



On Prudence and Restraint in Foreign Policy

Susan Windybank talks to Owen Harries

Owen Harries was, until July 2001, the founding Editor-in-Chief of the influential, Washington-based, foreign policy journal, *The National Interest*. The journal rose to mainstream prominence with the publication of Francis Fukuyama's 'The End of History?' in the summer of 1989, although it was no stranger to spirited debate—in the very first issue, Harries ran an article by publisher Irving Kristol dismissing the very concept of 'national interest' as 'dead beyond resurrection'.

Born in Wales, and educated at the University of Wales and Oxford, Harries taught at both the University of Sydney and New South Wales, before becoming Senior Advisor to shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, Andrew Peacock, in 1974. He then successively became head of policy planning in the Department of Foreign Affairs, and Senior Advisor to former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. The director and co-author of an influential study of Australia's relations with the Third World, dubbed 'The Harries Report', he was appointed Australian Ambassador to UNESCO in 1982. He then joined leading US think tank, The Heritage Foundation, as a Visiting Fellow, before founding *The National Interest* in 1985.

Once described as a 'man who enjoys talk the way others enjoy football', Owen Harries recently returned to Australia. He is now a Senior Fellow at The Centre for Independent Studies. He remains Consulting Editor and Editor Emeritus of *The National Interest*.

SW: Given that this issue of *Policy* contains several articles exploring the use—and misuse—of labels, I would like to begin by discussing your shift from Left

to Right. In a profile of you published in *The Bulletin* in 1984, you were described as a 'left-wing Laborite' who became a 'star in the American right'. When did you begin to change?

OH: You must remember that I grew up in a South Wales mining valley during the Depression, in a place that at one point had an unemployment level of 57%. I don't think I saw a live conservative for the first 20 years of my life. It was only after I came to Australia to take up a teaching position in adult education at the Department of Tutorial Studies at Sydney University that I really started moving away from a leftist position. I had Harry Eddy on one side and Esmond Higgins, who was an ex-leading member of the Australian Communist Party, on the other. In a small department, I was a new factor that was fought over, so to speak.

SW: Who ended up converting you?

OH: I think largely myself, though Harry Eddy was certainly influential. He was an ex-Trotskyist who had moved away to become a very strong anti-communist. He was polemically very powerful and he just out-argued me. At least I had the sense to realise I was being out-argued, and I started to shift.

SW: Despite this shift, you voted for Whitlam in 1972. What was it that attracted you to Whitlam?

Susan Windybank is Editor of *Policy*.

OH: It was more push than pull. It was the push of Billy McMahon. I felt it was impossible to vote for him. The Liberals had a very bad spell. They were split internally. Gorton had been a mixed bag, and McMahon was really bad. At that time I was running a television programme on Channel Nine and I was interviewing people every week. One week I interviewed Gough and at the end of the programme in the makeup room I told him that at the next election I was going to vote for him. And he said, ‘Well, Owen, if you’re going to vote for me, I’m going to win.’

SW: Within a few years of voting for Whitlam you were advising shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Andrew Peacock, before becoming head of policy planning in the Department of Foreign Affairs. During that time, you largely wrote the Report of the Committee on Australia’s Relations with the Third World, which became widely known as ‘the Harries report’. Why did the government feel that such a report was needed, and what was the reaction to it?

OH: You must remember that from 1973, when OPEC made its first move and forced up the price of oil, when America was very much on the defensive after Vietnam and Watergate, the Third World was at its most militant. It was riding high, it was exerting a lot of pressure on the West, and in those circumstances, it was felt—by Peacock and Fraser—that Australia was particularly vulnerable as a sort of outpost of the West with a lot of Third World neighbours. It was rightly felt that we needed to give serious consideration to what all this meant.

As for the reaction to it, it was very favourable, though not uniformly so. There were some attacks on it from the Left, but by and large it got a very good press indeed. It was pointed out that this was the first time that a report like this, a serious intellectual report, had been produced by an Australian government on the question of foreign policy. The British Foreign Office was very interested in it, and I conducted a seminar on it for them in London. The Japanese seriously thought of translating it into Japanese. So it was pretty much a success.

