

**TAMING AMERICAN POWER: THE GLOBAL
RESPONSE TO U.S. PRIMACY BY STEPHEN
M. WALT**

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"Brilliant." —Anatol Lieven, *New York Times Book Review*

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Review

This is a pathbreaking book for both the informed public and policy makers, for whom it should be required reading and who would do well to follow its recommendations. --Samuel Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civil*"

About the Author

Stephen M. Walt is the academic dean and the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. He lives in Brookline, Massachusetts.

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Finalist for the 2006 Gelber Prize: "A brilliant contribution to the American foreign policy debate."?Anatol Lieven, New York Times Book Review

At a time when America's dominance abroad was being tested like never before, Taming American Power provided for the first time a "rigorous critique of current U.S. strategy" (Washington Post Book World) from the vantage point of its fiercest opponents. Stephen M. Walt examines America's place as the world's singular superpower and the strategies that rival states have devised to counter it. Hailed as a "landmark book" by Foreign Affairs, Taming American Power makes the case that this ever-increasing tide of opposition not only could threaten America's ability to achieve its foreign policy goals today but also may undermine its dominant position in years to come.

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65 of 78 people found the following review helpful.

Good old-fashioned Realism to the rescue

By Automeus

Walt is a long-time proponent of Realism in international relations, publishing especially in the journal International Relations. This is his latest brief for U.S. foreign policy, and not only is it a rebuke of the Bush Administration's disastrous war on Iraq, "GWOT," and "preemptive war doctrine," which of course is really *preventive*, offensive war, but it outlines a more sensible course of action -- a strategy based on Realist principles.

The bulk of the book examines how the rest of the world is actually responding to U.S. primacy, and why, from the eminently logical point of view that countries pursue their own interests, not ours. Walt looks at examples of the whole range of possibilities, from balancing (including asymmetric strategies), to "balking" (footdragging), "binding" (to alliances, institutions and norms), and delegitimation (what we call in sociology a "framing" strategy), in the cases of Europe, China, Russia, Arab states, and the whole cast of characters on the world stage.

Only at the end, based on this primer on Realist analysis, does Walt turn to his eminently sensible prognosis for U.S. foreign policy. He indicts the failed Global Hegemony strategy of the Bush Administration, which has led to active attempts by virtually everyone else to counter the U.S. After a brief survey of the Selective Engagement strategy of the Bush Sr. and Clinton Administrations, he recommends a return to Offshore Balancing, which was U.S. strategy through most of its history, and which Walt says is perfectly suited to this (no doubt temporary) period of U.S. primacy. Offshore Balancing is not isolationism, but it would minimize permanent commitments and bases in places like Europe and Asia where our allies should take up their share of the common burden, and will in their own interest if forced to, according to Realist theory.

In lamenting the feckless Bush Administration policies that have put the U.S. in a deep hole in terms of its international standing and alliances, Walt observes that the U.S. is "a remarkably immature Great Power," and that "Americans remain remarkably ignorant of the world" (p. 245). In contrast to the spate of immature, ignorant books currently flooding the market, calling for a global War on Islam, among other amazing hare-brained ideas, TAMING AMERICAN POWER is a refreshing voice of sanity.

28 of 34 people found the following review helpful.

Back to the drawing board!

By fCh

Ask folks outside the US if there is something wrong with it and what that is, and chances are that you'll get a good many little piece of the big puzzle characterizing the relationship between the US and the World. Since the "mission accomplished" moment, similar pieces have made it in the US media taxonomy, as high up as editorials. It is the merit of Stephen Walt's, to have been gathered a lot of little pieces in a framework that would capture the situation like this: 1) Why other states fear the US primacy? 2) What strategies can states pursue in response to US primacy? 3) What can the US do about #2? If not much can be debated about points #1 and #2 in Walt's framework, point #3 comes along the lines of a growing conversation meant to supplant the neocon doctrine, as the latter one loses steam by the day. It should be briefly noted that the answer to point #3 had preoccupied the US foreign policy makers even before the neocon doctrine - recall Clinton's 'indispensable nation.'

The relative novelty Professor Walt brings into consideration, when looking for answers to point #3, is the need for openness and public debate about the activity of political lobbies - especially those steering the US foreign policy. Michael Scheuer might have been the first one, in this round, to raise awareness about political lobbies as factor influencing the US foreign policy. However, it is only now that we have a proposal on how to deal with the shortcomings of what, Walt reminds us, is a fundamental feature of the American democracy - interest groups. It should also be added that, in a recent report on overall nations' business competitiveness, released by The World Economic Forum, the US occupies only the second place due also to the perceived negative influence of business lobbies on government policy. So, here we have a complementary instance where interest groups, the same ones Tocqueville was first to write about, are exacting their price on the American system.

