

**Note from the President of the Osgood Center, Shelton Williams:** Jonathan Tkachuk has served as a Program Associate at the Osgood Center for four months. In these months, I have asked him to “find his own voice” as an analyst. Over five articles, he has done exactly that. It was his idea to revisit Robert Osgood’s “Ideals and Self Interests” as a tribute to the scholar whose name graces our institution and as a way to find for himself why I constantly argue Mr. Osgood’s relevance. I like Mr. Tkachuk’s article even as I disagree with his conclusion. I know Mr. Osgood would embrace the article’s notion that all sides in the US foreign policy debate must be represented but I think his main argument would not bemoan the absence of intellectual opposition to intervention but rather the inertia that prevents the US from reassessing its priorities and recognizing its purpose: to support an international order that serves US interests over the long haul. Nevertheless, Tkachuk presents his case and honors Mr. Osgood. I commend the article for your consideration.

## Relevant Today: The Insights of Dr. Robert Osgood

By Jonathan Tkachuk

*“An idealistic policy undisciplined by political realism is bound to be unstable and ineffective; political realism unguided by moral purpose will be self-defeating and futile.”*

-Robert Osgood, “Ideals and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations,” p. 451

*“The Reagan administration was always willing to talk to the Soviets... In 1988, Reagan spoke eloquently about peace as well as freedom in a speech to students at Moscow State University. No wonder Norman Podhoretz, editor of Commentary magazine, earlier had denounced Reagan for “appeasement by any other name.””*

-Doug Bandow, “American Realist: Hefting a Big Stick and Using it Springly,” *The American Conservative*, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004

*“The party as a whole has helped to make Cain’s candidacy possible by lowering the bar for knowledge about foreign policy and national security issues so much that he could bluff his way through most of this year by saying that he would defer to experts. Aside from Huntsman and Paul, the GOP field doesn’t have any members who could discuss foreign affairs for any length of time without falling back on a lot of cliches and slogans, and much of what Romney and Santorum think they know about foreign policy is simply wrong.”*

-Daniel Larison, “Foreign Policy Ignorance and Foreign Policy Nonsense,” *The American Conservative-Eunomia*, November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011

In his seminal work on American foreign policy, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations*, Dr. Robert Osgood examines the critical relationship between America’s distinct national narrative and its conduct of foreign policy from 1898-1950. While his insights into the historical details of that relationship are exemplary, it is his broader argument that is most noteworthy: that an American realist foreign policy must be mindful of the altruistic, idealistic and moralistic features of America’s internal narrative in order to be successful. For Osgood, this means that an American foreign policy based solely on either Realpolitik or self-

less Idealism will ultimately fail, both politically at home and in the securing of its legitimate national interests abroad.

On the surface, Osgood's acknowledgement of the legitimate, albeit limited, role idealism plays in American foreign policy seems out of place within the realist tradition. Historically, realist thinkers in foreign policy have understood the concept of a nation's "interest" as being a highly rational, calculable and objective concern of state. In other words, this means that the "interests" of a state in its foreign relations are not influenced by altruistic motives. Indeed, one can usually identify a realist simply upon their usage of the term "national interest."

Yet, what places Osgood's argument firmly in the realist tradition is its preoccupation with "the possible," as opposed to the "ought." of American foreign relations. While Osgood acknowledges the legitimate role idealism has in shaping American foreign relation, he does so only to the extent that a failure to cede a public role for American idealism would cripple the work of American foreign policy entirely. He identifies two ways this crippling would manifest itself: 1) through the eventual loss of public support at home for that policy or 2) through the failure to support an international order that is more conducive to securing and advancing her legitimate national interests. While contemporary realists may take issue with the latter, one suspects that disagreement would be one of degree, not substance.

Unfortunately for the American people, it is unlikely that the insights of Dr. Osgood will be taken into consideration at this time. The reasons for this are numerous; ranging from the state of our collective education, entertainment, attitude of mind, civic commitment, concept of justice, concept of the "good," common culture and politics to the ultimate quality of our leaders, political and otherwise.

In addition to these, and recognizable to Dr. Osgood, would also be the extent to which America's internal narrative has been employed in the furtherance of its foreign policy over the last twenty years. Osgood would have recognized our interventions in places such as Somalia, Haiti, the former Yugoslavia and Libya as having relied heavily upon the same humanitarian sentiments of American idealism that galvanized America into the Spanish-American War. Our more ambitious interventions in Iraq (beginning in 2003) and Afghanistan (2001-present) would have been recognized as having relied upon the more liberal sentiments of American idealism that undergird American support for both World Wars.

Yet, there is a singular quality of our public narrative that I believe Dr. Osgood, were he still with us today, would not recognize. This element is the almost complete lack of a widespread antagonism to foreign intervention. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such an antagonism was either well-represented by an entire political party (usually the Republican Party) or by the outside party who benefitted from the foreign policy belligerence of the presidential incumbent

(Eisenhower in 1952, Johnson in 1964, Democrats in 2006 midterms and in the Obama landslide in 2008).

Other than for a small but energetic “Ron Paul faction” of the Republican Party, a faction seeking to bring the party towards a foreign policy historically championed by Senator Robert Taft, the present Republican Party is the party of interventionism, par excellent.

The Democratic Party, for all the realists that fill their ranks, has nevertheless been a complicit accomplice to the pattern of post-Cold War interventionism.

This is unfortunate, for it suggests an America not content with itself, as itself, by itself, for itself and its posterity. It suggests an American political culture that, both on the right and on the left, is more comfortable projecting its idealism abroad to heal the blights of nations than it is in perfecting our Union at home. It suggests that while we believe ourselves to be uniquely endowed, particularly in the moral sense, we now perceive this quality being contingent upon our acting to combat the various travails that plague humanity.

In other words our foreign policy, and not our “way of life,” has become the means by which we gain our collective sense of identity and moral purpose. It is through armed intervention that our nation finds the highest expression of its civic and cultural values. We recoil at the thought of being a “shining city on a hill,” not for fear of what may lay at the bottom of the hill, but of what may lay within the city.

I believe this state of affairs would baffle Dr. Osgood. Rather than growing mature while remaining young, America has grown insecure; both with herself as well as her position in the world.