



VOICE

# The Foreign-Policy Establishment Reeks of Desperation

After years of failure, elites have only name-calling left.

BY [STEPHEN M. WALT](#) | NOVEMBER 5, 2018, 6:48 AM



Former President Barack Obama, former Vice President Al Gore, former President George W. Bush, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrive at the memorial service for Sen. John McCain at the Washington National Cathedral on Sept. 1.

(Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images)

If you're a pundit defending a weak case, there are several familiar techniques you can employ. You can mischaracterize the views of those with whom you disagree to make it easier to criticize them. You can distort the historical record so that the so-called evidence appears to support your case more than it really does. Or you can rely on guilt by association and suggest that the views of people you disagree with are more or less identical to the views of people who are already regarded as dangerous or unsound.

In a [recent column](#) in *Bloomberg*, the historian Hal Brands displays an impressive mastery of all three techniques. His target is a group of scholars—John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and myself—who have published works that are critical of recent U.S. foreign policy and have highlighted some of the failings of the foreign-policy establishment. Brands points out that President Donald Trump has also been critical of past foreign-policy decisions and has heaped scorn on some parts of that same establishment. According to Brands, this congruence means we three scholars are actively aligned with the 45th president. In his words, “It is unusual to find academics at some of America’s most elite universities in enthusiastic agreement with Donald Trump.”

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You see how this works? Trump is critical of U.S. foreign policy and those responsible for it; Mearsheimer, Posen, and Walt are too. Ergo, Mearsheimer, Posen, and Walt must be “enthusiastic” Trumpians. Although Brands later acknowledges that all three of us have been “critical of Trump himself,” the clear implication is that while we may find Trump personally distasteful, we hold the same outlook on world affairs that he does and are in favor of more or less the same policies.

Needless to say, this not-so-subtle smear tactic is without foundation. Although all three of us believe U.S. foreign policy has gone badly off the rails in recent decades, we have been equally critical of Trump’s handling of foreign policy and the beliefs that underpin it. A quick reading of Posen’s *Foreign Affairs* [article](#) on “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony” or Chapter 6 of my book [The Hell of Good Intentions](#) (titled “How *Not* to Fix U.S. Foreign Policy”) demonstrates this beyond doubt.

Moreover, anyone can play the guilt-by-association game. Brands believes that the United States should continue to be the world’s strongest military power. Guess what? So does Trump, whose defense budget called for substantial increases in spending. Brands also [believes](#) that China is a growing military and economic challenge. Surprise! Trump does too. Brands has [written](#) that “[i]t may well be worth keeping 10,000 or so U.S. troops [in Afghanistan] if doing so prevents the Taliban from winning the war and

keeps Islamic State and al-Qaeda from re-consolidating safe havens that they could use to execute major terrorist attacks.” Golly, that is pretty much what Trump decided as well. By Brands’s own logic, therefore, he’s more Trumpian than we are! I don’t think that’s really the case, by the way, but it shows you why guilt by association is such a bogus way to try to win an argument.

Brands mischaracterizes our views in another way. He defends the foreign-policy establishment by arguing that the “persistent global engagement” it has long advocated played a “vital role” in foreign-policy successes such as the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the first Gulf War in 1991. The implication is that those of us who are critical of that establishment today are opposed to “global engagement” and thus akin to isolationists.

Nothing could be further from the truth. All three of us supported the 1991 Gulf War (for familiar balance-of-power reasons), and we have repeatedly emphasized that the United States should remain economically, diplomatically, and, in some cases, militarily committed around the world. For example, Mearsheimer and I have written extensively about the need to balance China in Asia, an effort that will require a sustained U.S. military presence there. We do believe that U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been mostly a failure—especially given the stated objectives of every president from Bill Clinton forward—and that a more realistic and restrained foreign policy would be better for the country. But none of us favors a return to Fortress America, let alone Trump’s version of “America First.”

Which brings us to Brands’s reading of the historical record. His defense of recent U.S. foreign policy rests on the claim that it hasn’t really been so bad. One sees this clearly in his characterization of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as “disappointing.” To call these wars “disappointing” is a bit like calling the [Hindenburg crash](#) a “mishap” or describing Hurricane Sandy as “poor beach weather.” But those debacles are merely the most clear-cut examples of recent foreign-policy blunders. One could add the misguided decision to pursue open-ended NATO expansion, which poisoned relations with Russia and helped trigger the crisis in Ukraine; the ham-handed diplomacy that produced the Kosovo war; the strategic folly of dual containment, which required keeping thousands of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and thus helped inspire the 9/11 attacks; the ill-fated U.S. interventions in Libya, Yemen, and Somalia; the refusal to talk seriously to Iran as it went from having zero nuclear centrifuges to operating thousands; the bipartisan bungling of the Oslo peace process; and many more.

Brands correctly reminds us that past U.S. leaders made some big mistakes, too, of which the Vietnam War is perhaps the most obvious. But as I noted in [my recent](#)

[book](#), “the overall performance of some previous administrations was still impressive, especially when one considers that they were dealing either with formidable expansionist powers (Germany and Japan in the two world wars) or confronting a continent-size, nuclear-armed superpower whose revolutionary ideology attracted considerable support around the globe. ... They made their full share of mistakes ... but they also got many big things right.”

By contrast, today’s foreign-policy elite started out with the United States at the pinnacle of a far more benign world and proceeded to get most of the big things wrong. No administration fails at everything, of course, but neither Clinton, George W. Bush, nor Barack Obama could point to any major foreign-policy successes, and each made costly and avoidable mistakes. For all three, the taproot of their failures was a bipartisan commitment to “liberal hegemony”—the idea that the United States should use its vast power to spread liberal values all around the world, peacefully if possible but if necessary by force. This is not just engagement; it is an actively revisionist effort to reshape local politics in many different places. And the foreign-policy establishment has remained staunchly committed to this worldview, despite the many failures it has produced.

Moreover, the fact that previous administrations also made mistakes is hardly a reason to be uncritical of more recent blunders or to give those responsible for them a free pass. Brands’s suggestion that recent setbacks “are no worse than those of any other 30-year period in American history” is a recipe for complacency that makes it more likely that past errors will be repeated.

