

Morgenthau's Unrealistic Realism

BY ROBERT KAUFMAN

Hans J. Morgenthau is deservedly recognized as the founder of post-World War II realist theory in international relations. Many aspects of Morgenthau's thought continue to resonate powerfully among modern international relations theorists. The neorealist approach widely popular in the academy today explicitly builds on Morgenthau's concept of defining interest in terms of power, providing a single-variable structural explanation for international politics. Even critics of unalloyed classical realism and neorealism must reckon with Morgenthau's path-breaking approach. Nor is Morgenthau's relevance limited to abstract academic theorizing. Much of the criticism of the so-called Bush doctrine and the president's emphasis on regime change in the Middle East as a goal in the war on terror comes from the realist and neorealist traditions.

Though it offers a brilliant critique of utopianism in international politics, Morgenthau's version of realism fails as a theory and as a reliable guide for policy choice. His correct emphasis on the imperatives of power, the constraints of anarchy, and the inherent flaws of man needs to be supplemented with factors drawn from idealism and the other traditions of international politics that Morgenthau discounts. These factors include the necessity of objective transcendent moral standards to judge relative degrees of moral and geopolitical evil, the intrinsic significance of ideology and regime type for promoting cooperation or exacerbating international conflict, and a recognition of the salutary pacifying effects of stable, liberal democracies vis-à-vis one another. To a greater extent than Morgenthau ever imagined, U.S. national interests, rightly understood, have and will continue to correspond with American ideals. Historically, the American people have insisted, with

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considerable success, that U.S. leaders practice a foreign policy that is morally right as well as politically expedient. For these reasons, Morgenthau's realism is highly unrealistic as a guide to U.S. policy.

Morgenthau's attempts to sever domestic from international politics and to minimize the impact of ideology on the international system rendered him less capable of understanding the moral, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions of the conflict with the Soviet Union than such quintessential Cold Warriors as President Harry Truman, Senator Henry M. Jackson, and President Ronald Reagan. Similarly, President George W. Bush understands better than his realist and neorealist critics that undemocratic regimes encourage terror and that democratization in the Middle East is imperative to address this root cause.

Constrained Pessimism

Morgenthau was so prolific that paradoxes and contradictions in his thought are inevitable. This analysis concentrates therefore on his most important works and the dominant trajectory of his approach. While Morgenthau, like many German academics escaping from Hitler's Germany, retained a somber pessimism more emblematic of German thought than the greater optimism of the American realist tradition, his views about democracy in general and the United States in particular evolved substantially from his formative years in Germany. The analysis that follows relies mainly on his four most essential works of this post-war period: *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*; *Politics among Nations*; *In Defense of the National Interest*; and *The Purpose of American Politics*.¹

Morgenthau rooted his political realism in St. Augustine's recognition of both the "inevitability and the evilness of man's lust for power."² He repudiated the outlook and policy prescriptions of utopians and rationalist liberals, who, in his view, wrongly assumed that power and its hazards are attached to certain types of actions, situations, and institutions, and that by reforming or abolishing them, the lust for power could be abolished and thus the moral problem for power would be thus solved.³ Instead, Morgenthau argued that human nature itself, rather than faulty institutions, was responsible for the misuse and temptations of power. In line with this negative view of human nature, Morgenthau rejected the tenets of the liberal strain of international relations theory, including faith in a natural harmony of interests among states, in collective security enforced by international organizations, in pacifism, in peace without power, and in the simple identification of morals and politics. Morgenthau's grim assessment of man's predicament in the political realm underpins his six principles of political realism laid out in *Politics Among*

Nations. These six principles also typically, but not always, form the basis for his policy prescriptions and specific criticisms of U.S. foreign policy.

