

Rachel Ferrari

Professor Shelton-Colby

SISU-230: Analysis of US Foreign Policy

16 October 2017

Change and Continuity in U.S. Foreign Policy

While elements of both change and continuity can be found interwoven throughout every decade, issue, and level of analysis, it is clear that overall US foreign policy has been dominantly--and indeed, overwhelmingly-- characterized by change, rather than continuity.

First of all, it is important to note that continuity has certainly played a role in some aspects of US foreign policy, particularly with respect to national identity and ideals. For example, the concept of American exceptionalism as a core value has persisted from the American Revolution until today, and effects of it can be seen throughout history and American culture. Similarly, the defense of the US's hegemonic role in the Americas is another policy that has exhibited continuity over time. From the earliest days of Manifest Destiny, which declared that the US had a responsibility to expand territorially (Jentleson 75), and the Monroe Doctrine, which warned off European powers from attempting to establish influence in the New World (Jentleson 75), to more recent historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis involving tensions over Russian buildup of weapons in Cuba (Jentleson 173), the United States has continued to prioritize the maintenance of its own role as a dominant hegemonic power in the region. The term "benevolent hegemony" (Jentleson 288) has even been suggested to describe the relationship that the US has with the rest of the region. Indeed, other policies like the Good Neighbor Policy and US involvement in the Panama Canal, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Mexico

(Jentleson 75) underscore the fact that the United States has long held claim to the right to interfere in Latin America as it sees fit to serve its own national interest, and it has never really deviated from that involvement.

Along the same lines, the promotion of capitalism has been a guiding element in the way that the United States views itself. Fervent opposition to communism leading up to, during, and after the Cold War was a natural development in continuing this principle. This stance was even institutionalized through the House Un-American Activities Committee (Jentleson 179), which sought to expose communist infiltrators during the Red Scare, and in doing so, firmly placed communism on one side of a line, and “American” national identity on the other. In opposing communism and other non-American ideals, the US also offered support to pro-American regimes in order to prop up those who supported similar stances while simultaneously toppling regimes that did not. This is consistent with the United States’ insistence on spreading its own values to the rest of the world, something that it has always prioritized, whether through military action, diplomacy, or cultural imperialism.

Generally speaking, one can see that the elements of continuity in US foreign policy tend to be abstract and idealistic in nature, which is likely due to the fact that those are the easiest to keep consistent over time, even as the country develops and faces new challenges. Juxtaposed with the continuity of American idealism is the ever-changing implementation of policies, which shows how the United States interprets its own guiding values and puts them into practice.

To elaborate, debates persist over questions of how involved the US should be in deciding world affairs, and the answers fluctuate drastically over time. Since the Revolutionary War, the country has gone through several cycles of embracing internationalism and then

retreating to isolationism. For example, the country started off fairly isolationist in its early days, with President George Washington even warning against factions and entangling alliances in his farewell address. However, the country then embraced expansionary policies in the mid-1800s with massive land gains from the Louisiana Purchase and Mexican-American War (Jentleson 75). This growth in territory brought a growth in international influence as well; the US became very involved in the world both diplomatically and militarily in the late 1800s and around the turn of the century. Events like the Spanish-American War spread the US' influence across the globe and allowed it to create its own empire of lands that it controlled through military conquest and diplomatic influence (Jentleson 76). However, in the few years prior to WWI, the country leaned again towards isolationism with the implementation of laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act, which placed limits on immigration (Jentleson 76), and other such policies. In terms of international relations, the US was still keen to avoid 'choosing sides' by investing itself in any alliances for fear that they would drag the US into a war it did not want to fight. As a result, the US clung to isolationism even after WWI began in 1914, holding out until 1917, before finally joining when a threat from Germany surfaced in the form of the Zimmerman Telegraph, meant to enlist Mexico's help in attacking the United States (Jentleson 78). Clearly, the only reason the United States entered the war when it did was because mounting international conflict had begun to threaten the US itself.

