



## Perspektiven auf globale Politik

### JEFFERSON AND JACKSON IN THE FRONT SEATS: US FOREIGN POLICY UNDER TRUMP

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Donald Trump's foreign policy agenda has been characterized as **unpredictable**, **unprecedented** and – after a telling neologism of the president himself – **unpresidential**. In this blog post I will argue that the constituent parts of Trump's foreign policy are all but new. What is new is their combination. Moreover, while Trump's Jeffersonianism-Jacksonianism stands in stark contrast to the Wilsonianism-Hamiltonianism that Hillary Clinton embraced during her election campaign, it is only a partial departure from Barack Obama's Jeffersonianism-Hamiltonianism.

by *Jan Niklas Rolf, Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences\**



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In his celebrated book *Special Providence* Walter Russell Mead (2002) identifies four principal schools of US foreign policy, which he associates with the four great American politicians of Alexander Hamilton, Woodrow Wilson, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Mead (2002: 94) invites us to picture American politics as a large sheet of paper covered with millions of tiny iron filings. With four powerful magnets under the paper, bearing the names of Hamilton, Wilson, Jefferson and Jackson, the filings form four big clumps, representing the schools of Hamiltonianism, Wilsonianism, Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism. Yet not all filings line up along neatly patterned lines; some fall outside the effective power of the magnets, while others are under the influence of two magnets at the same time. As argued below, the four schools can form six different bilateral alliances and, in fact, with Donald Trump taking office, they have done so over the course of the past 40 years.

### *Mead's four schools of US foreign policy*

Among the four schools, *Hamiltonians* are the strongest supporters of a global market economy. This is because of their belief that free trade is to everyone's benefit and to the greatest benefit of a hegemonic power that is the US. Looking to the British Empire as a role model, Hamiltonians promote the freedom of the seas, an open door policy towards other countries and the free flow of money between trading partners. A positive side effect of being integrated in such a global trading system, Hamiltonians assert, is that countries are less likely to go to war with each other, as that would interrupt their beneficial trading relations.

*Wilsonians* not only want to export American goods but also American values. More interested in the moral and legal aspects of world order, they strive for a peaceful international community based on the rule of law. For Wilsonians, peace is not so much a result of economic interdependence than of democratic government. Accordingly, they are devoted to the promotion of liberal democracy and the protection of human rights. This missionary fervour to remake the world in America's image can easily lead to "democratic" and "humanitarian" interventions.

*Jeffersonians* hold that foreign policy is less about spreading American values abroad than about safeguarding them at home. As a result, they avoid any active involvement in international affairs and, if this is the only option available, they prefer economic sanctions (and presumably drone strikes) to full-scale military interventions. When it comes to domestic policy, it is possible to distinguish between left and right Jeffersonians. While the former follow an egalitarian program that promotes civil rights, the latter prescribe to a libertarian agenda that advocates small government. What unites them is the belief that the reification of America's founding principles, and the Bill of Rights in

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particular, is an on-going project and that excessive entanglements abroad will only endanger that project.

*Jacksonians* agree that the First Amendment, guaranteeing some basic liberties, is important, but prioritize the Second Amendment, protecting the right to bear arms. Adhering to a populist tradition of honour, courage and military pride that draws a clear distinction between the members of the folk community, whose physical security and economic well-being is put first, and outsiders, whose intrusion is opposed on both cultural and economic grounds, Jacksonians show little interest in the outside world. However, when provoked, they respond with the greatest possible application of force, both domestically, where they stand ready to take the law into their own hands, and internationally, where they are prepared to kill and die for family and flag regardless of international law.

### ***US foreign policy since the Cold War***

During the 40 years of the Cold War, Wilsonians and Jeffersonians came together in a dovish coalition that favoured a strategy of containment of – and sometimes even engagement with – the Soviet Union, whereas Hamiltonians and Jacksonians built a hawkish coalition that preferred a more activist – and sometimes even aggressive – approach to the Soviet Union (Mead, 2002: 264-265). With his strong commitment to human and civil rights, *Jimmy Carter* is probably the best example of a president embracing Wilsonianism and Jeffersonianism, whereas the alliance formed by Hamiltonianism and Jacksonianism is epitomized by *Ronald Reagan's* neoliberal and patriotic agenda.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two Cold War coalitions dissolved into their constituent schools and allied in new ways. During the 1990s, Wilson and Hamilton were sitting in the front seats, first under *George H. W. Bush* and then under *Bill Clinton*. The former called for a New World Order in which “**the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle**” and in which democratic regimes and free trade make war essentially impossible. To that end he intervened in Iraq and Somalia and backed NAFTA and the WTO. The free trade agreement and world trade organisation came into being under his successor Bill Clinton who also continued Bush’s interventionist agenda when he sent troops to Haiti and the Balkans and spearheaded the Oslo, Dayton and Belfast peace agreements. While Wilson and Hamilton were heading in the same direction, they sometimes disagreed on the best course. Clinton’s decision to extend most favoured nations status to China despite that country’s massive human rights abuses indicates that Hamilton was sitting in the driver’s seat.

