

# U.S. Foreign Policy and the Complex Factors in the Decision-Making Process

Salah Oueslati

Published online: 19 August 2014  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014

**Abstract** The founding myths and ideals have greatly shaped U.S. foreign policy since the emergence of the young republic. They constitute the framework within which institutional and non-institutional actors try to influence the decision-making process. But to provide a complete picture of U.S. foreign policy making, one has to take into account all the dimensions and parameters at all levels.

**Keywords** U.S. foreign policy · Founding myths · Exceptionalism · Expansionism · Imperialism · Institutional forces · Non-institutional forces · Lobbying · Ethnic groups · Business groups

US foreign policy has been the subject of much debate, praise and criticism both among the American elites and abroad. Who makes U.S. foreign policy, in accordance with what principles, with what objectives and to what ends? To answer these questions we need to go back to the early history of this country, analyze the founding myths of the young republic. They constitute the framework within which institutional and non-institutional forces craft, shape and try to influence U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Those founding myths and ideals have of course evolved and have been adapted to changing contexts of the time. But the core values that shape the style and justify actions and non-actions of American foreign policy on the world stage have remained almost intact.

## U.S. Founding Myths and Values

The U.S. was founded upon a strong belief, a deep conviction and a set of ideas which were profoundly ingrained in the colonies well before independence. The burgeoning colony was idealized by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, as a new moral compass, a “shining city upon the Hill.” After independence, the Founding Fathers were convinced that American social and political values were universal; the founding leaders felt therefore committed to the highly noble mission to propagate a special form of political morality and make the world in the nation’s image. This sense of exceptionalism was prevalent among the political and economic elites as well as among citizens. Thomas Jefferson, writing in his 1784 “Notes on the State of Virginia” asserted that Americans had proven themselves to be “the chosen people of God, if even He had a chosen people, in whose breasts He has made peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”<sup>1</sup> American exceptionalism was later complemented by the notion of Manifest Destiny as the nation was expanding across the continent in the 1840s. Urging the U.S. to annex the republic of Texas, editor John O’ Sullivan proclaimed, in the *Democratic Review*, the Manifest Destiny of the United States “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”<sup>2</sup> O’Sullivan believed that Providence had given the U.S. a mission to spread republican democracy. The westward expansion, driven by the unquenchable thirst for land and the quest for new economic opportunities for “the multiplying millions,” was draped in God’s “ordained” notion of Manifest Destiny. This enterprise caused the annihilation and the subjugation of a sizable number of the native population.

S. Oueslati (✉)  
Département d’Etudes Anglophones, UFR de Lettres & Langues–  
BAT. A3, Université de Poitiers, 1, rue Raymond Cantel, BP 613,  
86022 Poitiers cedex, France  
e-mail: salah.oueslati@univ-poitiers.fr

<sup>1</sup> Steven W. Hook, *U.S. Foreign Policy, The Paradox of World Power* (Washington, D.C.: The CQ Press, 2008), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Hook, op.cit., p. 31.

Although westward expansion could not be considered as an aspect of foreign policy, it is nevertheless “a central theme of American diplomatic history.”<sup>3</sup> This very notion would soon be used to justify the war with Mexico which ended with a swift victory of the U.S. and the signature of a peace treaty in 1848 that granted the victor a vast new territory of nearly one million square miles. The founding myths of the new republic would, with the gradual ascension of the nation to a hegemonic status, be transposed to a regional (the American continent) and then to a global scale. Hence the mixture of idealism and nationalism—tainted with a non-disguised hubris and a sense of mission—that has constantly characterized American imperialist foreign policy.

Nationalism and the sense of an exceptional destiny have also been the driving force behind the assimilation of the non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant communities and the requirement of a minimum sense of cohesion and loyalty, particularly during periods of international crisis.

### The Founding Doctrines and Ideals of U.S. Foreign Policy

The Monroe Doctrine is the first expression of the founding myths of the U.S. and their concrete translation into American foreign policy. It also constitutes the first manifestation of the genuine ascension of the U.S. as a regional hegemon that European powers had but to reckon with. It is a founding philosophy of U.S. foreign policy; a guiding thread that would shape Monroe’s successors foreign policies, first on the local level and then on a global scale. The presidential message of December 1823 announced and defined the attitude of the United States toward foreign powers. While dealing with a number of specific topics and issues relevant to the international political and ideological climate of the time, the Doctrine outlined a fundamental statement of American foreign policy in relation to European powers. Using as a pretext the negotiations taking place between the Russian Imperial government and the U.S. concerning the Northwest coast of the American continent, James Monroe asserted the idea of non-colonization as the first principle of his foreign policy. Stipulating that the U.S. opposed the establishment of any new colonies on the American continent, the President reminded the European powers that the U.S. had never interfered in European affairs. Monroe went on to point out that nations in the western hemisphere were inherently different from those of Europe, emphasizing that they were republics rather than monarchies. With this in mind, he warned that the United States would regard as a threat to its safety any attempt by European powers to impose their system of government on any independent state and the Western hemisphere. Provided that the European powers remained uninvolved in the affairs

of the new world nations, Monroe added that the U.S. would not interfere with the existing colonies. Rather, it would henceforth consider itself the protector of the independent nations in the Americas. The speech ended by noting that the U.S. would continue to keep out of the internal affairs of European nations, thereby respecting the principle of non-intervention. Monroe’s declaration was rightly seen as a defining moment in the foreign policy of the U.S.

