I feel about realism as Winston Churchill did about democracy: It is the worst theory of international relations—except for all the others. It does not tell us that much, but what it does tell us is important: When interests conflict, power tends to determine whose claim prevails; just because something is necessary does not mean that it is possible; having good intentions does not excuse pay-

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**Richard K. Betts** is director of the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University.

ing the road to hell; and a few other things ideologues of any stripe should bear in mind when deciding whether war will be worth its costs. Of course, it is fair to point out the many limitations of realism. The best of realists themselves are forthright about them: E.H. Carr himself wrote an entire chapter on just that subject in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*. It is not sensible, however, to dismiss a body of theory because of arguments that fundamentalists make, but that sensible realists reject.

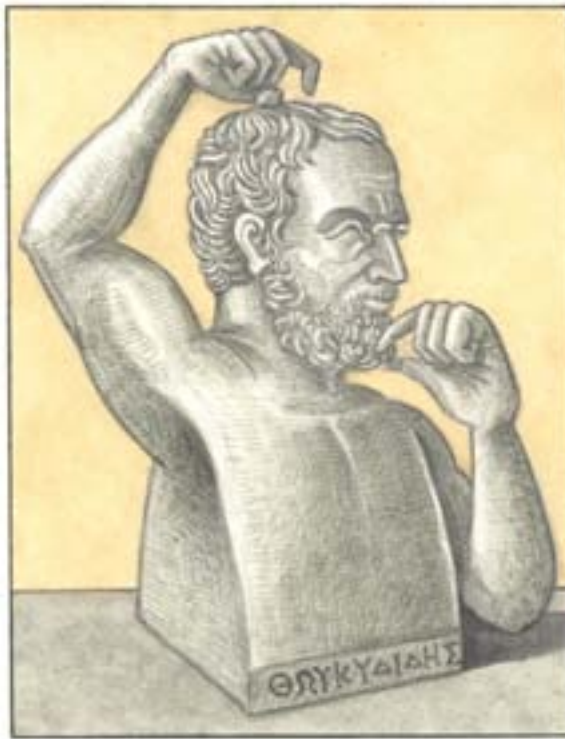
Cohen levies two principal indictments. First, realists deny that domestic politics, leadership or ideas affect the interactions of states, and they “think of states as homogeneous billiard balls bouncing predictably around the pool table of international politics.” Second, realists are morally cynical, as when they “take sophisticated pleasure in the clinking of cocktail glasses with the architects of the Tiananmen massacre.”

One can certainly find realists who are guilty of these indictments, since the school is—like Marxism, liberalism, conservatism or any rubric for an unwieldy body of strong ideas—a motley collection of sectarian variations on a theme. There are classical realists and neorealists, defensive and offensive realists, dovish and hawkish ones, realists who believe stable peace is most likely under multipolarity, and others who argue the benefits of bipolarity or unipolarity. Some realists are crude determinists, and some are in-

deed morally callous. But the particular leading ones Cohen mentions—Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz—are innocent of these charges. Applying the indictments to them is like blaming the Pope for the pronouncements of Jerry Falwell on the grounds that both can be called Christians.

Morgenthau, like Thucydides, is acutely aware of the human factor. He emphasizes the *animus dominandi* in human nature as an essential source of conflict. True, he could have been clearer about the difference between typical state behavior that makes the rules of the game and the deviations he criticizes as self-destructive. Waltz is more explicit about how the two go together. Nor is Waltz obtusely unaware that domestic institutions and politics affect the actions of states. Indeed, although his first classic, *Man, the State, and War* (1959), emphasizes the anarchy of the international system because it is the permissive cause of all wars, the book clearly cites the internal politics of the state as the level of analysis to plumb for the “efficient” causes of any specific war. And his second book

*focuses* on the subject of internal determinants: *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (1967). Like many other critics, Cohen misses Waltz’s crucial distinction between a theory of international politics and a theory of foreign policy. The former explains typical outcomes in the international system over time, while the latter explains specific choices of governments



Peter Bono

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**The realist school is a motley collection: classical realists, neo-realists, defensive and offensive realists, dovish and hawkish...**

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*focuses* on the subject of internal determinants: *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (1967).

Like many other critics, Cohen misses Waltz’s crucial distinction between a theory of international politics and a theory of foreign policy. The former explains typical outcomes in the international system over time, while the latter explains specific choices of governments

and groups. This clarifies the relation between the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of theory that classical realists leave a bit confused. Because states usually take whatever they can get without great strain, those that do not guard what they have are likely to be exploited. (The same can be said of politics within states when regimes collapse or civil war reproduces the anarchy of the international system.) Waltz's third book, *Theory of International Politics* (1979), argues not that states interact like billiard balls, but that the ones whose policy choices fail to take proper account of the constraints of the balance of power, as idealist statesmen sometimes do, will suffer—in Waltz's words, "fall by the wayside." How many good examples are there to refute this simple point?

Many liberals cite the collapse of the Soviet Union as just such an example confounding realism, but it actually illustrates the point perfectly. Mikhail Gorbachev bought into neo-liberal globaloney and "cooperative security" so incautiously that he made one concession after another to Washington, with virtually no reciprocity, in hope of reaching a *modus vivendi* with the West that would allow communism to revive itself by focusing on internal development. Instead, happily for us, the Soviet Union fell by the wayside, big time. Other countries did not return Moscow's concessions but pressed their advantage. The result was first the loss of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and then the disintegration of the Union itself and the abasement of Russia. As one disgruntled communist said at the time, the result was no different than if Gorbachev had been a CIA agent.

