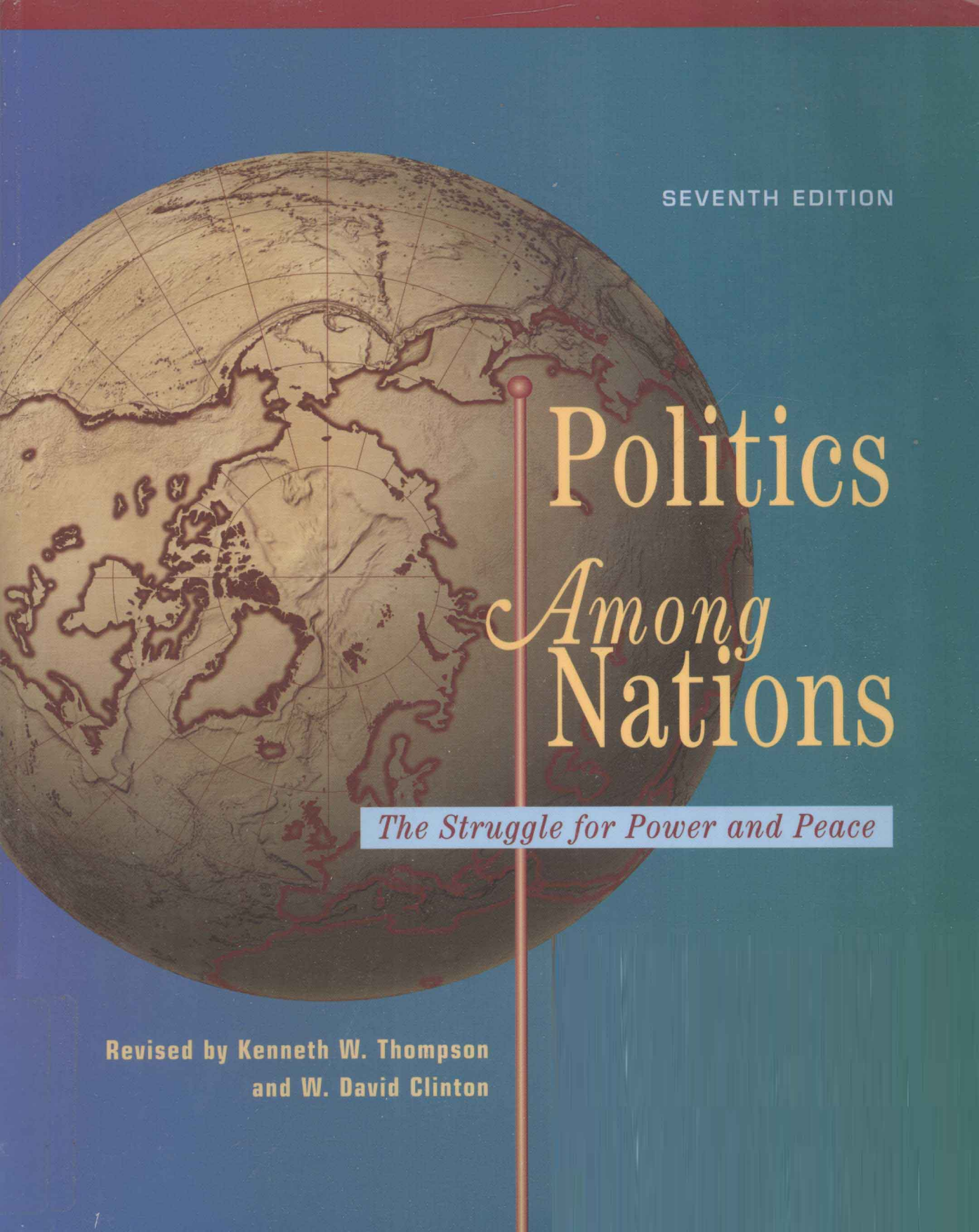




SEVENTH EDITION

Politics *Among* Nations

The Struggle for Power and Peace

Revised by Kenneth W. Thompson
and W. David Clinton

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POLITICS AMONG NATIONS

The Struggle for Power and Peace

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Preface

For over five decades *Politics Among Nations* has been considered by many the premier text in international politics. Now appearing in its seventh edition, its main themes, including national interest, power, and diplomacy, are commonplace among practitioners of foreign policy. At the same time, its value for a wider public is beginning to be felt, especially when assertions are heard that “9/11 has changed everything.” Certainly, circumstances have altered since 2001, and even more since the appearance of the sixth edition in 1985. But it was Professor Morgenthau’s conviction that, beneath the rapid succession of events, certain basic characteristics of international politics remained that were essential to understanding the ebb and flow of contemporary international life.

