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### **3 Obama as modern Jeffersonian**

Jack Holland

Since 1993 the United States has been led by presidents representative of all four of Walter Russell Mead's (and David Hackett Fischer's) foreign policy traditions. First, Bill Clinton's foreign policy exhibited a Hamiltonian-Wilsonian tension, as he attempted to deliver the intoxicating vision of an expanded zone of peace and prosperity, through the promotion of democracy and laissez faire capitalism. Second, George W. Bush's election flung the United States back onto a relatively isolationist footing, as the president embodied and performed a Jacksonian stance, sensitive to the dangers and skeptical of the entanglements that lurked beyond the water's edge. This, of course, was rapidly modified after 9/11, but American foreign policy remained more overtly Jacksonian in nature than is usually credited in a literature fixated with images of a 'neocon' presidency: a foreign policy of Wilsonianism with boots. Third, Obama's foreign policy has been Jeffersonian in formulation and prosecution. The only footnote to add is that such a stance is, arguably, fundamentally irreconcilable with the demands of world hegemony in the twenty-first century. Obama has recognised this and governed as a 'modern Jeffersonian': an internationalist, wary of domestic implications of internationalism. This approach has enabled him to enjoy about as much foreign policy success as is possible for a Jeffersonian president of the world's only superpower in a hyper-globalised world.

#### **American Foreign Policy Traditions from Bush Senior to Bush Junior**

##### **Conceptualising US Foreign Policy**

This chapter mobilises a theoretical framework developed by two principal authors. Walter Russell Mead's ambitious book, *Special Providence*, builds on David Hackett

Fischer's seminal tome, *Albion's Seed*. Fischer (1989) outlines four folkways in the United States that were transported to the North American continent in the language, culture and beliefs of four distinct groups, which made their ways to the United States in a series of large-scale population movements from Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The first accounts for the exodus of English Puritans from East Anglia to Massachusetts between 1629 and 1641. The second maps the movement of 'distressed Cavaliers and indentured servants' from southern England to Virginia from 1642 to 1675. The third traces migrants from the north Midlands to Delaware between 1675 and 1725. And the fourth notes the flight of the Scots-Irish from the Borderlands of Britain and Ulster, in a series of migration waves, from 1717 to 1775. These groups dispersed across distinct but overlapping territories in the United States, during a period in which the nation, its politics and customs were in formation. Although their numbers are significant they are dwarfed by the impact of these groups on the character and composition of the fledgling nation. As they evolved and took root in the United States, across a variety of measures — including language, dress, habit and belief — these four groups came to dominate American cultural and political life, suppressing minority alternatives.

Mead (1989) extends Fischer's (1989) dense historical unpacking of these complex and interwoven cultural predispositions to consider the impact these migrant groups had on the development of American foreign policy. Respectively, Mead (2002) has labeled these groups and their ideas after four great figures in American political history, which best encapsulate their central tenets: Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, Hamiltonian and Jacksonian. Although imperfect, this labeling serves as a useful heuristic and shortcut to understanding their key policy preferences and likely interactions. Together, they offer a nuanced, socially rooted and culturally sensitive alternative to the traditional analytical language of International Relations and US foreign policy.

The best known of the four schools, Wilsonian foreign policy emphasizes the spread of human rights through democracy promotion. Although agreeing on the ends of American foreign policy, the school splits on the preferential means by which to achieve them. So-called 'Soft Wilsonians' tend to privilege the role of international organisations, such as the United Nations, valuing the efficacy and legitimacy of

coalition action and good international citizenship. Their closely-related but politically-distant counterparts, ‘Hard Wilsonians’, are quicker to dismiss the limitations that accompany such institutions, and are more willing to use force — unilaterally, if necessary — in order to achieve the optimal foreign policy outcome of a democratised state. Far from pure altruism, Wilsonians contend that it is only necessary to consider Germany and Japan to recognize the national interest premised benefits of a policy of democracy promotion. Crucially, the route to success looks overly optimistic for many Wilsonians, who focus on the heartfelt assumption that inside every enemy there is an American waiting to get out.

