

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY TRADITIONS:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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The study of political traditions is one of the most important American contributions to the study of political history and the social sciences. In the twentieth century Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition* (1948), Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) and Seymour Martin Lipset's *American Exceptionalism* (1996) were three of the stand-out works in the field of politics. All offer bold assessments of American political history and the American condition, and follow in the footsteps of Alexis de Tocqueville's sweeping and rightly recognised nineteenth-century masterpiece *Democracy in America*. These works challenge readers to think broadly about the human experience often across decades, if not centuries. While this panoramic style has remained popular with the general public and with students, since the 1950s the academy has generally delivered ever more specialised and narrowly focused scholarship. Working within a narrow sphere, it is easy to develop an intellectual clubbiness that exclusively references a relatively small group of one's colleagues. In the study of International Relations, such tendencies have become so prevalent that, instead of offering in-depth insights into the history of foreign relations or contemporary international events, scholars are often mired in debates within and between certain theoretical positions. This disconnect is at times painful to read. Meanwhile, histories of the present constantly appear in more popular foreign affairs journals and in the highly engaged venue for many of the world's top public intellectuals, the *New York Review of Books*. Though often written with great panache, these essays generally lack conceptual depth. One of the great exceptions to this divide is the work of Walter Russell Mead. His brilliant book *Special Providence* (2002) and his many essays for journals such as *Foreign Affairs* make a wonderful case for the generalist. With his knack for choosing revealing anecdotes and quotes to illuminate the relevance of past events, Mead offers fresh insight into contemporary events. These skills have made him one of the most highly regarded living scholars writing on American foreign affairs today. One of the central reasons for his popularity is his use and defence of the notion of political traditions to explain foreign policy. Mead's work provides considerable inspiration and some of his best work argues that dominant traditions provide a framework for the understanding of both the history and ongoing trajectory of American foreign policy.

Why political traditions? What is a political tradition?

At its simplest, a tradition can be understood as "the way we do things". For example, I recently heard someone arguing that bailing out the American auto-industry in the 1970s was not seen as being part of the "American tradition" – it was not viewed as the "American way". Tradition in this sense is both a pattern of behaviour and the folklore that describes that behaviour. In this case the American folklore is that, unlike most other nations, America's auto-industry has been based on a free market model. Like most traditions this is part reality, part mythology. In a recent article in the journal *Millennium* Renée Jeffery (2005) cleverly argues that traditions are

inventions in that they reflect how we reconstruct the past to use it in the present. As a result, the use of the term tends to suggest a greater coherence and continuity over time than is often the case. However, for me this search for cohering themes is crucial as it allows political traditions to be usefully viewed as narratives; in other words, these traditions give us a way of talking about political experiences and history that boils the past down into recyclable principles, generalisations, priorities, stories, tropes and lessons. Put simply, the study of political traditions can be seen as an examination of how the past informs the present. While a dead tradition is one that has lost its currency, a living tradition carries historical experiences, beliefs and values into the present. This is not to claim that all living traditions are dynamic; some traditions have waxed and waned in popularity, but others have undergone considerable periods of dormancy. Indeed, some of the most influential traditions rely on recycling the same set of clichés and lessons from the past over and over again. At their worst, traditions can be deterministic and simplistic; at their best, they are dynamic and rich with historical experiences.

The work of both Mead and others presents traditions as interpretations of the past and the present that not only compete against each other, but also often overlap. Traditions are also often the bridge between intellectuals and political practitioners. American political traditions tend to be much more popular with politicians and policy-makers favouring their user-friendly nature over that of more abstract “schools of thought” or “ideologies”. As presented by the like of Mead and Hofstadter, these traditions are very actor-centred, with statesmen (presidents in particular) at the core of their descriptions and analysis. Terms like the Wilsonian tradition and the Jacksonian tradition provide catchy titles to connect key ideas with something concrete, namely a famous president. Furthermore, the word tradition is a more plastic and less burdensome term than the word ideology. I would also argue that the study of political traditions is generally more historically informed than the study of schools of thought within contemporary academic International Relations.

My notion of the importance of traditions is underpinned by a great respect for historical understanding and inquiry. One of America’s greatest icons, Henry Ford, is oft quoted as having claimed that “history is more or less bunk”, and that Americans are often painted as the most forward looking and ahistorical people in world. However, there are strong grounds to argue that Americans are extremely tradition-minded. Mead contends that America has a “love affair with the Constitution”, having elevated this document, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights to “something like sacred scripture: revelations of eternal principles, valid for all time.” If you add to this the veneration of the founding fathers (Mead 2002a: 56, 57) it seems fair for Mead to conclude that “This respect for national tradition is one of our stronger and most valuable national traits. It is based on two different elements: an admiration for the founding principles based on the degree to which the enlightened ideas of the Revolutionary era still commend themselves to the American mind, and a sober historical recognition that under their guidance the American Republic has enjoyed a far happier political and material existence than any other commonwealth of comparable size in the history of the world” (Mead 2002a: 96-7). Mead’s work is a healthy corrective to conventional negativism about the US and its lack of sophistication; however, Mead is occasionally guilty of over-promoting the superiority of the American experience.