Let me emphasise that while I chaired it, and wrote something like over half of it, there were a lot of other important contributions from other people. Ashton

Calvert, who is currently head of the department, wrote some chapters in it. Des Moore was influential on the economic side. It was a very good, very enjoyable year. We worked intensely. It involved interviewing extensively, and sorting out internally on the committee. We only had one member who dissented. Everything else we managed to resolve without smoothing it all out into a bland custard.

SW: You went on to become Senior Advisor to Malcolm Fraser, before accepting the post of Australian Ambassador to UNESCO. How long were you at UNESCO?

OH: I was at UNESCO for about a year and a half. I went there at the beginning of 1982, but then Malcolm Fraser lost the election in 1983. As a political appointee I was required to submit my resignation, and the Labor Party wanted to find somewhere for Gough Whitlam to get him out of Australia. So I offered my resignation, it was accepted, and I left. And then it was a question of what I was going to do. I didn’t particularly want to go back and teach at the University of New South Wales. I had already become pretty disillusioned at what was happening to universities, so some friends suggested I went to

Washington. I joined a think tank there, the Heritage Foundation, where I spent a very happy year and a half getting America and Britain to withdraw from UNESCO.

SW: On what grounds?

OH: That under its director general, M’Bow, it was corrupt, that it was grossly inefficient, and that it was grossly anti-Western. America and Britain were paying to get their values undermined and attacked. Even by UN standards, UNESCO was pretty outrageous, and I always argued that even those who believed in the UN should have wanted to criticise and attack UNESCO because it was giving the UN a bad name.

ON PRUDENCE AND RESTRAINT

SW: How would you describe yourself now?

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OH: I would describe myself as a conservative.

SW: What's the difference between a neoconservative and a conservative?

OH: Irving Kristol famously described a neoconservative as a liberal who'd been mugged by reality, and I guess there's an element of that. But I think I became increasingly aware that, as compared with a lot of the neoconservatives that I worked amongst and that I had as colleagues and friends in America, my position tended more towards what you might call classical conservatism. After the Cold War ended, a lot of the neoconservatives reverted to their liberalism, particularly in foreign policy, whereas I didn't. In fact, conditions after the Cold War tended to strengthen my realist, conservative approach to foreign policy. I think I spent most of the 1990s arguing not against the Left but against the neoconservatives, arguing for prudence and restraint in American foreign policy, as against the rather gung-ho approach they favoured.

SW: When you say that some neoconservatives reverted to liberalism after the Cold War, do you mean that they had an overarching vision of a post-Cold War world in a Fukuyama-style sense—that is, that liberal democracy as the ultimate form of government would triumph?

OH: For as long as the Cold War was on, the presence of the Soviet Union, and the threat it posed, demanded a realist approach from the United States and this set up a sort of intellectual and ideological discipline on American neoconservatives. They operated in the realm of necessity, and the choices were very limited. Absent the Soviet Union, and with America as the sole remaining superpower, they left the realm of necessity and entered the realm of choice, where the constraints were lifted.

What happened in these circumstances is that a lot of neoconservatives remembered that they used to be liberals and went back to a sort of Wilsonian belief in America as a crusader for democracy, America as the founder of a New World Order, that would replace realism and replace power politics. Increasingly, you had neoconservatives very strongly arguing that America should use its position of dominance to establish this

New Order, to impose its will on the world, to promote democracy very actively.

Now I had two serious objections to this. One was that it is not doable. Democracy is not an export commodity. It's much more a do-it-yourself project. Americans should have realised this because for several generations they had been using their influence in the Caribbean and Central America, right next door to them and with very small countries, and even there they couldn't do it. So why they thought they could do it elsewhere in the world was a bit mysterious. Also, I don't think the United States is particularly good at understanding other cultures and other societies.