Jeffersonians, on the other hand, see themselves as the intellectual defenders of the common man. They revere the constitution and the division of powers that, if carefully and actively preserved, will ensure that the New World never falls prey to the tyrannies of the Old. As with the Wilsonians, Jeffersonians value human rights. In contrast to the Wilsonians, however, Jeffersonians focus first and foremost on the rights and liberties of American citizens. The reasons for this are simple: Jeffersonians do not share Wilsonian optimism for foreign adventurism. Foreign policy, for them, is the careful calculation and management of costs and risks, striving to prevent the overreach of the state and — above all else — the tyranny of an imperial presidency, emboldened through quests for geopolitical gain in the name of Empire. In this sense, the Jeffersonians and Wilsonians occupy a single axis, but sit at opposite ends of the spectrum. Both value democracy and human rights above all else, but Jeffersonians worry that their preservation at home requires an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the United States. This fragility is threatened – potentially fatally – by overly assertive foreign policy. Since the ultimate Jeffersonian task is to continue to pro-actively build a more perfect union at home, it is better not to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.<sup>1</sup>

Hamiltonians are America’s capitalists. While they acknowledge the importance of human rights for all citizens, at home and abroad, they start with a focus on the material wealth of the American nation. This wealth is maximised by free trade, which will also bring the happy concomitant benefit of the greater protection of

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to other schools, which understand that America once had a revolution, both Wilsonians and Jeffersonians believe that America is and remains a revolutionary country (Mead 2002, 178).

human rights abroad. For Hamiltonians, global flows of money, goods and people are what ties states together, prevents wars and ensures that the United States continues to sit atop a neoliberal world order. Of course, if needed, Hamiltonians will act hypocritically, assertively kicking open doors for trade around the world, by arguing for low import taxes, while hiking tariffs at home in order to protect fledging or weakened American industries. It is not that Hamiltonians are uninterested in democracy and human rights, just that they privilege liberal capitalism, as the most important and fundamental component of American security and wellbeing. They are internationalist, certainly, and focus foremost on pursuing the national interest, conceived as broadly synonymous with economic policy.

Last and least understood, Jacksonians harbour a clear, consistent and acute philosophy, which underpins the development of a sharply bifurcated foreign policy, based on military populism. At the end of the day, all that matters for Jacksonian America is the continued physical survival and wellbeing of the United States and its people. The fate of the rest of the world is only relevant if it impacts America. This binary underpinning generates a distinctive foreign policy approach, characterised on the one hand by indifference (easily confused with tolerance) and, on the other hand, assertive unilateral displays of military force. A tendency to ‘underplay’ foreign policy when events only indirectly impact the US stands in stark contrast to gross overreaction when America’s physical security is threatened. In this infrequent situation — such as Pearl Harbour, or 9/11 — Total War is a legitimate option for a policy response. America’s armed forces should be fully equipped to deliver victory at all costs. As Jacksonians consider America’s enemies to be beyond the protection of the law by virtue of having broken it, they have little time for international legalities or institutions. Once figuratively outlawed the human rights of non-Americans are inconsequential at best and inexistent at worst; they may be punished or killed in the name of re-establishing America’s physical security.

### **The 1990s and early 2000s**

The 1990s were a remarkable decade for American foreign policy. Bush senior’s foreign policy is frequently underestimated in academic and popular literature, despite significant successes, such as: helping to steer the US and the world through the end

of the Cold War and into a new world order, where the certainties and rules of bipolarity no longer held true; helping to broker agreement on the re-unification of Germany; helping to avoid significant entanglement in the cause of Eastern European uprisings; and successfully preserving the norm of non-intervention and chemical weapons usage in Kuwait and Iraq, without creating a security vacuum at the heart of the region. And, yet, Bill Clinton successfully framed these multiple, challenging achievements as pre-occupation; a failure to acknowledge the domestic realities faced by struggling Americans, on the part of a wonk-ish and distracted global diplomat. Bill Clinton was and remains a formidable politician.

In contrast to the pragmatism and realpolitik of George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, Bill Clinton came to power on the back of one straightforward and resonant line more than any other: 'it's the economy, stupid'. Everything else played second fiddle. Through the promotion of free trade and encouraging the benefits of globalisation, Bill Clinton embodied a Hamiltonian president. In order to situate this preference within a broader grand strategy, he spoke of engagement (broadly, diplomacy committed to internationalism) and enlargement. While the former was relatively empty in meaning (and benign), the latter encompassed two — potentially contradictory — foreign policy traditions. Clinton's policy of enlargement aimed to increase the size and scope of the zone of market democracies. Within this vision, capitalism and democracy were envisaged to go hand-in-hand; free markets, democracy and human rights were seen as intimately interwoven. Inevitably, this vision hit key sticking points, most notably in dealings with China. Clinton's (secondary) calls for a Wilsonian promotion of human rights led to an ill-advised Executive Order tying future Chinese trade conditions ('Most Favored Nation' status) to demonstrable progress being made in the realm of human rights. When this progress failed to materialise, Clinton's Hamiltonian preferences were made abundantly clear as, rather than risk damaging trade relations, human rights concerns were relegated. For Clinton, Wilsonian policy was to be pursued and welcomed, but only when and where it complemented the Hamiltonian underpinnings — the economic imperatives — of America's foreign policy.