Renée Jeffery offers a range of definitions by leading scholars on what they consider a tradition to be. According to Terry Nardin:

tradition is stringently defined as both ‘the process of handing down’ from generation to generation, and ‘the thing handed down, the belief or custom transmitted from one generation to another’. [Martin] Wight, on the other hand, entertains a vague notion of tradition as being somewhat akin to a paradigm according to which sets of ideas are defined by their ‘logical inter-relation’ (Jeffery 2005: 61).

Some authors have much more exacting understandings of what a tradition is than others. For example, Martin Krygier sets a rather imposing definition, whereas Eric Hobsbawm has a much looser conception. The thoughts of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Oakeshott are also considered by Jeffery. For our purposes the key question to be addressed is whether a tradition can be invented by inquiring scholars at any time (for instance, scholars could unearth the previously unrecognised Trumanian and Bushian traditions in American foreign policy), or whether a tradition must show a record of historical transmission of a set of beliefs and stories.

In this paper, my definition of tradition requires solid evidence of strong resonance and influence over time (and possibly into the future). It also seems to make sense that there is a hierarchy of traditions; not every tradition can command the same level of influence. Rightly, the bar is set fairly high for adding new traditions to the study of American foreign relations. The Wilsonian tradition is one of the most widely understood and widely used terms because its meaning is easily grasped, and it is, relatively speaking, a reasonably coherent tradition. Conversely the term Jeffersonian tradition is far messier and less coherent (reflecting the thoughts and actions of the third US president), and thus the term enjoys less popularity.

Although Jeffery’s work is concerned with theoretical traditions within International Relations rather than American foreign policy traditions, she makes numerous thoughtful and useful points about the nature of traditions. On the question of how persistent a tradition needs to be, Jeffery refers to Martin Wight’s description of the “revolutionist tradition” as “less a stream than a series of waves” (Jeffery 2005: 76). Given how crucial historical events and actions are to the notion of traditions, periods of both dramatic activity and dormancy seem highly likely within the lifespan of any tradition. Jeffery (2005: 81) concludes: “to designate something as a part of a ‘tradition’ implies an inherent connection to the past”; further, choosing what to include or exclude in a tradition inevitably simplifies complex realities both past and present, and requires what Jeffery calls the act of invention. I personally prefer to think of this as the practice of interpretation, creating workable generalisations that enable us to order and make sense of the vast array of political interactions that occur in any given day, let alone in any given year.

The American Tradition

“God has a special providence for fools, drunks, and the United States of America.” Otto von Bismarck

Walter Russell Mead argues that “throughout the U.S. rise to world power, most observers have believed that the country did not care very much about foreign policy and was not very good at it” (Mead 2002a: xv). Given America’s relative global success Mead questions this “strangely fossilized conventional wisdom” which he labels the “Continentalist” outlook to foreign affairs. The approach that Mead is referring to lionises realist thinking and sees America as both too naïve and unsophisticated in its foreign affairs, which leads, in Mead’s opinion, to the severe underestimation of the richness and variety of America’s foreign policy traditions. It also generally dismisses democracy as “at best an irrelevance and at worst a serious obstacle in foreign affairs” (Mead 2002a: xv, 44).

From the standpoint of Continental realism, American foreign policy, and for that matter the whole American government, looks wrong. Massachusetts congressman Fisher Ames put his finger on the problem in a speech he made to the House of Representatives in 1795: “A monarchy is a merchantman which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock, and go to the bottom; a republic is a raft which will never sink, but then your feet are always in the water.” According to Mead, because the raft of American foreign policy lacks all the features that Continental realists look for in a vessel, they consistently fail to grasp the raft’s capabilities (Mead 2002a: 39).

To understand the US approach to world affairs, Mead stresses that one needs an understanding of a number of issues: the US constitution, the impact of Congress, regionalism, the role of missionary tradition, and the impacts of American feminism, and American democracy and nationalism (Mead 2002a: 44-45, 144, 145, 171). Mead argues that this multitude of influences has led to the emergence of competing US foreign policy traditions rather than a single unified view. Consequently American policy often looks inconsistent; however, Mead claims that despite this, it has been unusually successful (Mead 2002a: 54-5) from the early nineteenth century onward. In making his case, Mead offers a direct rebuke to Lord Bryce’s claim in 1888 that US foreign affairs up to that point had been like snakes in Iceland¹ – rather non-existent.² He also asks readers to rethink the orthodoxy expressed by Henry Kissinger’s more recent assertion that “between the Monroe Doctrine and the Spanish-American War, the very notion of foreign policy – its practices and strategies – had little place in American thinking” (Kissinger 2001: 240). Mead challenges both of these views by effectively bringing to life the richness and successes of US foreign policy in the nineteenth century.