The U.S. pursued its imperialistic ascension which culminated with the war with Spain in 1898, adding the Philippines, Cuba and other islands in the Caribbean and the Pacific under its control. During the run up to the war, Theodore Roosevelt was serving as Assistant Secretary of the Navy; he was a staunch proponent of military action. As President, his Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1904) went further, announcing the right of the U.S. to use military force in Latin America if need be in order to keep European countries out. Under the threat of the intervention of Britain, Germany, and Italy because they defaulted on the payment of their debts, some Latin American countries fell under the umbrella of U.S. protection. The Roosevelt Corollary undermined their sovereignty, deprived them of the freedom to make their own decisions and established Latin America as a US protectorate. Unlike the European presence, American interventionism was seen in a positive light, necessary for the welfare and stability of Latin American countries.

Behind the paternalistic and police roles, economic motives were crucial determinants to U.S. intervention. Political leaders, business people and farmers believed that both U.S. prosperity and security depended on the extension of American influence abroad and on the opening of new markets for U.S. products. American presidents used the Roosevelt corollary as a justification of U.S. intervention to quell civil unrests that challenged its influence in Latin America. Alfred Thayer Mahan, the most important American strategist of the nineteenth century and author of the classic, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, had a tremendous influence on Theodore Roosevelt’s strategic thinking. Mahan believed that control of seaborne commerce was decisive to domination in war. Mahan’s concept of sea power went beyond sheer naval superiority. He pointed out that states should benefit from periods of peace to build their capacities and they should acquire overseas possessions, either on the form of colonies or privileged access to foreign markets. Mahan studied the ascension of Great-Britain as a global power and believed that the U.S. should follow its strategy to attain the same status. Mahan’s Book had a critical influence on U.S. naval strategy under the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt as well as his successors. Under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, the U.S. built up its navy and deployed a naval armada around the world, decided to complete the Panama Canal (1902), insisted on an “Open Door” into China to consolidate American economic expansion. The Roosevelt administration laid the foundations for a new global engagement of the U.S.

<sup>3</sup> La Feber Walter, *The American Age* (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 10.

Roosevelt's successor, President Woodrow Wilson, adopted a new approach, known as "moralistic" and "idealistic." But, if the style was disparate, the substance of American foreign policy did not change so much. Wilson continued and even extended his predecessor's hegemonic and imperialistic policy toward Latin America. During his first term the U.S. intervened in Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, The Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. Wilson adhered to the spirit and the letter of the Monroe Doctrine's main provision of non-intervention in European conflicts, even as the First World War was heading to its third year of hostilities. The first incident that might have provoked U.S. intervention in the war was the sinking by German submarine attacks of the unarmed British liner *Lusitania* in May 1915 which caused the death of 128 Americans. Notwithstanding this aggression the U.S. remained in the neutral camp. However, the Germans' determination to continue their attacks on vessels entering an exclusion zone around Great-Britain, imposed on President Wilson the necessity and offered him the opportunity to engage the U.S. in a global intervention.

As Adam Quinn notes, "After the First World War had brought about entanglement in Europe, he [Woodrow Wilson] consciously regarded his reimagining of the Monroe Doctrine and his efforts at a Pan-American Pact as the template for America's new global diplomacy. In 1919, he argued that under the proposed League of Nations the Monroe Doctrine would become 'the Doctrine of the world.'"<sup>4</sup> If the intention of Wilson was to elevate the Monroe Doctrine to a world scale, this would also elevate the U.S. to the status of a world hegemon capable of leading the world in line with America's ideological preferences and economic and strategic interests. The intervention of the U.S. in the First World War showed that the nation had become "indispensable" for the maintenance of the balance of power among European nations and its involvement in World War II, after a brief period of isolationism, confirmed this status.

The U.S. emerged from World War II as the predominant world power, maintaining a nuclear monopoly, though for a short period, and enjoying an unequaled economic wealth and cultural influence. With the advent of the Cold War, as Adam Quinn puts it, "Truman subscribed to internationalist convictions that blended Wilsonianism and Rooseveltianism [Theodore Roosevelt], universal civilizational moralism with, if not militarism, then at least a belief in the righteous necessity of military strength—and potentially physical force—in defense of the right."<sup>5</sup> The Truman Doctrine, delivered in March 1947, laid the ground for U.S. strategy to combat Soviet communism for the decades to come. For President

Truman, the world is now divided between "two ways of life", one was "based upon the will of the majority, and ... distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberties, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second was "based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed by the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms." The first way of life is embodied by the U.S. system, the second by the Soviet Union. For Truman, the role of the U.S. is to be on the side of "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."