Even after WWI, the country continued to retreat back into isolationism leading up to WWII. Notably, it rejected membership into the League of Nations, which was formed under the leadership of US President Woodrow Wilson (Jentleson 78). Clearly, the country felt very strongly about its isolationist policies, as its refusal to enter the League of Nations knowingly

struck a blow to the brainchild organization of its own president. Isolationism remained a key tenet of US foreign policy during this time, basically until the moment when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Similar to its entry into WWI, the US only entered the war because events outside of its control had forced it to do so. Prior to this, the US had enacted the Neutrality Acts (Jentleson 80) in an attempt to avoid favoring any one side, and had prioritized its own economic issues over any international involvement in trying to deal with the Great Depression.

However, after WWII, the US again embraced internationalism, joining initiatives to build peace through the UN and “Big Three” negotiations, along with sending large amounts of foreign aid to other countries, starting with Europe via the Marshall Plan in 1947 (Jentleson 80). Since then, the US has continued to grow in international involvement to the point where some complain that it is too involved. Much more recently, President Donald Trump has signaled a desire to withdraw from the US’ prominent position in the world through withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Climate Agreement, as well as criticizing NATO, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Iran Nuclear Deal, and other international commitments. So altogether, the US has cycled through practical isolationism and internationalism, and continues to do so.

With that, there has also been great change in who our allies are and how we behave towards them. For example, in its infancy, the US viewed Britain very unfavorably, after having just declared independence and fought a war against them. Later, the War of 1812 entrenched these feelings and led to resentment on both sides. However, by the time WWII broke out, the US-Britain relationship had positively evolved to the point where the US instituted the Lend-Lease program in spite of its own Neutrality Act to aid Britain in the fight (Jentleson 80).

Today, the United Kingdom is one of the US' closest allies. An example of the reverse process can be seen in the complicated relationship with Russia, who fought on the same side as the US in WWII, but soon devolved into a bitter enemy during the Cold War as the two countries clashed over ideology. A relief in tensions in the 1990s after the breakup of the Soviet Union saw the US actually giving foreign aid to former Soviet countries to help them rebuild (Lancaster 83). However, since the 2010s, and particularly since the 2016 election, the US-Russian relationship has chilled once again, and does not seem likely to improve anytime soon. To put that into perspective, the US has better relationships today with Japan and Germany, two countries it fought against in WWII, than it does with Russia, a WWII ally. Clearly, much has changed in the last 75 years. These examples show instances where very positive or very negative relationships reversed and became the opposite over time, and this illustrates the point that the US has had a fluid relationship with its allies that has changed often and even continues to change today.

Additionally, the nation's prioritization of the four goals of the national interest, Power, Peace, Prosperity, and Principles, has changed countless times, even shifting between presidencies. For example, President George H. W. Bush favored Power the most, while President Bill Clinton prioritized Prosperity, and President Barack Obama focused on Principles (Jentleson 488). As a result, the country's focus as a whole shifted between those presidencies and others to reflect the different main goal of each time period and the corresponding policies.

Scholars also note that there is a historical cycle of mobilization-demobilization as the military is repeatedly built up and then decreased again in response to whatever the situation requires (Jentleson 105). As a result, military spending and the size and usage of the military have all experienced great change over time, swinging back and forth wildly. Also in terms of

the way the US takes action, it has constantly moved between an emphasis on unilateralism and an emphasis on multilateralism in carrying out its foreign policy. Many factors have led to these changes, but its role in the international system has changed over time, so its actions and responses have had to change as well to fit the situation. Over its lifetime, the US has grown from a newborn country to a full-blown global superpower, during which time it acted increasingly unilaterally. However, some now argue that the US is in decline as a world superpower due to the rise of international influence of previously-developing countries (Kupchan 303). In the future, scholars say that instead of being the sole giant power, the role of the US is to simply organize a multipolar international system where it can retain relevant leadership (Kupchan 304). Therefore, the US' scope of international influence along with its use of unilateral and multilateral action has changed and evolved as well.