¹ Mead (2002a: 3 and 2000b: 163) misquotes Bryce claiming he said US foreign policy was like snakes in “Ireland”. In *The American Commonwealth* what Bryce said was: “From the Mexican war of 1845, down to the Spanish war of 1898, external relations very rarely, and then only to a slight extent, affected internal political strife. As they did not occupy the public mind they did not lie within the sphere of party platforms or party action. We have hitherto found no occasion to refer to them save in describing the functions of the Senate; and I mention them now as the traveller did the snakes in *Iceland*, only to note their absence, and to indicate some of the results ascribable to thereto.”

² Mead points out that: “It is no coincidence that of the first nine U.S. presidents, six had previously served as secretary of state, and seven as foreign ambassadors. Six of the fifteen American presidents who served before Abraham Lincoln had been both secretary of state and ambassador to the United Kingdom. A seventh, Thomas Jefferson, had been secretary of state and ambassador to France, and an eighth, John Adams, had been ambassador to both Great Britain and France” (Mead 2002b: 167-168).

Mead's work on Henry Kissinger promotes the foreign affairs expert's more recent dalliances with the Jeffersonian tradition. In my mind, Kissinger is the arch-realist who sits outside the American traditions of foreign affairs, and I feel that Mead, whose title at the Council on Foreign Relations is the Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy, has overstated these Jeffersonian tendencies, taking the title of Kissinger's 2001 book *Does America need a foreign policy?* too literally. Kissinger's longstanding foreign affairs career and the significance of both his writings and actions in the field of foreign relations make this controversial figure impossible to ignore. Many of the allegations directed at Kissinger by vehement critics such as William Shawcross (1981) and Christopher Hitchens (2001) are likely to be true, and Kissinger's at times brutal approach to asserting American power and influence while in government means that I too come to his writings with a somewhat negative attitude. That said, it is hard not to admire the clarity of Kissinger's views in print and his ability to summarise broad historical themes. In the introduction to *Diplomacy* (1994), he pithily highlights some of the central paradoxes of the American approach to foreign affairs and its difference in approach vis-à-vis other nations. On one hand, Kissinger hones in on the tension between the belief that "America serves its values best by perfecting democracy at home, thereby acting as a beacon for the rest of mankind", while on the other hand he asserts "that America's values impose on it an obligation to crusade for them around the world." Consequently, "American thought has oscillated between isolationism and commitment". Although the missionary and isolationist traditions appear contradictory on the surface, according to Kissinger they reflect "a common underlying faith: that the United States possessed the world's best system of government, and that the rest of mankind could attain peace and prosperity by abandoning traditional diplomacy and adopting America's reverence for international law and democracy." Kissinger's realpolitik voice emerges to declare: "America's journey through international politics has been a triumph of faith over experience" (Kissinger 1994: 17-18).

Another big thinker on the topic of American foreign policy traditions is Walter McDougal. In his book *Promised Land, Crusader State* (1997), he shows that he is a stylist and thinker every bit as gifted as Walter Russell Mead. McDougal's work, however, is more pessimistic and critical of the direction of American foreign policy since the late nineteenth century. Like Mead, McDougal finds much to admire about the approach to foreign affairs adopted by the founding fathers and the generations of presidents and American statesmen before the McKinley presidency. McDougal breaks American foreign policy history into two periods, which he names the Old Testament and the New Testament – he strongly favours the former. The Old Testament approach sees America as the promised land where republican liberty can be preserved if America knows its limitations and keeps the rest of the world out of its affairs. In opposition, the "New Testament traditions define America as Crusader State called to bring salvation to a world ravaged by revolution and war" (McDougal 1992). McDougal's reading of the difference between the Old and New Testament traditions in US foreign affairs is essentially the same as that espoused by Senator J. William Fulbright in his classic *The Arrogance of Power* (1967). Fulbright argued that there are two sides to the American foreign policy tradition: "both are characterized by a kind of moralism, but one is the morality of decent instincts

tempered by the knowledge of human imperfection and the other is the morality of absolute self-assurance fired by the crusading spirit” (Fulbright 1967: 245).

