

HAS THE US BEEN A SPECIAL PROVIDENCE TO THE WORLD?

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American foreign policy has often been derided by its critics as isolationist, idealistic, contradictory, and hypocritical. The consensus is that the United States is “internationally challenged.”

In a lecture organized jointly by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy, and the Centre for Governance and Leadership of the Singapore Civil Service College, Mr. Walter Russell Mead challenged this oft-held perception. Setting the context for his thesis, Mr. Mead began his lecture with a sweeping overview of international relations since the 17th century, highlighting the historical development of the Anglo-Saxon liberalist and capitalist tradition.

Mead acknowledged American foreign policy does indeed often appear contradictory and erratic in the short-run. Yet, over the long-term, American foreign policy was reflective of and responsive to its true national interest. America could be seen as the “Mr. Magoo” of international politics—blissfully unaware of forthcoming dangers and yet miraculously escaping disaster each time. Indeed, the miracle was that the US made disastrous short term decisions in its foreign policy, yet in the long term, its influence on others had somehow increased. Quoting Otto von Bismarck who had declared that “God has a special providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States”, Mr Mead offered two reasons as to why American foreign policy was not the disaster that it seems.

First, the constant interaction of multiple players and competing interests results in a highly sensitive process to determine US “national interest”. This is in contrast to the romanticized notion of statecraft, which is premised on an “individual genius in a tower,” who enacted long-term, well-crafted strategies for the state independent from internal political pressures. But the US does not have a dominant person or institution running the country’s foreign affairs. Instead, many interest groups vie for influence in policy formulation. As a result, the system is sensitive to societal demands. Mr. Mead compared US foreign policy to “a ship of state” with a thousand different hands influencing the direction of the ship. In the short-term, the ship “veers, turns, and wobbles.” Rarely does a special interest group achieve all its demands, yet even small minority interests can affect the ship’s direction. Yet, while American foreign policy, at any given point, appears muddled, the overall trajectory of the ship is directed. Over time, Mr. Mead claimed, “the ship reaches its port of destination.”

Second, US foreign policy operated in the context of an Anglo-American system of global trade, finance, and communications that had been developed over 300 to 400 years. The influence and dominance of this “operating software” meant that new players had to play by the rules of the game. This system, promulgated by the Dutch in the 17th century, was taken over by the British a century later and then by the Americans after World War II. Mead pointed out that the Anglo-American primacy in the international sphere is verified by the historical record of great wars. Since 1688, the British or the Americans, or both, have emerged as the winners in every global war.

Looking into the future, Mr. Mead predicted that the US system will continue to be successful, even though its foreign policy seems to be “one disaster after another.” The ability of the US, following the shoes of its Dutch and British predecessors, to set the rules of the game and shape the global trade and communications system, gave it a sustainable advantage. Mr. Mead proceeded to analyse the Anglo-American system, which was based on five premises:

Have an open and dynamic society at home. Dutch society in the 17th century enjoyed religious freedom, free thought, and free education. Persecuted philosophers, artists, and entrepreneurs flocked there from other parts of Europe. The resultant fervent exchange of ideas created new concepts, products, and techniques.

Take the show on the road and engage the world. Having a dynamic, tolerant society at home enables a country to engage the rest of the world with greater ease. Dutch merchants established strategic trading posts all over the world, resulting in a global trading system dominated by Holland.

Develop a geopolitical strategy based on sea power and balance of power. The key for the Dutch and the British was to sustain a balance of power in Europe with their navies and militaries funded primarily by trade. In turn, the global power can gain support from weaker powers through aid and subsidies in key geopolitical areas.

Develop a trading network and espouse free trade. The Dutch encouraged other economies to integrate into their trading system and utilized their own resources to keep the seas safe for the commerce of every country. British and American naval power today both continue to monitor the sea-lanes.

Promote liberal institutions, such as democracy, rule of law, and intellectual property rights. Encouraging other countries to adopt such institutions and practices has two benefits – (1) it fosters more profitable economic relations, and (2) it enables that society to flourish in the international system. Mr. Mead described this premise as the “American addition” The bearers of this system want to encourage other countries to adopt institutions

and practices that generate higher aggregate economic profits for all. This democratic and economic agenda transforms other countries into better partners for peaceful development and economic cooperation. Mr. Mead pointed to the current state of US-China relations as an example. China is enmeshed in a system where it risked losing access to energy resources, financial sources, and its largest market if it chose to oppose the US. Similarly, the US stands to lose if it chooses conflict with China.

