

Promised Land, Crusader State: The Eight Traditions of US Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

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As part of my graduate studies, I recently had to read [Dr. Walter McDougall's](#) 1997 book [Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776](#). McDougall outlines eight US traditions of diplomacy and foreign policy, which he identified in the process of reviewing previous conceptions of these and the primary source they drew from. Given my [ongoing reflections](#) on US grand strategy and the fact that I am a sucker for attempts at comprehensive thematic frameworks, I thought I would outline and compare the traditions he identified. Thus, as a book summary, this article will take a modest amount of time to read but is certainly shorter than reading the book.

While I do not fully agree with some of his characterizations of, or issues with some of these traditions, I do believe that the eight traditions are a valid way of conceptualizing the history of U.S. diplomacy and foreign policy. More importantly, they are invaluable for those attempting understand the many contradictions of U.S. rhetoric and policy. I also throw in my two cents at the end regarding the third century of US diplomacy and foreign policy. For those left wanting a more in-depth overview, I suggest [this book talk](#) by McDougall and his [2014 reflection](#). Similarly, in lieu of my personal critique, I strongly encourage reading the book reviews by historians [Dr. Warren F. Kimball](#), [Dr. Ralph Raico](#), and [Dr. David Fromkin](#).

The Testaments

McDougall divides the eight traditions into what he terms “The Old Testament of American Foreign Policy” and “The New Testament of American Foreign Policy.” McDougall’s, “use of biblical terms is not meant to suggest that theology directly inspired U.S. foreign policy”. Instead, “the biblical metaphor is meant to suggest that the leaders who founded and led the United States throughout the nineteenth century imagined the nation as a sort of New Israel destined to fill a rich Promised Land and enjoy the blessings of liberty”.

McDougall argues that each of the two Testaments of American Foreign Policy emerged from the given question of their times, roughly corresponding to the first and second centuries of the US’s existence. The question for the first century of US history was relatively simple; to paraphrase – can the US survive, and how shall it do so? Though I could not find an explicit question representing the second century, I would formulate it as, “can America save the world, possibly by exporting its model?”

As McDougall describes, there have been a variety of attempts to summarize the themes and eras of US foreign policy. In surveying them he determines that each is lacking in some way or another. To remedy this, he formulates what should qualify as a genuine US tradition of foreign policy. Specifically:

To qualify as a genuine tradition, a principle or strategy must have commanded solid bipartisan support, outlived the era that gave it birth, entered the permanent lexicon of our national discourse, and continued to resonate with a portion of the American public even during eras when it did not directly inspire policy.

With this formulation in mind, McDougall closely examined primary sources in an attempt to avoid the truisms and mythologies that have been taken for granted.

In the process he encountered information that both changed his understanding of US history, and challenged the conventional wisdom of terminology and traditions which he identified. The radical shifts in intent and understanding of the concepts, as well as the baggage associated results in the “or ... (so called)” naming convention.

The Old Testament of American Foreign Policy

Broadly, McDougall feels that four traditions of the Old are concerned with, “Being and Becoming, and were designed by the Founding Fathers to deny the outside world the chance to shape America’s future”. This process of Being and Becoming, “was born of two eighteenth-century impulses: Enlightenment rationalism, with its universal notions of natural law and human rights doctrine, and a Christian anthropology that stressed the flawed and unchangeable nature of man”. Aware of this, the framers sought to keep in check the utopian and crusader tendencies embodied in these two impulses, while also harnessing the impulses more positive attributes such as sublime aspiration, humility, and caution. Thus, the Old Testament of American Foreign Policy reflects a balance of reason and faith.

Fittingly, this vision of The Old Testament of American Foreign Policy can only be maintained so long as “its people kept the commandments...chief among those...was ‘thou shalt not have truck with foreigners *even for the purpose of converting them*’”. According to McDougall, this commandment was broken and replaced in 1898 when the U.S. entered the Spanish-American war, began acquiring colonies, and attempting to “civilize” their peoples by forcefully exporting the ways of the U.S., all spurred on by the crusading spirits of religious and industrial movements.

The New Testament of American Foreign Policy

McDougall argues that while the traditions of the New Testament are derived from the Old, they are less coherent, conflicting not only with the Old traditions but also with each other. As a result the four New traditions are characterized by, “discord and danger as well as great promise”. This

is because the New traditions, “reflected an image of America not only as a Promised Land, but as a Crusader State called to save the world”.

