



Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 14, No. 17

The Newsletter of the Wachman Center

July 2009

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TRADITIONS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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In October 1942 leaflets appeared in Egypt. The occasion was the British Eighth Army victory over Rommel's Afrika Korps at El Alamein, which at last made the Allies confident they could drive the Axis out of the Middle East. Moreover, the first American observers had arrived in North Africa in preparation for Operation Torch, the invasion of Morocco and Algeria scheduled for the following month. The leaflets, printed in Arabic and signed by President Roosevelt, proclaimed:

"... Behold. We the American Holy Warriors have arrived. We have come here to fight the great Jihad of Freedom.... Assemble along the highways to welcome your brothers. We have come to set you free. Speak with our fighting men and you will find them pleasing to the eye and gladdening to the heart. We are not as some other Christians whom ye have known, and who trample you under foot. Our soldiers consider you as their brothers, for we have been reared in the way of free men. Our soldiers have been told about your country and about their Moslem brothers and they will treat you with respect and with a friendly spirit in the eyes of God..."¹

We may forgive such condescending propaganda on the grounds that Arabs, Persians, and other Muslims were hardly the focus of U.S. geopolitics then that they are today. During World War II they seemed just backward, superstitious, and thieving peoples who happened to be in the way of the armies fighting for control of the world.

That isn't to say that the United States has not been engaged with the Middle East throughout its history, at first modestly but with increasing intensity. Moreover, the Middle East has always held a certain fascination for various groups of Americans whether or not their government was entangled there. But not until 1979, when Jimmy Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski called the Islamic Crescent an Arc of Crisis, did the Middle East take center stage. By that time all the major U.S. foreign policy traditions were already in place.

It is my assigned task to provide the overarching context of American foreign relations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My most telling message is that the strategies and methodologies--the ends and means of America as a world power--were all contrived to surmount crises and challenges elsewhere in the world. They had no initial relevance to Islamic cultures or Middle East geography, but had somehow to be applied to Middle Eastern policies once they had pushed themselves onto the American foreign policy agenda. That is why I shall have nothing more to say on the Middle East until the very end.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TRADITIONS

The genesis of these remarks date from 1988, when I left Berkeley to become chair of the international relations program at

¹ The leaflet was authored by two American officials and one local agent. See Anthony Cave Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold: The Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), pp. 104-105; see also <http://www.meforum.org/45/fdr-addresses-the-arabs>.

Penn. Since Penn's U.S. diplomatic historian Bruce Kuklick was away that first year, I agreed to work up lectures for a survey course in that field. It occurred to me that a good way to structure the course would be to focus on the discrete traditions that Americans founded regarding their proper place in the world. I defined a genuine tradition as a principle or strategy that "commanded solid bipartisan support, outlived the era that gave it birth, entered the permanent lexicon of our national discourse, and continued to resonate with a portion of the American public even during eras when it did not directly inspire policy."²

I identified eight, divided into two groups (see [handout](http://www.fpri.org/education/modernmiddleeast/), <http://www.fpri.org/education/modernmiddleeast/>). The first four, what I call our Old Testament, defined U.S. grand strategy during its first century: (1) Independence, Unity, and Liberty at Home, or "Exceptionalism" (as properly understood); (2) Unilateralism, or "Isolationism" (as mistakenly derided); (3) the American System, or Monroe Doctrine (as commonly called); and (4) Expansionism, or Manifest Destiny (as triumphantly touted). These were designed to prevent the outside world from shaping America on the assumption that the wicked Old World must threaten or corrupt. The last four, our New Testament, defined U.S. grand strategy during its second century: (5) Progressive Imperialism; (6) Wilsonianism, or Liberal Internationalism; (7) Containment; and (8) Global Meliorism. These were designed to help America shape the outside world on the assumption that the benevolent New World must uplift and reform.

It struck me that the frequent confusion in U.S. foreign policy stemmed not from false dichotomies between a mythical Realism vs. Idealism, or Isolationism vs. Interventionism, but rather from tensions among our twentieth-century traditions and between the twentieth- and nineteenth-century ones. Americans imagine theirs to be a Crusader State destined to transform the world in the pursuit of justice and freedom, but at the same time they want America to remain a Promised Land, uncorrupted by the world outside.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

One of my first discoveries was that America's vaunted moral Exceptionalism had little to do with foreign relations. To be sure, American colonists believed their country was destined to be different and better than others. Colonial leaders imagined America a land set apart and called by Providence and Enlightenment Reason alike to "begin the world over again." That is what historians mean when they refer to American messianism, mission, idealism, or the morally neutral term Exceptionalism.

