

“US FOREIGN POLICY FROM THE RESTRAINTS OF ISOLATIONISM TO THE EXCESSES OF INTERVENTIONISM”

Dr. Hafedh Gharbi,
University of Sousse, Faculty of Arts and Humanities.Saudi Arabia



"American foreign policy since the Spanish- American War of 1898 has sought to ensure U.S. supremacy in the Western Hemisphere while at the same time asserting American influence widely around the globe. Until 1945, U.S. foreign policymakers sought to fashion the United States into a great power, the equal of the major European nations. During the Cold War era, the United States surpassed the Europeans and contended with the Soviet Union, the other so-called superpower, for mastery of world politics. In the decade after the Cold War, it stood at the apex of an international hierarchy."

Robert D. Schulzinger, U.S. Diplomacy since 1900; 2002.

Introduction

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'excess' as "more than the reasonable action that exceeds proper or lawful bounds (416)." Some degree of irrationality is therefore associated with this notion, as it represents the actions or behaviour going beyond acceptable terms. In its historical evolution, American foreign policy has been modelled by excessive and sometimes maximalist actions, doctrines and deeds. To justify these excesses, high profile politicians (presidents, secretaries, Congressmen etc...) have resorted to rhetoric; from their vantage point of decision-makers, they had the moral and the political obligation to constantly communicate with the masses on their intentions, plans and resolutions towards the rest of the world. This constraint has been made compulsory by the nature of the American political system in which the dialectic ruler/ ruled is a dynamic construction imposing communication and mutual understanding.

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize some of the debatable US Foreign Policy decisions, to measure their degree of 'justifiability', and to understand their impact. The special light will be shed on the post 9- 11 era, when the neoconservatives took American Foreign Policy to new extremes.

National Interest, Expansion, and Interventionism

Among the cement of the American nation since independence, the notion of "national interest" is often elevated to the rank of dogma. In its name, the different administrations

have found justifications to achieve sometimes contradicting purposes; for its sake, civil liberties have been episodically curtailed, and for its guaranteeing, non- principled action has been made. Tracing its historical roots in the ministry of French Prime Minister Cardinal de Richelieu, 'raison d'Etat' found anchorage in America as the first generation of presidents used it for purposes as diverse as maintaining the status quo, territorial expansion, or wars for land. In its most basic definition, 'raison d'Etat' is a motive for governmental action based on alleged needs or requirements of a political state regardless of possible transgressions of the rights or the moral codes of individual persons. Read as such, this doctrine can be interpreted as excessive in the sense that it assumedly transgresses codes and limits. Richelieu, Chief Minister of King Louis XIII between 1624 and 1642, adhered to the maxim that "the ends justify the means." Although he strongly believed in the mission of the Roman Church, he sought to assign the church a more practical role, detached from the centre of policymaking. Richelieu argued that the temporal is above the spiritual and that religion is a mere instrument to promote the policies of the state. This doctrine, therefore, justifies the subordination of the powerful religious factor to the superior National Interest. Richelieu, a man of Church, had therefore outstepped the field of the clergy and gave supremacy to the temporal realm of policymaking.

Richelieu's strong sense of realism found an echo in the American political practice under different administrations all putting national Interest as a supreme goal. The "ends justify means" leitmotiv has been a blueprint directing policy, and occasionally justifying diplomatic and military excesses too. The following examples shortly illustrate this fact:

The notion of Manifest Destiny was the popular motto of the America of the 1840s assuming that the Westward Expansion was a messianic mission vesting a divine ordeal: that of conquest and submission of nature and peoples to the will and power of the American Man. In 1845, John L. O'Sullivan (editor and democratic leader) defended America's claims to new territories: "The right of our Manifest Destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the Continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative development of self- government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and the earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth."

The Monroe Doctrine (1823): It proclaimed that any efforts by European nations to colonize land or interfere with states in North or South America would be considered as acts of aggression or declarations of War, commanding U.S. intervention. The Doctrine also added that the United States would neither interfere with existing European colonies nor in the internal affairs of European countries. The first public expression of the doctrine by President James Monroe came during the latter's seventh annual State of the Union Address to Congress. Later, the Doctrine would be used by many U.S. statesmen and several U.S.

presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan and many others. The impact of the Monroe Doctrine has been lasting for almost two centuries. Practically, Monroe simply wanted to free America's hands to intervene in what he termed the "Western Hemisphere".

In what came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1904), Theodore Roosevelt asserted that European nations should not intervene in countries to the south of the US. If all of the republics to the south of us will only grow as those to which I allude have already grown, all need for us to be an especial champion of the doctrine will disappear, for no stable and growing American republic wishes to see some great non-American military power acquire territory in its neighbourhood. These three examples, chronologically distant, show that there has always existed in American Foreign Policy a thread of expansionism and a self-renewing definition of the term "frontier". This "excessive" quest for expansion has marked its stamp on the United States as the country voluntarily gave up its relatively comfortable isolationism to replace it by assumed interventionism: Until the turn of the twentieth century, American foreign policy was quite simple: to fulfil the country's manifest destiny, and to remain free of entanglements overseas. America favoured democratic governments wherever possible, but avoided action to impose forced democratization. However, the reverse side of this policy of self-restraint was the decision to exclude European power politics from the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine proclaimed in 1823, considered the Pacific Ocean as a natural and a political barrier, declaring that Europe must not be entangled in American affairs. And Monroe's idea of what constituted American affairs- the whole Western Hemisphere- was expansionist indeed.

