Why John J. Mearsheimer Is Right (About Some Things)

"A disgrace" and "anti-Semite" were two of the (more printable) barbs launched last fall at John Mearsheimer, a renowned political scientist at the University of Chicago. But Mearsheimer's infamous views on Israel—in the latest case, his endorsement of a book on Jewish identity that many denounced as anti-Semitic—should not distract us from the importance of his life's work: a bracing argument in favor of the doctrine of "offensive realism," which can enable the United States to avert decline and prepare for the unprecedented challenge posed by a rising China.

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I—CHINA—WANT TO BE the Godzilla of Asia, because that's the only way for me—China—to survive! I don't want the Japanese violating my sovereignty the way they did in the 20th century. I can't trust the United States, since states can never be certain about other states' intentions. And as good realists, we—the Chinese—

want to dominate Asia the way the Americans have dominated the Western Hemisphere." John J. Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, races on in a mild Brooklyn accent, banging his chalk against the blackboard and erasing with his bare hand, before two dozen graduate students in a three-hour seminar titled "Foundations of Realism."

Mearsheimer writes ANARCHY on the board, explaining that the word does not refer to chaos or disorder. "It simply means that there is no centralized authority, no night watchman or ultimate arbiter, that stands above states and protects them." (The opposite of anarchy, he notes, borrowing from Columbia University's Kenneth Waltz, is hierarchy, which is the ordering principle of domestic politics.) Then he writes THE UNCERTAINTY OF INTENTIONS and explains: the leaders of one great power in this anarchic jungle of a world can never know what the leaders of a rival great power are thinking. Fear is dominant. "This is the tragic essence of international politics," he thunders. "It provides the basis for realism, and people hate people like me, who point this out!" Not finished, he adds: "*The uncertainty of intentions* is my Sunday punch in defense of realism, whenever realism is attacked."

After class, Mearsheimer leads me down grim, cement-gray hallways to his office in Albert Pick Hall, whose brutalist Gothic architecture he describes as "East Germany circa the 1960s." At 64 years of age, with round wire-framed glasses, and gray hair fringing his balding head, he is genial, voluble, animated: the opposite of the dry, heartless, muscular prose that he is known for and that has enraged so many people. His office, littered with books and file boxes, is graced with pictures of America's two preeminent realists: Hans Morgenthau from the first half of the 20th century, and Samuel Huntington from the second half. Morgenthau, a German Jewish refugee who, like Mearsheimer, taught at the University of Chicago, once wrote that realism "appeals to historic precedent rather than to abstract principles [of justice] and aims at the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good." Huntington, the late Harvard professor who died in 2008, challenged the policy elite with his famous idea of a "clash of

civilizations," and with his earlier notion, perhaps more provocative, that how people are governed—democratically or not—matters less than the degree to which they are governed: in other words, the United States always had more in common with the Soviet Union than with any weakly governed state in Africa.

Mearsheimer reveres both men for their bravery in pointing out unpopular truths, and throughout his career he has tried to emulate them. Indeed, in a country that has always been hostile to what realism signifies, he wears his "realist" label as a badge of honor. "To realism!" he says as he raises his wineglass to me in a toast at a local restaurant. As Ashley J. Tellis, Mearsheimer's former student and now, after a stint in the Bush administration, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, later tells me: "Realism is alien to the American tradition. It is consciously amoral, focused as it is on interests rather than on values in a debased world. But realism never dies, because it accurately reflects how states actually behave, behind the façade of their values-based rhetoric."

Mearsheimer's intellectually combative nature first disturbed the policy elite in 1988, with the publication of his critical biography, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*. In it, he asserts that the revered British military theorist Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart was wrong on basic strategic questions of the period between the first and second world wars, especially in his opposition to the use of military force against the Third Reich, and was a de facto appeaser even after evidence had surfaced about the systematic murder of Jews. Mearsheimer expected that his perspective would draw fire from British reviewers who had been close to Liddell Hart, which it did. "Other political scientists work on capillaries. John goes for the jugular," notes Richard Rosecrance, a retired UCLA professor who mentored Mearsheimer in the 1970s.