Clinton's intoxicating foreign policy vision of peace and wealth, achieved through an internationalist US foreign policy, was brought to an abrupt end with the election of

George W. Bush. America's forty-third president was elected, in part, due to the framing of Clinton's humanitarian misadventures as squandering America's great resources and unnecessarily risking the lives of US troops for reasons only tangentially related to the US national interest. Bush assured the American people that limited interventions, for altruistic purposes, would not feature in his foreign policy; never again, would US troops be sent to fight with one hand tied behind their backs. When engaged, for the right reasons, US troops would have only one mission: to win. Bush's presidency therefore began with a series of attempts to roll back the agreements and internationalism of the Clinton years, as he sought to retrench the US and reduce overseas entanglements. Bush campaigned and then governed for eight months as a Jacksonian president.

9/11, of course, would alter America's footing, from relative reluctance to engage the world beyond its borders, to pro-active and increasingly pre-emptive foreign policy. The limits of tolerable risk were lowered as a Jacksonian, president assessed all necessary means to eviscerate the newly apparent threat to the American nation (Daalder and Lindsay 2003; Holland 2009, 2013b). Congress also shared such considerations with near-unanimous support for the Authorisation for the Use of Force, permitting the president to do whatever might be necessary in the logic of the response. Five weeks later, the United States intervened in Afghanistan, a state accused of harbouring those guilty of perpetrating the events of September 11, 2001. This was the first of two '9/11 wars' (Burke 2011) that Obama would inherit. While he supported the first, the second — begun eighteen months later in Iraq — he infamously termed, 'a dumb war'. This war brought together a dangerous coalition of foreign policy traditions. Jacksonian vengeance fused seamlessly with the zeal of Hard Wilsonian policy, as Bush's foreign policy morphed from the isolationist preferences of his habitual Jacksonian leanings into an increasingly interventionist approach, influenced by a narrowed neoconservative philosophy, and belief in the possibility of democratisation through the use of force. With no link to 9/11, despite the rhetorical justification for the conflict, Obama would come to power opposed to one enduring military intervention in Iraq and seeking to refocus another in Afghanistan. He would seek to improve, and then end, both.

## **Obama as Modern Jeffersonian**

“Jeffersonian foreign policy is no bed of roses” (Mead 2010). Fearing and actively avoiding the consequences of military conflict can readily lead to accusations of wimpishness, not least in the context of a highly charged and partisan domestic political landscape. Yet accusations of timidity on the part of Obama are misleading and have frequently been (justifiably) deflected for three reasons. First, Obama achieved that which Bush failed to: he got Osama bin Laden, whose extrajudicial assassination was both the remit of Jeffersonian cost-benefit calculation and the ultimate tonic for vengeful Jacksonian America (Jarvis and Holland 2014). This single incident helped to silence and appease some of Obama’s most vitriolic opponents. Second, Obama is not a president solely motivated by the avoidance of armed conflict. Rather, he is a president who will commit American forces to action, in a manner carefully arrived at, when he considers the cause to be just and practical. In this, he is no different from other presidents before him. It is simply that his cost-benefit calculations err on the side of caution, not least respective to his immediate predecessor’s preferred war-fighting style. Third, Obama has been an internationalist president. Far from focussing exclusively on the creation of a more perfect union at home, Obama has seen himself as a uniquely positioned global statesman, leading the world’s only superpower, in a dangerous and increasingly interconnected world.

