



U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective

Clients, enemies and empire

David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski



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What is the long-term nature of American foreign policy? *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective* refutes the claim that it has varied considerably across time and space, arguing that key policies have been remarkably stable over the past hundred years, not in terms of ends but of means

Closely examining U.S. foreign policy, past and present, David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski draw on a wealth of historical and contemporary cases to show how the U.S. has had a “client state” empire for at least a century. They clearly illustrate how much of American policy revolves around acquiring clients, maintaining clients and engaging in hostile policies against enemies deemed to threaten them, representing a peculiarly American form of imperialism. They also reveal how clientilism informs apparently disparate activities in different geographical regions and operates via a specific range of policy instruments, showing predictable variation in the use of these instruments.

With a broad range of cases from U.S. policy in the Caribbean and Central America after the Spanish-American War, to the origins of the Marshall Plan and NATO, to economic bailouts and covert operations, and to military interventions in South Vietnam, Kosovo, and Iraq, this important book will be of great interest to students and researchers of U.S. foreign policy, security studies, history and international relations.

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To Irwin S. Sylvan and Sally v. Sylvan and to Sheila O'Brien

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Preface

Early in the twenty-first century, United States foreign policy began to be talked about as having undergone major changes. Journalists and academics began to speculate that with the advent of the George W. Bush administration and its reaction to the events of 11 September 2001, the U.S. was now acting toward other countries in a way that was fundamentally different than in the past. Those differences included a more frequent resort to military force and a concomitant downgrading of diplomacy; a penchant for acting unilaterally rather than with allies or through multilateral institutions; and an ideological classification of countries into friends and foes, with the latter being combatted even if they did not pose a military threat to others. In short, whether this was seen as good or bad, the United States was said to have shifted to a fundamentally imperial stance toward the rest of the world.

These types of claims are misleading. On the one hand, they greatly exaggerate just how much U.S. foreign policy was militarized, or unilateralized, or ideologized, under Bush; on the other, they present past U.S. policy in a considerably more diplomatic, multilateral, and modest light than was in fact the case. Both criticisms are easy to demonstrate and we do so in the following pages. Specifically, we show how, from 1898 to the present, U.S. foreign policy has been fundamentally continuous, with the same types of routine and interventionary policies being opted for in similar situations. What this continuity involves is not an unchanging set of long-term goals but rather a small set of means, resorted to over and over as a means of taking on as clients certain states and supporting them, while at the same time actively opposing other states as enemies. In this sense, the book is both a detailed description of American foreign policy today and a history of how, within rigid limits, that policy evolved over the past eleven decades.

However, the broader question is why U.S. policy in fact changed as little as it did. To answer that question, we put forward a theory of how foreign policy gets made on three different time scales: day-to-day, when the problems dealt with involve the execution of existing policy; episodic, when that policy fails and has to be reevaluated; and epochal, when there is a sense that a historical turning point is at hand. To come up with this theory, we found that existing approaches to foreign policy analysis were of little use, mostly because they failed to take into account the details of how particular means were opted for in specific situations. Instead, we found that other intellectual traditions, namely cybernetics and organization theory, gave us the theoretical tools to explain the different types of policy continuity. Those explanations involve showing how policy is means-driven, through the availability of capabilities embedded in organizations, rather than spurred by any long-term goals or structural concerns.

To develop and test the theory, it was necessary to look closely at what precisely the U.S. was doing with regard to specific countries and at how the debates over what the U.S. should be doing unfolded in Washington. This meant that we had, as much as possible, to rely on primary source materials about the contours of U.S. policy, since secondary accounts were not always concerned with the same policy making issues as we were. It also meant that we had to amass a large number of cases of concrete U.S. policy making regarding specific countries, not only because continuity can only be demonstrated by showing that the same types of policies were opted for repeatedly over the course of more than a century, but because policy depended on the type of situation, and there were, by our count, some twenty-three of those. (There are, in fact, a small number of variables that generate those separate situations.) Although many of the cases are written up in the book, many others are simply mentioned, with full discussions of them being reserved for the book's website: www.us-foreign-policy-perspective.org

The theory we develop, the history we recount, and the description we put forward all point in the direction of the United States as possessing an empire of client states. That empire has been in existence for many decades and, we argue in the final chapter of the book, shows little signs of ending. Whether or not that is a good thing we leave to the reader to decide; although our views are easily discernible from the tone with which certain passages are written, this is a work of scholarship and not of advocacy.