The other thread of the argument is that if you are the sole remaining superpower, you should be very careful and restrained in the use of your power. As anyone who has studied international history and politics knows, the fate of dominant powers that are very active and assertive is that they're balanced sooner or later by coalitions of powers against them—and that this was likely to happen to a United States that insisted on imposing its will on the world. This is where—again—American exceptionalism came into it.

They couldn't believe that it would happen to them. They thought that America would be an exception to this rule. It might have happened to Spain under Phillip II, it might have happened to France under Louis XIV and Napoleon, it might have happened to Wilhelm II's and Hitler's Germany, but it wouldn't happen to America.

SW: What about Britain? It didn't really happen to Britain.

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SW: Britain got away with it, you might say, by exercising a very considerable element of restraint and prudence, a policy of ‘splendid isolation’. Britain was active in the outskirts of the world, but pretty inactive in the heartland of Europe. Britain stood aloof from the alliance systems of Europe—and perhaps it stood aloof too long—but it was certainly not an assertive European presence where the game was played.

SW: There were those who argued, when the Cold War ended, that the United States should pull back, that it was time to ‘bring the boys back home’. And since September 11, some commentators have subscribed to what the CIA call ‘blowback’—the unintended consequences of past American foreign policy and intervention overseas—and have subsequently argued that the ‘best defence is to give no offence’. What do you think of this view?

OH: That’s not my position. What I call for is not isolationism, not withdrawal, but restraint and discrimination. You should pick and choose and depend not on doctrine, but on circumstance. I don’t argue for a minimalist foreign policy for the United States, I argue for a discriminating foreign policy. It’s only in the context of the intellectual forces at work in the Washington environment in which I worked for 16-17 years that you might be able to appreciate the stress I put on prudence because I saw so much of the contra position. That, combined with the sort of fecklessness and fakery of the Clinton years—pretending to be doing something they weren’t doing, being busy without being effective—influenced my views to a great extent.

SW: You recently referred to the Clinton years as the ‘Saxophone years’, a kind of wasted near decade. What do you think could have been done differently?

OH: The United States under Clinton had a profoundly unserious foreign policy, and it was implemented by what I think was the most second-rate team that America’s had in foreign policy since World War II. What you had was a policy of gesture, masquerading as a serious policy, pinpricks being presented as massive hammerblows. And it all got quite silly. Even in the

attitude towards a serious subject like, say, China, swinging from treating China as the main rival to treating it as strategic partner, there was a profound lack of seriousness in it.

SW: Clinton famously claimed not to be a foreign policy president, sensing that Americans were tired after the Cold War, and that it was time to focus on pressing domestic issues.

OH: All the more reason why there was a need for discrimination and a careful selection of issues, not generalised busyness.

ON HARMONY AND CLASHES

SW: You are now a Senior Fellow at a classical liberal think tank—The Centre for Independent Studies. Yet foreign policy doesn’t seem to be a natural area for some classical liberals, although they are perfectly comfortable debating domestic issues. What do you think it is about international relations that some classical liberals can’t seem to come to grips with?

OH: Well, historically, of course, classical liberals of the 19th century—people like Cobden and Bright—rejected the belief that international politics had to be power politics, and believed in what we now call globalisation—that the more the capitalist system became globalised,

the more interdependent countries would become, the more harmonious relationships between countries would be, and that both the barriers between countries and the ignorance about each other that some liberals tend to believe is the cause of war, would be dissipated and become less and less influential.

There is a sort of Utopianism built into classical liberalism as far as international politics is concerned in the belief that more interdependence means more harmony. This is a doctrine which E. H. Carr in his great realist tract called ‘a harmony of interests’ theory. I just think that’s wrong. I think Rousseau got it righter in the 18th century when he argued that the more states had to do with each other, the more interdependent they became, the more scope for aggravation and irritation between them. People who talk of a ‘global

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village' as if all will be sweetness and light have no experience of real villages.