Two features of Obama’s foreign policy follow from these arguments and are vital to conceptualising the Obama Doctrine. The first is an appreciation of the duration of change and global context; the necessity of pursuing a modest pace of change in a world where freedoms are relatively recent, hard won and increasingly demanded. The Wilsonian tide of history does not run smoothly or without interruption — one need only consider the rise of Islamic State to realise that — but the ebb and flow of world events has drifted steadily in the direction of universal human rights, democratic freedoms and market capitalism. Obama is certainly no King Cnut He has not resisted this historical impulse, demanding the tide turn back Rather he has sought to ride the wave of history, without ever getting out too far ahead of it. Recognition of the dangers and limitations of forcing more rapid positive historical developments —

abroad, if not at home<sup>2</sup> — has been at the heart of Obama’s approach to the presidency. He has achieved significant foreign policy successes because of a necessary willingness to recognise the frustratingly slow pace of international change, which sits alongside a strongly-held conviction that more rapid transitions (delivered through unilateral action) require an utterly undesirable situation: an imperial presidency. Obama therefore recognises that the United States does indeed play a unique role in this ever-changing world: a position that elevates America above other states, as freedom’s guarantor and protector. Neither he, nor any other president, could ignore issues beyond the water’s edge. His options do not extend to whether to engage or not, but rather how best to perform America’s unique role in the historical arc of freedom’s evolution (Bouchet 2013; Dunn 2005). This approach has borne fruit, with a number of Obama’s major achievements coming late in his second term; such as, a deal with Iran on nuclear weapons; multilateral agreement in Paris on climate change; and the normalisation of relations with Cuba. All of these came about following the lengthy diplomatic efforts; Obama has played the long game well.

Second, performing this role has required Obama to decide how best to occupy America’s unique global position; how best to be exceptional? Obama, like all American presidents, has been required to strike a balance between competing impulses which attempt to influence the means of US internationalism. “The seemingly paradoxical idea of a state being exceptional by virtue of uniquely being built on universal principles” lies at the heart of this tension (Bouchet 2013, 37; see also McCrisken 2003). American exceptionalism — the notion that America is unique and superior — is a key and widely understood feature of American foreign policy. Despite ill-advised musings on the limits of uniqueness,<sup>3</sup> Obama has publically and repeatedly reiterated a shared understanding and appreciation of American exceptionalism. Again, in this, he is like all American presidents. The decision Obama has had to make is on how best to act and, here, he, like those before him, has

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<sup>2</sup> Here, in this divergence, we see the quintessential Jeffersonian contrast between the revolutionary zeal of domestic policy, relative to the gradual and creeping change apparent in foreign policy. Passing the Affordable Care Act; ending Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell; and facilitating gay marriage all constitute radical change for American society and serve the purpose of creating a more perfect union at home.

<sup>3</sup> “In April 2009, when asked whether he subscribed to the notion of American exceptionalism, the new President replied: believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.’ The critics who pilloried him for this apparently un-American thought chose to ignore that he continued his answer by speaking of America’s ‘continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity” (Bouchet 2013, 38).

attempted to strike a balance between exemplarist and vindicationist strands of American exceptionalism (Brands 1998).

Both vindicationists and exemplarists share an appreciation of America's exceptionalism and role to play in changing the world for the better — for both altruistic and self-interested reasons. They differ, however, on the best means for doing so. “Recalling Thomas Jefferson, in his Cairo speech to Muslims worldwide, Obama quoted the founding father; ‘I hope that our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us that the less we use our power the greater it will be’ (Obama, 2009, also cited in Marsden 2011). Like Jefferson, Obama most naturally occupies an exemplarist position, whenever circumstances permit. The shining light of America's example — a beacon of freedom visible to the rest of the world — is the optimal means by which to encourage democratic transition. Obama is certainly politically opposed to the Hard Wilsonian, vindicationist leanings of his predecessor — more inclined to use American military superiority to force change on others. However, as with all of Obama's foreign policy, this is a careful balancing act; a shade of grey, rather than black and white; context and fact-dependent, rather than being ideologically-wedded to one extreme position. Just as Jefferson did, Obama will pursue policies about which he harbours significant fears, if and when he calculates that they are in America's best interests. This is because, as many observers have noted, Obama is a “results-driven pragmatist ... attuned to complexity and nuance” (Milne 2012). He is the fox following on from his predecessor hedgehog.

The central argument this article makes is that Obama is a modern Jeffersonian: an internationalist president, by necessity, acting with notable caution, in a world where the United States stands as the defender and promoter of electoral and economic freedoms. He is a Jeffersonian by background, inclination and belief. He is a modern Jeffersonian by virtue of the pressures exerted on him: from America's hegemonic position; from an American national identity, premised on exceptionalism; from a Democratic Party, more internationalist and Wilsonian than he; and from a polarized domestic political landscape, where inaction is framed as dithering or timidity. Obama's challenge — and considerable success — has been in reconciling these contradictory demands, whilst staying true to his Jeffersonian convictions.