Mearsheimer certainly triggered a bloodbath with a 2006 article that became a 2007 book written with the Harvard professor Stephen M. Walt and dedicated to Huntington, *The Israel Lobby and U.S.Foreign Policy*, which alleges that groups supportive of Israel have pivotally undermined American foreign-policy interests, especially in the run-up to the Iraq War. Some critics, like the Johns Hopkins

University professor Eliot Cohen, accused Mearsheimer and Walt outright of anti-Semitism, noting that their opinions had won the endorsement of the white supremacist David Duke. Many others accused them of providing potent ammunition for anti-Semites. A former Chicago colleague of Mearsheimer's labeled the book "piss-poor, monocausal social science."

Last fall, Mearsheimer reenergized his critics by favorably blurbing a book on Jewish identity that many commentators denounced as grotesquely anti-Semitic. The blurb became a blot on Mearsheimer's judgment, given the book's author's revolting commentary elsewhere, and was considered evidence of an unhealthy obsession with Israel and Jewishness on Mearsheimer's part.

The real tragedy of such controversies, as lamentable as they are, is that they threaten to obscure the urgent and enduring message of Mearsheimer's life's work, which topples conventional foreign-policy shibboleths and provides an unblinking guide to the course the United States should follow in the coming decades. Indeed, with the most critical part of the world, East Asia, in the midst of an unprecedented arms race fed by acquisitions of missiles and submarines (especially in the South China Sea region, where states are motivated by old-fashioned nationalism rather than universal values), and with the Middle East undergoing less a democratic revolution than a crisis in central authority, we ignore Mearsheimer's larger message at our peril.

In fact, Mearsheimer is best-known in the academy for his equally controversial views on China, and particularly for his 2001 magnum opus, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2010, the Columbia University professor Richard K. Betts called *Tragedy* one of the three great works of the post–Cold War era, along with Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). And, Betts suggested, "once China's power is full grown," Mearsheimer's book may pull ahead of the other two in terms of influence. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* truly defines Mearsheimer, as it does realism. Mearsheimer sat me down in his office, overlooking the somber Collegiate Gothic structures of the University of

Chicago, and talked for hours, over the course of several days, about *Tragedy* and his life.

ONE OF FIVE children in a family of German and Irish ancestry, and one of the three who went to service academies, Mearsheimer graduated from West Point in the bottom third of his class, even after he fell in love with political science in his junior year. He got his master's degree at the University of Southern California while stationed nearby in the Air Force, and went to Cornell for his doctorate. "I disagreed with almost everything I read, I venerated nobody. I found out what I thought by what I was against." After stints at the Brookings Institution and Harvard, he went to the University of Chicago in 1982, and has never left.

Whereas Harvard, at least in Mearsheimer's telling, is inclined to be a "government-policy shop" with close ties to Washington, the University of Chicago comes closer to a "pure intellectual environment." At Harvard, many students and faculty members alike are on the make, networking for that first, or next, position in government or the think-tank world. The environment is vaguely unfriendly to theories or bold ideas, Huntington being the grand exception that proves the rule. After all, social-science theories are gross simplifications of reality; even the most brilliant theories can be right, say, only 75 percent of the time. Critics unfailingly seize on any theory's shortcomings, damaging reputations. So the truly ambitious tend to avoid constructing one.

The University of Chicago, set off the beaten path in a society dominated by bicoastal elites, explains Mearsheimer, has always attracted "oddballs" with theories: political scientists who, while deeply respected, are at the same time not truly embraced by the American academic power structure. These iconoclasts have included Hans Morgenthau, as well as Leo Strauss, another German Jewish refugee, whom some link with neoconservatism. Realists especially have been outsiders in a profession dominated by liberal internationalists and others to the left.

For Mearsheimer, academia's hostility to realism is evident in the fact that Harvard, which aims to recruit the top scholars in every field, never tried to hire the two most

important realist thinkers of the 20th century, Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. But at Chicago, a realist like Mearsheimer, who loves teaching and never had ambitions for government service, can propound theories and unpopular ideas, and revel in the uproar they cause. Whatever the latest group-think happens to be, Mearsheimer almost always instinctively wants to oppose it—especially if it emanates from Washington.

