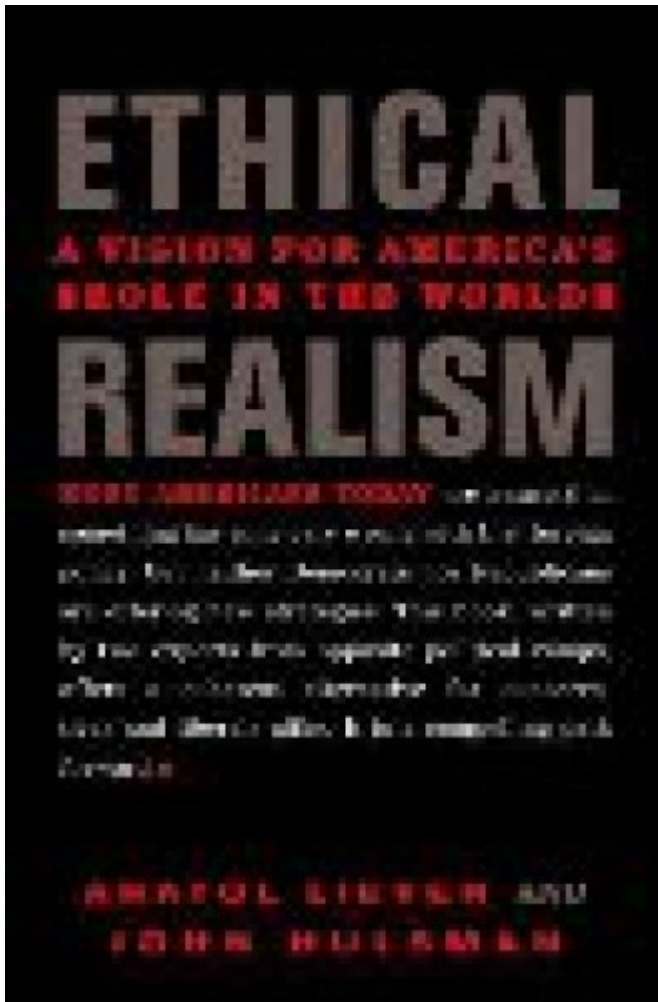


# Ethical Realism

reviewed by [Charles Strohmer](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## Ethical Realism: A Vision for America's Role in the World

Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman  
Pantheon

This book is a real find. And it couldn't be more timely. Written by two distinguished foreign-policy analysts from different political camps, it represents the collaborative

bipartisan efforts now under way in Washington to chart a new U.S. strategy for the Middle East. These efforts are essential to prevent another debacle like Iraq, and that is the point of *Ethical Realism*—a point also made by the Iraq Study Group and by voters during the 2006 midterm elections.

Now, Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman warn, Democrats and Republicans will be tempted to not dig deep enough, to instead cobble together a policy from their existing Middle East ideologies. The authors have little patience for either party's foreign policy, and they do not take a hunt-and-peck approach to producing an alternative to neoconservative foreign policy, now dead in the water. "We have . . . decided to turn our back on the orthodoxy of both parties," they write, especially that of the neoconservatives and the liberal hawks, whose "answers . . . go much too far in the contradictory directions of both hard-line realism and utopian morality—or, rather, as we shall argue, pseudo-realism and pseudo-morality."

It is refreshing to see the authors' proposal arising in the context of worldview analysis (though they do not use that term). "What has failed in Iraq," they write, is not just the strategy of the Bush administration "but a whole way of looking at the world" that is held by both parties, each in its own way. In brief, this is the view that the U.S. can spread democracy throughout the world, by force if necessary, and thereby advance its national interests and be supported in that effort "by good people all over the world, irrespective of their own political traditions, national allegiances, and national interests."

Having determined that this view has become an "unsuccessful approach" that if not "stopped will inevitably lead America to overreach itself, suffer defeat, and decline," Lieven and Hulsman argue for developing U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East through "the philosophy of ethical realism," a respected, historically successful approach propounded by Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan and drawing on a tradition stretching back to Edmund Burke and Augustine. Lieven and Hulsman call the U.S. foreign-policy community to a historic task, a fundamental rethinking not unlike what policy makers on both sides of the aisle agreed to and proceeded with during the late 1940s and early 1950s when learning how best to contend with Soviet communism and expansionism in the new and dangerous nuclear age.

A good deal of this short, tightly written book is devoted to the explication of five core principles of ethical realism—prudence, patriotism, responsibility, humility and

a deep understanding of other nations. To show what this revitalized ethical wisdom might look like, the authors draw on Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Kennan in the context of learned lessons and policy strategies from what Lieven and Hulsman call “the Truman-Eisenhower movement,” which unified the foreign-policy community no matter which party held power in Washington and set the U.S. on the road to eventual victory in the cold war.

This more prescriptive approach makes *Ethical Realism* a welcome addition alongside recent high-profile but chiefly analytical books such as *Cobra II*, *Fiasco*, *Hubris*, *State of Denial* and *The Looming Tower*. The authors’ prescriptive wisdom also directly links the philosophy of ethical realism to “the concept of the Great Capitalist Peace,” which “is based on ethical realist thought and directly echoes Kennan’s and Morgenthau’s concepts of international order and the moral purposes of diplomacy. It denotes a global order tacitly agreed to by all the major states . . . that guarantees their truly vital interests.”

Lieven and Hulsman are under no delusion about how difficult it might be for Democrats and Republicans to make this shift in worldview. Because both parties hold so instinctively to their own failing vision for the Middle East—a fact that is deeply troubling to the authors—neither will be able accept a truly alternative foreign-policy philosophy or strategy. Instead, they will keep reshuffling and playing with the same old deck of cards. That’s not good enough: “If Americans fail to reexamine their fundamental attitudes toward the world, then the risk for the future is that failure in Iraq will make the United States more cautious, but not wiser.”

*Ethical Realism* will not interest those who are so ideologically entrenched that their truth has become for them the whole truth. And even readers who believe that ethical realism is the sensible way ahead may balk at some of the book’s policy suggestions. For many in Washington, however, this thoughtful collaboration will be at the very least an admonition about the bipartisan humility that is now needed, even in the face of personal costs.

Hulsman has paid such costs himself. In 2005, when he and Lieven wrote an essay critical of neoconservative foreign policy for *The National Interest*, Hulsman was a senior foreign-policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank with strong ideological sympathies with the Bush administration. The essay annoyed Kim Holmes, the foundation’s director of foreign policy, and a year later, when Hulsman refused to let Heritage in on the ideas that were going into *Ethical Realism*,

Hulsman's seven-year career at the foundation ended.

But the winds of change are blowing. The Democrats now control Congress, Donald Rumsfeld is out and Robert Gates is in as secretary of defense, and President Bush has received thorough recommendations from the Iraq Study Group, the Pentagon, the State Department and the National Security Council about how best to shift U.S. Middle East and Iraq policy. *Ethical Realism* is an important voice in the national discussion—not just about Iraq today but about the U.S. and the Middle East tomorrow.