For McDougal, the shift from the Old to the New occurred with the Spanish-American war in 1898, when “Americans finally gave in to the crusader’s temptation, and the explanation for that must be sought not only in strategy and economics but in culture.” The cultural explanation that McDougal gives is that: “Thanks to the cresting floods of the social gospel, the Progressive movement, social Darwinism, and consciousness of the ‘white man’s burden,’ the old millenarian undercurrent that had sprung from the second Great Awakening conquered the mainstream of American religious and intellectual life” (McDougal 1992). According to this line of thinking worse was still to come. As America’s relative power increased – most evident with Wilson’s arrival in Europe at the end of the First World War – America had both the stage and the crusader president to launch its missionary vision upon the world (MacMillan 2001). Wilsonianism is the great villain in McDougal’s attack on American foreign policy because of its overreach, pomposity, and intellectually flawed underpinnings. To use Mead’s categories, McDougal calls for a return to the Jeffersonian approach to US foreign policy, namely a focus on preserving democracy and liberty at home rather than trying to reshape the world. This more modest vision is very similar to that advocated by another intellectual of considerable note, Anatol Lieven. In his brilliant *America Right or Wrong* (2004), he too excoriates America’s messianic tendencies in foreign affairs. Like McDougal, he quotes Wilson to good effect to make his case. He also quotes Herman Melville’s famous invocation of American exceptionalism:

Americans are the peculiar chosen people – the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and the great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the advance guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a path into the New World that is ours (Lieven 2004: 33).

Echoing Hofstadter (1962: 43) and Huntington (1981: 23, 25), Lieven suggests that because of these messianic and exceptionalist beliefs, America is more than a country – it is also an ideology. This exceptionalist ideology can be both universal and particularistic depending on the circumstances. For example, it was particularistic when used by John Bolton to defend America pulling out of international treaties on arms control; it was universalistic in George W. Bush’s second inaugural address when he stated that “it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”³ This universalistic ideology is also often teleological – to quote Bush again: “our nation is on the right side of history”. As Lieven points out this echoes “the Soviet communist cliché, ‘the wind of history is in our sails’” (Lieven 2004: 74).

Lieven presents particularism and universalism as the two sides of the American nationalist tradition. In doing so he offers an important corrective to McDougal’s

³ The idea of talking about “end tyranny” had been suggested by John Lewis Gaddis in a session with the president’s speech-writer (Baker 2007; Gaddis 2008).

argument. In my view, McDougal, in his description of the American foreign policy traditions, is too generous in his analysis of the so-called isolationism of nineteenth-century American foreign policy. McDougal believes this should be rightly called American “unilateralism” (McDougal 1997: 39). Lieven, on the other hand sides with Mead in placing American isolationism, inflexible unilateralism and Southern militarism all within the Jacksonian tradition,⁴ a tradition that is the source of considerable brutality and cultural insensitivity in American foreign relations. The great insight of Lieven’s analysis is his argument that it is the strange combination of Wilsonian messianism and Jacksonian vengeance that is at the heart of American nationalism (particularly evident during the George W. Bush presidency with, for example, policies on Iraq). This strange combination can also be seen in America’s approach to the Vietnam War. While McDougal sees Vietnam as the folly of the Walt Rostows of American foreign relations with their goals to socially engineer the rest of the world in America’s image, Lieven more correctly lays the blame for American failures abroad on the Curtis E. LeMays *and* the Rostows; or more recently, on the roughhouse military tactics of the 4th Infantry Division in Iraq (Ricks 2006: 232-233; 279-280) *and* the ham-fisted social engineering of the Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer (Chandrasekaran 2006: 179-180, 183, 185, 242, 314).

One of Jeffery’s salient points about traditions is that we imagine or read the past through the present; Lieven’s work certainly contains much of this, perhaps too much so. For example, the nationalist tradition in American foreign policy becomes almost interchangeable with Bush’s approach to foreign affairs post-9/11. Furthermore, Lieven’s use of the Iraq debacle and use of what he calls the “Wolfish Wilsonian” overstate the case against the Wilsonian tradition. Lieven (like McDougal) is right to criticise the hubris that Wilsonianism can bring to American foreign policy, but he too easily dismisses the possible positive impact more prudent American policies could have for people around the globe. Lieven’s example shows that how traditions are drawn upon and applied matters significantly, with the devil not always in the ideas of the tradition but how they are applied. The Wilsonian tradition as applied by an able statesman such as Franklin Roosevelt looks much more attractive than the Wilsonianism of George W. Bush or Woodrow Wilson himself.