SW: The terrorist attacks on September 11 would surely prove the 'harmony of interests' theory wrong.

OH: The violence and the Muslim reaction to the Western world is precisely a function of closer contact, and the greater impact of the West on the Arab world.

SW: Do you think the September 11 attacks have proved Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis—that the next era of conflict will be fought over cultural values, and, in particular, that it is inevitable that the West and Islam will clash?

OH: That is a clash of civilisations, but I don't know that I would generalise the thesis to be the be-all-and-end-all of conflict from here on in. My view of Huntington has always been that the 'clash of civilisations' was a bold and interesting thesis, that one should accept it as such and welcome the light it threw, and not criticise it in detail, but try to look at the central truth that it contained. I'm sure that if you try to push everything into that framework then you will find that some things would not fit, that there would be exceptions and contradictions.

SW: It's nothing new in a way. Cultures and civilisations have been rubbing against each other for centuries.

OH: No, but you must see it in context. What he was arguing was that after nearly a century of ideological confrontation, we were now going to have cultural confrontation. I think there was an element of truth in that.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

SW: During the 1990s there was a lot of talk about the pacific forces of globalisation, multinational companies and NGOs, all eroding the relevance of national borders and thus the nation-state. At the same time, states

no longer have a monopoly on force, given the rise of warlords, transnational criminal networks, and the like. Certainly, in many parts of the world it appears this way, with states breaking down or failing. What do you make of this?

OH: Let me respond to the much-heralded demise of the nation-state first. A lot of people have talked about this as a return to a sort of medievalism. Instead of power being monopolised by states, it's now become diffuse and you have a variety of agents applying power and applying force. I think there's some truth in this, and it's not just power in the military sense. One of the great features of our age is the decline in secrecy and the decline in the monopoly governments have had over information. It's very hard to keep secrets nowadays, and access to information for people who know how to go about it is much greater than it's ever been. This is to a large extent why NGOs have increasing influence in the world, because they have woken up to this very quickly and have made maximum use of the information that they can now get hold of. So in a sense nation-states are being attacked from above and below: above by pseudo, quasi, international or universal organisations—we have international courts, we have international this and that—but also from below, with all these forces coming up to challenge the power of the nation-state—everything from environmentalists to drug gangs.

Second, although a lot of people have wanted to see the decline and disappearance of nation-states, we may still live to discover that there are worse conditions than a world of nation-states—a world where you have a malign anarchy, where all sorts of irresponsible and uncontrollable agents have significant power without responsibility. The Westphalian system of nation-states at least established a set of ground rules and at least there were some constraints exercised on governments by their populations. Many of these new agents are utterly irresponsible. So it's starting to look like a very strange world. Perhaps the

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most that we can hope for is that nation-states can at best control the situation.

SW: Should policymakers and leaders try and explain this complexity instead of presenting complex issues as simple moral slogans? I'm thinking of Bush's 'Axis of Evil', even Reagan's 'Evil Empire'.

OH: It depends very much on the situation. It can be a drawback. It's not helpful in some situations of great complexity and where there are many shades of grey involved. On the other hand, people often overcomplicate international affairs, and I think there is a European tendency, particularly, to believe that making moral distinctions is in some way terribly unsophisticated and a sign of simplicity and naivety. And so you lapse into a sort of relativism and it can very often immobilise you, because who is to say that one thing is better than the other? Who is to decide? You end up with a sort of phony tolerance, which leads to paralysis.

As for Reagan's Evil Empire, I think that was a good statement because after a very bad decade when the US had lost in Vietnam, when they'd had Watergate, and lived through four years of Jimmy Carter, American conviction needed some simple, bold statements. Reagan's Evil Empire, on the one hand, and his use of the 'City on the Hill' image on the other were very good in reminding Americans of what they were and what they were against.

The Axis of Evil was, I think, one of these smart phrases that Bush's State of the Union address, which was going fine on its own, could well have done without. As far as I know, there is no axis. I don't know of any strong connection between Iraq and North Korea, for example. Words should have meaning. I know the person who wrote it, and he has since resigned from the speechwriting team.

