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Between Internationalism and Isolationism: McGovernism in the U.S. Foreign Policy Tradition

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Abstract

A new form of American Isolationism emerged during the Obama Administration as its foreign policy was characterized by its prudent attitudes and its practice of not taking unnecessary steps. Since President Donald Trump took office and implemented his “America First” strategy, it has become very apparent that a different kind of American foreign policy is now in operation. The current restructured American Isolationism can best be explained as the self-imposed creation of distance from international engagement which prioritizes government interests toward domestic rather than foreign affairs. This paper argues that the tendency toward isolationism has been a continuous process from the Obama to the Trump administration. This paper also analyzes the roots of the Obama isolationism: Democrats who have supported isolationism since the Vietnam War, particularly in opposition to military intervention. While both types of isolationism seek to minimize foreign involvement, the Obama style of isolation had different goals that distinguished its world view from Trump’s “America First” isolationism. The research presented in this paper approaches the question through the prism of the 1972 Presidential election. In that year, an active political faction and sloganeering within the Democratic Party resulted in the nomination of George McGovern as a presidential candidate. This paper provides a description of the ideological base of McGovernism: a new form of American isolationism which has survived within the Democratic Party since the Vietnam War. This paper shows McGovernism to be one of the foreign policy trends in contemporary politics. There are resemblances between the coalition that won in 2008 and the coalition that lost in 1972. Because of this, the importance of McGovernite politics should increase.

Keywords

1. McGovernism, 2. American Foreign Policy, 3. Isolationism, 4. Liberalism, 5. Vietnam War

1. Introduction

After the 2016 presidential election in the United States, people began to realize that times had changed. In the age of Donald Trump, “populism” and “anti-globalization” seem to be the main themes in American politics. Scholars have been kept busy in attempting to answer why they were wrong about President Trump until the day of the election. As of this writing, two years have passed but the fundamental question has yet to be answered: will America’s past foreign policy beliefs, the so-called liberal hegemony, or liberal international order, that informed American foreign policy remain?

In December 2018, the White House ordered the Pentagon to immediately pull all U.S. troops from Syria. Also, President Trump has directed the withdrawal of nearly half of the more than 14,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan. It was President Barack Obama, however, who decided not to intervene when the Syrian military attacked civilians with chemical weapons, an act that crossed his “red line.” During his first term, Obama set a timeline to start withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan within a two-year period. It is notable that both Obama and Trump were elected with platforms that emphasized early opposition to the Iraq War.

Both Presidents Obama and Trump have shared the fundamental idea that American forces should not be in the Middle East.¹ Obama’s idea of retrenchment is often criticized as showing weakness to the world, in contrast to being credited as a smart strategy for the “long game.”² President Obama’s foreign policy was somewhat different from that of his predecessors who managed the post-Cold War era, though his objective for U.S. foreign policy was interpreted within the historical mainstream, which was to maintain U.S. primacy and a liberal international order.³ Even before President Trump’s election, there were many discussions about whether the U.S. should continue to be the world’s policeman.⁴

Kenneth Waltz, the Harvard international relations expert, has argued that the post-Cold-War era was the failure of the liberal hegemony. Though post-Cold War presidents

¹ David E. Sanger, “A Strategy of Retreat in Syria, With Echoes of Obama,” *The New York Times*, December 19, 2018. In the article, the comment of Richard N. Haass, President of the Council of Foreign Relations, is quoted as saying “On this issue, there is more continuity between Trump and Obama than would make either administration comfortable.”

² Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s role in the World*, Public Affairs, New York, 2016.

³ Hal Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:4, 101-125, 2016.

⁴ Gideon Rose, “What Obama Gets Right,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sep/Oct 2015, Vol.94 Issue 5, p2-12; Bret Stephens, “What Obama Gets Wrong,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sep/Oct 2015, Vol.94 Issue 5, p13-16.

had different diplomatic styles and their specific policies and priorities varied in certain respects, Waltz thought that the concept of liberal hegemony remained the default strategy for all administrations.⁵ In contrast, Trump has called for a foreign policy, which would make Americans stronger and richer at home and less committed to issues abroad as the alternative to taking responsibility for the liberal world order with the U.S. as the “indispensable nation.”⁶ The result of the 2016 election partially showed the depth of public dissatisfaction with post-Cold War foreign policy. As Thomas Wright noted, Trump was the only president ever elected on a platform that explicitly rejected all of the pillars of U.S. grand strategy.⁷ The sudden announcement of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria and the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis support Wright’s comments.⁸

In the Trump era, we tend to focus more on Trumpism, and Trump’s views on foreign affairs. Trump’s impact is significant. The diplomatic attitudes that have resulted in the creation of a distance from foreign engagement and the accompanying limiting priorities to domestic affairs have been observed since Obama’s presidency, however. Therefore, this paper will begin by inquiring into the origins of that trend.