### **Bush's Wars: Iraq and Afghanistan**

Obama's immediate inheritance from his predecessor of two large, regional conflicts, amidst the context of a global war on terrorism, have dominated his foreign policy, framing and constraining his options. On Iraq, Obama's message was clear and concise: this was a dumb war, which the United States should not have begun, and from which the United States should extricate itself. On Afghanistan, however, Obama has always been far more committed to the cause and therefore prepared to use American military force (McCrisken 2011). As Aaronson (2014), like McCrisken (2011, 2014), notes, on the campaign trail in 2007, Obama was explicit that "we will wage the war that has to be won ... getting out of Iraq and on to the right battlefield in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Obama 2007); in this, Obama demonstrated a steadfast commitment (e.g. Holland 2014).

When it comes to waging war in Afghanistan, Obama has never been a pure, old-fashioned Jeffersonian in the mould of his eighteenth and nineteenth century counterparts. Rather, he has always acknowledged America's unique internationalist imperatives and global role. Even when inheriting Bush's wars, he was at pains to state, on the campaign trail, that ending those conflicts was a long-term goal. To start with, and particularly in Afghanistan, fighting smarter to deliver on the requirements of national security was always his focus. Afghanistan was always a war Obama believed in fighting. His approach was that of a modern Jeffersonian in three principal respects. First, Obama sought to reconceptualise the geography and geopolitics of the conflict, in order to fight the war in a manner he considered to offer greater likelihood of ultimate success. Obama reshaped the geopolitics of the Afghanistan conflict, reconceptualising the war around the AfPak label, to include Pakistani territory — "in particular the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan, incorporating Tribal and Pashtun regions along the Afghan border" (Holland 2014). Unlike Bush's war, Obama's prosecution of it neither counted nor relied upon Pakistani assistance: it doubted it (ibid.).

Second, despite clear disdain for the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Obama was prepared to learn lessons from the conflict. In Afghanistan, Obama was prepared to replicate the strategy of a troop surge, previously used in Iraq. Obama contemplated and deliberated this strategy for ninety days, following its request from military leaders. If the deliberation and compromise on troop numbers (Stanley McChrystal got 10,000 fewer American troops than requested) were Jeffersonian in nature, the ultimate decision to deploy 30000 additional US troops is indicative that Obama is a modern Jeffersonian, prepared to commit sizeable forces to conflicts, perceived to be in the national interest and following careful consideration, even when his natural inclination is to avoid putting Americans in harms way. In this instance, Obama calculated that the possibility of stabilisation and security through a sufficient troop-to-territory ratio outweighed a personal desire to avoid putting American's in harm's way.

Third, Obama officially ended combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014, with the handover of security responsibility from the US and NATO's ISAF to Afghanistan. The nature of the withdrawal, as well as its very fact, is further evidence of Obama's successful creation of a form of Jeffersonian foreign policy, fit for the United States in the twenty-first century. Ten thousand troops will remain in Afghanistan until at least the end of 2015. They are tasked with the limited and mobile counter-terrorism efforts that Obama, had he been in power in 2001, would have prosecuted from the outset. Finally, in 2015, he had the kind of conflict he was advocating on the campaign trail eight years earlier: "I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists ... I will ensure that our military becomes more stealthy, agile, and lethal in its ability to capture or kill terrorists" (Obama 2007). But, as a modern Jeffersonian, he would avoid full-scale, boots-on-the-ground wars, in countries that are very difficult to pacify and reform.

### **Obama's Wars: Libya, Syria and Beyond**

There is one war that is truly Obama's, and that is Libya. This is ironic, since the conflict was "initiated and legitimised, not by the United States but, principally, France and, to a lesser extent, Britain" (Holland 2014). This, however, is highly

representative of Obama's reluctance to engage in military conflict, getting out ahead of the Wilsonian waves of history. Its successful prosecution was nonetheless wholly reliant on US participation and leadership, even if Obama's preferred (unofficial) position was to 'lead from behind'. Here, again, we see that Obama embodies the presidency of a modern Jeffersonian. Addressing the nation and justifying military intervention in the first conflict of his own choosing, Obama clearly and succinctly articulated a modern Jeffersonian rationale for war, espousing caution and reluctance, but, ultimately, (global and national) obligation to act:

For generations, the United States of America has played a unique role as an anchor of global security and as an advocate for human freedom. Mindful of the risks and costs of military action, we are naturally reluctant to use force to solve the world's many challenges. But when our interests and values are at stake, we have a responsibility to act. To brush aside America's responsibility as a leader and more profoundly our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are. Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.

