

10th Anniversary Interview – Stephen Walt

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, DEC 7 2017

E-International Relations (E-IR) was founded 10 years ago this week. During that time we have interviewed over 150 academics, policy-makers and journalists. To celebrate E-IR's 10th anniversary we asked some of our existing interviewees two further questions reflecting on the last decade in International Relations.

Stephen Walt, the Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He is a contributing editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine, co-chair of the editorial board of *International Security*, and co-editor of the *Cornell Studies in Security Affairs* book series. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in May 2005 and received the International Studies Association's Distinguished Senior Scholar award in 2014. His books include *The Origins of Alliances*, which received the 1988 Edgar S. Furniss National Security Book Award, and *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, which was a finalist for the Lionel Gelber International Affairs Book Award and the Arthur Ross Book Prize. His most recent book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (co-authored with John J. Mearsheimer) was a *New York Times* best-seller and has been translated into more than twenty foreign languages. Stephen was interviewed about his current work, the failures of US foreign policy, realist IR theory, and the nature of American political institutions in 2017 and 2013.

What changes have you seen in International Relations or your field over the last 10 years?

First, the boundary between international relations and comparative politics has become quite blurry, with many scholars working on topics that cross that divide, such as ethnic conflict, insurgency, and the like.

Second, there has been an unfortunate over-emphasis on method over theory and substance, leading to what I have called "simplistic hypothesis testing." Instead of basing hypotheses in a rigorous and well-developed theory, students increasingly focus on testing empirical hypotheses that are best loosely derived from theory. The field also places a premium on methodological wizardry, instead of focusing on whether the questions being posed are the right ones or the answers being provided are novel and important. No matter how high-powered the statistical technique or how detailed the result case studies, the long-term impact of such work is limited.

Third, in recent years younger scholars have become more interested in topics that have genuine real-world implications, and they are increasingly willing to present this work on blogs and online publications that are read by people in the policy world. Because I believe scholars have a responsibility to use their training and skills to make a better world, I hope this latter trend continues.

What books, or other media, published in the last 10 years has made an impact on you and/or the discipline?

It is unfair to single out a few books, because my thinking has been shaped by many different works over the past decade. But if pressed, I'd simply say that I learned a great deal from Barry Posen's *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy*, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Nuno Monteiro's *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, Michael Glennon's *National Security and Double Government*, Tony Smith's *Why Wilson*

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Matters, Thomas Oatley's *A Political Economy of American Hegemony*, Patrick Porter's *The Global Village Myth*, and my colleague Dani Rodrik's recent works on globalization.

I also read a lot of international history, because that is still the raw material on which much of our understanding of the world rests, and I always learn things from these books. And my current work on U.S. foreign policy has been aided by the work of a number of terrific journalists, including Jane Mayer, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Jeremy Scahill, Dana Priest, and many more. So many books; so little time!