We began our collaboration on this book in 2004, although it grew out of work we had done on U.S. military intervention over the preceding eight years, with that work in turn having its origins in a lengthy research project on U.S. foreign policy making with respect to Vietnam. Over the years, many of the ideas in this book were tried out on various colleagues, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. Among those, we would single out Thomas Bernauer, Michael Byers, Lars-Erik Cederman, Michael Cox, Bruce Cumings, Richard Falk, Stephen Gill, Simon Hug, Anders Stephanson, and Donald Sylvan. Charles Kegley provided not only intellectual feedback but invaluable practical advice. Two other colleagues, alas now deceased, reacted to our ideas and were supportive: H. Bradford Westerfield and Hayward Alker. Hayward, in particular, kept up a drumbeat of suggestions, reactions, and "when will it be done" questions; we very much regret he never had a chance to read the book.

Colleagues and students at both our institutions also served as useful sounding boards. In Geneva, James Bevan, Thomas Biersteker, Andrew Clapham, Jussi Hanhimäki, Urs Luterbacher, Alexander Swoboda, and Charles Wyplosz each discussed one or more of the claims in the book with us. Students in The Foreign Policy of Great Power Intervention course and its predecessors read several of the chapters in draft form and reacted to them. In Seattle, comments, both formal and informal, came from Ellis Goldberg, Stephen Hansen, Brian Jones, George Lovell, Peter May, and Michael McCann; comments also came from the late Daniel Lev. Michael Ward not only reacted intellectually but was kind enough to produce the maps in Chapter 3. Students in several years' worth of courses on U.S. Foreign Policy read and commented on drafts of most of the chapters. Our respective institutions – the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, and the University of Washington – furnished support in various forms. Similarly, our research assistants – Navitri Ismaya Putri Guillaume and Christoph Pohlmann – were invaluable in tracking down information and constructing data sets.

Finally, our editor, Heidi Bagtazo of Routledge, was encouraging and patient beyond any reasonable expectations. Almost (but usefully, not quite) as patient were our families who, without ever coordinating their efforts, transmitted the same message for four years.

Abbreviations

ACRI	African Crisis Response Initiative
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AID	U.S. Agency for International Development
ANZUS	Australia-New Zealand-United States Security Treaty
ARVN	Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam
CAT	Civil Air Transport [CIA]
CIA	U.S. Central Intelligence Agency
COCOM	Co-ordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls
DAC	Development Assistance Committee [OECD]
DDO	Directorate of Operations [CIA]
DEA	U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration
DSCA	Defense Security Cooperation Agency
ECA	Economic Cooperation Administration
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ESF	Exchange Stabilization Fund
Ex-Im	U.S. Export-Import Bank
Fatah	Palestinian National Liberation Movement
FBI	U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
FMLN	Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation [El Salvador]
FNLA	National Front for the Liberation of Angola
FY	Fiscal Year
G-8	Group of 8 Industrialized Countries [Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, United States; plus European Union]
GVN	Government of [South] Vietnam
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IDA	International Development Association
ILEA	International Law Enforcement Academies
IMET	International Military Education and Training
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JCET	Joint Combined Exchange Training
KGB	Committee for State Security [USSR]
Khalq-PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

KMT	Kuomintang: Chinese Nationalist Party
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group.
MACV	Military Assistance Command, [South] Vietnam
MEK	Mujahedin-e-Khalq: People's Mujahedin of Iran
MI5	Military Intelligence, Section 5 [UK]
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service [UK]
MINUSTAH	United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola – Labor Party
MPRI	Military Professional Resources Incorporated
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSA	Anti-Communist National Salvation Army [China]
NSA	U.S. National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEEC	Organisation for European Economic Co-operation
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OPC	Office of Policy Coordination
OPS	Office of Public Safety
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSO	Office of Special Operations
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
Pathet Lao	Land of Laos [communist movement]
PDF	Panama Defense Forces
PEJAK	Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan
PKI	Communist Party of Indonesia
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces [South Vietnam]
PMC	Private Military Companies
RAF	Royal Air Force [UK]
ROK	Republic of [South] Korea
SAO	Security Assistance Office/Officer
SAVAK	<i>Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar</i> : National Intelligence and Security Organization [Iran]
SEA	Southeast Asia
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SOE	Special Operations Executive [UK]
SPG	Special Procedures Group
SPLA	Sudanese People's Liberation Army
SVN	South Vietnam
TFG	Transitional Federal Government of the Somali Republic
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
VC	Viet Cong: Vietnamese Communist army/soldiers
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

