Hegemonic Obsessions

What an Irrelevant Speech says about Republican Foreign Policy

BY MATT FAY, ON OCTOBER 6TH, 2011

Now that New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has reaffirmed that he will not seek the Republican nomination for president in 2012 his recent speech at the Reagan Library on American exceptionalism—which, last week, had pushed the fervor for Christie to enter the race to ever-higher levels—may seem irrelevant now. But there was an important foreign policy element to his speech that has caused some disagreement, and may get to the heart of the forces that will shape American foreign policy in the next Republican administration—whenever that may come to be.

In the speech, when discussing foreign policy, Christie said,

The United States must also become more discriminating in what we try to accomplish abroad. We certainly cannot force others to adopt our principles through coercion. Local realities count; we cannot have forced makeovers of other societies in our image. We need to limit ourselves overseas to what is in our national interest so that we can rebuild the foundations of American power here at home – foundations that need to be rebuilt in part so that we can sustain a leadership role in the world for decades to come.

Such a sensible pronouncement caused Cato Institute Vice President—and New Jersey native—Gene Healy to declare:

Lately, alas, [American exceptionalism] has become shorthand for jingoism, bombast, and national self-flattery. It's turned from justifiable pride in our country's uniqueness to something more bellicose and juvenile: "My dad can beat up your dad."

[…]

At the Reagan Library, Christie refused to play along. American exceptionalism, he argued, "must be demonstrated, not just asserted."

Christie emphasized reform at home, America living up to its free-market, limited-government principles, to better serve as "a beacon of hope for the world."

In Christie's formulation, austerity is, in a way, a "forward strategy of freedom," minus the bombs and bloodshed. Solving our entitlements crisis at home is a way to enhance our influence abroad.

Of the ongoing Arab revolutions, Christie argued: "There is no better way to reinforce the likelihood that others in the world will opt for more open societies and economies than to demonstrate that our own system is working."

Healy refers to this last part as a "subtle rebuke" to neoconservativism and the "armed humanitarians on the left." But Daniel Larison of The American Conservative is much less sanguine. Larison fixates on Christie's desire for sufficient military and intelligence "resources" that America will be "prepared to act" and "prepared to lead," as well as his contention that America has a "stake" in the outcome of uprisings like the Arab Spring.

Christie claims that his call for a foreign policy focused on America's interest was an "argument for getting our own house in order is not an argument for turning our back on the world." But, according to Larison,

Christie takes for granted that the U.S. must devote enormous resources to all of these things to "be prepared to act" and "to lead," and he laments that our domestic problems are hindering our ability to "do good for other countries." Presumably, his insistence that the U.S. should continue trying "to stop the spread of nuclear materials and weapons and the means to deliver them" is a nod towards perpetuating a dangerous, confrontational policy towards Iran. As I said last week, he recycles the ridiculous isolationist charge by setting up an opposition between "leading" and "turning our back on the world." The choice he presents us is one between hegemony or nothing.

Larison's assessment is based somewhat on the idea that governors do not, by necessity, have much in the way of foreign policy experience, and therefore, "What we know about Christie's current staff and the people who were most eagerly pushing him to run ought to tell us that Christie was not going to be the candidate Healy imagines." In the "pushing him to run" category, the chief proponent has been uber-neocon Bill Kristol, so it may be true that underneath Christie's less-than-hawkish rhetoric there lies the desire for a globe-spanning crusade on behalf of democratization. Or, perhaps Christie was seen as just the unformed lump—no pun intended—of clay Bill Kristol could mold to his neoconservative heart's desire, therefore explaining the Weekly Standard editor's relentless pushing for him to get into the race.

But could there be a more subtle explanation for Christie's sentiments at the Reagan library? Could it be that Governor Christie was expressing a sentiment more in line with Jeffersonian and Jacksonian traditions of American foreign policy thought? For that to be true, it need not be the flat out repudiation of Wilsonian principles that Healy saw, but it also means that Larison's pessimistic view of Christie's foreign policy outlook may be misplaced as well.

The Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian—along with Hamiltonian—schools of thought were articulated by Walter Russell Mead in his book Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World. The book is often pretentious and overly-triumphalist, but the taxonomy Mead developed to explain a myriad view of American foreign policy is quite useful:

Hamiltonians regard a strong alliance between the national government and big business as the key to both domestic stability and to effective action abroad, and they have long focused on the nation's need to be integrated into the global economy on favorable terms. Wilsonians believe that the United States has both a moral obligation and an important national interest in spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world, creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law. Jeffersonians hold that American foreign policy should be less concerned about spreading democracy abroad than about safeguarding it at home; they have historically been skeptical about Hamiltonian and Wilsonian policies that involve the United States with unsavory allies abroad or that increase the risks of war.

Finally, a large populist school I call Jacksonian believes that the most important goal of the U.S. government in both foreign and domestic policy should be the physical security and the economic well-being of the American people. "Don't Tread on Me!" warned the rattlesnake on the Revolutionary battle flag; Jacksonians believe that the United States should not seek out foreign quarrels, but when other nations start wars with the United States, Jacksonian opinion agrees with Gen. Douglas MacArthur that "There is no substitute for victory."

Modern Republicans have always hued toward a Jacksonian rhetorical line. While President Bush's second inaugural address might have been dripping with Wilsonian excesses about ending tyranny all over the globe, his assertions about the U.S. military "kicking ass" in post-Surge Iraq or wanting Osama bin Laden "Dead or Alive" were much more in line with the Jacksonian tradition's bloody-minded vengefulness than the Wilsonian tradition's high-minded idealism. Throughout his presidency Bush pursued policies that put him firmly in the Wilsonian camp but appealed to his Republican base through the use of Jacksonian rhetoric and imagery that seemed to mesh perfectly with his Texas drawl and "cowboy" swagger.

Before 9/11 though, Bush struck a more Jeffersonian tone with his call for a humble foreign policy and skepticism about nation-building. Governor Christie's soft jab at neoconservatism seems in line with a reinvigoration of those same Jeffersonian principles into Republican foreign policy thinking. These principles will always be linked to Jacksonian-style articulation in GOP rhetoric as it helps Republicans juxtapose themselves against their "appeasement"-minded Democratic opponents.

The marriage of these two strains of thought is not always the easiest to demonstrate in today's soundbyte culture—just witness as the current crop of Republican candidates try to present themselves as equally tougher on terrorism than the lilly-livered Democrats, while also expressing a desire to "bring the troops" home from far off lands of little interest to most Americans. But such an effort would certainly be much closer to a traditional conservative line of thinking on foreign policy than anything witnessed over the course of the past decade. What has been missing is the limiting principle offered by the Jeffersonian school of thought—replaced by the expansive ambition and unbounded, and often misplaced, idealism of the Wilsonian school.

These competing tendencies of American foreign policy thought—Jeffersonian non-interventionism, Jacksonian nationalism, Wilsonian idealism, and even Hamilitonian mercantilism—will all find a home in any particular politician or candidate as political leaders continually attempt to be all things to all people. Christie's speech at the Reagan Library, with its paeans to the necessity of American leadership even in the face of further fiscal austerity, was no different. The balance between these strains achieved by any particular administration determines the direction policy will take. The Bush administration, stocked as it was with neoconservative advisors and policymakers, schewed toward the Wilsonian even as it espoused the Jacksonian. Christie's reassertion of Jeffersonian principles of limitation along side its nationalistic and idealistic brethren is a positive, if still incomplete, step toward bringing sanity back to American foreign policy.

Even with Christie bowing out of the Republican race before stepping in, such a sentiment has been grudgingly articulated to some degree by Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman and is embodied in the insurgent campaign of Ron Paul. It remains to be seen how any would govern once in office, but the need to insert Jeffersonian principles into campaign—and non-campaign—rhetoric is a sign that some semblance of balance might be restored.