In conclusion, despite the short-term, erratic nature of American foreign policy, in the long-term it shows a tremendous degree of resilience and strength because the system aggregates all the vested, special interests of the society. America is able to collate these various interests primarily because it is an open, liberal society that places utmost importance on the freedom of speech.

Q&A Session:

Mr. Simon Tay, Chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, questioned whether America's involvement in Iraq was "a blip" in America's seemingly resilient foreign policy. Mr. Mead felt that to the contrary, it was possible to see the resilience of American foreign policy even in a situation as sensitive as the Iraq War. He observed that the war had not, as its critics had anticipated, driven "a wedge" in the relationship between the United States and its traditional Arab allies. Instead, the collapse of Iraq has made Iran look relatively stronger in the region, which in turn motivated Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia to develop closer ties with the United States. At the same time, these states now have a greater resolve to reach a consensus regarding Iran.

A participant asked whether Mr. Mead had pushed his thesis too far, given that great moments in United States foreign policy had been propounded by strong leaders. After all, the Marshall Plan and America's détente with China were impelled by individuals. Mr. Mead conceded that geopolitics is still crucial to policy-making and that foreign policy decisions are not made in a geopolitical vacuum. As such, the US system can produce great personalities with the ability to balance the various interests in society and to articulate persuasive long-term strategies accordingly, especially if the geopolitical environment is favorable to such long-term agendas.

On how he would defend the Anglo-Saxon liberalist tradition against opposition from extremists and those who regard the U.S. as an overbearing unilateralist, Mr. Mead replied that the source of anti-American sentiment is not anti-Americanism *per se*, but more a rejection of a system dominated by WASPs – the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Those who reject this system see Anglo-American capitalism and society as "fundamentally destructive and illegitimate." Mr. Mead remarked that these sentiments are not new; rather, they are part of a very old discourse that saw WASPs and the emergent capitalistic society as cruel and greedy and a *de facto* plutocracy in

which hidden string-pullers clandestinely control state policy.. Mr. Mead contended that in history, there have been two broad reactions to the invasion of Anglo-Saxon values– to repudiate the Anglo-Saxon way of life by retreating further into a pure, archaic faith, or on the other hand, to adapt one’s beliefs so that the culture survives in the new system. Mr. Mead maintained that Islamic extremists are only a minority of all Muslims. The fundamentalist Muslims, like the Vichy French and the American Indians, are neither the first nor the last staunch opponents of the Anglo-Saxon liberalist tradition.

On the US’ response to China, Mr. Mead felt that as China continues to grow within the existing economic system, it will “find itself entangled in a golden net.”, and be constrained by virtue of its rise. From the United States’ standpoint, the largest danger is the existence of two nuclear powers in Asia (India and China). The United States would much rather prefer a multipolar geopolitical system in which China, Japan, India and the United States all act as counter-balancing weights against each other, and Asia as a whole remains outward-looking and geared toward economic growth. Mr. Mead further asserted that the US’ strategy towards China was indicative of its “sticky power”. “Sticky power” is stronger and more effective than soft power because people actively choose to be seduced by the system. The challenger wants to work *within* the system to prosper.

Mr. Mead was asked for his thoughts on how the US’ system of policy determination through the interaction of many diverse interests and players can play out in a small nation-state like Singapore, which is looking to move in the right direction while becoming more open, dynamic and incorporate more diversity interests. He felt that Singapore needed to develop its own self-identity and figure out what being “Singaporean” means. He personally felt that diversity was a strength; Voltaire had remarked that a state with one religion leads to despotism; with two religions, civil war; and with thirty religions, harmony. Mr. Mead observed that greatness is not an attribute that a state can confer upon a people, but rather something that citizens themselves must bestow upon the state. He suggested that artists, writers, and intellectuals should be encouraged to express their conception of Singaporean national identity.

Mr. Mead closed his lecture with by noting the striking paradox at the heart of US foreign policy. As a status quo power, the United States wants to maintain its authority as a global hegemon, yet the true power of the United States is rooted in her own dynamic society and an open, capitalist world economy. The United States is therefore itself a force in accelerating the process of structural change and innovation worldwide; simultaneously a status quo and a revolutionary power. The more successful the United States is at propounding her liberal economic values and social traditions, the more likely powerful, new players will rise to the fore in the near future.