As we shall see later, this paper pays close attention to George McGovern and claims a new typology, McGovernism. In order to understand liberals’ negative sentiments toward intervention, it is essential to see that the current trend is not the first time that this kind of negative sentiment toward involvement in world matters has existed. It also argues that the Obama era’s isolationism is not the same as Trump’s isolationism. Just as Obama may have used the term “strategic patience” and Trump uses “America first,” it is still important to differentiate between Obama’s and Trump’s isolationism. In the age of polarization, there is hope that by understanding the roots of political ideas, a compromise between the two parties can be achieved.

This paper touches upon McGovern’s legacy in the development of a philosophy concerning foreign policy, especially within his party and in the Democrats’ political philosophy.

⁵ Stephen M. Waltz, *The Hell of Good Intentions; America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Thomas Wright, “Trump’s Foreign Policy Is No Longer Unpredictable: Gone Are the Days of a Divided Administration,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 18, 2019.

⁸ David A. Graham, “James Mattis’s Final Protest Against the President,” *The Atlantic*, December 20, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/12/defense-secretary-james-mattis-leaving-trump-administration/569746/>.

For the first time in 40 years, the Left is now shaping the Democratic Party's identity.⁹ In fact, Obama came from a background that was farther to the Left than any presidential nominee since George McGovern, perhaps farther than any previous nominee.¹⁰ Moreover, the enthusiasm of Bernie Sanders' supporters in 2016 and the results of the 2018 Midterm elections give us a substantial reason to understand the Democrats' stance on foreign policy and the origins of that stance.

2. Between Internationalism and Isolationism

To provide the simplest explanation of the issue, there are only two positions concerning U.S. foreign policy on problems overseas. One supports intervention; the other opposes it. The power dynamics of those two positions have drastically changed within the past decade in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center polls, 57 percent of the Americans believe that the United States should "deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their own problems as best they can."¹¹ Moreover, it should be pointed out that skepticism about U.S. global engagement reached historic levels in 2013. With 52 percent in favor of the U.S. minding its own business, the survey showed the most lopsided balance in nearly 50 years.¹² In Congress, the peak of solidarity supporting intervention was seen after the terror attacks of 9/11. Before and after that event, however, there have always been political debates about whether America should intervene. Although bipartisan consensus has not been seen for a long time now, there were reasons and support for U.S. involvement in world politics. Usually, the party occupying the White House has supported intervention based on a set of logical reasons, including humanitarian concerns, the war on terror, or development and possession of nuclear weapons.

A recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a well-known bipartisan think tank, provided insight on how members of the 115th Congress view

⁹ Peter Beinart, "Will the Left Go Too Far?" *The Atlantic*, December 2018.

¹⁰ Joshua Muravchik, "Obama's Leftism," *Commentary*, October 2008.

<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/obamas-leftism/>

¹¹ Bruce Drake and Carrol Doherty, "Key Findings on How Americans View the U.S. Role in the World," *Pew Research Center*, May 5, 2016.

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/05/key-findings-on-how-americans-view-the-u-s-role-in-the-world/>.

¹² "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips: America's Place in the World 2013," *Pew Research Center*, December 3, 2013.

<http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>.

the U.S. commitment to global leadership and support for the liberal world order.¹³ As a result, the 50 members studied by the CSIS team fell into the three categories: order-driven, values-driven, and limits-driven. The primary purpose behind the study was to find overlapping views among the members of Congress, regardless of their political party, in order to provide a possible consensus. The results of the study provided us cause for hope. All in all, the study successfully showed a strong degree of bipartisan support for alliances, multilateralism, or foreign aid. Nevertheless, a bipartisan consensus cannot be reached under the current predominance of populism, which strongly opposes the Washington establishment, and the ideological divisions that exist between the two political parties.