Our agreement with this conviction led to the two complementary decisions made early on in the preparation of this edition. First, we have preserved essentially intact the entire text of the sixth edition. Professor Morgenthau believed that his classic text, as it moved through successive editions during his lifetime, should retain unaltered the core elements of his philosophy of international relations: a realist theory, politics as a struggle for power, the foreign policies of the major powers, nationalism, national power, diplomacy, and the possibilities for a world state. The sixth edition (the first posthumous edition) itself consciously kept to a minimum the changes it made to Professor Morgenthau’s fifth edition, confining them to the updating of factual material and some brief excisions of material such as that on judicial settlement, which had been considered in an earlier section of the book on international law. In preparing the sixth edition, Professor Thompson—with the able assistance of Mr. Peter Gellman, and relying on Professor Morgenthau’s papers, made available at Alderman Library at the University of Virginia through the cooperation of his children, Susanna and Matthew—sought to emulate the approach of Morgenthau, who had written in his preface to the fifth edition that it had continued “in an organic and almost inevitable fashion the work of the preceding editions.” In a like spirit we have decided to let the seventh edition speak for itself. We should note that throughout the manuscript the male pronoun predominates, as was customary at the time the book was first published. In the sixth edition, and therefore in the seventh edition, the decision was made not to alter the original language. We would hope that we might be

understood as referring to men and women wherever appropriate in our use of the male pronoun.

Nevertheless, the march of events since 1985 cannot be ignored—hence our second editorial decision. As part of our effort to suggest the continuing relevance of Professor Morgenthau's thought even in the vastly changed circumstances of contemporary international life, we have made two additions to this classic text. The first is found at the beginning of the book; it is an introductory essay in which we set out the timeless insights of the realist approach to international politics with which he is so closely associated, note some underappreciated aspects of his thought as revealed in *Politics Among Nations*, and speak to several current problems at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The second addition may be found at the conclusion of the book. It consists of several essays by recognized scholars of varying traditions of international thought, in which they respond to Professor Morgenthau's realism from within those other traditions, as well as an essay by Admiral William Crowe, speaking from within the realist tradition and applying it to issues of war and peace facing the United States in the contemporary world. Timely essays in current events by General Brent Scowcroft and Ambassador David Newsom have also been included. In approaching the opportunity of bringing Professor Morgenthau's wisdom to a new generation of students and citizens in this way, we believe that we are acting on the best authority—the example set by Morgenthau himself in his editing, along with Professor Thompson, of another classic work—*Principles and Problems of International Politics: Selected Readings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950).

For most students of international relations, *Politics Among Nations* requires no introduction. It has become an intellectual staple for faculty and graduate students and for thousands of undergraduate students. It is our hope that the present edition will serve to broaden its audience even further, reaching new readers and serving the changing needs of a new era in higher education and public affairs.

Kenneth W. Thompson
W. David Clinton



Foreword

The Continuing Relevance of Politics Among Nations

“If our discipline [of international relations] has any founding father, it is [Hans] Morgenthau,” states one contemporary scholar who is neither an acolyte of Morgenthau’s realism nor an inconsiderable scholarly figure in his own right.¹ At the outset of the twenty-first century, who would disagree with this assessment of either Morgenthau or his most famous work, *Politics Among Nations*? More than fifty years after the appearance of such a path-breaking analysis, its admirers attempt to build on its insights even as its critics feel obliged to begin their arguments with an effort to demonstrate its inadequacies. It remains the single most influential text on international relations and has guided the intellectual development of more than one generation of American students.

In one sense, then, the task of stating the relevance of *Politics Among Nations* is very simple; it is attested to in practically every introductory international relations class as instructors respond to its arguments, either explicitly or implicitly. In another sense, however, championing this classic book more than twenty years after the death of its eminent author is quite difficult because of its very absorption into the bloodstream of the discipline. Those parts of it with which contemporary scholars agree, they often simply appropriate as part of the generally understood background conditions of international life. “Everyone knows that” is the watchword, with the implication that Morgenthau need no more be cited than Isaac Newton be quoted when one observes that an apple has fallen to the ground. (What this causal transformation of the contentions of *Politics Among Nations* into “common sense” forgets is that, at the time of its initial publication, many of these arguments were thought extremely contentious!) At the same time, those of Morgenthau’s arguments with which there is disagreement receive the attention, frequently with the observation that, whatever their worth in the days of the Cold War, they are certainly not valid today.