The weakness of seeing the past through the failure of the present is also strongly evident when we look back at the work of Max Savelle. Savelle’s reading of the colonial origins of US diplomacy highlights how American thinking is deeply affected by the want to “escape from the turmoil of Europe” and a more general isolationism (Savelle 1934: 336). When Savelle offered his isolationist interpretation of early American diplomacy in the mid-1930s, it was a fairly convincing and well-regarded position. However, by 1941, and certainly during the Cold War, this reading of the American foreign policy tradition looks overstated. The events of World War II and beyond have led scholars to look for continuities between nineteenth and mid- to late-twentieth century US foreign policy, which has led to rich veins of new scholarship; this position, however, can be taken to extremes by contriving historical events to fit a prescribed pattern. One such example is Robert Kagan’s presentation of

⁴ To be fair McDougall’s “unilateralism” is more Jeffersonian and Washingtonian than Jacksonian. However, McDougall’s failure to discuss the Jacksonian tradition is a significant omission that makes the period covered by the Old Testament traditions look more prudent and less vengeful than it was.

American foreign affairs as outward-looking (and imperialist) from the nation's earliest days (Kagan 2006, 2008). Kagan is undoubtedly a persuasive writer, and this can be seen in the narrative of US foreign policy history presented in his article "Neocon Nation" (2008), where he so selectively (and thus distortedly) presents the case that America has been a neo-conservative nation from its beginnings. The piece is an excellent example of how history can be used (and abused) to make the case for a tradition.

A scholar who offers a healthy antidote to Kagan's tendency to marshal historical evidence to suit his argument is Michael Dunne (1994, 1998, 2001). In Dunne's work we see someone wrestling with the vastness and variety of US foreign ideas and diplomatic history. By highlighting divergent tendencies, Dunne's essay in this collection shows the ability of US foreign policy to renew and reinvent itself. Dunne's reading of US foreign relations sees the US struggling to develop traditions as it lurches from one set of events to the next (or one doctrine to the next). His observation that "the United States has not employed balance-of-power methods since the earliest years of the Republic" (Dunne 1994: 716-717) stands in contrast to the work of Norman A. Graebner who sees American foreign relations as far more realist. Graebner views Washington, Adams and Jefferson as comfortable with balance-of-power politics (Graebner 1989: 606-609, 615-616). This takes us to one of the most commented-upon speeches in US diplomatic history: Washington's farewell address.

In his classic work, *To the farewell address*, Felix Gilbert suggests a realist bent to the thinking of Washington and particularly Hamilton on how best to preserve the United States against foreign interference. It was estimated "that America must do everything possible to keep the peace for twenty years, until which time her position would be almost unassailable" (Gilbert 1961: 122). The best way to do this was to have a "general principle of policy" of avoiding "permanent alliances" while recognising that America might occasionally be forced into temporary alliances (Gilbert 1961: 130). Despite this largely realist interpretation of the ideas that guided early American foreign policy, Gilbert concludes that: "America has wavered in her foreign policy between Idealism and Realism, and her great historical moments have occurred when both were combined" (Gilbert 1961: 136). Like Gilbert, Walter McDougal interprets this famous speech and early period of American foreign policy with an emphasis on Washington's view that America's distance from Europe was one of its great advantages, not to be squandered by becoming involved in either European affairs or alliances (McDougal 1997: 39). Washington was not alone in holding this position: other leading minds and politicians of the time such as Thomas Paine and John Adams echoed his thoughts (McDougal 1997: 41). Reflecting on this, McDougal convincingly argues: "So, our vaunted tradition of 'isolationism' is no tradition at all, but a dirty word that interventionists, especially since Pearl Harbor, hurl at anyone who questions their policies" (McDougal 1997: 40). The tradition McDougal prefers to use to describe this position is "Unilateralism."⁵

Mead's four Traditions

⁵ Unlike the negative manner, the term "unilateralism" was used during George W. Bush's administration, McDougal uses the term very positively linking it to an approach to foreign policy based on prudence and knowing America's limitations.