The best grand theories tend to be written no earlier than middle age, when the writer has life experience and mistakes behind him to draw upon. Morgenthau's 1948 classic, *Politics Among Nations*, was published when he was 44, Fukuyama's *The End of History* was published as a book when he was 40, and Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* as a book when he was 69. Mearsheimer began writing *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* when he was in his mid-40s, after working on it for a decade. Published just before 9/11, the book intimates the need for America to avoid strategic distractions and concentrate on confronting China. A decade later, with the growth of China's military might vastly more apparent than it was in 2001, and following the debacles of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, its clairvoyance is breathtaking.

Tragedy begins with a forceful denial of perpetual peace in favor of perpetual struggle, with great powers primed for offense, because they can never be sure how much military capacity they will need in order to survive over the long run. Because every state is forever insecure, Mearsheimer counsels, the internal nature of a state is less important as a factor in its international behavior than we think. "Great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size," he intones. In other words, Mearsheimer is not one to be especially impressed by a state simply because it is a democracy. As he asserts early on, "Whether China is democratic and deeply enmeshed in the global economy or autocratic and autarkic will have little effect on its behavior, because democracies care about security as much as non-democracies do." Indeed, a democratic China could be more technologically innovative and economically robust, with consequently more talent and money to lavish on its military. (A democratic Egypt, for that matter, could create greater security challenges for the United States than an autocratic Egypt. Mearsheimer is not

making moral judgments. He is merely describing how states interact in an anarchic world.)

Face it, Mearsheimer says in his book, quoting the historian James Hutson: the world is a "brutal, amoral cockpit." To make sure readers get the point, he taps the British scholar E. H. Carr's 1939 book, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, which takes a wrecking ball to liberal internationalism. One of its main points: "Whatever moral issues may be involved, there is an issue of power which cannot be expressed in terms of morality." To wit, in the 1990s we were able to intervene to save lives in the Balkans only because the Serbian regime was weak and had no nuclear weapons; against a Russian regime that was at the same time committing incalculable human-rights violations in Chechnya, we did nothing, just as we did nothing to halt ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus. States take up human rights only if doing so does not contradict the pursuit of power.

But being a realist is not enough for Mearsheimer; he needs to be an "offensive realist," as he calls himself. "Offensive realism," he writes in *Tragedy*, "is like a powerful flashlight in a dark room": it cannot explain every action throughout hundreds of years of history, but he exhaustively goes through that history to demonstrate just how much it does explain. Whereas Hans Morgenthau's realism is rooted in man's imperfect nature, Mearsheimer's is structural, and therefore that much more inexorable. Mearsheimer cares relatively little about what individual statesmen can achieve, for the state of anarchy in the international system simply guarantees insecurity. Compared with Mearsheimer, Henry Kissinger and the late American diplomat Richard Holbrooke—two men usually contrasted with each other—are one and the same: romantic figures who believe they can pivotally affect history through negotiation. Kissinger, in fact, has written lush histories of statesmen in *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–1822* (1957) and *Diplomacy* (1994), embracing his subjects with charm and warmth, whereas Mearsheimer's *Tragedy* is cold and clinical. Kissinger and Holbrooke care deeply about the contingencies of each situation, and the personalities involved; Mearsheimer, who was always good at math and science in school, sees only schemata, even as his own historical analyses have helped to

rescue political science from the purely quantitative studies favored by others in his field.

Just as Mearsheimer's theory of realism is opposed to Morgenthau's in being structural, it is also opposed to the structural realism of Columbia's Waltz in being offensive. Offensive realism posits that status quo powers don't exist: all great powers are perpetually on the offensive, even if obstacles may arise to prevent them from expanding their territory or influence.

