The list goes on, but whatever the actual causes – historians will one day battle it out – we can not eliminate the possibility that “liberalism” and “democracy” have a hand in the war. These principles have turned from noble ideas inspiring a system of government that took root in Western countries and enabled them to progress and flourish into a weaponised ideology that the US uses to destabilise other countries, delegitimise their governments, and intervene with forms of sociopolitical engineering that often backfires in drastic ways. None of it has to do with the liberalism, democracy and freedom the US claims to promote.

John Mearsheimer is among a minority of political scientists who, since the end of the Cold War, foresaw, not just how Washington’s liberalist enterprise would lead not just in war but also in tremendous failure. A good many of his books, articles and elections fall under the heading of The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities, the title of a book he published in 2018.

A political science professor at Chicago University since 1982, Mearsheimer was born on 14 December 1947, in Brooklyn, New York, which is where he grew up. At 17 he enlisted in the US army. He was then admitted into the West Point Military Academy, from which he graduated in 1970. After a five year stint as an air force officer, he enrolled in Cornell University, earning his doctorate in international relations in 1980.

Mearsheimer is an exponent of the realist school in international relations theory founded by Hans Morgenthau, one of the most influential political thinkers after World War II. Morgenthau also taught at Chicago University so it was from there that the realist school spread to other US universities and among the US public in general. Another proponent is Stephen Walt, international relations professor at the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, who co-authored with Mearsheimer The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy (2007), a study on the power of the pro-Israeli lobby in the US and how it shapes US foreign policies, towards the Middle East in particular, in ways that conflict with real US interests in the region.

Mearsheimer and his colleagues pose a great challenge to liberalism, or the “great delusion” as he called it, with his assertion that the liberal hegemony project that US foreign policy has embraced since the end of the Cold War has been a recipe for unmitigated disaster. He draws attention to two basic liberal assumptions related to human nature: firstly, that the individual takes precedence over the group and, secondly, that individuals are unable to attain a general consensus on first principles; passionate differences over those often lead to violence. Liberalism’s solutions to such potential violence is threefold: inalienable human rights for the individual, an emphasis on tolerance despite disagreement, and a state to maintain order when disputes turn violent and to restrain those who threaten others’ rights. Such traits make liberalism a universalist theory which can turn liberal democracies into crusading states.

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