SW: It was obviously used to evoke Reagan's Evil Empire.

OH: And, of course, 'axis' evoked the 1930s and fascism. But I don't think it made conceptual sense. And I don't think that one should assume that all evils are joined, that they are united. They're not. What America has had to start on after September 11 is very complicated

and difficult. It needs a lot of very hard and clear thinking to sort out what exactly you're against and how you're going to go about it. I think that's still a work in progress.

SW: Unlike Clinton, however, Bush has a good foreign policy team.

OH: Yes. He has a good foreign policy team. And he and they are deadly serious about it. So at least there's some hope that they might come up with some good answers.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM

SW: In a recent column in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Gerard Henderson wrote that some people are drawing parallels between the war on terrorism and the Cold War, with Islamic fundamentalism replacing communism. Do you find such parallels useful?

OH: I'm struck much more by the differences than the similarities. Looking back at one of the great central questions of the last century, it is striking how responsibly and cautiously the two main actors behaved throughout the Cold War. They handled their enormous power very carefully. I guess the boldest move was the Soviet policy that led to the Cuban Missile Crisis, but even that, once it

came to a crisis point, was handled very delicately, and sensibly and quickly. The Soviet Union, at least until the very end, was a vicious and evil system, but in its international behaviour it was essentially a cautious actor that calculated the correlation of forces carefully. It was both at the same time. Flying two aircraft into those towers in New York is an animal of a different breed.

SW: Perhaps one similarity is that to prevail against terrorism, the United States must try to keep a coalition together that cuts across civilisational lines, just as it did in the Cold War.

OH: This comes back to what we were talking about earlier about prudence. Because the Soviet Union was as powerful as it was, the United States readily

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recognised that it needed allies and that it had to act in multilateral ways. I think there is a danger now that the United States is so supreme in terms of all-round power that the temptation of unilateralism is greater than it was. There are some people in Washington—some of them are my friends and some occupy senior positions in the Administration—who believe that the United States can, and should if necessary, dispense with allies and proceed on its own.

SW: Which do you think will prevail—multilateralism or unilateralism? Take the current debate about action against Iraq as a case in point.

OH: What would worry me about Iraq is (a) what America might have to do in order to get rid of Saddam Hussein and that might involve killing a lot of innocent people; and (b) what you would do with Iraq afterwards. To be responsible for a country of that size, and to put something together that would work with the Kurds and the Shiites, would involve America in an avoidable exercise in what we now call nation-building, and I doubt it could be brought off successfully.

At the same time, I also think there is a real and serious problem. Saddam Hussein is a vicious dictator. I think that if he thought he could get away with it, he is not above using biological and chemical weapons, even against America, and then there's the question of whether he has nuclear weapons. And insofar as he dominates and he's mortal, think if he should suddenly discover he had a terminal illness, think of what he might do before he died. It's a horrifying thought.

SW: The European reaction to possible American action against Iraq has ranged from apprehension to opposition from some quarters. Does this foreshadow an uncertain future for the Atlantic alliance? You have written, for instance, that if the EU project is successful, Europe could become a major rival, and that it could cause serious problems for the US.

OH: I think one of two things is going to happen to the European Union. They're either going to bring it off, and make it work, in which case they will be a very serious rival; or the whole thing will disintegrate. The

whole EU project has been an elite-driven thing that has been foisted upon Europe essentially by the political elites. If it collapses, those elites will be discredited and you'll have rival elites of the extreme Left and extreme Right there to exploit the situation, in which case you'll have a tremendously unstable continent. Either scenario is bad. So I guess the best one can hope for is that the thing just limps along in the middle somehow, not failing, not succeeding.

SW: The French government clearly hopes that the EU will act as a 'second pole', a balancer against the US and what they call the 'dollar hegemony'. Is it necessarily a bad thing for the EU to act one day as a balancer against the preponderance of American power?