Morgenthau claims that “political realism” is governed by objective laws “that have their roots in human nature,” which have “not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these laws.” Within those bounds, it is the job of realists to assess “what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose.”⁴ Morgenthau assumes that statesmen think and act according to interests defined “in terms of power,” dismissing as “futile and deceptive” clues to foreign policy that are “exclusively in the motives” or ideological preferences of statesmen.⁵ Despite insisting that the key concept of interest—defined as power maximization—is universally valid, Morgenthau concedes that the meaning of that concept depends upon the political and cultural context in which foreign policy is formulated. Nevertheless, interest defined as power remains for Morgenthau “the perennial standard” that directs and judges political actions.⁶ As a result, Morgenthau maintains, “universal moral principles cannot be applied to the action of states in their abstract universal formulation, but...must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.”⁷

He thus considers prudence, the weighing of consequences of alternative political actions, the cardinal virtue of a statesman in politics.⁸ Morgenthau identifies interest defined as power as the measure of prudence that saves us from the moral excess and political folly “of identifying the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.” Even if nations are subject to eternal laws, Morgenthau argues, we cannot “pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations.” We will achieve a greater degree of justice by moderating our moral judgment and looking at all states, including our own, “as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power.” In this way, we are more likely to pursue “policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own.”⁹ Morgenthau stresses the autonomy of the political sphere from other modes of thought that a political realist must subordinate when studying the nature of politics. His theory does not claim to explain everything, but to understand “international politics as it actually is and as it ought to be in view of its intrinsic nature, rather than as people would like to see it.”¹⁰

On the basis of these principles, Morgenthau concludes that the creation of a world state overseeing perpetual peace is “unattainable under the moral, social, and political conditions in the world at our time.”¹¹ Instead, he advocates two primary methods to mitigate the inevitable struggle for power

in international politics: the balance of power resting on an international consensus about the imperative of restraining the unbridled power aspirations of all states; and diplomacy, devoid of a crusading spirit, through which states define their foreign policies in terms of concrete conceptions of the national interest, readily compromise on issues not vital to them, and strive empathetically to view foreign policy from the point of view of other nations, not just their own.¹²

The Enduring Virtues of Morgenthau

Morgenthau's version of realism has several virtues that are perilous to ignore. He succeeds brilliantly in demolishing the fallacious assumptions underlying utopian thinking about international relations: faith in the moral force of public opinion, faith in the harmony of interests between states, and faith in the capacity of organizations such as the United Nations to replace the rule of force with the rule of law. Morgenthau's devastating refutation of the principle of collective security should be mandatory reading for those who harbor the dangerous illusion that the United Nations can serve as an adequate substitute for U.S. power and the willingness to use it. On issues of supreme national security, the UN has failed utterly to deter great powers from acting in their interests for the reasons Morgenthau enunciates so persuasively. Neither the UN nor any international organization in the foreseeable future will possess the power, the consensus, or the will among its members for collective security to work. Instead, Morgenthau anticipated that the UN Security Council would generate gridlock rather than decisiveness as the major powers used the forum to pursue their clashing interests by other means. In this environment, deterring and defeating aggression will still require unilateral action, often in defiance of the United Nations.

Morgenthau also highlights why power is a pivotal and inescapable element of international politics. His fiercest critics must concede that even the contingent and imperfect realization of ideals in politics depends on power, or as Reinhold Niebuhr, America's greatest Christian realist, so aptly put it, "There has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation."¹³ This is equally true for the current ascendance of liberalism in international politics, which depends as much on U.S. power and leadership as on the intrinsic appeal of liberal principles. Morgenthau's warning against the dangers of moral messianism contains important elements of truth, as well. History is replete with examples of statesmen wrongly conflating particular principles and interests into universal ones. In many cases, moreover, messianic ideologies have served merely as a pretext or justification to strive for power rather than an autonomous force

shaping the behavior of states. Concrete conceptions of power and interest often offer a more reliable guide for understanding international conflicts and prescribing their solutions.

Morgenthau's equally prescient warnings against the dangers of false scientism in the study of politics provide the intellectual ballast for a stern and timely rebuke of neorealist theories now ascendant in the discipline of international relations. What Morgenthau would dispute is not neorealism's correct emphasis on the structure of the international system and the distribution of capabilities within it, which he, too, considered critical variables affecting the behavior of states. What he would rightly rebuke is the scientific pretension of neorealists who claim that structure is enough to explain all that is significant about international relations. Morgenthau recoiled from the tendency, emblematic of neorealists, to treat politics as a hard science rather than a soft one.