McDougall attributes this transformation to several compounding factors. To begin with, “the twig of American Christianity was bent from the start, as measured by the yardstick of orthodoxy (‘right reason’)”. On the one hand, US Protestants and increasing millenarianism could be a powerfully inspirational, empowering, and even coercive force for good (e.g. ending slavery and promoting social reform). On the other, “the tendency of Protestant divines at the time of the revolution to identify the New Israel with the United States rather than with the Church Universal,” would lead to the allegedly heretical belief that it was their duty to create heaven on earth, and in turn erode both humility and the barriers between Church and State.

These Christian developments coincided with, “the assault on revealed religion propelled by ‘higher criticism’ of the Bible, the growing prestige of science, and the power and promise of industrial technology”. The result was a fusion of the rising Christian utopianism with a veritable secular religion. McDougall states that the latter came, “complete with a teleology promising that through America the world itself would approach perfection,” but the reality of what he describes is that both movements held such teleology. Thus, the two founding impulses of the Old, “eroded the ability of each to act as a check on the other.”

Defining and Comparing Traditions

Liberty, or Exceptionalism (so-called)

Liberty is typically referred to as exceptionalism. Liberty refers to the roots of the concept of exceptionalism, which viewed foreign policy as a, “means to the preservation and expansion American freedom”. The founders tempered their domestic idealism with reason, pragmatism, and realism, particularly abroad. To the founders, “the exceptional calling of the American people was not *to do* anything special in foreign affairs, but *to be* a light to lighten the world”. This stands in contrast to the modern crusader understanding which views the US as having the duty to intervene or to export ideals, even, or even particularly if, it is not in the more concrete national interest of the US.

Unilateralism, or Isolationism (so-called)

Unilateralism, or isolationism (so called) is interesting both because of their conflicting meanings in the modern sense and because of their relationships with exceptionalism in the modern sense. Unilateralism extends naturally from the tradition of liberty in that it seeks to ensure that US foreign policy decisions are free to preserve and expand the US’s freedom, sharing the suspicion of foreign entanglements, obligations that run counter to interests, and dependency. If treaties work for them, great, if not, ditch them, but do not concede interests to foreign entities or take actions that harm your own for the sake of others.

Today both unilateralism and isolationism are understood as form of *modern* exceptionalism, and all three terms are slurs (perhaps rightfully so these days). Unilateralism is taken to mean that the US should go on crusades or coerce others when it wants and how it wants, regardless of its interests, allies, or blowback. Isolationism is taken to mean that the US should completely or almost completely withdraw from the world. Both are justified by the modern take on exceptionalism; that the US is so powerful, just, smart, and all around special that it should either be Atlas before or after the shrug.

The American System, or Monroe Doctrine (so-called)

The American System, or Monroe Doctrine (so called) in its initial form was neither the complete exclusion of great powers from Central and South America, nor complete dominance over it, nor the pursuit of republicanism. Rather, it was a relatively minor, slowly evolving, speech turned doctrine which grew out of liberty and unilateralism. Put simply, “the American System declared by Monroe is... a purposely vague proclamation of U.S. determination to defend whatever vital national interests it had, or might identify in the future identify, in the Western Hemisphere”. However, “it was not about hemispheric politics at all [but] about Great Power politics as they ought *not* to apply to our hemisphere”. It all but disappeared until the turn of the end of the 19th century, when it was somewhat radically repurposed, heralding the New Testament and the final tradition of old: expansionism.

Expansionism, or Manifest Destiny (so-called)

Expansionism is simply, “the ideology of national growth”; the term Manifest Destiny was merely the branding of a specific zeitgeist. In reality, expansionism has existed in one form or another since the US was settled, on through today and the future, if only in principle. It is of the Old in that it logically extends from the first three traditions, recognizing that the growing country required room for those considered US citizens to be secure from foreign influence and to live free and prosper. It evolved from colonial expansion, to independence and the need for new farmland and the ousting of foreign powers from the continent, and to colonies of its own and the 20th century’s need of new markets. Today the US has softer forms of technological, economic, final frontier (submarine and outer-space), and the potential integration of territories.

Expansionism, like the potential for crusades, was always present in US civilization. The means and ends of pursuing the Promised Land increasingly nurtured and were driven by the crusading potentials and the socio-economic developments of the age. In this sense it is all too logical that the moralistic rationalizations of the industrial, territorial, racial, and religiously motivated expansions yielded progressive imperialism.