After the inauguration of *George W. Bush*, the globalist coalition of Hamiltonianism and Wilsonianism came under pressure from the nationalist opposition of Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism. This, at

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least, is Mead's (2002: 176) take on it, writing on the eve of 9/11. Yet with Bush signing the Patriot Act, curtailing some basic liberties at home, and declaring a War on Terror, drawing America into bloody conflicts abroad, Jeffersonianism was soon replaced by Wilsonianism. Indeed, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were fought in the name of bringing "freedom", "democracy" and "human rights" to the disenfranchised people of the world. Wilson's missionarism, which in this case stems from the president's Evangelicalism and his advisors' Neoconservatism, was coupled with Jackson's militarism, as is evident from Bush's dissatisfaction with the inconclusive peace his father made with Saddam Hussein and his obsession to revenge the Iraqi dictator for attempting to assassinate his father. The Jacksonian contempt for international law, organizations and treaties was mirrored by the administration's establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, its invasion of Iraq without a clear UN-mandate and its withdrawal from both the International Criminal Court and the Kyoto Protocol, putting Jackson in the driver's and Wilson in the co-driver's seat.

After the foreign policy excesses of the Bush years, *Barack Obama* pursued a more isolationist approach. He pulled out of Iraq and, after sending some additional troops, gradually withdrew from Afghanistan. Sharing the cautiousness of Jeffersonianism, Obama only hesitantly supported a no-fly zone in Libya and consistently opposed the erection of such a zone in Syria – even after his self-imposed red-line was evidently crossed. Looking for the least costly and risky method of engagement, Obama ordered a series of drone strikes that became a symbol of his Jeffersonian foreign policy. When it comes to domestic policy, he adhered to an outspoken left Jeffersonian agenda as testified by his **fight against racial and sexual discrimination**. Committed to nation-building at home, but unwilling to retreat from the world completely, Obama embraced an unlikely coalition of Jeffersonianism and Hamiltonianism that found expression in his support for the transpacific and transatlantic trade partnerships TPP and TTIP and his (partial) lifting of the trade embargoes on Cuba, Iran, Myanmar and Sudan. Yet on the question of whether or not to impose economic sanctions on Russia in reaction to Putin's annexation of Crimea, Jefferson won the wrestle for the wheel.

With *Donald Trump's* protectionist plans to revoke and renegotiate several free trade agreements and to impose punitive tariffs on various countries and companies, Hamilton is banned to the back seat. There he joins Wilson, whose internationalism contrasts with Trump's "America first" rhetoric and his disdain for international institutions such as NATO and the UN. The president's threat to pull back US troops from Europe and East Asia unless America's allies bear the cost of their protection, his willingness to subcontract America's foreign policy in the Middle East to Russia and his affirmation that "[w]e do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example" all point to the fact that US foreign policy under Trump is further steering in a Jeffersonian direction. Domestically, Trump advances a right

Jeffersonian agenda, as is apparent from his [100-day action plan](#) that foresees massive tax cuts, the repeal of Obamacare and numerous other measures to roll back the state. His announcement to build a wall on the border to Mexico and to deport 11 million illegal immigrants, on the other hand, is indicative of a Jacksonian outlook that, internationally, manifests itself in a sharp friend-enemy distinction and a preparedness to use overwhelming force against the latter. In fact, Bush's hard stance on Iraq and Al-Qaeda 15 years ago is mirrored by Trump's hard stance on Iran and ISIS today. Thus, while Trump retains Obama's Jeffersonianism, he mixes it with Bush's Jacksonianism in what is the last of the six coalitions in which the four schools can combine. Unlike the other five coalitions, whose constituent schools tend to balance each other out, effectively hindering one school from pressing its agenda too far, both Jeffersonianism and Jacksonianism are profoundly suspicious of political elites, as a result of which this coalition is particularly able to tap into the populist sentiment of our time.

Since Carter's inauguration 40 years ago, Mead's four schools of US foreign policy have combined in all six possible ways. We have witnessed, in that order, Wilsonianism-Jeffersonianism, Hamiltonianism-Jacksonianism, Hamiltonianism-Wilsonianism, Jacksonianism-Wilsonianism, Jeffersonianism-Hamiltonianism and Jeffersonianism-Jacksonianism. With the exception of Clinton, who continued George H. W. Bush's foreign policy (but opposed him over domestic policy issues), each president broke at least partly with his predecessor's foreign policy, indicating that one cannot win a presidential election campaign without offering some alternative to the status quo. The greatest breaks occurred between Carter's Wilsonianism-Jeffersonianism and Reagan's Hamiltonianism-Jacksonianism as well as between George W. Bush's Jacksonianism-Wilsonianism and Obama's Jeffersonianism-Hamiltonianism. The transition from Obama's Jeffersonianism-Hamiltonianism to Trump's Jeffersonianism-Jacksonianism, in contrast, is marked by as much continuity as change. Trump's foreign policy, contestable and detestable as it may be, is therefore neither completely new nor totally different from that of his predecessor and, as such, more predictable than we might think.

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