Finally, Morgenthau identified, with great lucidity and insight, the formidable barriers to transcendent morality becoming a significant force in foreign policy. Humans are incapable of perfection, but indeed capable of great evil and depravity, an inclination that often manifests itself more acutely and perilously among states. The fog of uncertainty and the imperatives of the lust for power sometimes confound moral reasoning and the application of moral principles to concrete circumstances. Also, Morgenthau argues persuasively, sound moral reasoning entails not just good intentions, but a probabilistic assessment of the consequences of alternative courses of action that usually becomes clear only in retrospect. Like ideology, universal moral principles can serve as a mere pretext for the pursuit of national policies.¹⁴

A Flawed Conception of Man and Morality

A major source of Morgenthau's error is his excessively pessimistic view of human nature, which is the converse of unalloyed liberalism's excessively sanguine view. In this way, Morgenthau belongs more to the Christian realist tradition of St. Augustine than the realpolitik school of Hobbes, Machiavelli, or other thinkers who extolled power to the exclusion of Judeo-Christian notions of ethics. Morgenthau examines the perennial struggle for power in international politics not with moral indifference, but rather with a sense of tragedy and regret for the enormities of depravity and injustice in history. His writings on U.S. politics in particular reveal a profound and stern moralism. Morgenthau condemned, for example, the U.S. war in Vietnam as immoral as well as imprudent: "The policy-makers who are so concerned about our collective and their personal prestige might take a moment to reflect on the

kind of country America will be when it emerges from so senseless, hopeless, and brutalizing a war."¹⁵

Morgenthau insists that statesmen must choose the lesser evil based on the ethic of consequences rather than the perfectionist ethic of intentions. The proximate source of Morgenthau's morality is not directly Judeo-Christian but a cosmopolitan ethic, the content of which he did not bother to define precisely, perhaps because he could not do so.

Yet what Morgenthau recognizes in theory—the existence of transcendent moral standards—he takes away in practice. He largely divests international politics of ethical content by treating the lust for power as man's overriding characteristic and by dismissing as mere pretense the invocation of universal moral principles in international politics. Even Greg Russell, the best of Morgenthau's biographers and a sympathetic one, concedes that Morgenthau's view of "the pervasive evil in human nature and politics rendered his formal ethic so transcendent that it could not easily function as a vital force directing man's creative energies in an imperfect world."¹⁶ This is a vast understatement.

Morgenthau's deep pessimism leaves few concrete mechanisms to guide foreign policy except national interest defined as power, which he defends as both moral and practical. He believes it is more honest, more likely to induce moderation, and more likely to minimize deadly ideological crusades for nations to confess to their real motives rather than pretend to have moral ones. Morgenthau's reification of the national interest defined as power stems not just from his view of what is, but what ought to be, given his severely constrained vision of man's possibilities. According to Morgenthau, "A foreign policy derived from the national interest is in fact morally superior to a foreign policy inspired by universal moral principles."¹⁷ This normative dimension of theory provides the key to resolving the otherwise vexing paradox of his entire enterprise. On one hand, he claims the immutable and objective nature of realism's imperatives. On the other, he constantly and scathingly remonstrates American statesmen for ignoring them: "It is not only a political duty but also a moral duty for the nation to follow in its dealings with other nations, but one guiding star, one standard of thought, one rule for action: The National Interest."¹⁸ The United States can and should set its sights much higher than Morgenthau does. His realism, and the flawed conception

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of human nature underpinning it, would incline statesmen to embrace the dangerous fallacy of moral equivalence and a crabbed, unenlightened definition of the national interest at variance with our ideals or self-interest. As Niebuhr rightly observed, Morgenthau obscured “the residual capacity for justice and devotion to a larger good, even when it is dealing with a dimension of human behavior in which the realistic assumptions about human nature are most justified.”¹⁹ Morgenthau thus over-learned the lessons of the twentieth century. Alarmed at the illusions of democracies intoxicated with their own goodness and ideals and appalled by the ideological fanaticism of Nazi Germany which he experienced directly as a young man, Morgenthau became pathologically hostile to all forms of universal moral claims without making reasonable distinctions among them.

A more sensible approach would stake a middle ground that rejects the extremes of both idealists who minimize the formidable barriers to securing even imperfect justice in international politics and the extreme pessimists such as Morgenthau who exaggerate such barriers. Generally, Judeo-Christian morality illuminates much more clearly than Morgenthau’s impotent cosmopolitan ethic the moral as well as geopolitical stakes involved in many of the great conflicts of international politics. This standard informed the more compelling and enlightened anti-utopian vision of Winston Churchill who was, justifiably, one of Morgenthau’s great heroes. Churchill, however, had none of Morgenthau’s paralyzing inhibitions about employing absolute standards of Judeo-Christian morality as the standard by which to judge relative degrees of moral and geopolitical evil.