This Manichean vision of the world would shape American foreign policy during the whole period of the Cold War. The fight against communist expansion became the absolute priority of U.S. leaders. The spread of democracy and human rights was quite often sacrificed at the altar of the fight against this ideology. The U.S. found itself not only supporting dictators, but even worse, conducting covert operations to overthrow democratically elected regimes like in Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), and Chile (1973).

### The Post-Cold War Era and the "Triumph" of the U.S. Model

From a "superpower," the U.S. emerged after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, in the words of former French Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Vedrine, as a "hyper-power." The triumph of the American model was considered as a vindication of U.S. unchallenged superiority. In *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski describes the U.S. as the only hyper-power which has supremacy in four key areas simultaneously: military, economic, technological and cultural.<sup>6</sup>

The sense of moral righteousness and ordained exceptionalism which guided America's vision of itself and of the world persists in the post-Cold War era and will attain its climax during George W. Bush's presidency. In a world dominated by the Internet, social networks and alternative sources of information, the traditional ideological tools of U.S. foreign policy, such as civilizational advancement, messianic vision, spread of liberty, democracy and human rights, have become less operational and more problematic for the U.S. at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The U.S. President as Commander-in-chief of the armed forces wields greater foreign policy power in wartime. Seven days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress granted George W. Bush broad authority "to use all necessary and appropriate

<sup>4</sup> Adam Quinn, *U.S. Foreign Policy in Context, National Ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Quinn, op.cit., p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

force ... to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States.”

In his State of the Union Address of January 29, 2002, where he talked about the “axis of evil”, George W. Bush insisted that the U.S. would “stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance.” But democratization stopped at the frontiers of the Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. How do you expect Arab and Muslim people to take the U.S. willingness to promote women’s rights, religious tolerance and democracy seriously, when at the same time you *never* hear the U.S. President or any high American political official criticize a country like Saudi Arabia which is known for having the worst record in the world concerning those issues?

The pretense of the U.S. to establish a democratic bastion in Iraq as a first step to spread democracy in the other countries of the Middle East sounded shallow. The justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was sold to the American people and to the world on lies and fabricated evidence concerning the presence of weapons of mass destruction and the ties of the Iraqi regime with the terrorists of Al Qaeda, has further undermined the credibility of the U.S. in the world.

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2002) contained three guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy: the need for pre-emptive action; the U.S. must be the unchallenged superpower; the U.S. democratic values should be celebrated and spread abroad.<sup>7</sup> These principles reveal the imperial pretensions of the U.S., the deeply ingrained belief in its exceptionalism, messianic pretensions and missionary role in the world.

Unilateralism has become the hallmark of U.S. imperial power under the Bush administration. The concepts of “pre-emptive war,” and “war on terror” have far-reaching implications since they open the door for unilateral military intervention anywhere in the world; no geographical space is immune from U.S. military intervention. These notions also entail that the U.S. is in a situation of quasi-perpetual war and constant military mobilization. In his speeches and declarations to justify U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, George W. Bush deployed not only U.S. military might but also the traditional ideological arsenal to its paroxysm. The Clausewitzian approach, calling for the maximum use of force until the unconditional surrender of the enemy, did not allow the U.S. to attain its political and strategic goals, in spite of its swift victory against what remained of the Iraqi forces. The U.S. should instead have heeded the Confucian Sun Tzu, “If you know your enemy and know yourself, you need not fear

the result of a hundred battles.” In Iraq, the U.S. did not know its enemy and overestimated its capacity at nation building and at democratizing a tribal country with religious and sectarian divisions and an unstable geopolitical setting. The U.S. has dilapidated what has remained from its credibility and capital in the scandal of Abou Ghraib prison and in the way it has treated Gitmo prisoners. Far from leading by the example, the U.S., after proclaiming its democratizing mission in the Middle East, has continued to support the most undemocratic regimes in the world. Shaped by the neoconservative ideology and its militarized idealism, U.S. intervention in the Middle East has had disastrous consequence not only for the U.S. itself but for the whole region. After Bush’s adventurism, Barack Obama, with his cautious pragmatism, has not yet found the solution to get the U.S. out of the quagmire it has created.

Until the Vietnam War and more particularly until the Watergate scandal, the executive branch enjoyed a large room for maneuver in conducting U.S. foreign policy. In war time presidents were granted far more power and freedom of action. But within the executive branch itself there is a harsh power struggle and cutthroat competition for influence between the President’s close advisors, State Department, Defense Department and the National Security Council. Competition is also fierce between the different agencies that deal with intelligence issues and within those agencies. The President has the final say, but his decision is the result of intertwining influences and power struggle. However, if the President has a prominent role in conducting foreign affairs he is far from being the only player.