Another element that has changed greatly has been the debate over national security versus civil rights. One of the defining grievances of the American colonists was the British intrusion into their personal sovereignty through actions like the quartering of soldiers, so when the United States was founded, an emphasis was placed on limiting the powers of the government and instituting strong personal freedoms through the Bill of Rights. However, in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 and other national security threats, the country has moved away from that strong defense of civil rights towards a weakened version for the sake of safety through the USA Patriot Act (Jentleson 276). This came as a result of the country being forced to adapt to modern developments in terror and technology that the original founders could never have anticipated.

Also, the country has experienced change in the war powers of the president as it navigated conflicts over time. During WWII, Franklin D. Roosevelt held a large amount of discretionary power to determine the course of military action, and luckily for the country, it led to victory. However, the US did not luck out in Vietnam, and President Nixon's decisions caused Congress to reevaluate and re-legislate the issue through the War Powers Resolution (Jentleson 314). Over time, Congress and the president have not upheld the War Powers Resolution as strictly as originally intended, and the role of the presidency in taking military action has gradually increased again, further changing the landscape of the distribution of power when it comes to foreign policy.

Another great change has been the introduction of foreign aid as a tool for diplomacy and development. Prior to 1945, foreign aid was not an established practice in the US, but after the success of the Marshall Plan in helping Europe rebuild and fight off the rise of Communist parties (Lancaster 69), it increasingly became a prominent tool for the US, one which could not be removed once embraced. As a result, the US greatly increased its foreign aid over the years, and then decreased it during the Clinton administration's efforts to balance the government budget (Lancaster 86). So in just a short period of time, foreign aid was created, greatly expanded, decreased, and then increased again, showing great change in its usage and extent.

After looking at the elements of continuity and change in foreign policy, one can see that change has had a far greater impact on US foreign affairs. Indeed, the US national image of itself has pretty much stayed the same; throughout its history, it has always seen itself as a shining city on a hill, a defender of democracy and other principles. But in practice, our behavior and assertion of influence in the world have changed drastically throughout the decades, and it is that

implementation of policy that has had a greater influence on American foreign policy. History is written about the concrete laws and policies of a country, not its overarching ideals.

Interestingly, we have actually seen great discrepancy in ideals versus implementation at times, especially with regards to things like supporting “ABC democracies,” in which the US prioritized security and anti-communism over its own principles of democracy and human rights. In cases like that, the policy implementation makes a much greater difference than the lofty ideals that the country likes to believe in but cannot practically adhere to. Perhaps on a micro scale there has been some continuity from president to president on certain policies, but on a macro scale, there have been mostly large changes over time in how policy is created and carried out, and the role of the US as it grew and developed.

In summary, American foreign policy has experienced both continuity and change, and the difference is a matter of broad ideals and basic national identity that remain generally consistent versus more narrow interpretation, debate, and specific policy implementation that change frequently. Indeed, when looking at the US in the past and today, it is clear to see that the basic ideals and values have remained generally the same over the years, as people still refer to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as the baseline for American identity. However, the way those values are put into practice ultimately decides what actions the United States actually takes, and this implementation has experienced so much change and fluctuation that it is questionable whether the founders would even recognize the modern United States as the same country that was born out of the Revolutionary War. Therefore, it is clear that US foreign policy has primarily been characterized by change over the many years since the country was founded.

Works Cited

Jentleson, Bruce. *American Foreign Policy, the Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century*, 5th edition. W.W. Norton, 2013. Print.

Kupchan, Charles. "Multipolarity, No One's World." *American Foreign Policy, the Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century*, 5th edition. W.W. Norton, 2013. Print.

Lancaster, Carol. *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, and Domestic Policies*. University of Chicago Press, 2007. Print.