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The Archetypes of American Foreign Policy: A Reprise

We are currently experiencing one of the most contentious primary election seasons in at least 35 years. Candidates have made numerous incendiary statements about foreign policy that offer insights into their thinking. However, without a paradigm, it can be difficult for investors to determine what foreign policy decisions a candidate is likely to make. By using these archetypes of American foreign policy, one can more easily anticipate how a candidate today might act if they were to occupy the Oval Office. For this reason, I decided that our readers would benefit from a “refresh” of this study.

In 2012, we published a report titled “The Archetypes of American Foreign Policy.” In that article, I borrowed heavily from Walter Russell Mead in his 2002 book, *Special Providence*.¹ Mead took a unique approach in describing policy positions, using historical figures instead of abstract models. Other policy analysts have used terms like “realists” or “idealists.” Unfortunately, these broad generalizations fail to fully express the subtleties of American foreign policy.

Mead named four archetypes: Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian. Each one of these archetypes has specific characteristics that describe the viewpoints

and behavior of a policymaker of that certain type. Mead does admit that other archetypes have existed throughout American history. 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, and Davisonian foreign policy would be designed to support that institution. Of course, this archetype ceased to exist after the South lost the Civil War.

By using a real historical figure as a representative of that archetype, it helps the reader to envision the position of that particular “school.” 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 Mead projects for each type. 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.

In this report, we will briefly describe and discuss the four archetypes of American foreign policy.² With presidential elections less than eight months 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 my

¹ Mead, W. R. (2002). *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*. New York, NY: Routledge.

² However, readers are urged to read Mead’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.

characterization of the current leading candidates.

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 it militarily stronger than its 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. 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 aims 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 businesses 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 make 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 nations. 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 wellbeing 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, they often fail to grasp that once committed, Jacksonians are hell-bent on

winning unconditionally. Because of their full commitment, Jacksonians do not take war lightly. 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 is 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 giveaways 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.

The Current Presidential Candidates

In this section, I will offer my views on where the leading candidates fall within these archetypes. This is my opinion derived from my analysis of each candidate. Thus, there is room for disagreement and readers may draw different conclusions.

Sen. Clinton: The former senator is a Wilsonian. As Secretary of State, she often pushed President Obama (a Jeffersonian, in my view) into intervening in conflict zones that he clearly would have preferred to avoid. In some cases, she couldn't move him in her desired direction, especially in Syria. As president, we would expect a more interventionist foreign policy compared to the last eight years.

Sen. Sanders: The senator from Vermont is almost a pure Jeffersonian archetype. It is clear he would avoid conflict as much as possible and focus mostly on domestic policy.

Other candidates (Democrat): Jim Webb is probably Jacksonian. As for Martin O'Malley, there wasn't much evidence in the public record, although the comments he makes suggest Jeffersonian.

Donald Trump: Although he speaks like a Jacksonian, I suspect that he is, at heart, a Jeffersonian. I would expect him to be quite reluctant to intervene in foreign matters. His primary framework is deal-making and so if he does intervene, and it goes badly, look for him to cut his losses quickly and withdraw. When Trump talks about building our military “so nobody messes with us,” it is primarily a stance that is designed to discourage attacks on the U.S. directly.

Sen. Cruz: The Texas senator is likely a Jacksonian. Comments such as, “carpet bomb until the desert glows green,” are classic Jacksonian positions. In other words, they dishonored us and we must totally destroy them. At the same time, I would not necessarily expect him to seek out conflicts where there is no direct threat to the U.S. geographically or to American honor.

Governor Kasich: I don't think the Ohio governor is a pure archetype. Most likely, he sits between the Jacksonian and Wilsonian archetypes, leaning toward the latter. He supported the Iraq War and has called for ground troops against IS. A Kasich presidency could be unexpectedly interventionist.

Other candidates (Republican): Mario Rubio is Wilsonian. Rand Paul is a perfect Jeffersonian. Jeb Bush is mostly Hamiltonian. I could not really determine what Dr. Carson's archetype would be, although he seemed to be evolving into a Jacksonian.

Ramifications and Reflections

What is remarkable about the current list of leading candidates is the lack of Hamiltonians. Free trade has become a policy position to avoid. So has supporting business. During the Cold War, Jeffersonians became almost extinct. Now

that the Cold War has ended, a similar fate seems to be facing the Hamiltonians. To a great extent, this turn of events likely reflects the growing discord surrounding America's superpower role. The problems caused by free trade that have been highlighted in this election season are due in part to the dollar's reserve currency role which is a key element of being a financial hegemon; the wars that are fought to unsatisfying conclusions are as well.

We have argued before that the best way to examine American politics is to view it as establishment versus populists.³ The establishment is mostly populated with Wilsonians and Hamiltonians, whereas the

³ See WGRs: [2016 \(Part 1: The Economic Issue\)](#), 3/31/2014; [2016 \(Part 2: The Political Situation\)](#), 4/14/2014; [2016 \(Part 3: The Election Situation\)](#), 4/21/2014; and [The 2016 Election: An Update](#), 2/22/2016.

populists are where one finds Jacksonians and Jeffersonians. The ascendancy of populists in this campaign is consistent with the rise of the Jacksonian and Jeffersonian archetypes.

As I analyze this election season, the odds are increasing that either (a) a populist will be elected, or (b) an establishment candidate will be mostly forced to adopt populist positions. This will likely include either Jacksonian or Jeffersonian foreign policy positions. This outcome could be detrimental for international investments, which rest on a superstructure provided by America exercising its hegemonic role. If that role is relinquished, supply chains will shorten and inflation could become an issue.

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