

# Policy Connection



What is America's role in the world?

FOREIGN POLICY

In Chapter 1 we made the case for enhancing our understanding of American government and politics by examining and appreciating the role that various myths, beliefs, and ideologies play in how we view the complex political world we live in. But those various means for “making sense” of the U.S. political system also play a role in how we view **public policies**—that is, decisions made and actions taken by government officials in response to problems identified and issues raised through the political system.

In addition to the fourteen chapters that comprise this printed version of this textbook, we have posted online two additional chapters that deal explicitly with public policies. In online Chapter 15 we will focus on domestic policies, whereas online Chapter 16 considers U.S. foreign and defense policies. Although policies can be treated as distinct topics from government institutions and political dynamics underpinning American government, there are no doubt important connections between each of the subjects covered in the printed version and public policies. We have appended these “Policy Connection” sections at the end of each chapter to highlight some of the ways policies are related to and emerge out of the topics covered in the preceding pages. In this Policy Connection, for instance, we show how one important myth discussed in Chapter 1 plays a significant role in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

## The Slogan

In 2016, more than 20 candidates entered the race for the White House, most of them attempting to attract attention by offering a campaign slogan that

could be used as simple summary of what their candidacy represented. “A Future to Believe In” and “A Political Revolution Is Coming” were two slogans used by the Bernie Sanders campaign, although many associated “Feel the Bern” with his run for the Democratic nomination. “Fighting for Us” and “I’m with Her” became the phrases favored for campaign posters used at Hillary Clinton’s rallies. The sixteen or so candidates on the Republican side put forward their own catchphrases to be used on their websites and in television ads. “A New American Century” was senator Marco Rubio’s slogan, whereas Chris Christie’s “Telling It Like It Is” highlighted his unique political style developed while serving as the governor of New Jersey.

But perhaps no slogan drew as much attention during the 2016 campaign as Donald J. Trump’s “Make America Great Again,” iconically featured on a red baseball cap the candidate often wore at outdoor rallies. Among the many other slogans, “Make America Great Again” stood out from the rest as the defining theme of a successful bid to capture the party nomination. It was hardly original as a campaign slogan: Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign prominently featured the phrase “Let’s Make America Great Again!” in many of its political advertisements.

Students of modern political campaigning regard slogans as part of a more general effort to “market” presidential candidates to the American electorate, a view made famous in a best-selling book, *The Selling of the President 1968*, about Richard M. Nixon’s successful run for the White House. In many instances, slogans are merely short, pithy, and somewhat meaningless selections of words (e.g., Nike’s “Just do it!” or

Coca Cola's "It's the real thing!") created to attach a memorable and inoffensive phrase that immediately brings the product—or, in this case, the candidate—to mind.

But in the case of "Make America Great Again," the slogan implied much more. It is designed to provoke positive images of the nation's past—a past that has supposedly been lost and requires new leadership to be restored. When the Reagan campaign used the phrase in 1980, it was clearly aimed at the popular sentiment that the United States had lost its stature in the world under then-president Jimmy Carter. For the Trump campaign, it reflected a message the candidate delivered constantly during his rallies that conditions at home and abroad had deteriorated to the point that we need to "rebuild." "So here's what's going to happen," he argued. Under a Trump presidency "we are going to start winning again."<sup>55</sup>

We are going to make our country so strong. We are going to start winning again. As a country we don't win on trade; we don't win with the military. . . . We don't win with anything. We are going to start winning again and we're going to win so much, you are going to be so happy, we are going to make America so great again, maybe greater than ever before.<sup>55</sup>

## American Exceptionalism

Trump's slogan struck a chord with the feelings of many Americans as he scored victory after victory in the highly contested 2016 GOP primary battle and headed into the general election contest against Hillary Clinton. Underlying that success is a popular myth in American politics—the *myth of American exceptionalism*. It is a myth traceable to the observations of a French visitor to the United States in the 1830s. Alexis de Tocqueville came to the United States with the intention of studying the American prison system, but he soon discovered that there was much more to this relatively young republic to admire. In contrast to the European societies of the day, he found America quite distinct in its origins and social and political practices. It was, he declared, "exceptional."

Equally significant, Tocqueville found that Americans were quite aware and proud of their exceptionalism, almost to the point of annoyance. It was part of their identity as a nation. "The Americans," he observes, "in their intercourse with strangers, appear impatient of the smallest censure and insatiable of praise."

The most slender eulogy is acceptable to them, the most exalted seldom contents them; they unceasingly harass you to extort praise, and if you resist their entreaties, they fall to praising themselves. It would seem as if, doubting their own merit, they wished to have it constantly exhibited before their eyes. Their vanity is not only greedy, but restless and jealous; it will grant nothing while it demands everything, but is ready to beg and to quarrel at the same time.<sup>56</sup>

In her study of American exceptionalism, Hilde Rested noted that the feeling of being exceptional went beyond a sense of being different from other societies. It also included a belief that America had a unique role to play in world history and world affairs and that, unlike other nations, America will not fall victim to the historical traps that undermined previous republics.<sup>57</sup>

Many observers of American politics would argue that it is this myth of American exceptionalism that underlies the success of campaign slogans such as "Make America Great Again!" Others note the connection between that myth and the development of American foreign policies.