Our task, therefore, in explaining why a new edition of *Politics Among Nations* is a worthwhile contribution is a threefold one. First, this introductory essay will, in a fairly summary form, note certain fundamental observations about international life, identified with realism as Morgenthau understood it, that remain valid in the aftermath of the Cold War and in the midst of the War on Terrorism. These points are closely connected with a classical realist view of the

world and thus need not be discussed at length, except to note that their acuteness did not desert them with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, we shall present a case for considering a concern with the ethical deterioration of the international system as equally an inheritance from Morgenthau; the greater detail in this section is necessitated by the often-encountered assumption that ethics was not his concern. Third, the essay will conclude by applying Morgenthau's ideas to contemporary events, in a *tour d'horizon* of the international scene, with all its elements that he could not have imagined in his lifetime but that nonetheless he could powerfully have grasped using the intellectual framework found in his great work. The argument here, in other words, moves from familiar principles, to an unfamiliar principle, to the application of those principles.

REALISM AND THE PERENNIAL PRESENCE OF CONFLICT

Realists have always been fascinated by conflict. While not condoning it, they have never followed the irenic call that conflict, even only violent conflict, can be removed root and branch from international life. To say that international conflict has continued to occur following the Cold War, just as it did prior to that struggle, is to note a truism. Still, Morgenthau would not have been surprised by the refusal of the world to become a peaceful, cooperative place simply because the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

Realism, then, expects to find conflict as the usual pattern of interaction in international politics. Differences in circumstances and views create different definitions of self-interest, and these interests clash. The energy of self-interest as a motor or motive force, and the weakness of the moral or institutional brake, drives us into contests the outcomes of which are largely determined by relative power.

The relish that realists sometimes evince in noting the ubiquity of conflict can be connected to their debunking predilections, as they seek to puncture the assertions by their intellectual opponents that harmony has been achieved, or readily can be, through the comparatively simple application of rationality, morality, or institutional adjustment. To the extent that the roots of conflict are found in human nature, the belief that strife is an inevitable part of political life fits well with the tragic line of realist descent. Morgenthau freely conceded that his view of human nature was a bleak one.

In fact, it could be argued that realists, in advocating reliance on touchstones such as *raison d'état* and the balance of power, endeavor to break out of this grim and repetitive cycle and place statesmanship on the more promising footing of calculable self-interest.² Even here, nonetheless, the furthest that the realist can be persuaded to go is the moderation, limitation, and channeling of conflict, not its abolition. Even if their prescriptions are adopted, these prudent calculators do not allow their hopes to be raised so high. Contests, threats, and counterthreats are still the norm, even if they are veiled in caution and diplomatic protocol. No realists expect the lion and the lamb to lie down together, any more than they anticipate two lions ceasing to contend for preeminence. If the contest can be settled

through growls and menacing body language without recourse to sanguinary combat, so much the better, but in the end one will have prevailed over the other. In such a conflict-ridden environment, if one does not behave somewhat aggressively, one will only be taken advantage of. In other words, prudence encompasses not just a sense of how safe it is to rely on the pacifying effects of international society but also a shrewdness in wielding the instruments of power effectively. The mutually beneficial balance rests on the assumption of the subtle pursuit of self-interest by the major players; overall stability relies on restrained, but nevertheless real, conflict.

Thus, in the well-publicized disputes between the United States and some of its European allies—disputes that the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of a common enemy permitted to emerge in full force—it was sometimes overlooked that, along with their reluctance to employ military force against *Iraq*, the Europeans were willing (or at least stated that they were willing) to employ economic coercion by granting or withholding access to their markets depending on *Iran's* cooperation with international inspection of its nuclear program. As Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, coercion involves the infliction of pain, whether through military strikes or through economic sanctions, and political life almost always operates through the medium of coercion. Even if one adopts a narrower definition of coercion that restricts it to military action, there is the example of China's armed demonstrations to assert its claims to the potentially oil-rich Spratly Islands chain. If Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, or the Philippines wished to contest these claims, they would also have to be prepared to back up their positions with force, either their own or that of an outside power prepared to support them, such as the United States.³ Conflict in the twenty-first century might occur over religious fundamentalism or over natural resources, but conflict, it seemed, there would be; and realism claimed to impart the necessary tough-mindedness to accept the reality of conflict, wage it, and prevail in it. Even a stalemate would rest on the unwillingness of any party to press its claims too far, for fear of provoking coercive action by the others; the avoidance of open conflict would be achieved through conflict at one remove. Players would be willing to resort to diplomacy because they counted the costs of confronting other states that had demonstrated that they were prepared to engage in conflict. Without that anticipation of counteraction, however, the shadow of the future would not deter present coercive actions. Into this side of international life, realism gives the clearest insights.