I would sum up the value of this book in terms of: (a) Taking a snapshot of the world's perception of the US through the lens of the American foreign policy; (b) Building a framework of the relationships between the

US and the other nations; (c) Bringing to public attention several prescriptions for maintaining US primacy while addressing (some of) the world's concerns. As for Walt's prescriptions for US foreign policy, the part of the book that's open widest to debate, only time will tell what and how. Somehow, I have a feeling, the next executive is taking notice.

For those still undecided customers, have a look at "Taming American Power," an article the author published in Sept/Oct issue of Foreign Affairs.

23 of 29 people found the following review helpful.

Using a chair and whip?

By Stephen A. Haines

A new genre of foreign policy writers is emerging in the United States. They are called "realists", but defining the term defies precision. Following the "neo-con" works extolling the idea of the US flexing its military and economic might came the "soft power" advocates. The latter declared that overbearing foreign policies were counterproductive. Power must be curbed or withdrawn in favour of more conciliatory policies, preferably multilaterally decided and applied. Stephen Walt's approach is a middle ground, without being conciliatory to either of the previous stances.

Walt opens with a summary of all the aspects of might available to the USA. This is the foundation of the "realist" genre - the power is there and Walt catalogues it nicely. The USA is at once the strongest power militarily and economically, influencing many by sheer presence. It has far outstripped whatever competition it might have had. A military defeat is out of the question and even economic challengers can only hope to share, not dominate, markets. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the USA in the role of world primacy. That unique position has led other nations to view such solitary might with distrust and resentment. Walt explains brilliantly why these countries are suspicious. Any nation confronted with such prowess will naturally be wary. He generally avoids value judgements in the depiction, but he notes how poorly informed the leaders and general populace of the USA are about the resentment. How other nations do and should react becomes the theme of most of Walt's remaining chapters.

Once he's described what he calls "the roots of resentment", Walt describes the reactions by nations uncomfortable with the USA's "primacy". He lists various "strategies of opposition" and "accommodation". Opposition to such prowess must range across many options. Can it be direct? Walt shows how resistance to US demands might depend on the severity of the issue, whether other distractions command greater attention or whether the resistance might reach across more than one nation. Excessive power is a fine tool for forging opposition alliances. Where open and direct alliances may be lacking or impractical, various forms of "balancing" may be established to offset US hegemony. The most extreme form of "balancing" is the terror attack, but many other methods are available, from "balking" to blackmail. It's important to note that with a single power to contend with, continuous or sustained tactics to counter US strength are unlikely. There will be shifts and rearrangements until new balances are struck. Pejorative references to "Old" and "New" Europe, for example, are counterproductive. They only serve to demonstrate inflexibility and increase disaffection toward the US leadership.

Where direct opposition to US hegemony fails or is impractical, there are various forms of accommodation that may be adopted. Understanding that each nation has its own interests to follow, "accommodation" is a term of wide and flexible definition. One strategy is to call in the "debts" of past cooperation. That may lead to modification of the original demands by the US. "Bandwagoning" is Walt's term for a nation agreeing to a US policy, but with an eye to later possible challenges. It's a rare tactic, but one used effectively in the proper circumstances. "Regional balancing" is another form of manoeuvring. It was used successfully during the Cold War, and lingers in some of today's national alignments. A more blatant form of accommodation is the

use of "penetration" of domestic politics. Here, Walt treads on shaky ground as he depicts the extensive lobby groups run by Israel and India. These forces have gone beyond seeking accommodation to actually guide US policy-making. His recommendation to banish these groups as inimical to US long-term interests will certainly lead to protest by vested interests. Walt further recommends the blatant and unhindered support of Israel in the Middle East is causing more problems than benefits. The US should cut Israel loose and strive to broker a new arrangement based on the establishment of a Palestinian nation.

Walt stresses a point often lost in discussions of US power and policy. It is a mistake, he notes, to think other nations resent or "hate" the people of the US. Except through the leaders they elect, the people of the US aren't held accountable for mistaken policies. The failures of successive administrations are regrettable, but the peoples of other nations generally accept the foundation of "good intentions" in US actions. What is needed, Walt suggests, is to prove that good intentions work. This can be accomplished by the US using its might with circumspection. "Offshore balancing", the solving of problems by negotiation with the might of the US present in the background, has been successful and should be applied more often. The present administration has abandoned "offshore balancing" in favour of a declaration of "preventive" war against nations it deems unaccommodating. This, in effect, is a declaration of war against the rest of the world. Instead of asserting its power, Walt argues, the US should assume a stance of playing "hard to get". Other nations should be welcomed in bringing problems to the US instead of the US intruding unilaterally. He calls this approach a "mature foreign policy".

Who will tame this powerful eagle? Chairs and whips are for lions, so something else must be applied. It is the ballot that will curb excess or foolishly applied power. Walt intends this book as a non-partisan prescription for improving the awareness of the US electorate. He notes that many of the problems in international affairs his nation is facing are of recent origin. It isn't too late to employ corrective action, but voters and their representatives must be better informed of the issues and how policies are irritating other nations with which the US must coexist. Read this book and learn where to start. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

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