What was Manifest Destiny, Mearsheimer asks the reader, except offensive realism? "Indeed, the United States was bent on establishing regional hegemony, and it was an expansionist power of the first order in the Americas": acquiring territory from European powers, massacring the native inhabitants, and instigating war with Mexico, in good part for the sake of security. Mearsheimer details Japan's record of aggression in Korea, China, Russia, Manchuria, and the Pacific Islands after its consolidation as a nation-state following the 19th-century Meiji Restoration. To demonstrate that the anarchic structure of the international system, not the internal characteristics of states, determines behavior, he shows how Italy, during the eight decades that it was a great power, was equally aggressive under both liberal and fascist regimes: going after North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the southern Balkans, southwestern Turkey, and southern Austria-Hungary. He characterizes Germany's Otto von Bismarck as an offensive realist who engaged in conquest during his first nine years in office, and then restrained himself for the next 19 years. "In fact, [that restraint] was because Bismarck and his successors correctly understood that the German army had conquered about as much territory as it could without provoking a great-power war, which Germany was likely to lose." But when Mearsheimer picks up the story at the start of the 20th century, Germany is again aggressive, because by now it controls a larger percentage of the world's industrial might than any other European state. Behind every assertion in this book is a wealth of historical data that helps explain why *Tragedy* continues, as Richard Betts predicted, to grow in influence.

"To argue that expansion is inherently misguided," Mearsheimer writes, "implies that all great powers over the past 350 years have failed to comprehend how the international system works. This is an implausible argument on its face." The problem with the "moderation is good" thesis is that "it mistakenly equates [so-called] irrational expansion with military defeat." But hegemony has succeeded many times. The Roman Empire in Europe, the Mughal Dynasty in the Indian subcontinent, and the Qing Dynasty in China are some of his examples, even as he mentions how Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Adolf Hitler all came close to success. "Thus, the pursuit of regional hegemony is not a quixotic ambition," though no state has yet achieved regional hegemony in the Eastern Hemisphere the way the United States achieved it in the Western Hemisphere.

The edgiest parts of *Tragedy* are when Mearsheimer presents full-bore rationales for the aggression of Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan.

> The German decision to push for war in 1914 was not a case of wacky strategic ideas pushing a state to start a war it was sure to lose. It was ... a calculated risk motivated in large part by Germany's desire to break its encirclement by the Triple Entente, prevent the growth of Russian power, and become Europe's hegemon.

As for Hitler, he "did indeed learn from World War I." Hitler learned that Germany could not fight on two fronts at the same time, and he would have to win quick, successive victories, which, in fact, he achieved early in World War II. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was a calculated risk to avoid abandoning the Japanese empire in China and Southeast Asia in the face of a U.S. embargo on imported energy and machine tools.

Mearsheimer is no warmonger or militarist. His job as a political scientist is not to improve the world, but to say what he thinks is going on in it. And he thinks that while states rightly yearn for a values-based foreign policy, the reality of the

anarchic international system forces them to behave according to their own interests. In his view, either liberal internationalism or neoconservatism is more likely than offensive realism to lead to the spilling of American blood. Indeed, because, as some argue, realism in the classical sense seeks the avoidance of war through the maintenance of a balance of power, it is the most humanitarian approach possible. (In this vein, fighting Nazi Germany was essential because the Nazis were attempting to overthrow the European balance-of-power system altogether.)

In the course of his 500-plus-page defense of his own brand of realism, Mearsheimer popularizes two other concepts: "buck-passing" and the "stopping power of water." The latter concept leads Mearsheimer to propose—in 2001, mind you—an American foreign policy of restraint. But first, consider buck-passing. Whenever a new great power comes on the scene, one or more states will end up checking it. But every state will initially try to get someone else to do the checking: buck-passing "is essentially about who does the balancing, not whether it gets done." The United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union all buck-passed prior to World War II, each trying to get the other to be the one to bear the brunt of Hitler's onslaught. In Asia today, the United States quietly encourages Japan and India to build up their militaries in order to check China, but in the end, it has no country to whom it can pass the buck. Hence Mearsheimer's plea from a decade ago that we need to focus on China.