For Mead, conventional International Relations labels are not nuanced enough to explain American foreign policy in all its complexity; he sees the liberal/realist dichotomy as too narrow and the internationalist/isolationist divide as a misreading of US history. Mead suggests that the history of American foreign policy is better understood with reference to four traditions: Hamiltonianism, Jeffersonianism, Jacksonianism and Wilsonianism. Hamiltonianism is named after Alexander Hamilton, America's first Secretary of the Treasury and a close adviser to George Washington. Hamiltonianism "sees the first task of the American government as promoting the health of American enterprise at home and abroad" (Mead 2002a: 87). This tradition emphasises the long-standing special relationship between the US and the UK as America's central nation-to-nation relationship (initially as a trading relationship, and then as much more). This emphasis on the special relationship is taken up in Mead's more recent *God and Gold* (2007), where he argues that American global power is really just a continuation of British global power, and that an Anglo-American ideology (or mindset) emerged from the colonial period onwards that has proved very effective as a strategy for developing and maintaining global wealth, power and general influence. Hamiltonians are a crucial element of this mindset. Famous Hamiltonians include Theodore Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., and George H.W. Bush. The most elusive of Mead's traditions is the Jeffersonian tradition (some would say this is not surprising given that it is named after one of the America's most elusive and contradictory presidents, Thomas Jefferson). Jeffersonians want to celebrate and protect what is uniquely valuable about American life – particularly the belief in liberty and democracy. This is best done by avoiding foreign entanglements. For Jeffersonians the goals of 1776 remain paramount but unmet. In *Empire of Liberty*, Robert W. Tucker and David Henderson detail how Jefferson clearly rejected the constant warring of Old World foreign policy as a corrupt approach that put the lives of citizens at risk often without due cause (such as "a pretended insult to the sister of the king") (Jefferson quoted in Tucker and Henderson 1992: 12). America would be different if it could avoid the accumulation of centralised state power and the prioritising of foreign affairs over domestic interests. Nonetheless, Jefferson had great ambitions for the US, and he clearly rejected the notion that republics must stay small to survive. To paraphrase Tucker and Henderson (1992: 18), his new diplomacy hoped to "conquer without war". Jefferson's statecraft relied on the ambitions of free men to expand across the US, while using commercial deals to negotiate with European powers so war could be avoided. Walter LaFeber emphasises these expansionist tendencies in Jefferson's statecraft, seeing them as deriving from Jefferson's belief in a largely agrarian America free from the corruption and restraints of cities (LaFeber 1993: 371-376). LaFeber's reading of American foreign policy as a story of expansion at home and then abroad does not exclude Jeffersonianism from this expansionist tradition; this is contra to Mead who presents Jeffersonianism as isolationist and anti-interventionist.

The Jacksonian tradition is named after Andrew Jackson, the seventh US President, and commander of US forces at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. David Kennedy has written that the Jacksonians "resemble the fabled Irishman who didn't know what he believed in but was more than willing to die for it" (Kennedy 2002: 34). In their discussions of the Jacksonians, Walter Russell Mead and Antol Lieven draw heavily on the notion of folkways developed by David Hackett Fisher in *Albion's Seed* (1989). They are particularly interested in the influence of the Scots Irish immigrants who they place at the heart of the Jacksonian tradition. The experiences of the Scots

Irish fighting in Northern Ireland and then in America in the colonial, expansionist and Civil War periods account for their particular emphasis on military service, loyalty and retributive justice. They are described as a largely inward-looking people who, if forced into a war with foreigners, will fight to win by any means necessary. America's other traditions often aim to temper and tame the Jacksonian influence on American politics. Nonetheless, in the words of Mead, "in very different ways the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians believe that the specific cultural, social and political heritage of the United States is a precious treasure to be conserved, defended, and passed on to future generations; they celebrate what they see as the unique, and uniquely valuable, elements of American life and believe that the object of foreign policy should be to defend those values at home rather than to extend them abroad" (Mead 2002a: 175). In short, both traditions are exceptionalist in their worldviews.

The fourth of Mead's traditions, Wilsonianism, is named after the early twentieth century US President Woodrow Wilson. This tradition emphasises America's mission of spreading liberty and democracy. One of the fascinating elements of this tradition is that its origins clearly predate Wilson's political career, with various forms of its missionary zeal evident throughout America's history; Mead strongly connects it to the missionaries in Burma, China and elsewhere, whose causes American church-goers heard about via letters read out in their local churches in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. When reflecting on this tradition's long and often missionary history, it is easier to understand how George W. Bush came to be called a Wilsonian. However, it is generally left-liberalism that is associated with Wilsonianism. According to Mead, "the first principle of Wilsonian foreign policy is that democracies make better and more reliable partners than monarchies and tyrannies" (Mead 2002a: 162). Although democracy (and liberty) are generally presented as universal values, they begin to sound more like the instruments of American power when the US dictates who should adhere to these values and in what manner. Mead argues that the "Wilsonian school allows the United States to do something that democratic societies cannot easily do consciously: to play the suave and accomplished hypocrite" (Mead 2002a: 171). However, this probably overstates the success of Wilsonian rhetoric, particularly during the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations. In truth, this type of rhetoric has often been seen by US critics as the cloak behind which the dagger of US power and greed lies.

The final point on Mead's traditions I wish to briefly discuss is how his evocation of historic figures can be both a boon and a burden. When discussing Wilsonianism, Wilson's own inflexible and sanctimonious style, and unfortunate end to his career casts a long shadow; as a result, scholars may feel more comfortable using terms like the "messianic tradition" or the "liberal tradition" because they are less burdened by the actions of one era or one president. Similarly, Hamiltonianism is confusing because Alexander Hamilton was a protectionist, whereas in the 20th and 21st centuries the tradition as Mead explains it is strongly in favour of free trade. Jeffersonianism is ultimately very slippery given the contradictory personality and actions of Thomas Jefferson. Finally, Jacksonian populism can be admired by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. for being a forerunner to New Deal economic populism and welfarism, and at the same time be condemned by Lieven for being anti-intellectual and at times barbaric in its approach to war. Given these challenges, it is not surprising that most scholars with less bravery (and verve) than Mead prefer to use more general terms like realism and liberalism.

