



Who Speaks for America?: Why Democracy Matters in Foreign Policy

Eric Alterman

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A book in current affairs by a columnist for *The Nation* whose first book sold some 30,000 copies. The new book continues the work the author began in *Sound and Fury: The Washington Punditocracy and the Collapse of American Politics* (Harper-Collins, 1992). Alterman says that elites dominate U.S. foreign policy at every turn, and that the gap between the views of the public and those of the policy-making elites has increased to the extent that the United States has become an empire. Journalist and historian Eric Alterman argues that the vast majority of Americans have virtually no voice in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. With policymakers answerable only to a small coterie of self-appointed experts, corporate lobbyists, self-interested parties, and the elite media, the U.S. foreign policy operates not as the instrument of a democracy, but of a "pseudo-democracy": a political system with the trappings of democratic checks and balances but with little of their content. This failure of American democracy is all the more troubling, Alterman charges, now that the Cold War is over and the era of global capital has replaced it. Americans' stake in so-called foreign policy issues from trade to global warming is greater than ever. Yet the current system serves to mute their voices and ignore their concerns.

Experts have long insisted that the public is too ignorant to contribute to the creation of successful foreign policy. But over the course of two hundred years, as Alterman makes clear, the American people have shown an impressive consistency in their ideals and values. The problem for any elite, the author explains, is that Americans often define their interests quite differently than those who would speak in their name. The American public's values are, ironically, much closer to the "liberal republican" philosophy of our founders than to those of our most powerful elites. Alterman concludes with a series of challenging proposals for reforms designed to create a truly democratic U.S. foreign policy.

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