The "stopping power of water" is where *Tragedy*, in an analytical sense, builds toward its powerful conclusion. "Large bodies of water are formidable obstacles that cause significant power-projection problems," Mearsheimer writes. Great navies and air forces can be built, and soldiers transported to beachheads and airstrips, but conquering great land powers across the seas is difficult. This is why the United States and the United Kingdom have rarely been invaded by other great powers. It is also why the U.S. has almost never tried to permanently conquer territory in Europe or Asia, and why the United Kingdom has never tried to dominate continental Europe. Therefore, the "central aim of American foreign policy" is "to be the hegemon in the Western Hemisphere" only, and to prevent the

rise of a similar hegemon in the Eastern Hemisphere. In turn, the proper role for the United States is as an "offshore balancer," balancing against the rise of a Eurasian hegemon and going to war only as a last resort to thwart it. But better to try buck-passing first, Mearsheimer advises, and come into a war only at the last moment, when absolutely necessary.

Mearsheimer tells me that the U.S. was right to enter World War II very late; that way it paid a smaller "blood price" than the Soviet Union. "Before D-Day, 93 percent of all German casualties had occurred on the eastern front," he says, adding that the devastation of the Soviet Union helped the U.S. in the Cold War to follow.

"How is offshore balancing different from neo-isolationism?," I ask him. "Isolationists," he responds, "believe that there is no place outside of the Western Hemisphere to which it is worth deploying our troops. But offshore balancers believe there are three critical areas that no other hegemon should be allowed to dominate: Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia. Thus," he goes on, "it was important to fight Nazi Germany and Japan in World War II. American history suits us to be offshore balancers—not isolationists, not the world's sheriff." Later, when I ask Mearsheimer about the Obama administration's slightly standoffish policies toward Libya and whether they are a good example of buck-passing, he says the problem with leading from behind in this case was that America's European allies lacked the military capacity to do the job efficiently. "If mass murder was truly in the offing, as it was in Rwanda," he tells me, "then I would have been willing to intervene in Libya. But it is unclear that was the case."

Such thinking is prologue to Mearsheimer's admonition that a struggle with China awaits us. "The Chinese are good offensive realists, so they will seek hegemony in Asia," he tells me, paraphrasing the conclusion to *Tragedy*. China is not a status quo power. It will seek to dominate the South China Sea as the U.S. has dominated the Greater Caribbean Basin. He continues: "An increasingly powerful China is likely to try to push the U.S. out of Asia, much the way the U.S. pushed European powers out of the Western Hemisphere. Why should we expect China to act any differently

than the United States did? Are they more principled than we are? More ethical? Less nationalistic?" On the penultimate page of *Tragedy*, he warns:

> Neither Wilhelmine Germany, nor imperial Japan, nor Nazi Germany, nor the Soviet Union had nearly as much latent power as the United States had during their confrontations ... But if China were to become a giant Hong Kong, it would probably have somewhere on the order of four times as much latent power as the United States does, allowing China to gain a decisive military advantage over the United States.

Ten years after those lines were written, China's economy has passed Japan's as the world's second-largest. Its total defense spending in 2009 was $150 billion, compared with only $17 billion in 2001. But even more revealing is the pattern of China's military modernization. "Force planning—the product of long-term commitments and resource allocation decisions—is the heart of strategy," the military expert Thomas Donnelly, of the American Enterprise Institute, wrote last year. And for more than a decade now, China's military

> has shifted its focus from repelling a Soviet invasion and controlling domestic unrest to the sole problem of defeating U.S. forces in East Asia. This has been a strategic surprise to which no American administration has appropriately responded.

China is increasing its submarine fleet from 62 to 77 and has tested a stealth fighter jet as part of a buildup also featuring surface warships, missiles, and cyber warfare. Andrew F. Krepinevich, the president of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, believes that nations of the Western Pacific are slowly being "Finlandized" by China: they will maintain nominal independence but in the end

may abide by foreign-policy rules set by Beijing. And the more the United States is distracted by the Middle East, the more it hastens this impending reality in East Asia, which is the geographical heart of the global economy and of the world's navies and air forces.