Liberalism and Realism

All of Mead's four traditions have been interpreted in a variety of ways, and Wilsonianism scholarship provides vast testimony to this fact. A broader snapshot of these trends is captured admirably by David Steigerwald (1999) in his essay "The Reclamation of Woodrow Wilson?"⁶ while others such as Tony Smith focus on the Wilson legacy. He writes: "The greatness of Wilson lay in his understanding that channeling the force of nationalism into liberal democratic governments that would respect their citizens as well as their neighbors was the best solution reason could establish" (Smith 2007: 67). Like Colin Dueck, Smith sees liberalism as the defining hegemonic ideology from World War I onwards, particularly after the finish of World War II. According to Smith, Wilson provided the impetus and many of the ideas that made liberalism the most appealing and successful ideology of the 20th century. Smith paints an extremely positive picture of America's use of liberal ideas, claiming that their judicious transfer helped not only Germany and Japan, but also the USSR.⁷ Dueck is less positive, believing America has underfunded its commitment to liberal internationalism. He sees this "low-cost internationalism" as a defining part of the "Wilsonian tradition", a tradition he believes has been followed by nearly all of the 20th century US administrations apart from Nixon's, which he argues was condemned from both the left and right for not being Wilsonian enough. Dueck argues that Reagan, Clinton and even George W. Bush took up the Wilsonian mantle. Despite the many claims that Bush was a break from America's liberal past, Dueck claims that: "The problem is not that the president is departing from a long tradition of liberal internationalism; it is that he is continuing some of the worst features of that tradition" (Dueck 2003/4: 9). In short, Bush gave "sweeping commitments, too often supported by inadequate means" (Dueck 2003/4: 7). Smith sees things very differently, arguing that there is much less continuity in the liberal tradition. He paints liberalism in the post-Cold War period as having undergone a less pragmatic transformation into what he calls "liberal imperialism" (what others call neo-conservatism). Some would say that liberal imperialism is a break from Wilson's pledge to "make the world safe for democracy" as it sees America actively attempting to turn undemocratic nations into democracies (within highly unrealistic timeframes). Smith argues that liberal imperialism has three new conceptual underpinnings that make it a dangerous departure from the liberal-realism of the 20th century: a belief in the democratic peace thesis, a belief that democracy is a universal value, and a belief that humanitarianism can be delivered by military means. All of these discussions about Wilsonianism stretch this undoubtedly important tradition to the breaking point. In other words, as crucial as Wilson was to providing key liberal ideas, liberalism is bigger and more complicated than the term Wilsonianism implies. One of the best cases for the limitations of the Wilsonian tradition is put by Steigerwald in *Wilsonian Idealism in America* (1994) where he makes a case for how events such as the Great Depression, the dropping of the atomic bomb and the Holocaust saw the Wilsonians "concede liberalism to the liberal realists" (Steigerwald 1994: 169-171).

⁶ Also see John Coogan (1994) who ably covers the controversies and contradictions in Wilson scholarship. One of the richest readings of Wilsonian legacy is Lloyd Ambrosius' *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition* (1990).

⁷ In Smith's earlier book *America's Mission* (1994), he paints a more complicated picture of the success of Wilsonian ideas and American liberalism in the 20th century.

The divide in America between liberalism and realism in the early Cold War was often slight, yet it is amazing how often the two have been treated as opposing worldviews. This oversight seems even more dramatic when you consider the centrality of this period to debates about American foreign relations. McDougal's work on containment shows how he sees balance-of-power ideas like containment being pushed in the direction of global meliorism during the Cold War by liberal desires to make foreign policy an extension of American domestic policy. To be more specific, he argues that particularly in the 1960s there was an attempt to export the Great Society outlook abroad to Vietnam and elsewhere. For example, Lyndon Johnson pronounced an "overriding rule" that US "foreign policy must always be an extension of our domestic policy. Our safest guide to what we do abroad is always what we do at home." Hence, McDougal writes, Vietnam "had its origins in the same presidential impulses that gave birth to the Great Society and the April 1965 offer to North Vietnam of a billion-dollar economic development program for the Mekong River" (McDougal 1997: 190). This overstates the reality, but again shows the strange mix of realism and liberalism in the Cold War. Wilsonians were likely to see the liberal-realism of the Cold War as too realist (Steigerwald 1994); McDougal sees it as too liberal. Another interesting division is how McDougal and Mead diverge on where the Cold War fits into the history of American foreign relations. McDougal treats the Cold War policies of the US as drawing on earlier traditions and understandings, while Mead sees this period as one where the American traditions took a back seat to more conventional Continentalist ideas about spheres of influence and the balancing of power. McDougal is more inclined to see realist thinking motivating the policies of Washington, Quincy Adams and Monroe. So, for him, the best of the Cold War strategies of securing America's national interests are squarely within the American tradition (in fact they are for him the best and wisest part of it). Further, the excessive desires of Johnson, Rostow and McNamara to remake Vietnam in America's image are, for McDougal, foreshadowed by the actions and thoughts of the 19th century "progressive imperialists" (and are the worst aspects of the American tradition).