To the extent that they are not shocked to find conflict a part of the international system (because they do not *discover* this is so, they *assume* it), realists may be inoculated against overreacting to it. This is another way of saying that they would wish to confront the phenomenon of conflict with prudence. It will do a people who have suffered a severe injury no good to allow their justifiable anger to cause them to strike out wildly without considering coolly how to attain their military objectives. No state has unlimited resources, and all may confront multiple dangers. It is precisely the recognition that another conflict lurks in the distance that warns a state against, in all but the most desperate circumstances, unwisely overinvesting in the present one.

The ideological battle that was an important part of the Cold War has, of course, been superseded. A world in which the members of international society are not bitterly divided over the proper domestic organization of states and societies is a world in which one significant cause of war has been removed. More generally, the realist tradition would be inclined to search out motives of power and interest behind publicly professed ideological aspirations as the true reasons for collisions among any repositories of power, and would see the discrediting of Communism not only as the defeat of a tyranny but also as a desirable occasion for clearing away the underbrush of slogans that had obscured underlying suspicions relating to resources, prestige, and control. But has this conflict only been replaced by a new quasi-ideological confrontation between the West and Muslim fundamentalism?

An appreciation for the careful attention that realists have paid to conflict carries with it the implication, naturally enough, that they have less to say about cooperation. Certainly, selfless dedication to a common goal is not the primary preoccupation of realists, many of whom lived through eras of widespread international and domestic disorder, if not of systemic collapse. Rivalry, suspicion, confrontation—these are the relations that realists find most illuminating about international politics. Accommodation, amity, cooperation—these, for realists, are always more tentative and less fundamental, more of an overlay softening and concealing but never abolishing the relations of power underneath. This is not to say that such lineaments of international society as the diplomatic system are unknown to realists—Morgenthau, for one, discusses them at length, as we shall see below—but in his work one always finds the reminder that these practices are not a substitute for power politics. Instead, they are a way of guiding power in ways that all sides find useful, as well as a path toward the development of shared norms that will allow the competition for power to go on in less ferocious ways than were seen, for instance, during the Cold War.

The question then arises whether trust and collaboration have flourished in the post-Cold War period in such profusion as to create substantial areas of international life in which realist assumptions are out of sync with actual diplomatic, economic, or strategic practice. Without doubt, relations between the two former centers of power in the Cold War system have improved, the unprecedented experiment in regional integration and the creation of supranational institutions in Europe has continued, and international financial institutions such as the World Trade Organization have been granted increased scope and authority. The allying of Russia and China in an effort to balance the power of the United States, long predicted by many neorealists, has yet to occur. Still, one may wonder whether these developments constitute a remolding of the presuppositions at the heart of the system. It is possible to argue that enmity between Washington and Moscow has diminished almost to the vanishing point because the latter is no longer an active rival to the former—and even here certain European capitals would like to maintain NATO as an insurance policy against a renewal of the power and the ambitions of the Russian state. The rounds of negotiations under the aegis of the WTO remain very much encounters in which the players jealously

guard and seek to advance their economic interests. A Sino-Russian bloc balancing the United States has not emerged, but a Franco-German one, atop the new power bloc represented by the European Union, is at least conceivable. The point is that a concern for relative power appears to be alive and well in the international politics of a post-Cold War, post-9/11 world. By and large, realists have not maintained that international cooperation is impossible but only that, in order to be successful, efforts at international cooperation must accommodate themselves to the realities of power, rather than vainly attempting to suppress the desire for power or ignoring the pattern of relative influence that the current distribution of power creates. Realism may well be usefully supplemented by other traditions in an effort to understand eras of relative calm and strengthened international society, but that is well short of saying that realism has lost all or even most of its relevance, if the world is indeed entering one of those eras.

REALISM AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF IGNORING POWER

The international system has, in the post-Cold War period, arrived at a greater concentration of power than existed at any point during Morgenthau's lifetime. How should the United States employ this power? Realists seem as one in urging restraint, cautioning that the possession of great power does not exempt the leaders of a dominant state from the lust for domination, the misguided confidence, or the irrational passions that have in the past led states to disaster. At the same time, no realist would counsel the United States to abdicate responsibility by following a passive foreign policy. The danger of dirty hands is not one that realists find compelling.