1 Explaining the continuity of U.S. foreign policy

The 28th of September 2006 was an ordinary day for United States foreign policy. In Slovenia, the U.S. met with the other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) about counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and peace enforcement in Kosovo. Meanwhile, in Washington, the State Department announced it was committing almost \$40 million to six countries in Central America and the Caribbean to help them “enhance labor and environmental protection practices.” Thousands of miles to the east, U.S. troops were engaged in combat operations in Iraq; still further east, U.S. military advisers continuing training Philippines battalions to “fight against insurgency and terrorism.” At the same time, the Cuban government remained indignant over the decision of the U.S. to refuse its health minister a visa to attend the annual meeting in Washington of the Pan American Health Organization. Finally, the State Department’s spokesman warned that “time [was] growing short” for there to be a “negotiated settlement” by which Iran would suspend enrichment of uranium.¹

What these various U.S. policies had in common is that they were aimed at different problems faced by those in charge of the political and economic life of particular states. In some cases (the six countries in Central America and the Caribbean; Iraq and the Philippines), U.S. policy attempted to solve the problems of the states in question, either by furnishing resources or by taking over some of the tasks of the local actors. In another case, U.S. policy focused on involving third parties (here, other NATO members) as junior partners in solving the problems of one or more other states (Afghanistan and the likely future state of Kosovo). Elsewhere (Cuba, Iran), U.S. efforts were instead directed at creating problems for states, in some instances actually trying to bring about the overthrow of the regime. These cases can be multiplied many times over, not only in terms of U.S. actions but in terms of U.S. concerns; and it is no exaggeration to say that American policy is concentrated on maintenance of U.S. clients and hostility toward U.S. enemies. In August 2006, there were some 80 of the former and six of the latter (a few years before, there had been eight enemies).

This focus on clients and enemies is nothing new. Already, a full century before the policies described above, the United States was maintaining clients and acting against enemies. In 1906, the U.S.-backed government of Cuba was facing an insurgency and, after trying to cobble together a political solution, the U.S. finally proclaimed a provisional government, headed by Roosevelt’s secretary of war and backed by U.S. troops. At the same time, the U.S. was arranging an emergency loan for the Dominican Republic and negotiating a treaty by which the president of the United States would appoint an administrator for the island’s customs revenues. The U.S. was also growing increasingly exasperated with Nicaragua’s policies toward its neighbors and would, a

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few years later, aid rebels in deposing the country's long-time leader. These stories, and others like them, can be repeated constantly, decade by decade, throughout the following hundred years, and there is no sign that they are becoming obsolete.²

Of course, U.S. foreign policy is and has been concerned with other issues beyond the maintenance of clients and hostility toward enemies. For decades, the U.S. has directed many of its actions at the creation and enhancement of a liberal economic order, one involving large numbers of minimally regulated commercial and financial transactions among private actors. The U.S. has also acted to foster its own security via a host of policies (including, critically, the possession of nuclear weapons and attempts to deter their use by others). In addition, the U.S. acts in various ways regarding the production and sale of narcotics, access to energy, and numerous other functional domains. What distinguishes these various types of policies from those concerned with clients and enemies is that the latter cut across the former. On the one hand, policy toward a given state may involve addressing problems of nuclear weapons transit, energy, port facilities, trade, and any number of other issue domains. On the other hand, policy making regarding functional issues has to be concretized as regards the political and economic situation of particular places: not only, say, energy production in general but building a pipeline across a specific country, providing particular investment incentives for pipeline investors, and training troops to protect that pipeline from potential attacks. For these reasons, a focus on resolving the problems faced by clients and exacerbating those faced by enemies captures much of the overall structuring of U.S. foreign policy, that is, how it is organized in such a way as to inform numerous specific policies in specific times and places. Put differently, our claim is that the U.S. has, for over a hundred years, resorted to the same set of activities: surveilling countries' domestic politics and economic policies, providing development assistance, coordinating with allies, selling weapons, running covert operations, carrying out overt acts of warfare.

How to explain this continuity? Why has the United States organized so much of its foreign policy, for over a century, around clients and enemies? Our answer is that the U.S. has a certain number of what we will call *policy instruments*: capabilities, embedded in particular organizations, for engaging in particular sequences of action. Policy making is instrument-driven: the U.S. spends much of its time devising programs to aid clients and hinder enemies because those are the competences it has. In this sense, policy is not driven by any overarching goals over and beyond those of helping clients and hurting enemies; instead, it is driven by the relatively limited set of means the U.S. has at its disposal. Policy making, as a process, is not a matter of trying to achieve long-term or structural goals by various means but of choosing a particular means that corresponds to whatever the immediate problem is faced by a client or presented by an enemy. Long-term, and indeed, intermediate, goals of various sorts are then, so to speak, pasted onto the means.