A well-known study by Walter Russell Mead explained the American foreign tradition using four categorizations: Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian.¹⁴ Each traditional school interpreted the end of the Cold War in a different way. The Cold War coalitions, an alliance between Hamiltonians and Jacksonians on the one side, and Wilsonians and Jeffersonians on the other, broke up. Mead explained the new character of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy as an overwhelming preponderance of Hamiltonians and Wilsonians within the establishment during the G. H. W. Bush and Clinton presidencies.¹⁵ George W. Bush was categorized as a Jacksonian.¹⁶

Kurt Campbell and Derek Chollet also provided the framework for a new arena of the U.S. national security debate. That debate has become far more complex as a result of the two political parties' polarization, although it has historically been known to vary on core positions in response to prevailing political winds.¹⁷ On the Republican side he describes four cliques: Oldsmobile Conservatives, Regan Republicans, Domestic-Oriented American Firsters, and Faith-Based Interventionists. There are also four cliques within the Democratic side: Come Home Americans, American Skeptics, Globalists, and Truman Democrats. As Campbell and Chollet noted, some of these cliques they identified represent some schools of thought that have

¹³ Kathleen H. Hicks, Louis Lauter, Colin McElhinny *et al.*, *Beyond the Water's Edge: Measuring the Internationalism of Congress*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, 2018.

¹⁴ Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2001.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: Melisa Deciancio, "The Jacksonian Tradition and the United States Foreign Policy: The Influence of History on the Ideas of the Bush Administration," *Area de Relaciones Internacionales*, FLACSO, Argentina, 2008.

¹⁷ Kurt M. Campbell and Derek H. Chollet, "The New Tribalism: Cliques and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.30, Number 1, Winter (2006-07): pp.193-203.

traditionally been represented in the national foreign policy debate, such as those Mead provided, whereas others are relatively new. Campbell and Chollet published their study, less than five years after the U.S. launched two major military campaigns, which have been described as a response to the most serious and direct challenge to national security since Pearl Harbor.¹⁸ Their study was also conducted during election cycles when a deep Republican-Democratic gap could be observed.

If Mead showed in his study the roots, cause, and motivation of U.S. foreign policy, Campbell and Chollet demonstrated how the tradition could remain consistent in real politics which no longer operated under a bipartisan consensus. While recognizing the problem of polarized politics, the focus of this paper is not to prove that the potential consensus base no longer exists, but to provide a new perspective on the ideological differences between Trump and Obama, between Republican populism and Liberal populism, or the Liberals' own negative sentiments toward the use of the military. Theoretically, the space without a center, created by recent politics, has made it more possible for populist voices to stand out and impact politics more directly. Thus, it is worth questioning if there are any other kinds of Jacksonian-like traditions.

This research paper additionally suggests using the term "McGovernite" to describe the new liberal-leaning isolationist attitude toward U.S. foreign policy. Mead explained the importance of the Jacksonian tradition especially in response to provocations that energize public opinion in favor of war.¹⁹ What is so significant in Jacksonian thought is its tie to so-called populism and a grass-roots movement, which could give voice to efforts to influence existing politics. Because it was a tradition that the establishment mainly directed the U.S. foreign policy, any grass-roots populist movements were regarded to be Jacksonian. Therefore, no single explanation could describe Obama's victory, with strong grass-roots movement support and the anti-Iraq War coalition from Liberal camps. Mead himself did not equate Jacksonian thought with Obama, despite stating that Jacksonian thought had been the enemy of many of what President Obama saw as some of America's most important advances.²⁰

In spite of this, both studies slightly mentioned the McGovern-like aspect of current U.S. foreign policy. Mead mentioned McGovern as the one of the main examples of the

¹⁸ Campbell and Chollet, "The New Tribalism: Cliques and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy."

¹⁹ Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Tradition," *The National Interest*, No. 58, Winter 1999/2000.

²⁰ Walter Russell Mead, "Andrew Jackson, Revenant," *The American Interest*, January 17, 2016.

“idealistic dove” during the Cold War in his study.²¹ Further, McGovern’s election slogan, “Come Home America,” is the label that Campbell and Cholent devised to identify one of the Democrats’ cliques.²² The next section explains the importance of the new tradition among the U.S. foreign policy cliques.