(Obama 2011, see also Aaronson 2014 for further analysis)

Libya was a war of choice, pursued primarily due to altruistic motivations (even though appeals to national interest were made for instrumental reasons [see Holland and Aaronson 2014]). It was fought through overwhelming air power supporting indigenous forces on the ground. A modern Jeffersonian, determined to preserve American lives, Obama repeatedly stressed that there was no possibility of US ground forces becoming involved. Haunted by Bush's mistakes in Iraq, he also explicitly ruled out US-sponsored regime change, which was declared to be outside of the mission's direct objectives.

If we tried to overthrow Gaddafi by force, our coalition would splinter. We would likely have to put U.S. troops on the ground to accomplish that mission, or risk killing many civilians from the air. The dangers faced by our men and

women in uniform would be far greater. So would the costs and our share of the responsibility for what comes next.

To be blunt, we went down that road in Iraq.

(Obama 2011)

“In Libya, Obama’s desire to fight the good fight, and to fight it right, came together” (Holland 2014). Libya was a model intervention for a modern Jeffersonian seeking to pay a limited cost and bear a limited burden (Quinn 2011: 819). “It minimised the costs and risks to American life, by concentrating efforts on the lofty heights of exceptionalist rhetoric and American airpower. It was the ideal type intervention of a slowly solidifying Obama Doctrine” (Holland 2014). Libya was an ideal type modern Jeffersonian conflict — one pursued reluctantly because America could not avoid involvement. The pressures to intervene came only partly from Obama; more significantly they resulted from America’s exceptional identity, public and international outrage, and partisan domestic pressures. The conflict was fought in a modern Jeffersonian style, utilising all available technological sophistication, coupled with elegant and lofty rhetoric, in order to minimise the costs and risks to the United States.

The second conflict that is Obama’s own, but not yet fully owned by Obama, is the crisis in Syria. If “Obama’s first term was marked by a satisfactory intervention in Libya” then his second term has followed with “mounting frustration over Syria” (Aaronson 2014). In Syria, the Wilsonian optimism of the Arab Uprisings has met the teleological reversals of international terrorism’s most despised creation to date. However, before we get to this point, it is important to note that the conflict in Syria is not a single war. Rather, the conflict in Syria has evolved through three phases, each frustrating in different ways. It is: civil war and humanitarian disaster; a conflict threatening to spill over into further and unabashed chemical weapons usage, undermining global norms and international treaties inhibiting such usage; and the latest battleground of the global war on terror, fought as counter-insurgency.

In its first guise, the Syrian Civil War began in Spring 2011, within the context of the regional Arab Uprisings. Following protests and government retaliation, the situation

rapidly escalated to armed conflict. Rebel groups fighting Bashar Al-Assad's government forces include(d) the Free Syrian Army. At this stage, calls for and pressures to intervene centred on humanitarian concerns, due to the rising death toll and number of displaced persons. In its second guise, following Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2012, the US and UK called, initially, for intervention. Obama's 'red line' on chemical weapons use was arguably a case of rhetorical self-entrapment, as the administration was coerced by its own bold statements to support an interventionist line out of step with Obama's usual reluctance to seek military solutions to global crises. A route out of this 'intervention trap' was presented by a combination of the political posturing of Ed Miliband's Labour Party, Secretary of State John Kerry's hypothesising, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's rapid strategic diplomatic manoeuvring. And, when this unlikely escape route presented itself, Obama rapidly opted to take it. In its third guise, the rise of Islamic State in 2014 has been a game-changer, shifting the Syrian conflict from the context of the Arab Uprisings to the context of the enduring war against terrorism. As Islamic State seized towns and territory in Iraq, Obama opted to act. Intervention has, once again, taken the form of targeted airstrikes, with America's president reluctant to commit troops on the ground, despite appeals from coalition states. In Syria, Obama's dilemma has become how best to resist calls to ramp up the military campaign, by those who claim an air campaign has limited ability to solve the crisis decisively. The president is gambling that internal pressures will cause Islamic State to collapse. Given the rapid evolution of the Syria conflict, through its three phases, perhaps it is reasonable to expect further (currently unforeseen) developments. But, at present, an uneasy and deadly stalemate has been reached, as Obama, more than many others, is prepared to recognise the need for a cautious approach which acknowledges the long duration necessary for positive change.