Mearsheimer's critics say that offensive realism ignores ideology and domestic politics altogether. They argue that he takes no account of China's society and economy and where they might be headed. Indeed, simple theories like offensive realism are inherently superficial, and wrong in instances. Mearsheimer, for example, is still waiting for NATO to collapse, as he predicted it would in a 1990 Atlantic article. The fact that it hasn't owes as much to the domestic politics of Western states as it does to the objective security situation. And the stopping power of water did not prevent Japan from acquiring a great maritime empire in the early and middle part of the 20th century; nor did it prevent the Allied invasion of Normandy. More generally, Mearsheimer's very cold, mathematical, states-as-billiard-balls approach ignores messy details—like the personalities of Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Slobodan Milošević—that have had a monumental impact in deciding how wars and crises turn out. International relations is as much about understanding Shakespeare—and the human passions and intrigues that Shakespeare exposes—as it is about understanding political-science theories. It matters greatly that Deng Xiaoping was both utterly ruthless and historically perceptive, so that he could set China in motion to become such an economic and military juggernaut in the first place. Manifest Destiny owes as much to the canniness of President James K. Polk as it does to Mearsheimer's laws of historical determinism.

But given the limits of social-science theories, even as we rely on them to help us make some sense of the Bruegelesque jumble of history, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* is a signal triumph. As Huntington once told his protégé Fareed Zakaria: "If you tell people the world is complicated, you're not doing your job as a social scientist. They already know it's complicated. Your job is to distill it, simplify it, and give them a sense of what is the single [cause], or what are the couple of powerful causes that explain this powerful phenomenon."

Truly, Mearsheimer's theory of international relations allowed him to get both Gulf wars exactly right—and he's one of the few people to do so. As a good offshore balancer, Mearsheimer supported the First Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, in 1991. By occupying Kuwait, Iraq had positioned itself as a potential hegemon in the Persian Gulf, justifying U.S. military action. Moreover, as Mearsheimer asserted in several newspaper columns, the United States could easily defeat the Iraqi military. This assertion made him something of a lone wolf in academic circles, where many were predicting a military quagmire or calamity. The Democratic Party, to which most scholars subscribed, overwhelmingly opposed the war. Mearsheimer's confidence that fighting Saddam would be a "cakewalk" was based in part on his trips to Israel in the 1970s and '80s, when he was studying conventional military deterrence. The Israelis had told him that the Iraqi army, mired as it was in Soviet doctrine, was one of the Arab world's worst militaries.

But Mearsheimer's finest hour was the run-up to the Second Gulf War against Saddam, in 2003. This time, offshore balancing did not justify a war. Iraq was already contained and was not on the brink of becoming the hegemon of the Persian Gulf. And Mearsheimer felt strongly that a new war was a bad idea. He joined with Harvard's Stephen Walt and the University of Maryland's Shibley Telhami to lead a group of 33 scholars, many of them card-carrying academic realists, to sign a declaration opposing the war. On September 26, 2002, they published an advertisement on the *New York Times* op-ed page that cost $38,000, and they paid for it themselves. The top of the ad ran, WAR WITH IRAQ IS *NOT* IN AMERICA'S NATIONAL INTEREST. Among the bullet points was this: "Even if we win easily, we have no plausible exit strategy. Iraq is a deeply divided society that the United States would have to occupy and police for many years to create a viable state."

Mearsheimer opposed not only the Iraq War, but also the neoconservative vision of regional transformation, which, as he tells me, was the "polar opposite" of offshore balancing. He was not against democratization in the Arab world per se, but felt that it should not be attempted—and could not be accomplished—by an extended deployment of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. And as he explains to me, he

now sees an attack on Iran as yet another distraction from dealing with the challenge of China in East Asia. A war with Iran, he adds, would drive Iran further into the arms of Beijing.

During the buildup to the Iraq War, Mearsheimer and Walt began work on what would become a *London Review of Books* article and later *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*. (*The Atlantic* had originally commissioned the piece, only to reject it owing to a profound disagreement between the editors and the authors over its objectivity.) In some respects, *The Israel Lobby* reads as an appendix to *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*—almost a case study of how great powers should not act. Many of those loosely associated with the lobby supported the Iraq War, which Mearsheimer saw as a diversion from the contest with China. The so-called special relationship between the United States and Israel, by further entangling the United States in the problems of the Middle East, contradicted the tenets of offshore balancing. And proponents of the special relationship have routinely justified it by citing Israel's status as a stable democracy in the midst of unstable authoritarian states—but that internal attribute, in Mearsheimer's view, is largely irrelevant.