In the late 1970s, the U.S. Congress started to reassert its authority in Foreign affairs. Congressional committees and subcommittees as well as Individual Senators and Congressmen have become vocal critics of the White House and have turned into competitors in domains that had previously been quasi-exclusively under the control of the President’s authority. This development has to a certain extent further decentralized the foreign policy decision-making. It has also opened the door to non-institutional actors, notably ethnic groups and business organizations, giving them the opportunity to shape American foreign policy in line with their foreign policy preferences.

### Non-Institutional Forces and U.S. Foreign Policy

In addition to the domestic political institutions, forces outside the government further complicate the American foreign policy process. These domestic forces include public opinion, the news media, religious institutions, trade unions, think tanks, human rights organizations, business interests as well as ethnic minorities. These actors exert pressure continually on the U.S. government from within the country’s borders to

<sup>7</sup> The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” 2002. Available at <http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss.2002/1/index.html/> accessed 13 April 2014.



accommodate their policy preferences. The role of these groups has become so important that the distinction between foreign and domestic policy spheres is blurred.<sup>8</sup> A study of American foreign policy that fails to take into account these domestic actors would not provide a global and complete vision of the forces in action in this process.

### Ethnic Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy

Throughout American history, U.S. based ethnic groups have been involved in the affairs of their countries of origin, and ethnic lobbies are known to be an integral part of American politics. It is not only the social character as a nation of immigrants that makes for the prominent role ethnic groups play in foreign policy deliberation; it is also the structure of American democracy that allows ethnic communities' access to policymaking.

For the last several decades an important number of studies focused on the increasing influence of ethnic groups in the foreign policy-making process. But analysts are divided not only on the real impact of such an involvement but even more so on the way ethnic group participation affects American national and strategic interests. For example, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that "immigration is the single most important determinant of American foreign policy."<sup>9</sup> For Alexander DeConde, "ethnoracial concerns have always been, and still remain a prominent determinant of American foreign policy."<sup>10</sup> Samuel Huntington claimed that, in addition to commercial interests, "transnational and non-national ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy."<sup>11</sup> Tony Smith argued that "ethnic groups play a larger role in the making of U.S. foreign policy than is widely recognized."<sup>12</sup> Eric Uslaner went even further by affirming that "foreign policy decisions increasingly reflect ethnic interests rather than some overarching sense of national interest."<sup>13</sup> Other studies downplayed the role of ethnic groups in shaping American foreign policy, claiming that these groups played at best a marginal role. For example, John Tierney maintained that, "generally speaking ... the record of ethnic group

lobbying success is far less imposing, to the point that analysts seem to agree that the impact of such groups on American foreign policy is minimal."<sup>14</sup>

Another more important point of disagreement among analysts concerns the impact of ethnic groups' involvement in the foreign policy making process. Does it promote American national interest or does it undermine it? Does it open the door for outside foreign influences to dictate policies? Is it a sign of the group's assimilation to American mainstream values, or is it an expression of the group's divided or dual loyalty, which in the long run might lead to the disintegration of national cohesion and the balkanization of American society? In *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy*, Louis Gerson, was one of the first analysts to warn Americans to what he viewed as the perils of ethnic politics.<sup>15</sup> For Samuel Huntington, ethnic groups' involvement in American foreign policy constitutes a real threat to American national and strategic interests as well as to its identity.<sup>16</sup> Michael Clough asserted that ethnically based lobbying "could well lead to the balkanization of the foreign policy making process ... [and even worse] causes a bitter and prolonged domestic struggle over America's role in the world, undermining its ability to lead in the era now dawning."<sup>17</sup> While dismissing the existence of "some sort of cabal or conspiracy", John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argued that the Israel lobby has pursued policies that "make little sense on either strategic or moral grounds."<sup>18</sup> Yossi Shain, on the contrary, celebrated and welcomed that participation and considered it as a sign of the ethnic group's assimilation to American values and as a way to promote American creed abroad and is therefore beneficial to American national interest.<sup>19</sup> In his idealized vision of ethnic participation, Shain claimed that "the damaging impact of ethnic influence in U.S. foreign affairs has been overstated and misrepresented"; and he added that "one of the signs that an ethnic group has achieved a respectable position in American life is its acquisition of a meaningful voice in U.S. foreign affairs. Yet in order to obtain such a role, ethnic officials must first demonstrate their determination to advocate the principles of pluralism, democracy, and human rights."<sup>20</sup> Another central argument of Shain's book is that "diasporic politics has the potential to temper, rather than exacerbate domestic ethnic conflicts, because it

<sup>8</sup> Bayless Manning, "The Congress, the Executive, and Intermestic Affairs: Three Proposals," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1977, pp. 306–324.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, eds., *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1992), p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Erosion of American National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, September–October, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachment: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Uslaner, "Cracks in the Armor? Interest Groups and Foreign Policy," in Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis, eds., *Interest Group Politics* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002), p. 356.

<sup>14</sup> John T. Tierney, "Congressional Activism in Foreign Policy: Its Varied Forms and Stimuli," in David A. Deese, ed., *New Politics of American Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Louis L. Gerson, *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1964).

<sup>16</sup> Huntington, op.cit.