Concluding remarks

I have discussed the main themes as I see them in the study of American foreign policy traditions; nonetheless, with the aim of being reasonably brief, I have passed over or failed to discuss in detail other interesting themes. The major theme that I have given limited space to thus far is the expansionist tradition, or what some would call the imperialist tradition. Continental expansion is undoubtedly a key component of nineteenth century US policy. Furthermore, expansion can be seen in many forms such as the Monroe doctrine, the acquiring of colonies from the Spanish, the Open Door Policy and Clinton's advocacy of globalization. How much of this is or is not imperialism is a vexed question, although I think a far less important one than how America behaved, and how well or poorly it treated other nations. Marxist scholars may well disagree, arguing that the term imperialism should be used to describe American foreign policy from the nineteenth century onwards, and that this term should be broadly used because it fairly describes the exploitative nature of US goals. For me, such a definition lacks an appreciation for the contradictory details of American practice, and promotes theoretical analysis over a richer understanding of the history of American travails and undoubted triumphs. In general, the term

imperialism seems to me too burdened and too lumbering to effectively describe American foreign relations. This is not to say that American practice has not had imperialist tendencies. Scholars such as Walter LaFeber, William Appleman Williams and Christopher Layne all effectively highlight these tendencies, and convincingly suggest that they reflect a pattern of behaviour. They correctly highlight the ideological nature of America's commitment to spreading capitalism, along with American capitalist practice through trade and other means. This seems a simple point to make but it was too often underplayed, particularly in 1959 when Williams' *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* was first published. Market ideology and the search for markets has always been an important part of American foreign policy. Williams' view was that nearly all Americans held "the firm conviction, even dogmatic belief, that ... domestic well-being depends upon ... sustained, ever-increasing overseas economic expansion" (Williams 1962: 11). He argued further that Americans promoted the Open Door Policy with a combination of missionary zeal and limited self-awareness. My qualm with the Open Door thesis is that it often overlooks or downplays contradictory tendencies and inconvenient evidence (McDougal 1997: 106). A capacity to see American foreign policy as an ever evolving contest between various traditions is Mead's great strength over those scholars influenced by Williams (like Christopher Layne and Andrew Bacevich) and those in the so-called Wisconsin school.

Later expansions on Williams' argument – namely those by LaFeber and Layne – at their best add a richness to the argument. LaFeber looks at the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, while Layne focuses on US policies in the immediate post-World War II period. LaFeber is strong on the excesses of American power; Layne's target is American liberalism. Layne writes: "Far from bolstering US security, America's liberal ideology leads to overexpansion, unnecessary military interventions abroad, and, occasionally involvement in otherwise avoidable wars. Liberalism's consequences for US grand strategy, in other words, are pernicious, not peace producing" (Layne 2006: 118). This leads Layne to describe American liberalism as "the hegemonic ideology at home and the ideology of hegemony abroad – and it is the fountainhead of America's imperial ambitions" (Layne 2006: 120). He further argues that these ambitions inevitably lead to overreach. This disdain for liberalism blinds Layne to its obvious successes in Western Europe and parts of East Asia, and his failure to credit American liberalism for helping deliver a long period of peace and prosperity in nations like Germany and Japan makes his case look decidedly one-sided. Certainly America too has benefited from these policies, as one might expect.

Layne's book *The Peace of Illusions*, and Andrew Bacevich's *The Limits of Power* offer a significant challenge to the American internationalist tradition. Both books call for a retreat from the world by America to avoid overreach and hubris. Bacevich worries about a tendency to exaggerate threats and overlook internal follies. Both scholars rightly execrate the American approach to foreign policy for its general lack of concern for the environment. Both call for a break from the past that is not particularly realistic, given that it shows little regard for America's dominant foreign policy traditions. It would seem more likely to me that under President Obama, America will not retreat from the world in the manner advocated by Layne and Bacevich, but will instead refashion the liberal tradition. This tradition will be sold as pragmatic and post-ideological (Dionne 2009), but will be internationalist in a manner that draws on Wilsonianism, Hamiltonianism and the liberalism of FDR and JFK.

This approach is likely to be called both bold and entirely in keeping with a dominant tradition of American foreign policy.

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