## Four Visions

According to Walter Russell Mead,<sup>58</sup> the connection of American foreign policy to the myth of American exceptionalism has emerged as four distinct visions of the U.S. role in world affairs. Historically, each is associated with an approach to foreign policy that emerged at different times in the nation's history:

1. *The Wilsonian vision*: In one such vision, the mission or purpose of American foreign policy is a moral one, in which the United States seeks to play a major role in establishing and defending a benign international legal order in which

democracy and free markets can thrive in peace. Associated with the efforts of president Woodrow Wilson to create the League of Nations after World War I, it is a vision that links American security to the support and success of organizations like the United Nations.

2. *The Hamiltonian vision:* A second vision for American foreign policy would have it foster a world order that best serves the economic interests of the United States. This view is closely associated with the views of Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury, who was committed to doing whatever was necessary to give the new nation a stable economic standing in the world economic order of the day.
3. *The Jeffersonian vision:* A third vision for American foreign policy stresses the need for the United States to shape its foreign and defense policies to protect and sustain our country's democratic institutions. Linked historically to the views of Thomas Jefferson, this vision regards the United States as an exceptional political system and society that requires its leaders to be on guard against risky entanglements that might put the nation's unique political qualities at risk. The mission of the United States in world affairs is to stand out as an example for others to emulate, but to avoid becoming involved in alliances or international arrangements that might sacrifice America's special "democratic experiment."<sup>59</sup>
4. *The Jacksonian vision:* Finally, a fourth, more nationalistic vision of American foreign policy gives weight to national honor and the wisdom and judgment of the American public and its leaders at any particular time. This view is associated with the domestic populism of president Andrew Jackson and in many respects shares the Jeffersonian vision of the United States as an exceptional country that should avoid foreign entanglements. But, whereas the Jeffersonians are skeptical and weary about international affairs, the Jacksonians are explicitly hostile to the idea of engaging in global politics on terms set by other nations. For Jacksonians, the special status of American democracy extends to how the

United States conducts itself once it is drawn into world affairs. Jackson had little tolerance or respect for the niceties of diplomacy or international rules, and he believed the United States should follow its own code of behavior in its relations with other nations.

It is easy to see how each of these four visions of America's mission in the world significantly impact the conduct of U.S. foreign policies, as well as the average American's understanding of them. Mead argues that these visions of the American role in world affairs (Wilsonian, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian) have, in various forms and mixtures at various times in U.S. history, provided the logic for the country's foreign policies. Indeed, when tied to the diverse feelings of national vulnerability over time, they offer us a means for understanding how these policies emerged and how they have changed over the years.

For the Wilsonians, Americans will only be safe in a democratic world, and U.S. foreign-policy makers should be guided by a sense of moral obligation to promote a world order reflecting those democratic values so central to our view of government. For the Hamiltonians, because the greatest threats come from a world order that undermines the economic interests of the United States, American policymakers must see foreign affairs in terms of serving our national economic self-interest. Jeffersonians, by contrast, regard the United States as an exemplar of modern democratic governance—a model to be nurtured and protected as much as possible from the corruption of international entanglements and intrigues. Finally, for Jacksonians, it is the integrity and honor of the United States that is most exceptional as well as vulnerable, and the country's foreign-policy makers must be prepared to do whatever is necessary to defeat those who might threaten either.

## The Realists

In contrast to those who see U.S. foreign policy as a reflection of these various visions, many analysts argue that the nation's role in world affairs is—and ought to be—driven by a realistic and more reasoned approach.<sup>60</sup> Usually associated with the "realist

school” of international affairs, they say that it is best to view the United States as just one among many state actors on the international stage, and although the United States may be unique in terms of its economic dominance and military power, it must still operate as a rational actor caught up in a system that it cannot control.

This view is linked to still another significant policy-related myth: *the myth of American vulnerability*. In the realm of American foreign and defense policy, the sense that the United States is vulnerable to attack from external forces has played a role in the public’s understanding of how our political system operates and how it should respond to those threats (see Chapter 16 online, on foreign policy). It has its roots in the earliest years of the Republic, when Americans still felt vulnerable to threats from England and other European powers that surrounded the newly independent nation. The fact that the British had attacked Washington, DC, during the War of 1812 and burned down the capitol and White House reinforced that myth. It was still influential during the Cold War period, when Americans felt vulnerable to nuclear attack from the Soviet Union. Although the feeling of vulnerability seemed to recede after the end of the Cold War, the myth reemerged on September 11, 2001, after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

If the realists have a vision, it is of a foreign policy guided by the principle that the United States can and should do what is necessary to deal with the threats to stability that can emerge in an international system that is inherently disposed

toward instability. The potential for threats and instability cannot be overcome or eliminated, and it is the role of foreign-policy makers to take steps to help the country sustain itself in such an uncertain environment.

Do policymakers take these visions and perspectives seriously? In April 2016, *The Atlantic* published an interview with President Obama<sup>61</sup> in which he claimed that he had followed a realist approach during most of his years in office. Earlier in his administration he was said to have expressed his guiding principle when faced in an international crisis as “Don’t do stupid stuff!” Critics of his position included hard-core realists who argued that in practice Obama was prone to assume a Wilsonian position, and they point to his support for popular movements that led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. During the presidential race of 2016, all signs pointed to a shift in the foreign policy of the United States given the position of the major party candidates. Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan reflected a contemporary version of the Jacksonian vision, whereas Hillary Clinton gave every indication that she would adopt a stronger Wilsonian approach than Obama had. Which perspective do you think would be the most effective guide for U.S. foreign policy in the near future?
2. We now live in a globalized and interconnected world. How will globalization and the revolution in telecommunications impact our foreign-policy agenda?