But when I examined early American statecraft, I was struck by the virtual absence of policies born of idealism, pacifism, or mission. On the contrary, from the moment Benjamin Franklin sailed for Europe, U.S. diplomacy was shaped by power politics and the need to secure the new nation's goals. Those goals, above all, were Liberty, Unity, and Independence at home, and what America was at home – a land of civil and religious liberty under law and growing equality and opportunity – was what made the nation exceptional.

The framers of the Constitution were careful to apply checks and balances to the President's military and diplomatic power, but it never occurred to them to restrict how the federal government ought to conduct foreign policy. The goal of the federal government, rather, should be to create "one American system" strong enough "to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world." As John Quincy Adams wrote,

"America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion only of her own.... For she knows well that by once enlisting under other banners than her own ... she would involve herself beyond the powers of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of avarice, envy, and ambition.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit."

American Exceptionalism did not require that the U.S. pursue a pacifist, revolutionary, or ideological foreign policy. To do so would only endanger what made America exceptional at home: free, united, and independent.

The second, third, and fourth traditions in U.S. foreign relations follow in such logical progression that Unilateralism, an American System of states, and Expansion across the continent were implicit from the very beginning. For if the nation was to preserve its hard-won Liberty, be spared the threat and expense of large armies and navies, avoid becoming a pawn of foreign powers, and instead exploit their conflicts in order to grow, then it must pursue a Unilateral policy, even (as in 1812) when it went to war. But Unilateralism in no way implied Isolationism, a term coined in the 1890s. Americans always pursued close commercial, financial, and cultural ties with Europe, the Caribbean, and Pacific, and the nation that dispatched one-third of its navy to open Japan was by no stretch of the imagination isolationist. So did Expansion, or Manifest Destiny, for if Europeans were not to occupy the empty lands of North America, and if the exploding American population was to enjoy its exceptional freedom and opportunity, then the U.S. itself had to fill the void from coast to coast.

These four traditions were coherent, mutually reinforcing, and spectacularly successful. They created the necessary conditions for the explosive territorial, demographic, and economic growth of the nation without compromise of its small government, free enterprise principles.

² See *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 10.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Imperialism

So what happened in 1898? Why did Americans suddenly embrace a form of Imperialism so at odds with all that they stood for? According to most historians this was a “great aberration”: by 1898 the U.S. was a potential world power in need of foreign markets; the Navy, big business, politicians, and the press were eager to junk what they now damned as isolationism; an assertive mood had swept the country; and the Western frontier had closed. But whatever motives historians stress, most conclude that President McKinley, once he intervened in Cuba’s war of independence against Spain, took the occasion to annex overseas colonies initiate 15 years of Yankee imperialism until Woodrow Wilson put us back on track.

But 1898 could not mark the end of Isolationism, because the U.S. had never been isolationist. Nor was overseas expansion anything new: the U.S. had purchased Alaska, bid for Samoa, and aggressively pursued commerce in Asia. Nor did U.S. exports, which were booming, require new markets. Nor, finally, were many Americans troubled by their little island empire as a moral issue--the leaders of the Progressive Movement and Protestant churches were eager to redeem colonial peoples from Spanish obscurantism.

In retrospect, the “great aberration” was really a culmination of trends that had been building up since the Civil War. America was now able to throw its naval weight around; Europe’s imperial powers were pressing against the edges of the American sphere in the Pacific and Caribbean; and reformers from Teddy Roosevelt and Herbert Croly to evangelist Josiah Strong all claimed that God had made America great for the purpose of uplifting other peoples.

The truly new and risky departure in 1898 was not colonialism, but moral progressivism! Americans abandoned their traditions when they went to war with Spain in the first place to save a damsel in distress. Still thinking of itself as a Promised Land, America chose also to be a Crusader State. With that, our New Testament traditions began to be written.