<sup>17</sup> Michal Clough, "Grass-Roots Policymaking: Say Good-Bye to the Wise Men," *Foreign Affairs*, January–February, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp. 111–112.

<sup>19</sup> Yossi Shain, *Marketing the American Creed Abroad: Diasporas in the U.S. and Their Homelands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Shain, op.cit., p. x.

discourages tendencies toward balkanization inside the United States. In many ways, then, the participation of ethnic diasporas in shaping U.S. foreign policy is a force of social integration and political inclusion.”<sup>21</sup>

Contrary to interest groups participation to shape domestic policies, the mobilization of groups on ethnic bases to influence U.S. foreign policy, even if it is tolerated by the American public, its legitimacy is based on strict rules prescribed by law. Ethnic lobbying involves parameters with highly symbolic and affective dimensions, such as “national interest,” “patriotism,” “citizenship,” and “allegiance,” in other words, notions and values which are sanctified by mainstream society and by the dominant culture and which tolerate no element of suspicion. Any activity in favor of a foreign entity, if it is illegal or perceived as such, could provoke passionate reactions which might find sanctions outside the legal framework of individual responsibility. Any isolated act committed by an individual or a group of individuals, in certain cases or contexts, could therefore, put a whole community under suspicion, or even disgrace. American history is replete with examples of ethnic groups singled out for their alleged dual or divided loyalties, or even worse, allegiance to a foreign entity. The most extreme example is the internment of over 110 000 people of Japanese heritage in “War Relocation Camps” during the Second World War. Should such allegations occur in a period of crisis, they could provoke violent reactions against the targeted group or groups.<sup>22</sup>

Given the ethnic diversity of the nation, the Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite had from the early days of the colonies and more particularly from the birth of the new republic put in place the ideological tools to make “out of the many, one.” Each new generation of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants had to go through a period of suspicion and a process of assimilation by which the new immigrant is required to embrace the values of his new country, display his patriotism and reject or forget the ones of the old one. More than any other nation in the world, the U.S. has always had a need to regularly activate or reactivate the feeling of patriotism and nationalism. The immigrant had to feel that acquiring American citizenship allows him or her to belong to an exceptional nation that has a mission to civilize other countries, to spread democracy, freedom and human rights to the rest of the world. The state of quasi-perpetual war or conflict (including ideological ones) coupled with the “paranoid style of American politics” have helped the American elite to tap into the feeling of nationalism and patriotism to impose a minimum degree of national cohesion, necessary for the survival of the country as a nation.

Given those ideological safeguards, the damaging impact of ethnic influence in U.S. foreign policy has been overstated.

Equally overstated are the arguments that highlight the positive impact of ethnic lobbying for both the U.S. and ethnic lobbies native countries. The foreign policy of the U.S. is carried out within the framework of certain “boundaries” and agreed upon limits. Only ethnic lobbying that is perceived to be detrimental to the national interest is denounced as promoting the specter of dual allegiance and encouraging the fragmentation and the balkanization of U.S. society. Moreover, ethnic lobbying does not take place in a political vacuum; it is deeply shaped by institutional, cultural and ideological factors. From the emergence of the first ethnic lobby (the Irish American lobby) to the present, a number of examples show that U.S. foreign policy serves to galvanize ethnic sentiments as much, if not more, than the other way around. In other words, ethnic lobbying, contrary to what is often advanced, is not a one-way but a two-way process. The Irish-American and the Cuban-American lobbies are, but not the only ones, two relevant cases that illustrate this process.

### The Irish and the Cuban-American Lobbies

As Yossi Shain wrote, “The genealogy of ethnic involvement in U.S. foreign policy should be traced back to the first time this British orientation resulting from the glorification of the Anglo-Saxon race was confronted and challenged.”<sup>23</sup> The massive arrival of Irish immigrants on the American soil after the potato famine (1840s) triggered the emergence of the first nativist movement in the U.S. The movement was born not only in reaction to the important number of immigrants, but also to their religious and cultural differences. Catholicism was perceived as a threat to the Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and to its republican and democratic form of government. Given the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church, nativists questioned even the loyalty of the Irish immigrants.

Aided by their important number, urban concentration and master of the English language, Irish-Americans were able to gain political clout and to climb the social ladder, not by achieving economic success, but through political and labor activism. Analyzing how Irish-Americans gained influence through political activism, Thomas Brown writes, “Their number and the concentration of those numbers in the cities, however, afforded them opportunities in American politics ... The ability to command votes could make a somebody out of nobody. The shrewd trading of votes one held in one’s pocket, like the capitalists’ shrewd trading of property, could advance one in power.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Shain, op.cit, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas N. Brown, “The Political Irish: Politicians and Rebels,” in David Noel Doyel and Owen Dudley Edwards eds., *America and Ireland, 1776–1976: The American Identity and the Irish Connection, The Proceedings of the United States Bicentennial Conference of Cuman Merriman, Ennis, August 1976* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press 1980), p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Salah Oueslati, “Les Lobbies Ethniques et la Politique Etrangère des Etats-Unis: ‘Double Allegiance’ ou Participation Démocratiques?” *Annales du Centre de Recherche sur l’Amérique Anglophone*, 2006, pp. 131–157.