A more sensible approach than Morgenthau’s would also recognize that ideologies do not merely rationalize the lust for power, but may also be a motivating force in the way states define and pursue national interests. In the case of the United States, Morgenthau’s paradoxical reductionism leads him inexorably and unrealistically to lament the moral and ideological impulses that continue so powerfully to affect U.S. foreign policy. As Morgenthau himself concedes, the United States has always conceived of its national purpose loftily as establishing “equality in freedom” and evaluated the world through the lens of this idealism.²⁰ He also concedes that “the invocation of abstract moral principle...was a magnificent instrument for marshalling public opinion in support of war or warlike policies.”²¹ Yet he cannot bring himself to accept the logical implications of this analysis, which contradict the underlying assumptions of his realism. As President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger discovered during the 1970s in their attempt to pursue a policy of *détente* based on restrictive conceptions of morality and the national interest similar to Morgenthau’s, *realpolitik* alone

will not suffice to win the domestic support necessary to sustain an effective foreign policy. Americans must believe that U.S. foreign policy is right and legitimate as well as in the nation's self interest. This is no less true for the current war on terrorism than for the two world wars and the Cold War that dominated U.S. foreign policy in the previous century.

Morgenthau's propensity to dismiss ideology as a mere rationalization for power also inclined him to misconstrue the essence and dynamics of the Soviet threat and the war in Vietnam. Particularly in his later writings, he identified the Soviet Union as a traditional great power seeking the traditional geopolitical goals of Tsarist Russia in ideological disguise. Yet what we have since learned from the Russian archives after the collapse of the Soviet Union affirms what quintessential Cold Warriors Harry Truman knew in the 1940s, Henry M. Jackson affirmed in the 1970s, and Ronald Reagan reprised in the 1980s: Marxist-Leninist thought largely influenced how the Soviet Union defined its national interests, its ultimate goals, and the means to pursue them.

There is, of course, much to criticize legitimately, as Morgenthau does, about the U.S. role in the Vietnam War. Yet the mistakes the United States committed in Vietnam neither validate Morgenthau's general critique of U.S. foreign policy nor invalidate the wisdom of Cold Warriors who took the ideological dimension of the communist threat more seriously than he did. American statesmen implemented and deepened the military commitment based on an exaggerated, although not groundless, fear that the loss of Vietnam could set off a chain of reaction that would imperil the entire edifice of U.S. containment policy toward the Soviet Union. Despite the caricature of this "domino theory" by Morgenthau and many other critics, history attests powerfully that dominoes sometimes do fall in international relations. For American Cold Warriors steeped in the lessons of Munich, prudence dictated that the United States should hedge against the real dangers that independent countries in Asia, many of them fragile and beset with domestic problems, could fall under the control of the Soviet Union or China. Communism possessed enormous appeal for the elites of the underdeveloped world, many of whom still considered it the wave of the future, as did Nikita Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, for all their differences.

Morgenthau's Erroneous Neglect of Regime Type

Morgenthau commits a serious error not only in denying the autonomous force of ideology in international politics, but also in depreciating the effect of regime type on the content of foreign policy. Raymond Aron offers a salient point of departure:

The features which all diplomatic-strategic behavior have in common are formal, they come down to selfishness, to the calculation of forces, to a variable mixture of hypocrisy and cynicism. But the differences in degree are such that a Napoleon or a Hitler suffices with the help of revolutionary circumstances to change the course of history.²²

Morgenthau tries and fails to explain these critical distinctions without any reference to the interplay of regime type, ideology, and external circumstances. Instead, he reduces all foreign policies to three types: status quo, prestige, and imperialism. His realism brooks no examination of whether, why, or how the internal characteristics of states and their animating ideologies

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may instill in some more than others the propensity to pursue more ambitious goals by more aggressive means. His theory is therefore untenable, especially as an explanation for the limited democratic peace. The complementary norms of stable liberal democracies encourage a significant, although by no means complete, harmony of interests among such regimes. Simultaneously, these norms mute the severity of conflicts of interest when they do occur among such regimes.

Although conflicts will invariably occur among stable liberal democracies, they will be less frequent and intense than with other types of regimes and, as a result, will be resolved short of the battlefield.