The second indictment against realists—that they are amoral or immoral—is a hoary one, because so many think of morality in terms of absolute rather than utilitarian principles. It is no accident that "Machiavellian" is a dirty word to idealists. Yet Machiavelli has a transcendent moral purpose in arguing that a leader must sometimes do evil in order to do good. Recognizing that right does not make might and that consequences matter more than motives, realists stand with Max Weber's "ethic of responsibility" against the "ethic of ultimate ends." If they are guilty of a tragic cast of mind, it is because they notice how

often the enthusiasm of righteousness yields destruction instead of salvation. As Robert Gilpin once put it:

This is not to say that power and security are the sole or even the most important objectives of mankind; as a species we prize beauty, truth, and goodness. . . . What the realist seeks to stress is that all these more noble goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one's security in the power struggle among social groups. . . . A moral commitment lies at the heart of realism. . . . What Morgenthau and many other realists have in common is a belief that ethical and political behavior will fail unless it takes into account the actual practice of states and the teachings of sound theory.

Why should one choose this moment to reopen the old debate and to suggest that realists are more foolish than Wilsonians or neocons? Adventurism in Iraq has gravely damaged American security interests and moral standing, and instead of eliminating threats has spawned dangerous new ones. The current disaster begs for comment in a debate about guidance for foreign policy; yet it goes unmentioned by Cohen. The closest he comes is a peculiar quotation about the Sicilian expedition apparently meant to reproach envious free-riding European allies for not signing on to the war.

Of course, realists often make terrible mistakes, but all in all, who looks wiser lately—the idealist architects of the current calamity, or the realists who opposed an unnecessary war in the first place? Bush the Younger's crew, or Daddy's? Pundits in the *Weekly Standard*, or the 33 scholars of strategic studies, mostly realists, whose manifesto on the *New York Times* op-ed page of September 26, 2002, predicted that war in Iraq would be a grave self-inflicted wound?

Cohen begins his essay by reporting the agitation of one of his students, an Air Force officer, who does not like Pericles. Cohen then goes on to laud Pericles' funeral oration for being "as noble a statement about what freedom means as one can find in any literature." There is, however, a leaden lining to Pericles' stirring speech. Cohen does not re-

port the reason for his student's distress, but if it was because of Pericles' arrogant brief for liberal imperialism, or his later deflection of responsibility for a war gone bad, the officer was on to something.

In this vein, let me cite scripture for my purpose. In the context of his times, Athenian democracy gave Pericles much to brag about, and the funeral oration is one long boast. Pericles brags about his city's openness, liberality, refinement, public spiritedness and generosity. His enthusiasm for empire shamelessly conflates Athens' material and moral interests. He grandly declares, "Our city is an education to Greece" and "a model to others." The Greeks had a word for this that begins with "h", and it wasn't humility.

Later, however, after a second invasion and a plague had laid waste to their land, the Athenians had the hubris knocked out of them, and they turned against Pericles for having convinced them to go to war. He is unapologetic and blames them for faint hearts. Then he frankly strips away the moral sheen of his earlier funeral oration: "Nor is it any longer possible for you to give up this empire. . . . In fact you now hold your empire down by force; it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go."

We hear the awful echo of this sentiment when supporters of persistence in Iraq attack critics by emphasizing the catastrophic consequences that would follow a U.S. withdrawal. Quite true; but whose arrogant optimism about remaking the politics of the Middle East got us into this bind in the first place? One can forgive those who promoted the war, later recognized their error and, with new humility, approach the challenge of fixing the disaster they caused. But those who remain unrepentant? Does Pericles vindicate them when Thucydides has him saying, "All who have taken it upon themselves to rule over others have incurred hatred and unpopularity for a time; but if one has a great aim to pursue, this burden of envy must be accepted"? Some neoconservative theorists may say yes, as they might brush off any analogy between the war in Iraq and the disastrous Sicilian expedition

by arguing that neither had been doomed to failure, but could be blamed on others' bad judgment about the particular strategies for implementing the projects. Thucydides the historian, however, might remind them of one very large discomfiting fact: Athens, however superior in virtue or motives it may have been, fought for 27 years, endured and inflicted more material devastation and moral degradation than the war's architects could possibly have envisioned at the outset—and still ultimately lost the Peloponnesian War.

Cohen chides those "who take comfort in the world-weariness of realism", but I would choose "sobriety" or "humility" rather than "world-weariness" as the bumper sticker for the best brands of realism—sobriety about

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**I would choose "sobriety"  
or "humility" rather than  
"world-weariness" as the  
bumper sticker for realism.**

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how much can be accomplished by force at a reasonable price, or about how much right intentions can make up for uncertain capabilities, and humility about one country's capacity to remake another in its own image. Of course, many realists are not humble, just as many Christians do not live by the Sermon on the Mount.

In the same way that Karl Marx said "*Je ne suis pas marxiste*" when he heard what some argued in his name, I would sometimes say that I am not a realist. For most practical purposes it is not sensible to demand consistent adherence to one vague school or another. And as Cohen rightly suggests, don't expect Thucydides to settle any general theoretical question neatly. Nor should anyone be foolish enough to claim to know for sure which side of a particular policy debate Thucydides would take if he were alive today. But if one has to choose between world-weary, sober humility and fresh-faced, romantic hubris, the choice should be easy. 🌐