Irish-Americans created the first ethnic lobby that tried to use the host country to defend the cause of the old one. At the same time, they were the first ethnic group used by the U.S. government to advance the national interest of the nation. After the Civil War, a few thousand of Union and Confederate veterans from Irish origin, members of the Fenian Brotherhood, were about to drag the U.S. into war with Great-Britain. Between 1866 and 1870, President Andrew Johnson allowed, as Joseph O' Grady writes, "the United States to be used as a fundraising center and staging ground for an Irish-American invasion of Canada."<sup>25</sup> Irish-Americans acted to put pressure on the British to withdraw from Ireland. Johnson took advantage of the anti-British sentiment in the U.S. because of their support of the Confederacy during the Civil War and their disregard for the neutrality law, to put pressure on the British government to pay reparations for the Union ships sunk and the men killed. Johnson also acted in order "to secure the votes of New York city Irish-Americans in midterm congressional elections."<sup>26</sup> This attempt ended in fiasco and once the British government paid the war reparations, the Fenian Brotherhood were ordered to stop the fight. Irish-Americans continued however to smuggle arms into Ireland to fight for the independence of the mother country. This example is a sound illustration of how high political officials in the U.S. government use ethnic minorities for electoral reasons and to advance U.S. national interests abroad.

Irish-Americans continued their political activism even after the independence of Ireland in 1921. They lobbied for the end of the British occupation of Northern Ireland. But the "special relationships" between Britain and the U.S. made the task of the Irish lobby very difficult. Irish-Americans were very active in political life before the Good Friday Agreement, and they continue to be active today even if the nature of their demands has changed. As Andrew Greely argued, "They are more likely to campaign, to contribute money to politics, to vote, to join civic organizations, to contact a political leader. The Irish still are the most politically active group in American society."<sup>27</sup> But Irish-Americans have never been able to convince their government or the cultural elite of their country that their cause was just.<sup>28</sup> It was the close relationship between President Ronald Reagan and the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that paved the way for the adoption of the Fair Employment Act by the British Parliament in 1989. This legislation, which was amended in 1990, was designed to end job discrimination against Catholics in Northern Ireland, in line with the McBride Principles.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Joseph O' Grady, "An Irish Policy Born in the U.S.A.: Clinton's Break with the Past," *Foreign Affairs*, May–June, Vol. 75, No. 3, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Greely, *The Irish Americans, the Rise to Money and Power* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981), p. 164.

<sup>28</sup> Greely, op.cit., p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Conor O' Clery, *The Greening of the White House* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), p. 9.

The democrat Bill Clinton showed a strong commitment to the Irish cause than any other American President before him. During the primary election as well as the general election of 1992, he promised to nominate a special envoy to Northern Ireland and to grant a visa for the U.S. to the IRA leader Jerry Adams. These campaign pledges led to the creation of Irish-Americans for Clinton/Gore Association which became later Americans for a New Irish Agenda. This organization had a real support from the Irish-American community, particularly in New York and Boston.<sup>30</sup> It adopted a more moderate approach than other Irish-American organizations such as the Irish National Caucus (INC) or the Ad Hoc Congressional Committee for Irish Affairs. Right after Clinton's election, the INC mobilized the Irish-American community to prevent the English government from forcing President Clinton from backing off his Irish promises.

It was the British government opening which paved the way for the Clinton administration to help find a solution to the Northern Ireland issue. In the Downing Street Declaration of December 1993, the British government reaffirmed its political and military neutrality in Northern Ireland. This declaration is considered as the most important agreement since the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The British government implicitly recognized that the Northern Ireland issue was no longer a domestic one, and it could therefore find a solution through the intervention of an outside third party. One is tempted to conclude hastily that the involvement of the U.S. in the Northern Ireland issue has one explanation: the supposed clout of the Irish-American lobby. If it took the Irish-American lobby such a long period to achieve this success, it is because the British government had always been able to convince the elite in the State Department and beyond that American national interest requires the reinforcement of the "special relationships" between the U.S. and Great-Britain and that the United Kingdom had been the strongest ally of the U.S. in the two World Wars, during the Cold War, and is also a solid partner in NATO and a reliable ally in the European Union. This strong alliance with Great-Britain was perceived by the power elite and the American media as in line with American national and strategic interests. It was therefore the opening provided by the British government itself that paved the way for American intervention as a peace broker in the Northern Ireland conflict and not the supposed clout of the Irish-American lobby.

In spite of the capacity of Irish-American organizations to mobilize their community, they had never been able to convince the larger American public that their cause was just and legitimate. Those organizations had never been able to counterbalance the negative media campaign which tended to portray the Northern Ireland issue as a mere religious conflict between two fanatical communities. In addition, the rivalry between Irish-American organizations, their lack of

<sup>30</sup> O' Clery, op.cit., p. 27.

coordination and cohesion and their incapacity to speak with one voice were major obstacles to their efficiency. The incapacity of Irish-Americans to mobilize did not compensate for the structural and strategic weakness of the organizations that represented them. Last but not least, the fact that part of Irish-American militants had adopted an ideology tainted with Marxism, and their support to an armed conflict put them outside mainstream ideas and alienated an important part of middle class Irish-Americans.

