

January 9, 2012

The Archetypes of American Foreign Policy

Students of foreign policy have struggled to describe the various models of American foreign policy. Invariably, they settle into “realist” or “idealist” schools.

Unfortunately, these broad generalizations fail to fully express the subtleties of American foreign policy.

I believe the best expression of American foreign policy was captured by Walter Russell Meade in his 2002 book, *Special Providence*. Instead of discussing various schools of thought, Meade characterized the major policy archetypes by historical figures. He used these historical figures as the primary examples of the policy inclination.

Meade named four archetypes: Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian. Each one of these archetypes has specific characteristics that describe the viewpoint and behavior of a policymaker of that certain type. Meade does admit that throughout American history other archetypes have existed. For example, the Davisonian was an archetype, named after the President of the Confederate States of America. Its goal was the preservation and expansion of slavery; Davisonian foreign policy would be designed to support that institution. Of course, this archetype ceased to exist after the South lost the Civil War.

As with all archetypes, these are considered model specimens for that particular type. In

real life even these historical figures probably don't fully capture the image that Meade projects for each type. However, by using a real historical figure as a representative of that archetype, it helps the reader to envision the position of that particular “school.” Actual policymakers tend to be a mix of these four types. Rarely will a policymaker be of pure form. However, the archetypes do offer a construct for an analyst to examine and predict the foreign policy behavior of elected officials. Although we won't delve into other areas of policy, we have found that these archetypes are helpful in predicting domestic policy as well.

In this report, we will describe the four archetypes of American foreign policy, briefly discussing each type. However, readers are urged to read Meade's aforementioned book so as to better understand his position on the four major types of foreign policy. My short report does not fully do justice to a 340 page book. At the same time, with presidential elections less than a year away, I hope that this discussion will assist readers in examining the candidates and their potential foreign policy positions, using these archetypes as a guide. This report will conclude with a discussion of these archetypes and political parties.

The Hamiltonians

Simply put, the Hamiltonians support a strong alliance between big business and government and want foreign policy designed to further such ends.

The Hamiltonians want to boost commerce and the standing of U.S. companies in world markets. Most analysts would place the Hamiltonians in the sphere of foreign policy “realists.” However, such a characterization is probably too simple. Realists are usually seen as policymakers who carry no illusions about the weakness of human nature. They strive to make decisions based on cool logic and avoid sentiment. However, unlike their counterparts in Europe who profess similar attributes, Hamiltonian policymakers are shaped by the specific geopolitics of the United States. In other words, the relative isolation of the U.S. from the rest of the world means that they don’t view policy or trade as a zero-sum game as it is for other nations. In Europe, for example, an improvement in Germany’s position is inevitably seen as a cost to France. However, because of the relative isolation of the U.S., Hamiltonians tend to view policy in terms of commerce. In capitalism, free exchange suggests that both parties are made better off. Thus, promoting economic development and growth worldwide is seen as beneficial to all, not just to the U.S.

As previously noted, this isn’t necessarily true for other nations. For example, supporting industry in one nation may improve that nation’s economy and make them militarily stronger than their rivals. For the U.S., this is simply another country boosting its growth for the betterment of the world economy. It also may allow the U.S. to sell to this newly emerging economy and will likely become a source for production.

To promote global commerce, Hamiltonians have traditionally supported the freedom of the seas. They also took a mostly dim view of European colonization, since it often restricted American access to trade with those colonies. Prior to WWII, Hamiltonians did not favor free trade. They

supported tariffs and tended to prefer mercantilist trade policies. However, after the war, when free trade became a policy tool for winning the Cold War and the U.S. was the preeminent global economic power, the Hamiltonians turned into free traders. Today, Hamiltonians are free trade supporters.

For the most part, Hamiltonians see war as “bad for business” but will support conflicts to open markets and expand U.S. power to build new markets. For example, the Cold War was a nearly perfect conflict—actual fighting was rare and business interruptions rarer still, but spending on military equipment supported industry. And, as the U.S. established itself as the importer of last resort, U.S. businesses expanded supply chains into the free world to boost growth and lower costs.