Mearsheimer denies that he co-wrote the book to explain away the contradictions that the U.S.-Israel relationship poses to his larger theory. He wrote it, he says, because the special relationship is a major feature of U.S. foreign policy in its own right. He might also have said that the Israel lobby is an example of how domestic politics do intrude in foreign policy; thus, his theory of offensive realism is less an explanation of events than an aspiration for how states should behave. He has said elsewhere that the lobby is an "anomaly" in American history. An anomaly is certainly what his book about it is.

Whereas *Tragedy* is a theory, *The Israel Lobby* is a polemic, a tightly organized marshalling of fact and argument that does not necessarily delegitimize Israel, but does delegitimize the American-Israeli special relationship. *Lobby* lacks the commanding, albeit cruel, objectivity that Mearsheimer evinces in *Tragedy*. It negatively distorts key episodes in Israel's history—beginning with its founding—and in effect denies Israel the license that Mearsheimer grants other countries,

including China, to act as good offensive realists. He and Walt equate U.S. support for Israel with Soviet support for Cuba, thereby equating a pulsating democracy with a semi-failed authoritarian state. And while *Tragedy* is rich in explication, *Lobby* is merely tedious, pummeling the reader with lists of names of people and organizations whom the authors group together as advancing the American-Israeli special relationship and the Iraq War, but who, in fact, often have had profound disagreements among themselves. Meanwhile, the motivations of America's political leaders at the time—the putative targets of the lobby's pressure, and thus the ones best able to assess the lobby's strength—go largely unexplored. This failure to establish a link between the lobby and White House decision making undermines the book. As the Middle East expert Dennis Ross has suggested, had Al Gore been elected president in 2000, he probably would not have invaded Iraq, even though he had much closer ties to prominent Jews and others in the lobby than did Bush.

Nevertheless, *The Israel Lobby* contains a fundamental analytic truth that is undeniable: the United States and Israel, like most states, have some different interests that inevitably push up against any enduring special relationship, especially because their security situations are so vastly different. To start with, the United States is a continent-size country protected by oceans, while Israel is a small country half a world away, surrounded by enemy states. Because the geographical situations of the U.S. and Israel are so dissimilar, their geopolitical interests can never completely overlap in the way that Israel's most fervent supporters contend. (Iran's nuclear program is a far more acute threat to Israel than it is to the United States.) "The fact that Israel is a democracy is important," Mearsheimer tells me. "But it is not sufficient to justify the terms of the special relationship. We should treat Israel as a normal country, like we treat Britain or Japan."

What particularly exasperates Mearsheimer and Walt is the lack of conditionality in the special relationship. They admit that making American support for Israel "more conditional would not remove all sources of friction" between Arab countries and the United States; nor do they deny "the presence of genuine anti-Semitism in various Arab countries." But they cannot condone a situation in which the U.S. has,

over the decades, given Israel more than $180 billion in economic and military assistance, "the bulk of it comprising direct grants rather than loans," and yet can barely achieve modest negotiating goals such as getting Israel to stop expanding West Bank settlements for 90 days, let alone dismantle them, even though the Palestinians have been willing at times to make major concessions. (And the U.S. has been willing to throw in major sweeteners in the form of advanced military hardware.) Mearsheimer and Walt repeatedly say in their book that they believe the U.S. should militarily defend Israel if it is in mortal danger, but that the Israelis must be much more cooperative in light of all the aid they get. But, as they also argue, the reason the Israelis are not more cooperative is that in the final analysis, they don't have to be—which, in turn, is because of the pro-Israel lobby. Thus, in the spirit of Huntington, the authors distill a complicated situation down to a single, powerful cause.

I see nothing wrong or illegitimate about this core argument. And no amount of nitpicking by their critics of *The Israel Lobby*'s 100 pages of endnotes can detract from it. I say this as someone who is a veteran of the Israel Defense Forces and who supported the Iraq War (a position I have come to deeply regret). Say what you will about The Israel Lobby, but as Justine Rosenthal—who is a former editor of *The National Interest*, a leading foreign-policy journal, and is now with *Newsweek*—told me, "It changed the debate on Israel, even if it did not change the policy." She added: "John is one of the clearest logical thinkers I know, who hammers his points home well." Indeed, if you put *Lobby* together with *Tragedy*, you have the beginnings of a prudent grand strategy for America: invest less in one part of the world and more in another, events permitting. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently proposed that the United States should attempt to pivot away from the Middle East toward the Asia-Pacific region, a realization that Mearsheimer came to years ago.