OH: I guess I have to say no. It's not a bad thing. I think some sort of balance is desirable. And Europe is a better balancer, a more reliable balancer, than China, which despite all its talk about its eternal civilisation, and about it being the oldest state in the world and so on, has extraordinarily little experience in living with other states in a quasi-competitive/cooperative environment. China has always thought of itself as the centre of power.

AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES

SW: Moving on to the relationship between Australia and the United States. You wrote in an op-ed recently that cultural affinities and shared traditions are not enough to ensure common foreign policy goals between countries, to override national interests. I think many Australians—certainly some media commentators—woke up to this with East Timor when they realised that the US intended to keep its distance (although the US provided logistical support and helped in other ways behind the scenes). That was a clear case of America's national interests diverging from Australia's. I wonder what would happen the other way around in a possible conflict between China and Taiwan. What if the US military went in to support Taiwan and asked the Australian government for help? Should we get involved, or would our interests diverge to too great an extent?

What would worry me about Iraq is what America might have to do to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and what you would do with Iraq afterwards.

OH: Well, there are two things there. First of all, American behaviour: how much one should expect a sort of generous appreciation of one's past help to influence America. States don't work like that. And they shouldn't work like that. We shouldn't expect them to. It was an American, George Washington no less, who explained why you can't expect generosity from countries when he said: 'The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave . . . It is a slave to its animosity or its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.' America is no exception. That should set any limits to the belief in goodwill as any sort of generalised factor in international politics.



As far as China and Taiwan are concerned, on the general question, and before coming to the Australia part of your question, this has been an intensely argued issue that divides people who'll agree on most other things. My own view is that America's relations with China should not be dictated by the Taiwan issue. That would be a case of the tail wagging the dog. America should not allow Taiwan to have control over its relations with China, which has many dimensions—broad strategic dimensions, economic dimensions, and so on.

Taiwan now has *de facto* independence in virtually every respect. The only limit on it is that it's not a member of the UN and a couple of other international organisations. To me that's no big deal. Now I think the United States should be prepared to defend that *de facto* independence in the event of any Chinese excursion against it. But I don't think it should be prepared to intervene in order to extend that *de facto* independence to a *de jure* independence. If the Taiwanese insist on pushing things to complete independence and create a situation of conflict, then I think that's their business and I don't think any Americans should die for that cause. To all intents and purposes, they've got independence now.

SW: President Bush recently re-affirmed American support for Taiwan in the event of a conflict with China.

OH: I think an unqualified commitment of that kind is a mistake, and could act as an incitement to the Taiwanese to push it to the limit. I'm a believer that there's a great deal of sense in leaving the question ambiguous, in a calculated ambiguity in American China policy. We have lived with it for the last 20 years, or virtually, and it's been to everyone's advantage. The Taiwanese have moved from being a dictatorship to a democracy, China has immeasurably improved from what it was like in the late 1970s, and the United States has got on fine. So I'm very sceptical about

America getting involved, unless the Chinese behave outrageously and without extreme provocation, and turn on Taiwan, which is very unlikely. The Taiwanese now have something between 50 and 60 billion dollars invested in China, movement between the mainland and the island is increasing all the time, and economic relations are thickening.

Australia is too eager to be part of everything. Australia too should act with discrimination.

SW: But just say things did go really badly. What should Australia do?

OH: My answer to that is, 'Keep well clear of it all'.

SW: Would that mean a rupture in the alliance?

OH: It shouldn't, it wouldn't. We should calmly look them in the eye and say, 'This is your East Timor. Good luck, chaps. We're solidly clapping from the sidelines.' And it would make good sense. Australia is much too small militarily to get involved in such a game. It would be completely out of its class, for one thing. Secondly, when the dust has settled, Australia has to live with China, and it should bear that in mind and not get involved.

SW: What about Australian support at a tokenistic level?

OH: What's the point of a token? I would say that perhaps Australia is too keen on tokenism with the United States, and too eager to be part of everything. Australia too should act with discrimination.