3. McGovernism

When the Bush administration announced the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Democratic-controlled Congress vehemently opposed it. In contrast to Republicans’ strong support for the Bush war in Iraq, Democrats, with the exception of Sen. Joe Lieberman, strongly opposed the war. The division between the political parties was too deep to sustain a bipartisan foreign policy consensus. The Democrats’ attitude toward Iraq was characterized by “Come Home, America” or to put it another way, “McGovernism was back with a vengeance.”²³

The first two decades of the Cold War are often remembered for a bipartisan foreign policy. What bipartisanship existed, however, was largely dissipated during the Vietnam War. From the 1970s, the Democratic Party would never again look like the New Deal era coalition. Moreover, the experience of the Vietnam War implanted a negative connotation in American history toward foreign intervention and triggered fear and popular backlash. Sen. Edward Kennedy often brought up the Vietnam War in his speeches to convince people to not support the war in Iraq, declaring that “like Vietnam, there is no military solution to Iraq.”²⁴

The image of George McGovern as a Democratic candidate is also connected to the historical image of the Vietnam War. The 1972 presidential campaign witnessed liberals decrying Vietnam as “Nixon’s War,” while conservatives caricatured McGovern as excessively soft on defense and Communism. This kind of negative and radical image of McGovern has been widely perceived as McGovernism and used as a way to urge Democrats to not repeat history. McGovernism is something the post-Cold War establishment has not supported, even going so far as to reject it.²⁵

The previous observations, however, describe only a portion of what constitutes

²¹ Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*.

²² Campbell and Chollet, “The New Tribalism: Cliques and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy.”

²³ Peter Wehner, “The Democrats and the Return of McGovernism,” *Townhall*, March 20, 2008. <<https://townhall.com/columnists/peterwehner/2007/03/20/the-democrats-and-the-return-of-mcgvornism-n1231375>>

²⁴ National Press Club, January 9, 2007.

²⁵ Kurt M Campbell, and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security*, Basic Books, New York, 2006; Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight: Why Liberals -and Only Liberals- can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*, Harper, New York, 2006.

McGovernism. Through his election campaign, McGovern aimed to redefine the role of the United States in world politics, with the linkage to the anti-Vietnam War movement. The campaign was a reexamination of Cold-War foreign policies. The idea that McGovern articulated was one of a world order with values and morals. He was as idealistic as the Wilsonians and as much a globalist as the Hamiltonians. He did not define “national interest” as narrowly as the Jeffersonians nor did he have the “folk” mindset associated with the Jacksonians. Jacksonian society draws an important distinction between those who belong to the folk community and those who do not.²⁶ What made McGovern so unique was his strong belief in his country. America is the indispensable nation, meaning that she should not have intervened with other countries, instead focusing on America herself.²⁷ McGovern preferred multilateralism through dialogues that cast doubt on the way of fighting the Vietnam War, and called for withdrawal from Vietnam in order to preserve America’s moral virtue.²⁸ Once again, that was the call for America to return to the founding ideals of the Constitution.

His strength within the field of Democratic candidates was gained through his early opposition to the Vietnam War. Since the Democrats’ tone in 1972 was more of opposing Nixon’s war, strategically, McGovern had the advantage having expressed strong opposition stance from the earliest stages, to show how deeply he could bring change to current politics. It was through the McGovern campaign that the Democratic Party shed its Truman-Kennedy hawkish heritage and embraced an antiwar orientation and skepticism toward increased American militarization and overseas interventions.²⁹ McGovern criticized elite foreign policy architectures by calling them “center,” which included not only the Nixon administration but also the Democratic mainstream. Gary Hart, McGovern’s campaign strategist, later recalled that their strong opposition to the mainstream forced their campaign to depend on using volunteer staff in lieu of political professionals.³⁰ The fulltime and volunteer staff consisted of members of the younger generation including Gary Hart and Rick Stearns, who described the 1972 election as being different in its openness and fluidity.³¹ This new experiment in staffing within

²⁶ Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*.

²⁷ George McGovern, *An American Journey: The Presidential Campaign Speeches of George McGovern*, Random House, New York, 1972, pp.109-118.

²⁸ Daryl Webb, Crusade: “George McGovern’s Opposition to the Vietnam War,” the *South Dakota State History Society*, Vol.28, No.3, 1998.

²⁹ Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party*, University Press of Kansas, Kansas, 2007, 2009.

³⁰ Gary Warren Hart, *Right from the Start: A Chronicle of the McGovern Campaign*, Quadrangle/ New York Times Book, New York, 1973.