For the realist attitude toward power is in fact complex and at the least bifurcated. Stemming from their understanding of human nature and their reading of history, realists hold such respect for the destructiveness of power and such fear that it will be misused that they are convinced that it must be *controlled*. Realism is little inclined toward trust—except in its resigned acceptance that human can generally be trusted to seek to advance their own interests over those of anyone else. Without the internal control supplied by conscience, one must fall back on external controls, which in the case of the international arena leads to the well-known expedient of the balance of power. Greater or lesser claims have been made for the beneficent effects of a proper distribution of power, but at bottom the rationale for a close and abiding attention to “the power situation”⁴ has been that only if power is checked and countered by sufficient opposing power will the danger of its misuse for the exploitation of others be minimized. Even the skillful application of a policy of balancing power may not preserve peace, but the very willingness to accept war as a mechanism for preserving or restoring a “safe” distribution of power illustrates the price that realists have been willing to pay for (that is, the value that they have placed upon) an equilibrium of power that does not expect safety from uncertain self-restraint but instead rests on the solid ground of actual or potential coercion by those holding sufficient power resources to

make their threats credible. No person or collective entity could be trusted to hold unchecked, uncontrolled power. Realists from Burke to Morgenthau have long contended against those who claimed that the desirability of their objectives and the purity of their motives meant that they could be trusted with unrestrained power. Power uncontrolled was dangerous, unaccountable power, and this unhappy state of affairs existed not because of the imperfections in one person or set of institutions but because of the flawed psychology or soul of all humans, which infected all institutions operated by humans. Thus the determination that power must be controlled has a particular hold on the imagination of realists.

A second, and at least on the surface not entirely compatible, realist attitude toward power is that it must be *used*. True, power ought to be prominently labeled “Hazardous Material” and not left unattended, that is, left unchecked. It is, nevertheless, a fact of life, and realists place great importance in accommodation to the facts of life. The phenomenon of power cannot be wished away; the only result of an attempt by one group to divest itself of its power will be that the power of other, competing groups will be left unchecked, and therefore probably abused. The fact that the exercise of power inevitably leads one to do evil does not excuse one from the power game, for justice is likely to suffer if some players are more concerned with refraining from dirtying their hands than with protecting the legitimate interests of their people. Realism has little patience with pacifism or with schemes for replacing power-competitive politics with power-neutral administration. Morgenthau would have argued that such as unfounded hope exemplifies the illusions of “scientific man.” To say that power cannot avoid being employed is necessarily to imply a concern for using it as wisely or as nondestructively as possible—hence the advice that power must be used is particularly attractive to realists. How can it be brought to bear with greatest effect? How may it be wielded so as to provoke the least countervailing opposition? To what degree is its use compatible with the development of rules and norms among its holders?

The advent and evolution of the post-Cold War world does not seem to have rendered obsolete concerns about either the control or the use of power. Rarely has the safety of concentrations of power been more widely debated than in a unipolar era. Whatever opinion one may hold on the abstract desirability of an international system characterized by the existence of one great center of power, however, the reality of American power exists. It must be taken account of. It can be frittered away, but it cannot be wished away. Discussions of its proper employment are in some measure a continuation of Morgenthau’s reminders of the ubiquity of power.

REALISM AS TRUTH SERUM

Realism has continuing relevance for the contribution it makes as a “debunking” approach to political life. As a habit of mind, it is particularly sharp-eyed in seeing the self-interest and hypocrisy that underlie all human (and therefore all collective) actions. Pride and self-interest have not been cleansed from human behavior, nor

have government propaganda machines ceased operation since Morgenthau's lifetime. When President Charles Taylor speaks to reporters of his abiding concern for the people of Liberia, whose livelihoods he has ruined for years, this skepticism seems fully justified. Some pretensions may have disappeared in the post-Cold War era (those of the former Soviet Union to its self-proclaimed role of defender of the world's downtrodden, for example), but others have become more inflated due to the peculiar circumstances of contemporary international politics (the self-image of the United States as a wholly disinterested or altruistic indispensable nation, or the attribution to the United Nations of a status as something more than the site of interaction of its member states—perhaps the idea of idea of “the world's conscience”).