This argument, which we will develop abstractly in this chapter and then, with numerous historical examples, throughout the rest of the book, is obviously a far remove from the way in which U.S. foreign policy is normally presented. To see why, it is helpful to begin with a brief discussion of the more standard explanations for the continuity of U.S. policy. These are of three types: (1) those that posit certain goals which, it is claimed, U.S. leaders have pursued for over a century; (2) those that concentrate instead on the political culture of the United States and its elites' sense of mission; and (3) those that see the U.S. as simply one more powerful state driven by

expansionist imperatives. Although these explanations are in many ways quite different from each other, they overlap in one important respect: that of ignoring policy instruments or at the least seeing them as of minor importance. In our view, this bias makes it impossible really to answer the question of why U.S. foreign policy has exhibited such striking continuity.

Explaining continuity: the problem with structural accounts

The most common account of why U.S. foreign policy has shown such strong continuity is that U.S. leaders have for over a century pursued an unchanging set of goals. Among those goals, the two most often mentioned are democracy and open markets: the claim is that the makers of U.S. policy have consistently tried to make other states democratic and their economies free market, whether by using marines and extending bank loans in Central America and the Caribbean in the early years of the twentieth century, or by similar means in Europe during and after World War I, or through a variety of overt and covert means in various parts of the world since the waning days of World War II. Of course, the argument continues, the U.S. has often been economically protectionist, just as it has often supported nondemocratic regimes, but such policies are, as one former ambassador to the United Nations put it, temporary compromises made to ward off the prospect of long-lasting illiberal systems. From this point of view, the U.S. acts more from ideological concerns than security-oriented ones, so that, for example, American policy makers' nearly 70-year long struggle with communism is explained not because communism posed a military threat to the U.S. but because it was the antithesis of the deepest American goals. Indeed, as several advocates of "grand strategy" have seen it, the U.S. has frequently pursued policies which were irrelevant, if not downright harmful, to its security because of its leaders' firm belief that the long-term prosperity and even survival of the U.S. as a liberal democracy depended on the world's being remade along American lines. The connection to clients and enemies is straightforward: the U.S. has faced a never-ending series of tasks, involving oversight, advice-giving, and frequent interventions to make sure that client states stayed on the right political and economic path and that enemies were at least overthrown, if not converted into clients.³

There are numerous variants of the democracy and open-markets arguments, depending on claims about the relative importance and mutual compatibility of the two goals, the extent to which these were conscious and long-term aims of U.S. leaders, and the significance of material interests as opposed to ideology in the formulation of particular policies. Nonetheless, there is a broad consensus among writers of various viewpoints that there is indeed an "American foreign policy tradition" based on open markets and the "liberal goal of democracy promotion" and which leads directly from John Hay's "Open Door" policy in China, through Wilson's war to "make the world safe for democracy," the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, and so on up to George W. Bush's intervention in Iraq and his war on terror. Indeed, it has been argued by some authors that even isolationism – the policy of "escape from a decadent Old World" – was still based on the "liberal impulse" that elevates democracy and open markets to the principal goals of United States policy. Note that this latter argument implies that U.S. foreign policy has been animated by the same goals not only since the end of the nineteenth century but far back into the days of pre-1898 isolation, perhaps even all the way to the dawn of the republic under Washington, Adams, and Jefferson.⁴

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Of course, the fact that democracy and open markets are the most-often cited goals of U.S. foreign policy does not mean that they are the only goals ever put forward to explain that policy. Some authors, struck by the frequency with which U.S. officials have pursued nondemocratic or protectionist policies, or by just how often those officials have been violent, exclusionary, or dominating toward those not deemed worthy of democratic rule or free exchange, have instead argued that the U.S. is principally animated by the goal of security, understood in practice as countering other states or ideologies that do or could pose a threat. Clients would have to be defended against foreign and domestic enemies, either because their “loss” might endanger the U.S. at some future point or because the lack of a defensive effort would embolden enemies. Other authors, though, claim that U.S. policy toward many clients is motivated less by concern with U.S. security and more by a general goal of maintaining “stability,” i.e., a pattern of regional and global power relationships that change slowly, if at all. Most U.S. efforts would in this case be directed at maintaining client states; enemy states would for the most part be dealt with by means of containment. Still other authors concentrate instead on economic goals that may have little or nothing to do with open markets: guaranteed access to resources such as oil; protection of major foreign holdings; captive markets for export or investment purposes. In these cases, clients would be aided because of their direct or anticipated economic utility, whereas enemies would normally be of less immediate concern.⁵