³¹ Miroff, *The Liberals’ Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the*

the Democratic Party and the birth of a new clique of liberals later caused fragmentation within the Party. It did, however, result in the nomination of McGovern as the Democratic candidate, with a dramatic grass-roots uprising by the day of the Democratic Convention, which initially only had 3% support when he began his campaign.

The McGovernites' political campaign was forged from the joined hearts and hands of people, who themselves referred to it as a "grass-roots movement." These individuals stood for peace and against the Vietnam War with youthful energy and new voices calling for change. Although opposition to militarism offered them leverage via the dialogues and multilateralism, it could also be viewed as being unilateral in terms withdrawing American troops. The McGovern campaign was dragged into a radical antiwar movement and its position weakened by the withdrawal of Thomas Eagleton as Vice Presidential candidate, which resulted in a devastating loss.

4. Conclusion

As Bruce Miroff pointed out, Obama's 2008 winning coalition resembles the losing coalition of 1972.³² Until 1972, the Democratic Party was based on the New Deal coalition, which comprised city political machines, blue collar workers, and white Southerners. The McGovern campaign evoked a different and distinctly American strain of idealism and created a new coalition that attracted young voters, women, minorities, and well-educated professionals. And similar coalition for Obama was later dubbed the coalition of ascendance. Both the McGovern and Obama coalitions were initially formed around platforms that strongly opposed an unpopular war, with mass organizing at the grass-roots level.

Joshua Muravchik warned conservatives that Obama's Leftism before the 2008 election made him unlikely to be a leader, or to be able to bridge the divides of party or ideology.³³ The 2016 election might have proved the failure of the center-Left's ability to transform its institutional and intellectual dominance into policy achievements that would actually stabilize middle-class life. At the same time the center-Right failed to articulate a workable alternative, thereby leaving an intellectual and political vacuum in the center of American life.³⁴ Trump's rise to power was surprising, but so was Obama's.

This paper has shown McGovernism to be one of the foreign policy trends that exist

Democratic Party.

³² Ibid.

³³ Joshua Muravchik, "Obama's Leftism," *Commentary*, October 2008.

³⁴ Walter Russell Mead, "The Meaning of Mr. Trump," *The American Interest*, May 23, 2016.

in contemporary politics. Although separated by nearly 40 years of political history, a similar political view, liberal philosophy, and attitude toward the international politics could be observed in the 1970s and 2008 coalitions. McGovern himself later wrote that although his ability to include any of the millions of Americans who felt that they were outsiders to the political decision-making process did not help him win the 1972 election, stated, “we unified our previously splintered party, paving the way for the Democratic administrations of Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama.”³⁵

Although it was, at the time, rejected and not given much attention, the importance of McGovernite politics should increase. It is still debatable whether Trump is the latest version of the Jacksonian surge,³⁶ as Jacksonian populism has been identified as one of the traditions of U.S. foreign policy for decades. On the other hand, as McGovernites demonstrated, this group is different from the Jacksonians, which also immediately reacted to the war and enthusiastically called for U.S. troop withdrawals. This liberal-rooted form of populism and its impact on U.S. foreign policy should be examined carefully.

Mead metaphorically explained American foreign policy by comparing it to a car:

*In the front seat the Wilsonian and Hamiltonian Schools agreed that the car should go as fast as possible, but they disagreed on the best course. Their feet were together in pressing on the accelerator, but they wrestled for the wheel. Jeffersonians, meanwhile, sat in the back and exercised the classic privilege of the backseat driver: They complained loudly and irritatingly that the car was going too fast, and that it was taking wrong turns. The three schools were so busy fighting that at first none of them noticed that the engine—the Jacksonians, whose support gave the car its real power and drive—were no longer responding.*³⁷

The question was whether Jacksonians were the only ones we did not recognize. In the age of polarization, to provide a new perspective on the ideological differences between Conservative and Liberal is important. In this paper, through the prism of the 1972 Presidential election, the Liberals’ own negative sentiments toward the use of the military is differentiated and explained as McGovernism.

³⁵ George McGovern, *What It Means to Be a Democrat*, Penguin Books, New York, 2011.

³⁶ Taesuh Cha, “The Return of Jacksonianism: the International Implications of the Trump Phenomenon,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:4, 83-97, 2016.

³⁷ Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*.

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