Contrary to what Morgenthau argues, therefore, Woodrow Wilson and other U.S. presidents dedicated to the spread of democracy did not pursue a policy at variance with U.S. national interest, but instead complementary to their vision of it. Morgenthau's conception of the national interest is not self-evident, to say the least. Historically, the United States has defined the national interest through the tug and pull of domestic politics, and, rightly, by reference to transcendent ideals. Indeed, the spread of stable liberal democracy probably does diminish the severity and frequency of war, rivalry, and discord in international politics.

Regime type has also had a critical effect on the extent of the danger other great powers have posed to the international system. Whether nations constitute a menace or an asset to international cooperation seems to depend as much on the internal arrangements of their states as it does on Morgenthau's abstract lust for power. Based on historical experience, the totalitarian Germany of Adolf

Hitler was more dangerous to itself and the world than the authoritarian and militaristic Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm or the revisionist democracy of Weimar Germany. The stable liberal democratic Germany of Konrad Adenauer and his successors constituted the least dangerous regime type: a peaceful Germany likely to cooperate with the other states of Western Europe, and to reconcile successfully its historic differences with France that led to three wars. Similarly, the history of the interwar years reveals that the problems of trade and economic rivalry that today merely irritate U.S.-Japan relations became explosive when Japan was governed by an authoritarian and militaristic regime. Likewise, a stable, liberal, and democratic China or Iraq also would pose less of a threat to their people and their neighbors than an autocratic Chinese regime or the megalomaniacal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

The mistake of Wilsonians lies not in their desire to promote stable, liberal democracy, a policy highly congenial to U.S. ideals and self interest. Rather, many democratic triumphalists underestimate the vital importance of systemic pressures that can enhance or undermine democratic peace and the enduring importance of power in world politics. The implications of the democratic peace argument remain limited in a world where only one half of the regimes in power remotely qualify as stable, liberal, and democratic. Despite the welcome surge in the number of democratic regimes since the 1980s, liberal democracy is unlikely to become universal any time soon, and its ascendancy will never be irreversible. Vast areas of Asia, much of Africa, and most of the Middle East remain deeply resistant to the allures of democracy. Beyond the liberal democratic zone of peace, therefore, large elements of Morgenthau's realism—and structural realism's emphasis on the distribution of capabilities—will remain critical. Neither the end of the Cold War nor a favorable end to the current war on terror could end the struggle for power and rivalry that has always characterized international relations.

Moreover, the imperatives of power on which Morgenthau places such great emphasis remain critical to the robustness of the democratic zone of peace. Although the extremes of the argument by Charles Tilly, Peter Gourevitch, and Alexander Gerschenkron that systemic factors determine regime types are unconvincing, such factors often are necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for the spread and maintenance of liberal democracy. The collapse of liberal democracy in Europe during the interwar years owed, for example, to an interaction between systemic and domestic conditions. The U.S. withdrawal into isolation after World War I, Great Britain's indifference, and French weakness conspired to undermine the favorable imbalance of power on which the survival of fragile democracies of Germany and Eastern Europe largely hinged.

Conversely, the establishment and sustainment of democracy in Western Europe and Japan since World War II owes a great deal not just to the force of U.S. ideals, but also to the benign effects of U.S. power. These successes highlight the vast superiority of the moral, practical, and strategic vision of the United States' most unrepentant Cold Warriors, compared to that of either Wilsonian idealism or Morgenthauian realism. Unlike the idealists, American statesmen after 1947 sought to contain Soviet expansionism by a combination of military and economic power. Though it is a liberal democracy with a strong tradition of isolationism and exceptionalism, the United States' implementation of containment in Europe resembled classic balance of power politics because external pressures gave the United States no alternative. On the other hand, Western European states did not balance against the Soviet threat or cooperate with one another spontaneously. They cooperated because credible U.S. commitments protected them from the Soviet Union and freed them from the security dilemma vis-à-vis one another.

Yet power politics alone cannot suffice to explain either the substance or success of the U.S. policy of vigilant containment in Europe. Consider, again, the case of Germany, the linchpin state of NATO. American statesmen strove not just to use German power as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, but to create enduring democratic institutions there and throughout Western Europe in the belief that liberal democracies were less likely to fight with one another, more likely to cooperate, and made better allies. They were right.