Wilsonianism

In 1898, Americans were swept away by militant self-righteousness into a crusade and then stuck around to export American values. Even Woodrow Wilson had applauded the Spanish American War and annexation of colonies. As President, he intervened in the Caribbean more often and with more firepower than did TR and Taft put together. He invaded Mexico twice in order, he said, to “teach the Mexicans to elect good men.” He also said that to base foreign policy on one’s self-interest was an insult to other nations and a disgrace to one’s own. Accordingly, when war broke out in 1914, he put his energy into trying to mediate a Peace Without Victory in the belief that it was America’s calling to crusade on behalf of democratic diplomacy.

When the belligerents spurned his call for peace and the Germans multiplied their outrages, Wilson finally made the hard decision for war, but only because he persuaded himself that it was a moral act: that is, precisely the opposite definition of Exceptionalism from the one the Founding Fathers endorsed. He would go to war to end war everywhere. He would teach the Germans to elect good men just as he tried to teach the Mexicans. He would create a League of all Nations modeled on his abortive Pan American League of 1913.

Wilsonianism was not slain by Isolationists until it was resurrected by Franklin Roosevelt after Pearl Harbor. The Republican internationalist administrations of the 1920s endorsed such Wilsonian goals as disarmament, collective security, self-determination, and the Open Door, and thanks to the diplomacy of Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes and Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, the U.S. achieved far more than Wilson did in stabilizing Europe and Asia. What hurled the U.S. into its deep Isolation in the 1930s were the effects of the Great Depression, the Neutrality Acts of the Democratic Congress, and the eager support for them of FDR, at least until 1938.

Of course, after Pearl Harbor the Roosevelt administration instantly embraced Wilsonianism, if only because America had no other banner under which to wage world war. But thanks to Joseph Stalin, Wilsonianism failed a second time as a blueprint for world order. If Unilateralism had been discredited by Versailles, the Depression, Munich, and Pearl Harbor, the deadlock with the Soviets at the UN meant that Wilsonianism was no guide for America’s place in the world either.

Containment

The Truman administration came up with a new tradition, Containment, to convince the American people to wage another dangerous contest with another aggressive dictator. The Truman Doctrine passed the Senate by a margin of 3:1, the Marshall Plan by 4:1, NATO by 6:1, and support for the Korean War by 10:1. This was not all the result of anticommunist hysteria, though that played its part. Containment was in fact not such a sharp break with the past after all, but meshed well with the previous traditions. It was based on the premise that the nation’s Liberty at home was under assault by a global conspiracy that reached into American labor unions, government agencies, schools, churches, Hollywood, even atomic facilities.

Nor did Containment necessarily violate Unilateralism, for whereas the U.S. now made alliances all over the map, it was clearly the boss of them and so retained its freedom of action. Containment meshed well with Progressive Imperialism since it justified projecting American power across the oceans and made parts of the world into virtual protectorates. It did excellent duty on behalf of Expansionism in that it opposed both the communist and European colonial empires and opened up half the world to American enterprise. Containment even honored Wilsonianism insofar as it served liberal values and worked through the UN when possible. Finally, global anticommunism amounted to a veritable religious war for many millions of

Americans, both secular and sectarian.³ It was a foreign policy expression of the American civil religion even more fervent and un-conflicted than Wilson's war to end war had been.

Containment was by far the most successful twentieth-century U.S. strategy, but the cost was very high. At home, the Cold War meant conscription, high taxes, federal intervention in science, education, business, and labor, militarization of the economy, domestic surveillance, and loyalty oaths. Critics on the Left and Right echoed the Neutralists of the 1930s by predicting that global involvement would push America itself in the direction of fascism or socialism. And Containment was frustrating and wearisome abroad. If pursued too vigorously, it risked nuclear war; too feebly, it amounted to appeasement; and pursued moderately, it risked dragging the U.S. into limited wars in which stalemate was all it dared hope for.

In the end, Containment not only triumphed, it outlived the Soviet Union itself. George H. W. Bush applied it against Iraq, then against Iraq and Iran in "dual containment," while pundits have repeatedly discussed the need to embrace Containment versus China, Putin's Russia, or radical Islam. It is our seventh hallowed tradition.