In sum, Hamiltonians believe that commerce and economic growth should be the primary aim of American foreign policy. Wars should be avoided but fought, if necessary, to support the economy, whether it is to maintain open oceans, secure critical raw materials or protect American investments. It is important to note that Hamiltonians believe that the primary beneficiary of American foreign policy should be the business sector and not necessarily other sectors of the economy. If free trade benefits business but harms workers, Hamiltonians will tend to side with free trade.

The Wilsonians

The Wilsonians are the idealists of American foreign policy. Coming out of the Protestant missionary tradition, the Wilsonians hold that the U.S. has a moral obligation to spread American democratic and social values to the world. The goal of

the Wilsonians is to create a peaceful planet based on the rule of law.

The Wilsonians take almost a religious view of American values and thus believe they should be spread to civilize the world. They believe that foreign policy is a moral undertaking and that wars should be fought to further the aims of democracy and protect the innocent against violence and genocide. This obligation often requires a muscular military response. Coming out of the missionary movement, Wilsonians work to improve the lot of common people in foreign lands. The Peace Corps is a good example of Wilsonian policy. For much of American history, Wilsonian policy was closely aligned with what would now be seen as mainstream Protestantism. Thus, the social gospel of earthly improvement went hand in hand with the saving of souls.

Wilsonian policy is more hard-headed than it is usually portrayed. Wilsonians believe that the work of democratization and spreading the rule of law is how the world gets better; they know that there will be opposition but also hold that American values are special and can play the role of making the world a better and more peaceful place. Standing up for American values in foreign policy is the best way to defend American interests—it is a form of ‘doing well by doing good.’

The Jeffersonians

The Jeffersonians, like the Wilsonians, also believe that American values are special. However, unlike the Wilsonians, they believe those values are so precious that they should be protected by avoiding interaction with other nations. The Jeffersonians are, for the most part, libertarian isolationists. The Jeffersonians are uncomfortable with the Hamiltonians’ willingness to deal with unsavory foreign

governments and recoil at the Wilsonians’ openness to use military power to spread the “gospel” of American democracy.

Jeffersonians believe, like the Wilsonians, that the world would be a better place if American values were adopted; however, they have little expectation that corrupt foreigners will ever do so. Instead, the goal of Jeffersonian foreign policy is to protect U.S. values from foreign corruption.

The Jeffersonians, like their namesake, want America to be capitalist and democratic. They worry that the Hamiltonians are willing to favor the former to the detriment of the latter. The Jeffersonians believe that capitalism should be made less efficient if it threatens democracy. Both the Wilsonians and the Hamiltonians favor a strong central government. The Jeffersonians, on the other hand, view government as a necessary evil and thus the weaker and more decentralized the government, the less evil it is prone to spreading.

In general, the Jeffersonians want the least invasive foreign policy as possible. For the most part, the Jeffersonians oppose most wars. They reject the ‘global policeman’ role and do not support America’s superpower status. They fear that taking on these roles will undermine American civil liberties, and thus prefer a smaller government that focuses more on protecting American rights and democracy and less on boosting commerce or spreading democracy abroad.

The Jacksonians

The Jeffersonians and Jacksonians are the more uniquely American of the four archetypes. Strains of the other two can be found in the foreign policy of other states. And, of the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians,

the latter is the one that probably most confounds foreigners.

The Jacksonians believe that the most important goal of foreign policy is the physical security and economic well-being of the American people. Thus, they oppose the Hamiltonian approach to policy as too willing to support business to the detriment of American workers. They also find the Wilsonian position on fighting moral wars repugnant. Why risk American lives because some dictator is abusing his own people? That problem is someone else's worry.