The tragic side of realism is naturally predisposed to look beneath the benevolent surface and find selfish motivations. Morgenthau's warning against the tendency to take the interests of our own group and make them into the moral law of the universe has never been more timely than in an age in which liberal states earnestly debate the degree to which they should tolerate the existence of polities founded on any other basis.⁵ The delight that we can take in the domination we exercise over others, or even the pain we cause them, helps to make comprehensible the many human rights abuses that disfigure so much of the international landscape. One reason sovereignty is under attack, and political, legal, and moral reasons for humanitarian intervention are being sought, is the sheer number of occasions for such outside interference in the systematic misgoverning of a people by its own rulers.

So, too, the prudent side of realism discerns advantage in seeing things as they really are, undistorted by self-congratulations or illusions. In all realist arguments lies the conviction that an unnecessarily inaccurate picture of the world is an obstacle to the effective exercise of political power, and in a dangerous setting the inability to employ power for one's chosen ends constitutes a potentially fatal handicap. Misconceptions must be debunked, not only because it is desirable to know the truth of things for its own sake but also because the safety of the regime may depend on the correspondence of its policies to the circumstances they are intended to address.

MORAL VALUES AND THE NATIONAL INTEREST

In a world of states the question of the relation between moral values and the national interest is one of the most troubling and difficult ones that statesmen and scholars ponder. It has proved particularly thorny in the realist tradition, not least because that tradition has so often been misunderstood as denying any connection between moral principles and the practical responsibilities of statecraft. At no realist has the charge been leveled more often than Morgenthau. Yet Morgenthau illuminated the possibilities for combining a concern for moral principles with a dedication to the national interest, ironically, by arguing that in his own time the two had been divorced to a historically unprecedented degree. His description of

the means by which they could still be brought together remains an insightful and provocative challenge to all who seek to understand international society. It may be approached through his observation in *Politics Among Nations* that “the national interest, as created by the character of modern war, and the possibility of satisfying that interest, as presented by the modern technology of warfare, have had a deteriorating effect upon the moral limitations of international politics.”⁶

As well as any twentieth-century realist, Morgenthau balanced the two counterweights of national interests and moral principles in the realist scale. He did so, in *Politics Among Nations* and other works of the period, by contending that the international environment confronting states was composed not only of the distribution of power but also of the climate of ideas. A “tamed” national interest would be restrained by an internationally accepted set of ideas (including moral values) that limited the expression of the power drives of individual states.

To be sure, the Morgenthau of the 1940s and early 1950s can be quoted as an adherent of more than one side. At times he could adopt the tragic stance of condemning all states for the partial, limited view they take in defining their interests. In 1952, when he described as “jingoist whitewash” declarations that historically American foreign policy had been based on moral principles, and termed it “ruthless” instead, he added, “We know that this is the way all nations are when their interests are at stake—so cruel, so faithless, so cunning.”⁷ Recognizing that in this matter one’s own country could be as great a sinner as others was necessary to the acceptance of “the tragic sense of life, the awareness of unresolvable discord” that underlay the conclusion of *Scientific Man*.⁸ And he declared that “any black-white pattern, conceived in moral and intellectual terms, is virtually by definition inadequate to do justice to a political situation in which on either side good and evil, wisdom and error, are inextricably blended and intertwined.”⁹

More often, he insisted that politics was an autonomous realm in which power was at least the immediate end, just as material well-being was the concern of economics and lawful conduct the concern of law.¹⁰ Within the political sphere, then, it could be said that “the political actor, has, beyond the general moral duties, a special moral responsibility to act wisely, that is, in accordance with the rules of the political act; and for him expediency becomes a moral duty.”¹¹ The consequences of unwise actions, even those with good intentions, went far beyond the political decision maker to his country and his fellow citizens, and “they are indeed blameworthy who in their moralistic disdain for the laws of politics endanger the interests of the nationals in their care.”¹² Therefore, “there can be no political morality without prudence, that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action,” and “there is no other standard of action and of judgment, moral and intellectual, to which a great nation can repair, than the national interest.”¹³ When Morgenthau discerned “a profound and neglected truth hidden in Hobbes’s extreme dictum that the state creates morality as well as law and that there is neither morality nor law outside the state,” he seemingly appeared adamantly amoral: “Between these two conceptions of foreign policy, the national interest and moral principles, there can be no compromise.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, Morgenthau did strive for a compromise between the two. He did so by asserting that, as the leaders of states sought to make out their national interests, they were much influenced by the international set of ideas and opinions within which they worked. The powerful force exerted by "international society," as the English School would put it, made itself felt in even the most materially minded of statesmen, precisely because it was so pervasive that it escaped notice. It was particularly potent in restraining leaders from claiming as much under the rubric of national interest as they might otherwise have done.