Progressive Imperialism

Progressive imperialism was the completed transition from the pursuit of the Promised Land – a primarily economic and security-driven expansion, driven by an internal desire for prosperity

and liberty – to a global imperial expansion based not only on economics and security, but also an ideological crusade. While, “the power-political principle of U.S. imperialism was sounder,” in the context of peaking imperial powers, and its legacy of bases remains more or less vital to modern national interests, the US colonial legacy and civilizing mission were failures and at great cost. The hubris of the minor wars of the era and their WWI climax led to an attempt at reform. The reform did not however seek to return to the logos and ethos of the Old, but rather revolutionized the New, bringing the millenarianism undercurrents front and center.

Wilsonianism, or Liberal Internationalism (so-called)

This manifested in liberal internationalism, aka Wilsonianism. Wilsonianism posits that, “conflict is not inevitable in human affairs, but is a preventable byproduct of greed, hubris, militarism, suppression of self-determination, secret diplomacy, and the idolatrous worship of the balance of power”. Instead it calls for the world to lay down its arms, give up large degrees of sovereignty, and carve out trade and peace agreements through institutions. In short eschews the traditions of liberty, unilateralism, the American System, and theoretically expansionism...all to try to expand the US model the world over. Regardless of the validity of its core arguments, Wilsonianism was both dead on arrival and pursued, at least rhetorically, in one form or another to this day.

Containment

The continued failures (and pursuit) of Wilsonianism was overlaid with containment, which in spite of its ideological and crusading edges, had a focus on simple calculations of economic and geographic security. Most importantly, “the purpose of containment is not to contest the rise of new powers, much less carve out an empire of our, but only to buttress the Eurasian balance that served us so well from 1776 to 1917”. In other words, for McDougall its success and desirability lay in its return to the Old traditions in that by putting interests first, the moral-ideological interests were assumed to follow.

Global Meliorism

Finally, global meliorism is something of a return to Wilsonianism, but instead of arising from devastation it was born out of the elation and hubris of the unipolar moment. Global meliorism holds that the world’s threats and issues, old and new, are generally rooted in oppression and poverty. Thus, the US should address their causes rather than their symptoms. Further, the tradition believes that US political and economic principles are universally valid and should be brought about by investment and coercion. McDougall holds that it, “is the least effective and in some ways the most arrogant of all our diplomatic traditions”. Instead he argues that the US should return to simply setting an example in the world, giving knowledge when asked, and generally allowing private citizens and diffusion to deal with everything else.

McDougall comes to these conclusions because he believes that at best such causal claims are highly questionable, and more importantly that forcing others to adopt elements of the US system will never be effective. While I would argue that numerous sciences strongly suggest that poverty and oppression are key factors at the root of many global issues, I do agree that forcing or coercing change, even if well-intentioned, almost never works. What I believe to be key are approaches that value true [stakeholder participation and empowerment](#) in everything from identifying their own problems, questions, and priorities to being able to sustainably improve things themselves; approaches that are transdisciplinary and account for [complex systems](#)...but that is for another day.

Conclusion

Those in the US tend to think of foreign policy camps and traditions in false dichotomies – Idealists vs Realists, Hawks vs Doves, Isolationists vs Internationalists. These oversimplifications permeate the academics, practitioners, pundits, and common man alike. However, they reflect a diverse set of US foreign policy traditions which McDougall compellingly distills into eight traditions.

This diversity is not inherently a weakness. Diversity of peoples and perspectives are what makes the US so great as a civilization and world power. This diversity emerges from the challenges of the day, only to help create new challenges from which more complexity emerges. What matters is how the US leverages its diversity to meet these challenges. That requires a tolerance for nuance and the discarding of false binaries. It requires truly grappling with its contradictions. That is why the question the US faces in its third century is, “can the United States be a Crusader State and still remain a Promised Land”?

For me, humans and reality are built upon contradictions; forces both physical and abstract working simultaneously with and against each other. This truth is apparent within and between every period and tradition of US foreign policy, and throughout human history. I believe my country’s issue is not so much the contradictions, whether real or apparent, but rather the human desire for simple frameworks. For me the question McDougall asks is a symptom of a larger one faced by humanity: can we foster societies which competently and comfortably discuss and embrace humanities contradictions while also striving to resolve and improve what we can? In short, can humanity pursue a more complete state of grace (whatever the practical limits), and if so, how?