None of these most-cited long-term goals of U.S. foreign policy is in fact very good at helping to explain the continuity of that policy. One problem is that particular goals clearly conflict with each other – for example, stability may be interpreted as a warrant for backing dictatorial regimes – and there is nothing in the literature that sheds any light on which goals take precedence over which others under which circumstances. This problem is one aspect of an even more serious difficulty with goal-oriented explanations: they lack any sort of translation mechanism for determining what specific actions ought to be undertaken. A good case in point is the democracy goal discussed above. Even if we assume that U.S. leaders fervently wish to promote democracy in states around the world, that goal tells us nothing about what the U.S. will do in particular circumstances: will officials in Washington try to overthrow a nondemocratic regime, or conversely will they try to be close friends with it, hoping to convince the regime’s top officials gradually to give up power to democratic institutions? If overthrow is the policy opted for, will the U.S. send in troops or simply content itself with condemnatory statements? If friendship is instead pursued, will the U.S. train the regime’s armed forces, or instead try to bankroll particular politicians? And for all of these questions, when, and for how long, will these actions take place? In sum, long-term goals simply do not, and indeed cannot, translate convincingly into particular, country-specific policies; and for this reason, such goals are of little help in accounting for the continuity of U.S. foreign policy.⁶

An alternate argument about continuity in U.S. foreign policy is that it stems from something in the country’s political culture. The approach here would concentrate not on long-term goals pursued for many years but on the way in which members of the U.S. foreign policy elite understand the world and see themselves as bound to act. Numerous authors, going back as far as Alexis de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century, have argued along these lines, claiming that U.S. political culture is marked by a sense that the United States is an “exceptional” country with a mission to serve as a moral, and perhaps a political, leader in the world. Advocates of this sort of argument have a

lengthy and apparently inexhaustible collection of speeches and writings to choose among, starting with the famous statement by John Winthrop in 1630 that “wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us” and running through any number of nineteenth-century statements about “manifest destiny” and of twentieth-century presidents who spoke routinely of Americans as being “heirs of [the] first revolution,” ready for “the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger” and thus to “truly light the world.” Given an outlook of this sort, officials could feel responsible for protecting client states and/or trying to rid the world of enemies. Note that these arguments do not necessarily presume that the United States is exceptional but simply that U.S. leaders feel they have a mission vis-à-vis other countries, if not the entire world. That mission may have religious roots, as in Winthrop’s original statement, but it could also stem from a liberal political culture; from ingrained habits of expansion beyond a frontier; or from a sense of racial superiority.⁷

However, since there are numerous cases of threatened countries whom the U.S. clearly feels no responsibility to protect and of aggressive states against whom the U.S. does not intervene, theories that explain American foreign policy continuity by American political culture need to be refined. One common way of doing so is to notice that the U.S. appears to go through cycles of engagement abroad. During activist periods, U.S. officials act on behalf of clients and against enemies; during isolationist periods, by contrast, U.S. elites see the world as hopelessly fallen and unworthy of American attention. Even such “mood” theories, though, fail to solve the precedence and translation problems discussed above with respect to goals: for example, they say nothing about whether, in a period of isolationism, existing clients will be abandoned to their fate or if instead the sense of responsibility trumps that of being special; nor do they help in determining precisely how the U.S. will respond to an enemy state even in a period of involvement (e.g., will the policy be one of negotiation, quarantine, or direct overthrow?). In short, even if U.S. elites do feel a sense of responsibility stemming from something in the political culture, that feeling gives them little guidance about what they should do with respect to particular countries at particular times.⁸

The third, and final, standard argument about continuity in U.S. foreign policy brackets both long-term goals and political culture, highlighting instead the sheer growth in U.S. power. Whenever a country becomes populous and wealthy, the claim goes, its elites will tend to increase their military capabilities and expand abroad, annexing territory – or, as in the case of the United States, acquiring states as clients – and defending it against actual or potential enemies. The mechanisms behind this type of imperial expansion are varied, ranging from economic and political crises at home to bumping up against states seen as endangering present or future prospects; but all of these factors only can come into play for states whose power has increased considerably and whose elites see themselves as having no room for further growth under existing interstate arrangements. In the same way, whatever specific goals U.S. officials may have in mind are subordinate, in these kinds of explanations, to the structural factors that lead the U.S. to expand in the first place. Note that most such theories of imperial expansion are concerned with an initial leap abroad or a major jump in the extent and geographical scope of annexation or client acquisition; the routine maintenance of empires, including prolonged campaigns against enemies, is considered as mundane and not terribly interesting.⁹

However, using general theories of imperial expansion to account for the continuity of U.S. foreign policy is not much more convincing than is the case for theories based