On several occasions, Mearsheimer and Walt approvingly bring up the Middle East policy of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, which was more evenhanded vis-à-vis Israel and the Arab states: without being hostile, it lacked the effusive warmth that more-recent American presidents have demonstrated toward the Jewish state.

When I say to Mearsheimer, "That's the kind of American policy you and Walt really want in the Middle East, isn't it?" he responds: "That's exactly right. Eisenhower came down like a ton of bricks on Britain, France, and Israel—U.S. allies, all three—to force them to withdraw from Sinai in 1956. Imagine," he goes on, "if we had Eisenhower in the post-'67 period, or now." Mearsheimer's argument is that Eisenhower would have quickly forced Israel out of the occupied territories, and all parties concerned—Israel especially—would have benefited over the long run. No doubt, decades of occupation have fueled hatred of Israel among Egyptians, Jordanians, and others. Given that Israel's electoral system helps assure weak governments—which are beholden in varying degrees to small right-wing parties opposed to substantial territorial withdrawal—perhaps the only chance Israel has of not becoming an apartheid society is if an American president finds the gumption to adopt an Eisenhower-esque approach and force Israel to withdraw from significant portions of the West Bank, wrangling Palestinian concessions in the process. "You don't have to trust me, Steve Walt, or Jimmy Carter, just listen to former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert," whose November 28, 2007, statement Mearsheimer quotes to me:

> If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African–style struggle for equal voting rights ... then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished.

Moreover, the revolt against calcified central authority in the Middle East, while in the long run beneficial to the emergence of more-liberal regimes, may in the short and middle term yield more-chaotic and more-populist ones, which will create more rather than fewer security problems for Israel. The cost to Israel of its unwillingness to make territorial concessions will grow rather than diminish.

Even as Mearsheimer is attacked, whenever he publishes something—a recent book on why diplomats are forced to lie, or a recent essay decrying both liberal and neoconservative imperialism—he breaks new ground. A collection of his critics'

academic essays published in 2010, *History and Neorealism*, takes aim at Mearsheimer's theories in *Tragedy*. Some of the criticism is scathing, proving that Mearsheimer is the political-science world's *enfant terrible* much more because of Tragedy than because of *The Israel Lobby*. (The essayists attack his theory for its lack of historical subtlety, but here, too, like Huntington, Mearsheimer is setting the terms of the debate.) Despite the media controversy that surrounded *The Israel Lobby*, his latest book, *Why Leaders Lie* (2011), attracted generous jacket blurbs from academic eminences such as the Princeton professor Robert O. Keohane and former editors of both *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*. Within media ranks, *The Israel Lobby* has delegitimized Mearsheimer. Inside the service academy where I taught for two years, in the think-tank world where I work, and in various government circles with which I am acquainted, Mearsheimer is quietly held in higher regard because of familiarity with his other books, but the controversy (and its echoes last fall) has surely hurt him.

Mearsheimer, who is not modest, believes it is a reliance on theory that invigorates his thinking. Returning to his principal passion, China, he tells me: "I have people all the time telling me that they've just returned from China and met with all these Chinese who want a peaceful relationship. I tell them that these Chinese will not be in power in 20 or 30 years, when circumstances may be very different. Because we cannot know the future, all we have to rely upon is theory. If a theory can explain the past in many instances, as my theory of offensive realism can, it might be able to say something useful about the future." And it is likely to be China's future, rather than Israel's, that will ultimately determine Mearsheimer's reputation. If China implodes from a socioeconomic crisis, or evolves in some other way that eliminates its potential as a threat, Mearsheimer's theory will be in serious trouble because of its dismissal of domestic politics. But if China goes on to become a great military power, reshaping the balance of forces in Asia, then Mearsheimer's *Tragedy* will live on as a classic.

Why John J. Mearsheimer Is Right*

*about some things

*about some things

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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