The Jacksonians are most similar to the Jeffersonians. Both oppose big government and support broad democracy. What separates the Jacksonians from the Jeffersonians is the role of national honor. According to the Jacksonians, it is dishonorable to back down from a real threat to American freedom and security. Jacksonians generally oppose war; however, once war is deemed necessary, the Jacksonians show no quarter. Wars for Jacksonians end with unconditional surrenders by the enemy. Limited wars are of no use. If the government decides to commit itself to a war, then the enemy must be destroyed.

The inability of foreigners to understand Jacksonians has been to their detriment. Foreign governments tend to view Jacksonians and Jeffersonians in the same light; both fear war and prefer not to fight. However, what they often fail to grasp is that once committed, Jacksonians are hell-bent on winning unconditionally. Because of their full commitment, Jacksonians do not take war lightly. But, once committed, an enemy finds itself facing a formidable foe.

I believe that America cannot fight a war without a commitment from the Jacksonians. This is why every conflict in the post-WWII era has been framed as “preventing the next Hitler.” Jacksonians don't understand the limited wars that a superpower fights; a superpower doesn't need to “win” every war if win is defined as total destruction. It just needs to fight enough to prove that it is the global superpower. For Jacksonians, leaving before the enemy is vanquished is besmirching the fallen who have given their lives for the cause of the war.

Jacksonians are probably the least understood of the four archetypes. To some extent, this was due to the lack of an intellectual tradition; the other three archetypes have ideological roots. Hamiltonians developed from the British conservatives. Wilsonians come from the Protestant missionary Social Gospel movement. Jeffersonians have been aligned with Libertarianism. Jacksonians are the closest the U.S. has to a folk movement. Ethnically, the Jacksonian roots spring from the Protestant Scotch-Irish that initially immigrated into the Carolinas and Virginia and spread to West Virginia, Kentucky, and parts of Illinois and Indiana. They tended to view themselves as a class. What they want from the government is not ideological. They want government to support their group's goals—for example, they don't oppose government spending per se, but want it focused on their needs and wants. In modern terms, they support Social Security, which helps the retirement of the middle class but oppose welfare as government give-aways for the idle poor. In visceral terms, the themes of country music—honoring America, living the simple life, following the rules—represent the best descriptions of the Jacksonians.

In sum, the Jacksonians are probably the most uniquely American of the archetypes and most difficult to categorize. They are generally held in the least regard by the media but as the most necessary when the country is in danger. Being driven mostly by group interests instead of ideology, they are the hardest to figure out and thus ignored by most political scientists.

Ramifications

Understanding these four archetypes doesn't necessarily affect the markets in any particular way but, as noted earlier, they may be helpful in understanding the candidates in an election year. It is important to realize that no perfect matches to the archetypes will exist. However, candidates tend to lean more heavily in certain directions.

Generally speaking, all four archetypes exist in both the major political parties. The Libertarian wing of the Republican Party and the isolationist left of the Democratic Party are Jeffersonians. The Jacksonians are the Tea Party of the GOP and the labor wing of the Democratic Party. The Hamiltonians are the "country club" Republicans and the Democratic National Committee in the Democratic Party. The Wilsonians were heavily represented in the Clinton State Department and are the "neo-cons" within the GOP.

It is important to remember that the two major parties in the U.S. are essentially

coalitions. Successful presidential candidates work to show these four archetypes that he represents their interests. When divisions within the parties become apparent, it is usually because these four archetypes are in conflict.

The Cold War caused the Jeffersonians to become the least important of these groups in terms of foreign policy. The isolationist tendencies of the Jeffersonians were discredited by WWII. Thus foreign policy has been set by the other three, with most of the differences being between the Wilsonians and the Hamiltonians. This would probably explain the persistent support for globalization.

However, with the Cold War over and Americans beginning to question the U.S. superpower role, we may see a resurgence in the Jeffersonians, and to a lesser extent, the Jacksonians. If so, military operations like Libya, Iraq or Kosovo may become less common and the conduct of conflicts such as Afghanistan would differ as well. This potential trend is one that bears watching in the coming years.

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January 9, 2012

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