The moderate and mainstream approach, in line with the American political process, adopted by the Americans for a New Irish Agenda helped the Clinton administration put the Irish issue on the political agenda. Furthermore, the case of the Irish-American lobby attests how American politicians, in this case Bill Clinton, galvanized ethnic sentiment for domestic political and electoral gains.

The Cuban exiles constitute another good example of how the U.S. government has used an ethnic community as an instrument for promoting its own foreign policy objectives. The Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) is also a perfect illustration of how the U.S. government does not only encourage the birth of an ethnic lobby, but also incorporates it into the formal foreign policy apparatus.

The first Cuban immigrants were dubbed as the “golden exiles” because most of them were from upper and middle class backgrounds. Coming in the heat of the Cold War, they were welcomed by American authorities like heroes and benefited from privileges not offered most other immigrants. The term “exile” itself is not neutral. As Maria de Los Angeles Torres argued, “As long as Cuban émigrés were exiles and not part of the United States, the administration in Washington could deny involvement in the military actions taken by them against the revolution. Because of their exile status, they provided plausible deniability to the CIA and other agencies involved in the covert war against the Castro regime.”<sup>31</sup> In addition, the exodus was presented to world opinion as evidence that the revolution had failed, and particularly that it had betrayed the middle class.<sup>32</sup>

The Bay of Pigs invasion to overthrow the Castro regime, where among the fourteen hundred or so Cuban exiles who landed on the morning of April 17, 1961, 200 of the invaders were killed and more than twelve hundred were captured by the Cubans, is the most conspicuous and well-known example of the U.S. strategy to use the exiles as a vehicle for the implementation of its Cold War strategy. In fact, in the 1960s, the Cuban exiles became the foot soldiers for U.S. military action against Cuba.<sup>33</sup> However, the activism of the

exiles had to be in line with the U.S. government’s strategy of the moment, otherwise the sanction could be immediate. As Maria de Los Angeles Torres observes, “The United States promoted the exile/soldier as a militant, but, when the United States disengaged from active opposition to the Castro regime, the militant activist came to be considered as terrorist.”<sup>34</sup>

The first generation of Cuban exiles was convinced that its presence on the U.S. soil was temporary and that its return to Cuba was only a matter of time. That is one of the reasons why those exiles had always been the most vociferous advocate of a tougher policy toward Cuba, but until the 1980s, their political significance was marginal.<sup>35</sup> Describing this paradoxical situation of the Cuban exiles, Maria de Los Angeles Torres wrote, “On the one hand Cuban émigrés were part of U.S. foreign policy, since they received monies and training from the CIA and carried out orders. On the other hand, émigrés were kept away from the center of power and treated as nationals of another state.”<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of Watergate and in a context of harsh criticism against the “imperial presidency” and the abuse of power on the part of the Nixon White House, the U.S. Congress started to regain some of the power it had lost during much of the Cold War period and to assert itself as a major player in the foreign policy area. As a result, “by the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, control over the process of making Cuba policy began to shift from the firm control of the President and into an arena that includes a variety of other actors as well, most notably Congress and interest groups.”<sup>37</sup>

After his election in 1980, Ronald Reagan tried to reassert presidential leadership in foreign affairs. As part of his plan to take control of the Cuban issue, “the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign team and the new administration that followed helped sponsor the formation of the Cuban-American National Foundation as an ally to lobby Congress, especially Democrats in the House of Representatives, for tougher policy on Cuba as part of their overall strategy to take the Cold war to Latin America more generally.”<sup>38</sup>

The creation of one of the most powerful ethnic lobbies in the U.S., The Cuban American National Foundation, was first designed to neutralize the Democratic opposition in Congress, and second and more importantly, as an instrument in the hands of the U.S. President to carry out his foreign policy designs in Cuba and in Latin America more generally. The irony is that Reagan’s creature gained in power, clout and independence in

<sup>31</sup> Maria de Los Angeles Torres, *In the Land of Mirrors, Cuban Exile Politics in the United States* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Sylvia Pedraza-Bailey, *Political and Economic Migrants in America: Cubans and Mexicans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Torres, op.cit., p. 60.

<sup>35</sup> William Leo Grande, “From Havana to Miami: U.S. Cuba Policy as a Two-level Game,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1998, pp. 73–74.

