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The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

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This is a minor problem, however. It does not significantly mar an excellent work that will serve anyone desiring grounding in strategic studies or a refresher on strategy.

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Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. 448pp. \$27.95

This monumental and ambitious work sets out to provide the definitive account of the “offensive realism” school of international relations theory. Offensive realism represents a kind of synthesis of the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau and the structural or “defensive” realism of Kenneth Waltz. With Morgenthau it assumes that states (or major states) seek to accumulate as much power as possible for themselves, but it accepts Waltz’s view that the reason they do so lies in the structure of the international system rather than in the human lust for power. Mearsheimer must therefore show that Waltz and his many followers have been overly optimistic in analyzing the implications for state behavior of the anarchic character of the international system. According to Mearsheimer, they have wrongly assumed that a cautious or defensive approach to safeguarding a state’s security is the only rational approach and hence the norm for most states. Rather, he insists, aggressive or expansionist behavior is both more common in the recent history of the great powers than this would allow and more rational in the sense that it is not infrequently very successful.

Mearsheimer’s thesis is richly illustrated, from the history of the great powers from the wars of the French Revolution through the end of the Cold War. It also looks out into the future to test the theory against the common if vaguely articulated belief that great-power war has become obsolete. For these reasons, and because it is written in a clear and jargon-free style, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* holds much interest even for those with limited patience for the theological disputes of international relations theorists. At the same time, it is a formidable challenge to mainstream realism. It scores many points off an approach that somehow never comes to grips with what one is tempted to call the sheer bloody-mindedness of international politics. Particularly novel and persuasive is Mearsheimer’s analysis of “buck passing” (not “bandwagoning”) as the fundamental alternative to balancing against another power.

Yet the book has its limitations, which are largely the limitations of the realist school as such. Mearsheimer never quite convinces when he argues that the domestic regimes and leadership of, for example, Britain, the United States, Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan had no fundamental impact on their international behavior. But perhaps the weakest part of the book is its disregard of the ideological context of nineteenth-century European diplomacy. The anti-revolutionary alliance of Austria, Prussia, and Russia, and the “Concert of Europe,” were arguably at least as important in maintaining the long great-power peace through much of this period as were the abstract structural characteristics of the European state system. For that matter, the fact that many of the wars that did occur were connected in some way with

the decay of the Ottoman Empire seems to suggest, contra Mearsheimer, that wars can be caused as much by the weakness as by the strength of a key actor. Both these points have suggestive applications as we look to the twenty-first century. The war against terrorism might well be the occasion for the formation of a global “concert” of the great powers. The greatest threat to such a concert could well be the continuing weakness of Russia—not, as Mearsheimer holds, the rising strength of China.

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Kagan, Donald, and Fredrick W. Kagan. *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000. 483pp. \$32.50

Did the leadership of the United States throw away a priceless opportunity to bring stability, prosperity, and peace to the world in the decade following the end of the Cold War, as surely as the leadership of Great Britain failed to grasp a similar opportunity following the end of the First World War? For Donald and Fredrick Kagan, the answer is a resounding yes. *While America Sleeps* is their attempt not only to show how opportunities were squandered but also to highlight the similarities of both situations. The Kagans argue that both states dangerously reduced the size of their military forces, falsely believed in the saving power of technology, failed to exercise strategic leadership, and embarked on a pattern of “pseudo-engagement.” The importance of the central question and the

authors' credentials make this a book to be taken seriously.

The Kagans, both historians of note, make a potent father-and-son team. Donald Kagan, the Hillhouse Professor of History and Classics at Yale University, has produced an impressive body of work, including the best-selling *A History of Warfare*. Fredrick W. Kagan, currently a professor of military history at West Point, is perhaps less well known to the general public but has impressive credentials in his own right.

While America Sleeps is divided into three sections. The first, “Britain between the Wars,” chronicles that state's transition from a globally dominant power in 1918 to one of near-fatal weakness by the mid-1930s. It pays special attention to the Chanak crisis of 1922, the Corfu affair of 1923, the Locarno Treaty of 1925, the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1934–35, and the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936. The second, “The United States after the Cold War,” follows a generally similar approach, addressing particularly the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the U.S. intervention in Somalia from 1991 to 1993, the occupation of Haiti in 1994, the Clinton administration's attempts to deal with North Korea's nuclear weapons program, that same administration's efforts to curtail Iraqi production of weapons of mass destruction, and American responses to conflict in the Balkans. The true third section, although actually included in the second section of the book, is the concluding chapter, in which the authors clearly state their belief that the United States is at risk of “suffering a fate similar to that which befell Britain in the 1930s.” They present an argument supporting this conclusion and