If liberal democracy alone did not suffice to ensure that post-World War II Western European states and Japan would cooperate with each other or with the United States, it greatly facilitated cooperation by fostering shared values and dramatically reducing the likelihood of war or fundamental conflicts of interest among them. The success of U.S. containment policy in Western Europe stemmed as much from the character of U.S. hegemony and the common interests of democratic allies as from a preponderance of U.S. power. The argument of realists that the United States merely followed its interests toward Western Europe after World War II begs the question of why the Soviet Union and the United States defined and implemented their so-called national interests in such radically different ways, despite their similar placement as superpowers in a bipolar system.

These examples seem to refute Morgenthau's theoretical and practical neglect of regime type in explaining international relations. The United States will continue to have a vital moral and material interest in promoting stable, liberal democracy when possible and prudent, especially in geopolitically powerful states. Such logic applies not only to the Cold War, but to current

struggles with terrorism and in Iraq, where President Bush wisely identified the odious nature of Saddam's regime, among others in the Middle East, as the root cause of conflict and the establishment of a stable, liberal democracy in Iraq as a main goal.

The Anomaly of Israel in Morgenthau's Thought

Morgenthau's robust support for Israel and Jewish causes generally represents the better angels of his nature for which his bleak, morally modest realism cannot fully account. On these issues, he exuded what he so wrongly criticized in the great U.S. Cold Warriors from Truman to Reagan: a justifiable righteousness based on Judeo-Christian standards of justice that rejected the fallacy of moral equivalence and accepted the autonomous significance of ideology and regime type. Morgenthau not only hailed Israeli democracy for realizing at least a modicum of justice in a world which by its very nature is evil; he unequivocally denounced the notion, popular on the left since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, that Israel was equally or more responsible for the conflict in the Middle East than its adversaries.

Morgenthau not only defends Israel's moral right to use force against its implacable enemies, but exhibited tremendous pride when Israel achieved an overwhelming military victory in the Six Day War of June 1967. During the 1970s, he excoriated Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy between Israel and its Arab antagonists for putting too much pressure on the Israelis, despite the non-ideological balance of power logic impelling it that Morgenthau finds so congenial in other circumstances. Morgenthau's intense concern for Israel's security even inspired him to offer this uncharacteristically favorable reference to the impact of public opinion on U.S. foreign policy:

No American government can, at least openly, embark upon a foreign policy with which large masses of its own population disagree. And as long as there is general sympathy for Israel within the American people, there is little chance that even if the administration wanted to, it could sell Israel down the river.²³

When it came to the plight of Soviet Jews, Morgenthau's Jewish decency also overwhelmed his general skepticism about defining and enforcing universal principles of human rights. Morgenthau supported one of the most controversial but ultimately successful human rights initiatives in the history of U.S. foreign policy: the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, which conditioned the grant of most-favored-nation status to the Soviet

Union on the right of emigration. Although this amendment applied to all non-market economies and to all people regardless of race or religion, Soviet Jews stood to gain the most because of intense Soviet repression of its Jewish citizens and Israel's open door policy giving the enormous number of Jews who wanted to leave the Soviet Union a place to go.²⁴

Henry Jackson, Democrat from Washington and the amendment's champion in the Senate, intended Jackson-Vanik as a blow to Nixon's and Kissinger's policy of *détente*, the non-ideological reasoning of which Morgenthau found quite appealing. Although well aware that the Soviet leadership by the 1970s no longer engaged in the rampant terror of Stalin's time, Jackson still considered the Soviet Union a totalitarian state, a malevolent Leninist-driven entity with unlimited aims and ambitions, not the traditional great power that Nixon, Kissinger, and Morgenthau considered it.

Morgenthau's support for an amendment that so utterly repudiated the precepts of his realism underscores once more how profoundly his Jewish background and the harrowing persecution he suffered in Germany because of it shaped his subsequent thinking. Like his fellow German-Jewish émigré Henry Kissinger, Morgenthau remained congenitally and normatively distrustful of ideological movements, even our own, not because they did not matter, but because their own experiences led them to fear the consequences based on first-hand experience. How regrettable that in evaluating the merits and dangers of rival ideological claims neither Kissinger nor Morgenthau heeded Aristotle's dictum on the importance of making reasonable distinctions. How regrettable, too, that Morgenthau did not infuse his realism with same moral and conceptual clarity resonant in his approach to Israel and Jewish issues generally.