Global Meliorism

How, one may ask, can Containment be construed as a success when it inspired such obvious disasters as the Vietnam War? Perhaps it did not, which leads us to the eighth and last tradition. Since 1898, the U.S. has sought a practical means of coping with a world ravaged by revolution and war. Wilson offered a legal, institutional answer; Truman a political, military one. Global Meliorism is the socioeconomic and cultural answer to how to make the world a better place by promoting economic growth, human rights, social reform, and democracy. The core belief is that the root causes of revolutions and militarism are poverty, ignorance, oppression, and despair. Hence we ought to seek to cure the disease rather than just combat the symptoms.

I trace Global Meliorism back to the nineteenth-century missionaries in the Pacific and East Asia. But it began to influence official policy in the Caribbean and Philippines under the Progressive Imperialists, then became a centerpiece of U.S. strategy with the Democratization pursued by Wilson and the massive famine relief pursued by Wilson's food czar for Europe, Herbert Hoover. A Quaker pacifist, he pleaded for food to be shipped to the enemy lest starving Germans turn to extremists. He urged Wilson to fight Bolshevism in Russia with bread, not guns. Thanks in part to Hoover, the U.S. bankrolled European reconstruction in the 1920s.

During World War II Global Meliorism moved to the forefront of U.S. policy. Inspired by Hoover's relief agencies, the New Deal, Keynesian economics, and the hardship and inflation of the interwar years, the U.S. founded the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. The postwar occupations of Germany and Japan and the Marshall Plan seemed to prove America's power to democratize and prosper whole nations.

This American mission to uplift the poor and oppressed was given new urgency by the Cold War, and the rhetoric and methods behind Truman's Point Four Program for foreign aid were boldly Meliorist. Eisenhower at first was skeptical of governmental foreign aid, but the emergence of the third world--where the Soviets played the anti-imperialist card, supported guerilla wars, and claimed that communism was the best road to development--gradually convinced Ike that the U.S. had to try to export economic growth and democracy. Meanwhile, economists developed theories on how American investment and technology could lift any nation into economic takeoff and self-sustained growth.

John F. Kennedy, a convert, established the Peace Corps, Alliance for Progress, and USAID. But his most aggressive Meliorist offensive was in South Vietnam. Granted, the commitment to Vietnam grew out of the extension of Containment to Asia. But when Truman helped Greece, Turkey, and South Korea he did not ask those countries to become model democracies. JFK's advisers, by contrast, believed that state-building, nation-building, and the "winning of hearts and minds" through social reforms were the keys to victory. So where Eisenhower, a military man thinking in terms of Containment, saw control of Laos as the key to South Vietnam's security, Kennedy bargained away Laos, then overthrew Saigon's Diem regime in 1963--*not* because Diem wasn't anticommunist enough, but because he refused to push the reforms that Americans deemed necessary. When his successors proved even worse, the Americans had no choice but to go in and remake the country themselves.

Vietnam was the first war in which large U.S. forces were sent overseas not to defeat the enemy, but just to keep their ally from losing until such time as U.S. civilian agencies could fashion a state able to stand up to Hanoi on its own. Lyndon Johnson waged a Great Society war based on the same methods of social engineering that he practiced at home. The Vietnam War was a thorough repudiation of America's Old Testament traditions. That is why the most effective critiques of it came not from the radical left, which shared most of the Meliorist assumptions, but from conservatives like George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and J. William Fulbright, who saw the Vietnam War as arrogance and presumption.

Failure in Vietnam dealt Global Meliorism a serious blow, but did not kill it. Nixon and Ford practiced it in the form of billions of loan guarantees and a subsidized wheat deal to the Soviet bloc. Jimmy Carter then clearly separated Meliorism from Containment when he asked Americans to let go of their "inordinate fear of communism" and focus on human rights and third-world development. Of course, Soviet provocations culminating in their invasion of Afghanistan caused Carter to rediscover Containment, which in turn allowed Ronald Reagan to redeploy human rights rhetoric against the Soviets even as his administration ratcheted up the military and economic pressure on Moscow. That turned out to be just the right mix of

³ See William Imboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge, 2008).

policies needed to promote Gorbachev's internal reforms and so bring the Cold War to an end.