Morgenthau could discern this flexibility in national interests because of his two-part definition of this term, which was so central to his thought. The "irreducible minimum" of a state's national interest, "the necessary element of its interests vis-à-vis other units," could be stated simply as its "survival . . . in its identity"—that is, "the integrity of the nation's territory, of its political institutions, and of its culture."¹⁵ National interest considered in this way—as national security—was the hard core that guaranteed the political unit its continued existence, "which diplomacy must defend without compromise and even at the risk of war."¹⁶ Here was the area in which national self-assertion was absolutely necessary and wholly justifiable. No other authority was available to look out for these manifestations of security on behalf of the state, and it was required by this international vacuum to adopt the Hobbesian rule in considering power and not other values its end. The size of the stakes when one was responsible *for* a national society, and the call of moral duty when one was responsible *to* all one's fellow citizens, demanded the ruthlessness to which Morgenthau referred—when national interest understood as national survival was at issue.

When he moved beyond the triad of territory, institutions, and culture, however, Morgenthau opened the way for a more nuanced, even sinuous, approach to protecting one's self-interest, because of the multiplicity of ends that might be considered among the variable part of national interest. "The goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue."¹⁷ Here one left the realm of Hobbesian necessity and entered the realm of diplomatic choice.

In choosing the goals that they would pursue under the variable portion of the national interest, statesmen would consider the moral values of the people they represented; to do otherwise would be to undermine the national culture that was central to the unchanging core of national interest. They would consider the interests of other states and the likelihood of conflict over such objectives; "prudence, that is, . . . consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral actions," demanded a calculation of the costs to one's power of advancing these secondary goals.¹⁸

What they might not consciously consider, but what could nonetheless powerfully shape their thinking, was an international code of conduct that set limits on both the objectives that states might pursue and the means that they might employ to pursue them. Morgenthau was no materialist; he made it quite clear that, while it was utopian to believe that stability and peace could be achieved by rationality alone (a conviction that is often taken to be the whole of

his contribution), it was no more realistic to believe that stability and peace could be achieved by power alone.¹⁹ The intangible influence of an international set of moral principles could, in other words, not only act to restrain policies based on national interests but also serve to define those interests.

Such moral values were so fundamental that they set the contours of practical political action: "Common moral standards are part of the political reality itself which goes into the making of government—nay, its very foundation."²⁰ True, states determined their policies based on their interests, but certain values were powerful enough to determine what could be considered an interest:

For although . . . states are moved in their international actions by regard for their own interests and will observe the rules of international law only as long as they serve these interests, the violation of the fundamental rights of other states has generally been held within certain bounds by a few moral principles to which the law of nations as well as Western civilization as a whole owe their existence. The contradiction between these two statements is only illusory; for these moral principles have been so powerful as to exclude from the sphere of political interests, such aims which could only be pursued by violation of those fundamental rights. These moral principles delimited not so much the international actions in pursuit of political interests as the sphere of possible political interests itself, so that it did not even enter the mind of statesmen to regard as [a] possible political interest what could only be accomplished in violation of those fundamental rights.²¹

This was true of international law, which owed "its existence to identical or complementary interests of states, backed by power as a last resort." "Where there is neither community of interests nor balance of power, there is no international law," but national interests—at least those beyond the core interests of survival—drew their meaning and their force as guides to action from "a body of principles which incorporate the guiding ideas of justice and order to be expounded by the rules of law."²² It was true also of the other practices that, Morgenthau contended, created and then reflected the shared norms, rules, and practices of international society. It was true of "the community-building processes of diplomacy." It was true of the balance of power, which, he argued, rested on an "awareness of an intellectual and moral unity . . . [that] makes its beneficial operations possible."²³ The solution to the problem of attaining international peace—"temporary and ever precarious solution" though it was—depended on three things: "social pressure which is able to contain the selfish tendencies of human nature within socially tolerable bounds," a social equilibrium, and "a moral climate" that promised at least an approximation of justice.²⁴

In all these references we see the role of moral values in shaping national interests. Even the most pragmatic of leaders would, without realizing it, be strongly influenced by a set of assumptions about what a possible interest was, and the power of the assumptions was demonstrated in the fact that they remained always unspoken—the background to any specific decision, without ever being

discussed as part of the decision-making process. The ideas shaping diplomacy were as significant as the material stakes over which diplomacy was conducted.

