

Ethical Realism (review)

Ethical Realism as a U.S. Strategy in the Struggle with Terrorism

Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World, by Anatol Lieven & John Hulsman (Pantheon Books/Random House, 2006; 200pp)

Reviewed by Charles Strohmer

This book is a real find. And it couldn't be more timely. Written by two distinguished foreign policy analysts from different political camps, Ethical Realism offers a coherent alternative for conservatives and liberals alike and represents what is possible from the collaborative bipartisan efforts taking place in Washington to chart a new U.S. strategy for the Middle East. This is essential, the authors believe, in order to prevent another "debacle" like Iraq, and that is the point of their book ? a point made also to the White House by voters during the 2006 midterm elections and by the Iraq Study Group.

The temptation, now, however, which Lieven and Hulsman warn against, will be for Democrats and Republicans not to dig deep enough, but to instead cobble together a policy from their existing Middle East ideologies. The authors have little patience for either party's foreign policy, and they do not take a hunt-and-peck approach to producing an alternative to neoconservative foreign policy, now dead in the water. "We have therefore decided to turn our back on the orthodoxy of both parties," they write, especially that of the neoconservatives and the liberal hawks, whose "answers... go much too far in the contradictory directions of both hard-line realism and utopian morality ? or, rather, as we shall argue, pseudo-realism and pseudo-morality." We have therefore decided to turn our back on the orthodoxy of both parties

It is refreshing to see the authors' proposal arising in the context of worldview analysis (though they do not use that term). "What has failed in Iraq," they write, is not just the strategy of the Bush administration "but a whole way of looking at the world" held by both parties, each in its own way. In brief, this is the view that the U.S. can spread democracy throughout the world, by force if necessary, and thereby advance its national interests and be supported in that "by good people all over the world, irrespective of their own political traditions, national allegiances, and national interests."

Having determined that this view has become an "unsuccessful approach" that if not "stopped will inevitably lead America to overreach itself, suffer defeat, and decline," Lieven and Hulsman argue for developing U.S. foreign policy through "the philosophy of ethical realism," a respected, historically successful approach as propounded by [slider title="Reinhold Niebuhr"]"Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."[/slider], Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan and drawing on a tradition stretching back to through Edmund Burke and Augustine. Lieven and Hulsman call the U.S. foreign policy community to an historic task, a fundamental rethinking not unlike what both sides of the aisle agreed to and proceeded with during the late 1940s and early 1950s when learning how best to contend with Soviet communism and expansionism in the new and dangerous nuclear age.

A good deal of this short, tightly written book explicates five core principles of ethical realism ? prudence, patriotism, responsibility, humility, and a deep understanding of other nations. To show what this revitalized realism might look like today, Lieven and Hulsman draw on Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Kennan in the context of learned lessons and policy strategies from "the Truman-Eisenhower movement," which unified the foreign policy community and set the U.S. on the road to eventual victory in the Cold War, no matter which party held power in Washington.

This more prescriptive approach makes Ethical Realism a good addition to recent, high-profile but chiefly analytical books such as Cobra II, Fiasco, Hubris, State of Denial, and The Looming Tower. The authors' prescriptive wisdom also directly links the philosophy of ethical realism to "the concept of the Great Capitalist Peace," which "is based on ethical realist thought and directly echoes Kennan's and Morgenthau's concepts of international order and the moral purposes of diplomacy. It denotes a global order tacitly agreed to by all the major states... that guarantees their truly vital interests."

"Ethical realism," the authors write, "recognizes that in the great majority of humanity, impulses to good and evil are mixed up

together," but in such a way that "it also believes in the ability of men and nations to transcend in spirit their circumstances and to strive toward the good, though never fully achieve it. . . . The conduct of international affairs in an ethical realist spirit therefore requires leaders with a combination of open minds, profound moral convictions, and strong nerves." The authors, here, are contrasting their vision to that of "traditional" or "classical" political realism, which, though it too has a sense of the tragic in human nature, "too often ignores the moral factors and the possibility of domestic progress," believing "that in the end, states, and the relative power of states, are the only really important imperatives on the international scene."the Iraq War violated the most basic rules of prudence

The moral aspect of life is, in fact, a large part of the authors' thesis in relation to U.S. foreign policy. In their detailed discussions of prudence, patriotism, responsibility, humility, and understanding other nations, Lieven and Hulsman explain this in some detail, using, in part, examples from the situation in the Middle East, such as when they argue that "the Iraq War violated the most basic rules of prudence," and that "moral modesty" is "central to the creation of a decent and well-ordered world." Humility towards other nations and serious study of those nations is also part of the authors' ethical concern. The duty to study other countries is an ethical command because the affairs of other nations cannot be "grasped with the help of a simple, universal set of ideas, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach to the challenges of foreign policy."

Lieven and Hulsman are under no delusions about how difficult it might be for Democrats and Republicans to process this shift in worldview. It is deeply troubling to the authors that because both parties hold so instinctively to their own (failing) vision for the Middle East, neither will be able accept a truly alternative foreign policy philosophy or strategy. Instead, they will keep reshuffling and playing with the same old deck of cards. That's not good enough: "If Americans fail to reexamine their fundamental attitudes toward the world, then the risk for the future is that failure in Iraq will make the United States more cautious, but not wiser."

Ethical Realism will not interest those who are so ideologically entrenched that their truth has become for them the whole truth. And even those who believe that ethical realism is the sensible way ahead may balk at some of the book's policy suggestions. For many in Washington, however, this thoughtful collaboration will affirm the bipartisan humility that is now needed, even in the face of personal costs.

Hulsman has paid such costs himself. In 2005, when he and Lieven wrote an essay critical of neoconservative foreign policy in *The National Interest*, Hulsman was a senior foreign policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank with strong ideological sympathies with Bush administration policies. The essay annoyed Kim Holmes, the foundation's director of foreign policy, and a year later, when Hulsman refused to let Heritage in on the ideas that were going into *Ethical Realism*, Hulsman's seven-year career at the foundation ended.

But the winds of change are blowing. The Democrats now control Congress, Donald Rumsfeld is out and Robert Gates is in as secretary of defense, and President Bush has received thorough recommendations for changes in U.S. Middle East and Iraq policy from the Iraq Study Group, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the National Security Council. The President has responded by ordering a "surge" of troops in Iraq and anointing secretary of state Condoleezza Rice to practice diplomacy in the Middle East. While everyone holds their breath to see how effective the surge and the diplomatic efforts will be, the Democrats are pushing investigative probes into the war.to seek a higher good not just for America but for humanity

Ethical Realism is an important voice in the mix, not just about Iraq today but America and the Middle East tomorrow. It would argue that even the current winds buffeting Washington may not be coming from the wisest direction, and that we should be open to a more fundamental change. What kind of change? "Ethical realism," the authors conclude, is "of universal and eternal value for the conduct of international affairs, and [is] especially useful as a guiding philosophy for the United States and its war on terror. . . . [T]he American people quite rightly expect their representatives to conduct a realistic and tough defense of their interests, but most also expect those representatives to observe certain moral limits and to seek a higher good not just for America but for humanity." (Charles Strohmer is a visiting research fellow of the Center for Public Justice and writing a book on wisdom and U.S. relations in the Middle East. See [Wisdom or War?](#).)

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