Toward a Higher Realism

Even those of us who find Morgenthau's realism an unreliable guide must nevertheless acknowledge our great debt to him. His constrained vision of man and politics remains a vital corrective to the excesses of idealist thinking, which depreciates the importance of power and the daunting barriers that still remain to achieving even provisional justice in international relations. The naïve belief that paper treaties, the natural harmony of interests among states, the moral force of public opinion, the United Nations, collective security, or other such measures would suffice to keep the peace has a long and futile history and has often imperiled freedom. Think, for example, of the fatuous Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1925, which outlawed war as a tool of foreign policy. Or think of the Clinton administration's obsession with securing arms control and peace treaties with mortal enemies, which has

yielded at least two potential disasters that may plague the United States for decades to come: North Korea's brazen admission that it has continued its nuclear program in defiance of the Agreed Framework of 1994, and Yasser Arafat's fateful decision to escalate his war on Israel in defiance of the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, mocking the promise of President Clinton that the agreement had made peace irreversible.

Even in the best of times, there is always a devil lurking around the corner in international relations, a realm in which interests will frequently clash, the correlation of forces remains critical, and the search for the perfect is eternally the enemy of the good. For all nations, even the United States, finite resources will demand that decisions on foreign policy emerge from an ordered hierarchy of interests, which sometimes may require the sacrifice of the desirable goals to defend core interests in crucial regions.

Morgenthau's realism thus marks the beginning of the wisdom that even such benign developments as the democratic peace will continue to rest heavily on the robustness and credibility of U.S. power. Yet any sound theory of international relations with reliable policy implications also must guard against Morgenthau's excessively pessimistic vision of man's moral and political possibilities. Although the relative anarchy of international relations and the imperfectability of man often limit the range of moral choice in international politics, the largely successful record of U.S. foreign policy since World War II demonstrates the potential for U.S. ideals and self-interest to coincide. The spread of stable liberal democracy can ameliorate, if not eliminate, the dangers of war and discord. The Bush doctrine today reflects this higher realism: that U.S. ideals and self-interest largely coincide. Like Franklin Roosevelt with regard to Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, like Ronald Reagan with regard to the Soviet Union, George W. Bush has rightly identified the nature of certain regimes as the root cause of dangerous aggression against the United States in the war on terror. In a manner similar to his great predecessors, President Bush also has wisely defined democratic regime change as our ultimate war aim in the Middle East.

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We should also reject the methodological reductionism that Morgenthau deplors in theory but applied to his own work by ascribing everything of significance in international relations to the national interest defined in terms of power. True, power is a critical and inescapable element in international politics, and the

danger of war will always exist to some degree in the anarchic world within which states operate. What the historical record refutes is not the validity of these insights, but the untenable claim that structure and power alone suffice to explain international politics. Not all states or leaders behave alike. Nor do the constraints of the international system, the imperatives of power politics, or even regime type eliminate the often broad range of moral and practical choice that powerful statesmen of powerful states possess. Belief systems often have a significant affect on how such statesmen act internationally.

Ultimately, a reassessment of Morgenthau's realism and its impact also underscores the need for devising a theoretical framework of international relations that integrates all three levels of analysis. The best approach envisages international politics as a three-level interaction in which systemic imperatives grounded in power and anarchy, the domestic characteristics of the key states in the system, and the predilections of decision makers in powerful states affect each other reciprocally. This approach promises to yield more modest, but useful generalizations about international politics than the grand, sweeping, but deficient and unrealistic realism of Hans J. Morgenthau. ■

NOTES

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951); Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Purposes of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

² Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10, 40-87.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167-169, 517-529.

¹³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 104.

¹⁴ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 35.

¹⁵ Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (New York: Public Affairs, 1965), 19-20.

¹⁶ Greg Russell, *Hans J. Morgenthau and the Ethics of Statecraft* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 169-170.

¹⁷ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 38-39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities* (New York: Scribner's, 1965), 65.

²⁰ Morgenthau, *The Purposes of American Politics*, 4.

²¹ Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest*, 4.

²² Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 597-598.

²³ "Daniel Berrigan and Hans Morgenthau Discuss the Moral Dilemma in the Middle East," *Progressive* XXXVIII (March 1974), 32-33.

²⁴ Robert G. Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson: A Life in Politics* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), 270-271.