George H.W. Bush shared Eisenhower's skepticism about nation-building. He wanted no part of governing Iraq and confined the Somali intervention to humanitarian relief. But Global Meliorism returned in force when Carter veterans such as Anthony Lake and Warren Christopher returned to office under Bill Clinton. Their post-Cold War doctrines of assertive multilateralism and enlargement, and occupations of Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia, attested to their abiding faith that the U.S. had the power, duty, and know-how to reform and uplift whole countries. They were roundly criticized: Jeane Kirkpatrick observed that the military "doesn't do windows," and Michael Mandelbaum called Clinton's "a Mother Teresa foreign policy." Even Jimmy Carter noted that the U.S. had sent 20,000 soldiers to Bosnia while ignoring the holocausts occurring in Africa; he called Clinton's policies racist. Most ironic, it was Clinton's mentor, Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, who questioned most sharply the United States' ability "to create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where there is defeatism, democracy where there is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is a way of life."

Promised Land was published in 1997, hence that was the end of my story. Indeed, my FPRI colleague Paul Dickler recently reminded me that I had written precisely the following in that final chapter:

"For no international bureaucracy, much less a single nation, however powerful and idealistic, can substitute itself for the healthy nationalism of an alien people. Almost everyone agrees, for instance, that Saddam Hussein is bad for his country. But can Americans can be better Iraqis than Iraqis themselves, or presume to tell the Chinese how to be better Chinese"?⁴

So what did I subsequently make of 9/11, the global war on terror, and the Bush Doctrine? Do the events and decisions of the Bush years mark a radical departure for U.S. traditions because our first Middle East-born existential crisis has created unprecedented circumstances? And may the Bush Doctrine yet qualify as a ninth tradition of American foreign relations?

Taking the second question first, the answer is not yet, because of my criteria for a tradition, and probably not at all, since Operation Iraqi Freedom may turn out to be a one-shot deal. Most telling, preemption is not new at all *if we are at war*. Since the seventeenth century at least, almost the whole world has understood a state of war to mean the declaration of hostilities between two or more sovereign states. After World War II, however, that clear definition began to break down.

The U.S. itself has played a major role in that breakdown, for not since 1941 has the U.S. Congress declared war against anyone. Korea was called a police action, engaged in with approval by the UN. Vietnam was called a conflict, engaged in on the dubious grounds of the Congressional Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The U.S. invasions of Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Haiti were likewise executive police actions launched in the name, not of U.S. security, but universal human rights. Even the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were not preceded by declarations of war, although they clearly involved U.S. security as well as human rights. Does the existence of transnational, non-state terrorist movements imply that the U.S. and its allies are in a permanent state of something like warfare against people who may be lurking in every country on earth? If so, can the U.S. or any other government claim the right to intervene anywhere according to their traditional right of self-defense? Perhaps a major theme of twenty-first century international relations will be a great global debate over the redefinition of war itself.

Whether the Bush policies were a radical departure from our traditions is also a complicated issue. I believe the Bush Doctrine is rooted to a surprising degree in American traditions. Terrorism against the U.S. homeland is surely a devastating assault against our Exceptionalism, our Unity, Independence, and Liberty at Home, our Freedom to pursue our American Dream. If the Boston Massacre and Britain's Intolerable Acts demanded an American Declaration of Independence, certainly 9/11 did. The War on Terror as waged by Bush also echoed some themes of Progressive Imperialism and Containment, and it brought to a deafening crescendo the theme of Global Meliorism. The Iraqi occupation has been called Wilsonianism with Guns. It is really Global Meliorism with Guns, which, to me, is the most persuasive analogy between Iraq and Vietnam, and therefore the most troubling as well.

How the Iraqi crusade comes out will be of surpassing importance for the short-range future of American statecraft and the place of the U.S. in the world. State-building, much less democratization, in Iraq and even more in Afghanistan is a fantastic proposition. But if I am wrong, then Bush's stock may rise in decades to come as Truman's did, the lessons of 2003-06 will be forgotten, and at some point Americans will over-reach all over again someplace else. Alas, failing to reckon with our own history and those of the countries we presume to invade and redeem is also a venerable U.S. tradition.

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⁴ *Promised Land, Crusader State*, p. 220.