This role of moral values was both limiting and limited. It was limiting in that it took certain objectives off the table, making them impossible even to consider as potential interests to be asserted. It lessened the stakes of international politics, squeezing interests down to a manageable size that could be negotiated and compromised. It opened a (welcome) gap between what was physically within man's grasp and what was normatively conceivable for him to grasp for:

[I]f we ask ourselves what statesmen and diplomats are capable of doing to further the power objectives of their respective nations and what they actually do, we realize that they do less than they probably could and less than they actually did in other periods of history. They refuse to consider certain ends and to use certain means, either altogether or under certain conditions, not because in the light of expediency they appear impractical or unwise, but because certain moral rules interpose an absolute barrier. Moral rules do not permit certain policies to be considered at all from the point of view of expediency.²⁵

The autonomy of the political sphere was thus breached; ends other than power entered into the calculations of the political actor, making some steps—which would be useful if the sole criterion was gaining power—almost literally unthinkable.

The role of moral values was limited in that it did not end conflict and self-assertion but only moderated them. When Morgenthau called it “a requirement of political morality” that “the national interest of a nation which is conscious not only of its own interests but also of that of other nations must be defined in terms compatible with the latter,” he specifically denied “presuming that the uniformly enlightened pursuit of their self-interest by all individuals, as by all nations, will of itself be conducive to a peaceful and harmonious society.” Rather, he assumed “continuous conflict and threat of war, to be minimized through the continuous adjustment of conflicting interests by diplomatic action”; this assumption was made necessary by the fact that one could *not* assume that “all nations at all times conceived of their national interest only in terms of their survival and, in turn, defined their interest in survival in restrictive and rational terms.”²⁶ The power-political realm did not cease to be political because of a diplomatic accommodation, and “[t]hat this conciliation is nothing more than a *modus vivendi*, uneasy, precarious, and even paradoxical, can disappoint only those who prefer to gloss over and to distort the tragic contradictions of human existence with the soothing logic of specious concord.”²⁷

A “tamed” national interest (for all Morgenthau's skepticism regarding the place of rationality or science in politics, he sometimes referred to a “rational” or a “scientific” one²⁸) would be restrained by an internationally accepted set of ideas that limited the expression of the power drives of individual states. These preconceptions prevented states from pressing too far and straining the fabric of international society. Morgenthau not only acknowledged that states had to act in

furtherance of their national interests but insisted that they so act, arguing that in the dangerous circumstances of international politics they were both obliged and obligated to look after their own well-being, because no one else would do so. Simultaneously, he recognized the limited, partial view that all states, including his own, had of justice in international affairs, and he advocated placing them all on the same plane of seekers after their own interests. Accepting that “all nations stand under the judgment of God, inscrutable to the human mind,” he took to heart the caution against “[t]he light-hearted equation between a particular nationalism and the counsels of Providence.” National interest limited by an unspoken consensus on moral values provided the vehicle for introducing this humility into action:

[I]t is exactly the concept of interest defined in terms of power that saves us from both . . . moral excess and . . . political folly. For if we look at all nations, our own included, as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power, we are able to do justice to all of them. And we are able to do justice to all of them in a dual sense: We are able to judge other nations as we judge our own and, having judged them in this fashion, we are then capable of pursuing policies that respect the interests of other nations, while protecting and promoting those of our own. Moderation in policy cannot fail to reflect the moderation of moral judgment.²⁹

By restraining the claims of national interests and therefore circumscribing the areas of overlap and conflict between the interests of competing states, moral values would open the way for modesty of policy, diplomacy, and peace.

“THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD”

What is striking about Morgenthau’s treatment of the effect of moral values in limiting what would otherwise become dangerously expansive definitions of national interest is that it is phrased in the past tense. His primary fear for the international politics of the twentieth century was that it had lost these moral values, so that national interests had become unlimited and uncompromising. This state of affairs increased the chances of collisions between nations’ interests—a political condition that combined dangerously with the simultaneous vast increase in the destructive technologies available to states.

The “Old Regime”

Morgenthau found the older set of ideas in the values of Christendom—*moral* beliefs that supplied a common framework for political contests and made it “possible for us to refer to the Western world as not merely a geographic unit but a cultural and moral entity.”³⁰ These norms constituted a “framework of shared beliefs and common values, which impose[d] effective limitations upon the ends and