Finally, beyond Libya and Syria, America, under Obama, remains in conflict with states it is not at war with (e.g. in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East, see Ryan 2011). Obama's proclivity to maximise the use of technology in order to minimise the risks to American life has also been consistently evident in his choice to fight from the air and, in particular, to use remotely piloted aircraft systems (UAVs/drones). As Aslam (2014) points out, Obama's use of drones builds on Bush's second term policy, rather than constituting a total step-change in US foreign policy.

Bush had ramped up the use of drones between 2005 and 2008, as the technology developed. What differs from his predecessor, however, is the frequency with which Obama has deployed drone strikes, in Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, and Somalia in particular. As Fuller (2016) notes, “Obama will leave office having overseen the construction of the largest, most efficient and most deployed assassination programme the United States has ever seen”. Obama is clearly not a ‘squeamish’ president; he has personally presided over kill lists, making tough calls on when to prioritise increased national security over civilian casualties. Remotely Piloted Air Systems give Obama ability to continue the War on Terror in countries the US is not at war with (e.g. Yemen, see Ryan 2011), in a manner that largely eliminates the risks of combat for American troops. This is an ability that, as a modern Jeffersonian, he has seized and maximised.

## **Conclusion**

Tony Smith argues that, after 2000, the US entertained a ‘progressive imperialist’ form of democracy promotion. In contrast and opposition to this position, Obama’s 2010 National Security Strategy insisted, “America will not impose any system of government on another country”. The corollary, “but our long-term security and prosperity depends on our steady support for universal values” (NSS 2010, see also Bouchet 2013), reflects a number of the key themes of Obama’s modern Jeffersonian foreign policy. Regime change, imperial foreign policy, and gung-ho interventionism are resigned to the past in Obama’s foreign policy; they are mistakes that he has attempted to remedy. Military intervention, for Obama, is rarely the answer to international questions and crises. Yet, history, and America’s exceptional role to play in its unfolding, demand that the US takes action. In these situations, circumstances must be carefully and patiently analysed, with a strategy arrived at that prioritises American life. When no good options present themselves, it is usually better to wait for the circumstances to change than search for new and bolder courses of action.

Obama’s caution is now infamous. As Quinn (2016) argues, “while there have been important continuities in policy between Obama and his predecessor, not least in some of the principles of executive discretion it has brought to bear in

counterterrorism, a key element of his policy has been its reluctance to enter into new entanglements which might bear significant cost”. Kitchen (2016) also accurately situates this caution and ‘issue management’ in direct contradistinction to his predecessor: “the Obama administration’s approach to international security has been one of issue management as opposed to the problem solving approach of the Bush, and to a lesser extent Clinton administrations”. Where Obama has engaged America’s armed forces, this has occurred with significant reluctance. In Syria, intervention was rendered necessary because of: the security vacuum inherited in Iraq; the evolution of the conflict to become recontextualised within discourses of chemical weapons norms and then the War on Terror; and domestic and partisan calls for action; which draw on embedded notions of American exceptionalism. In Libya, intervention was rendered necessary because of: international pressure from allies; America’s identity as freedom’s protector; the impossibility of effective action without the US; domestic calls and pressure from public opinion and partisan voices to take action against a widely known and disliked tyrant in order to prevent a potential massacre; as well as Obama’s own belief that this was a distinct possibility.

Obama’s presidency “confirms that, for all the difficulties and contradictions it produces, US presidents persistently fall back on democracy as a theme and goal of their foreign policy ... Had he wanted to, Obama would have had a hard time breaking away from this bipartisan tradition, just as Bush did after criticizing Bill Clinton for his democracy promotion” (Bouchet 2013, 31-32). Here, we see, again, that questions of structure and agency are central to making sense of US foreign policy. As a strategic agent, Obama is a Jeffersonian. As a strategic agent located in a strategically selective context, he is a modern Jeffersonian (see Hay 2002). He has adapted and updated a Jeffersonian foreign policy in the only way that is possible in the context of leading a sole, exceptional, superpower in a globalised world. This is his legacy. The Obama Doctrine is modern Jeffersonian; the least dangerous foreign policy currently possible for the greatest superpower the world has ever known.

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