<sup>36</sup> Torres, op.cit., p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> Patrick J. Haney and Walt Vanderbush, “The Cuban Embargo. The Domestic Politics of an American Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1998, pp. 67–86.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



such a way that after being an instrument of U.S. foreign policy, it has become an obstacle to a rational solution vis-à-vis Cuba. CANF has become like the monster of Frankenstein, a creature that escaped to its creator, a lobby that has learned how to play one branch of the U.S. government against the other. Ronald Reagan's successors had to deal with an assertive and powerful CANF that promotes policies which are not always in line with American national interests. For example, "by 1991 President Bush and the new Powerful CANF were on opposing sides of Cuba legislation, the Cuban Democracy Act."<sup>39</sup> The most hostile efforts directed against Cuba have originated in Congress including proposals to expand the embargo. The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, known as Helms-Burton Act (1996), whose aim was to tighten the embargo against Cuba, angered U.S. allies and trading partners because they objected to the extraterritorial application of U.S. law. Given the decentralization of power in the U.S. political system and the fact that "the internal rules and procedures of Congress provide additional veto points where minorities may block and amend threatening proposals, groups that defend the status quo are more likely to succeed than the ones that seek policy change."<sup>40</sup>

If the U.S. continues to carry out a failed strategy towards Cuba and is unable to adopt a sound and rational one, it is not only because of the supposed clout of CANF, this organization is indeed powerful, but also because the U.S. political system is favorable to groups that defend the status quo, provided of course that such status quo does not mar U.S. national interest in a major way. The other obvious advantage of CANF is that the organization does not have to face a powerful counter-lobby. The same thing could be said about Israel lobby, American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). If AIPAC was so powerful, it would have been able to get the U.S. government to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the American embassy from Tel-Aviv to the Holy city. American presidents whether they are Republicans or Democrats have always refused such a demand from AIPAC, in spite of the constant pressure from Congress on this particular issue. The White House has always defended a two-state solution and recognized the future Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, in spite of the objection of some powerful right wing pro-Israel groups like Christian Zionists. Like CANF, the power of AIPAC comes from its comfortable position of defending the status quo and from the fact that there is no genuine Arab-American lobby to counter it.

Ethnic groups are not the only non-institutional actors that attempt to shape American foreign policy. Business and professional organizations as well as individual companies have disproportional organizational and financial resources to influence U.S. foreign policy in order to advance or protect their interests. Business groups have a privileged access to the White

House more than any other interest group in the U.S. Robert Keohane demonstrated how oil lobbies greatly influenced U.S. postwar foreign policy.<sup>41</sup> Business groups have even more clout within the legislative branch. Jeffrey Frieden. Robert Keohane argued that oil lobbies greatly influenced U.S. postwar foreign policy.<sup>42</sup> Individual businessmen, like the Koch brothers, spend millions of dollars to finance climate denial and fight against any attempt by the government to ratify climate change treaties.<sup>43</sup> Through media ownership, political ads and grassroots mobilization (astroturfing), business organizations and wealthy businessmen could also shape public opinion and exercise an indirect influence on elected officials.

Because of the sheer magnitude of U.S. military might, economic wealth, and political and cultural influence, the decisions of U.S. foreign policy makers have an impact all over the world, no single government around the world is indifferent to American foreign policy choices. That is one of the reasons why foreign governments are among the numerous active actors that try to influence American foreign policy decisions. Stephen Walt observed that the U.S. political system is "especially receptive to foreign manipulation" because there are "a wide range of media outlets, a tradition of free speech, and interest group politics, and a divided system of government offering multiple channels to influence."<sup>44</sup> Foreign governments hire companies specialized in public relations, former members of Congress or former high officials in the executive branch to improve their relations or promote closer ties with the U.S. Public relations campaigns are quite often designed to improve the image of a country among the American public. For example, in the 1970s the Japanese government spent millions of dollars to project a Japan-friendly image in the U.S.

Given the fragmentation and decentralization of U.S. political life, the system of checks and balances, the multiple levels of decision-making, and the important number of institutional and non-institutional, national and international actors that intervene in the decision making process; given the ideological framework and the national interest imperatives within which U.S. foreign policy is crafted, focusing on one side of the foreign policy decision-making process, even if it contributes to the better understanding of the role of a given actor in this field, tends to have a magnifying glass effect and runs the risk of missing the whole picture. In the "fog" of U.S. foreign policy making process, except in wartime or in time of a major international crisis, one has to take into account all the dimensions and

<sup>41</sup> Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Economy* (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Sophie Yeo, "Carter Slams Koch Brothers for funding Climate Denial," *Global Climate Change News & Analysis*, 23 April 2014. Available at <http://www.rtcc.org/2014/04/23/carter-slams-koch-brothers-for-funding-climate-denial/> accessed 16 May 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *Taking American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 197.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Michal T. Hayes, *Incrementalism and Public Policy* (New York: Longman, 1992), p. 35.

parameters at all levels, vertical and horizontal, institutional and non-institutional, local, national and international, to provide a sound and relevant explanation and a complete picture of the U.S. foreign policy decision-making process.

**Salah Oueslati** is Associate Professor in American Studies at the University of Poitiers, France. He taught at the Political Science Studies Institute, Paris. Dr. Oueslati's research field is American Politics. He has published widely on interest groups and American domestic and foreign policies.

Copyright of Society is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.