Interventionism and its excesses: The Neoconservative Example

At the level of political action, interventionism has historically helped America grow from being an ensemble of colonies freshly free from British occupation to a regional power, then to a leading nation and ultimately to a global power or "hyperpower" as ex-French Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine had it. Still, recent experiences related to post-war social engineering in Iraq, for example, proved that the interventionist experience had reached its limits, notably because of a double excess: an excess of zeal and excess of power use. The Neoconservatives within the Second Bush administration proved this fact.

Neoconservatives can be best defined as Wilsonian idealists, believing in the moral superiority of the American model and in its universalist nature, and justifying interventionism and preventive action as Foreign policy imperatives in order to spread the US model. The events of 9- 11 gave credit to the Neoconservative theses and discourse, as the Bush Junior administration retaliated to the attacks by the immediate invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent intervention in Iraq. Bush, by doing so, vindicated Neoconservatism and

imposed it as the major Foreign policy doctrine of the beginning of the millennium. These interventions, if ever justified, occasioned many excesses of different types.

Francis Fukuyama, in his *America at the Crossroads*, did not hesitate to blame the Bush administration for what he viewed to be a series of cardinal mistakes: chief among these is what Fukuyama interpreted as an excessive "threat assessment" of the terrorist menace. Second, Fukuyama was also critical of the deficit of the image at the international level caused by the War on Terror and the various scandals linked to it (the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo exactions especially).

Last, Francis Fukuyama pointed at a historical neoconservative failure, that of "social engineering":

Finally, the Bush administration failed to anticipate the requirements for pacifying and reconstructing Iraq and was wildly over. This could not have been a failure of underlying principle since a consistent neoconservative theme had been scepticism about the prospects for social engineering.(6, 7)

Harsh criticism from within is perhaps the greatest evidence of the wrong direction taken by a particular political movement during the course of its own action. Francis Fukuyama had been notoriously neoconservative since the late eighties. His landmark *End of History*, published in book-length size in 1993, is seen by many critics as the legitimating voice of the neoconservative action. Also, he was a signatory of the PNAC letter sent to President Clinton in 1998 as a warning against the upcoming Iraqi threat, and that document had always been regarded as a major neoconservative blueprint. Therefore, it can be asserted that Fukuyama had been one of the major neoconservative intellectual voices to populate the media and the specialized press for over a decade. The return of the mack was spectacular when Fukuyama's 2006 *America at the Crossroads* was published.

Its thesis revolved around the reasons why Fukuyama no longer felt to be a neoconservative, and his call for the movement to adopt new lines of thought and do away with the shortcomings of the neocon experience under the Bush administration. To his merit, it can be argued that Fukuyama, at least, escaped the classical attitudes of denial that other neocons complied in. Through his book, his declared intention was to save neoconservatism from its own excesses and errors of appreciation. For instance, Fukuyama objects on the neoconservative disdain of multi-nationalism and finds that principle excessively simplistic in a globalized world witnessing the inexorable rise of regional powers with legitimate ambitions for economic and political domination (12). Also, he concludes dismantling the theory that he had himself revealed in his *End of History*: that American 'benevolent hegemony' seriously lacked credibility at the international level: other countries, especially in the Middle East, simply perceived it as yet another tool of domination invented by the United

States to pursue its interests in matters of obtaining natural resources, securing energy sources and setting up geo-strategic bases worldwide (111). This newly- found assumption by Fukuyama is nothing less than historical: here is one of the modern intellectual fathers of neoconservatism reaching the conclusion that the whole movement's ideology had to be reconsidered altogether, recast and rethought. As he confirmed this position in his *America at the Crossroads*, Fukuyama announced the failure of Wilsonian Internationalism to be a good foreign policy engine, the victim of its own excesses. America was at the crossroads, and so were the neoconservatives.

Conclusion:

Foreign policy is an interplay of diplomatic restraint, military deterrence and principled action. Depending on contexts, priorities are likely to be changed sometimes in spectacular ways: The excessive interventionism of the Bush administration was followed by a more pondered attitude under Obama. When it comes to the Middle East, for example, the latter has been showing will to accompany the geopolitical transformations taking place in the area without excessive commandeering. The cautious support given to the newly emerging regimes in the MENA region is the testimony to the new attitude dominating in Washington: avoiding the excesses of the past while still acting to safeguard America's interest. It is a phase where pragmatism takes over excess. Obama's critics may argue that it is a sign of excessive caution. Sadly, it has moved the other way -- toward instability, violence, and dashed hopes. The thin line between excess and moderation seems, therefore, blurred and blurring.

References:

- Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900*. Oxford University Press: 2002.
- Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. Simon and Schuster, New York: 1994.
- Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads*. Yale University Press: 2006.
- http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/02/Why_Obama_Has_Failed_in_the_Middle_East