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With pomp and polish and platitudes, the 2016 presidential campaign is underway. It began in December, as former Florida Governor Jeb Bush announced he was “actively exploring” a run for the White House. Bush is more moderate than much of the Republican base on many issues—perhaps too moderate to ultimately win his party’s nomination.ⁱ On foreign policy issues, however, Bush tows a hawkish line, pushing for a more aggressive U.S. posture against Syria, Russia, Iran, China, and Cuba in order to better promote and defend American ideals and interests throughout the globe.ⁱⁱ

On the whole, the Republican hopefuls are “racing to the right” on foreign policy, arguing for a more muscular approach to international affairs. A narrative is taking hold that many of the problems facing the world today are the result of the Obama administration’s “failed leadership.” More specifically, they were not brought about by America’s ill-conceived actions, but instead, because of U.S. *inaction*: a failure to intervene as often or aggressively as “needed” around the world, which (to many conservatives’ minds) projected American weakness and undermined U.S. credibility.ⁱⁱⁱ The solution? Clear principled American leadership. This line of reasoning permeates the recently-announced campaigns of noted surgeon Ben Carson, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, and Texas Senator Ted Cruz, and increasingly reflects the political strategy of Kentucky Senator Rand Paul as well.^{iv}

The presumed Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, is perhaps more aggressive still: unwavering in her advocacy of Israel, comparing Putin to Hitler over Ukraine, pushing for a more confrontational approach to China, championing intervention in Libya and Syria (just as she previously did for Iraq), supporting the troop surge in Afghanistan as well as the likely ill-fated campaign against ISIL, defending the counterproductive drone program, and arguing for increased sanctions and the threat of force against Iran (although she now tentatively supports the nuclear negotiation effort).^v

During her pre-announcement book tour, Clinton lambasted the Obama administration's foreign policy, particularly the administration's aspirational credo:^{vi} "Don't do stupid shit." Her complaint was not that the Obama administration has failed to live up to such an apparently modest goal, but instead, that "don't do stupid *stuff*" is not an organizing principle, and "Great nations" need doctrines to guide their foreign policy.^{vii}

On its face, this line of criticism is absurd. Clearly, "avoid doing harm" is, in fact, a maxim designed to guide action (just ask any medical professional).^{viii} Granted, it's a principle guiding what *not* to do, rather than what to do. However, for this very reason, it is more basic (and more important than) any offensive strategy: it constrains what sorts of affirmative policies are desirable or even permissible. But notwithstanding this apparent lack of understanding about what "organizing principle" means,^{ix} there is a more profound error that Secretary Clinton holds in common with the Republican frontrunners: the assumption that grand strategies are necessary or useful in guiding foreign policy. They aren't.

The Problem with "Grand Strategies"

To understand why foreign policy doctrines are counterproductive, let us begin with a handful of humble axioms:

First, situations are importantly different from one another. Libya is not Ukraine. The Syria of the 1950s is neither the Syria of 2011, nor the Syria of 2014. The crises America faces today are not the same as those of Rome at the time of its collapse. While drawing analogies can sometimes be useful, taking comparisons too seriously will tend to obscure rather than elucidate the problems policymakers are currently faced with. Indeed, a policymaker's overreliance on historical tropes is a sign that they probably lack a nuanced grasp on the actual situation at hand — and are likely not well-informed about history, either.^x

Second, situations are fluid and often volatile: they evolve over time in response to myriad factors, most of which are difficult to predict or control.^{xi} Therefore, mindfulness of the present will be far more useful in guiding policy than attempts to model the future, draw analogies from the past, or frame contemporary developments within pre-existing narratives.^{xii}

Third, U.S. interest, and the optimal means of promoting them, are also heavily context-dependent and evolve along with the situation to which they're indexed. Accordingly, strategies which take American interests for granted are likely to be blind to critical opportunities and risks presented by particular circumstances.^{xiii}

Fourth, even what is morally right is heavily determined by the context in which options are presented — both at the personal and institutional levels.^{xiv}

In light of these propositions, we are left with the question: why would policymakers approach fluid and dynamic problems through rigid principles and reactionary applications?

The Incentive Problem

It is disturbing that policymakers seem so willing to embrace policies driven by ideology or abstract projection at the expense of paying attention to the facts on the ground, or even in outright defiance of known empirical realities.^{xv} But worse still is that even as it becomes glaringly obvious that these ill-conceived measures are failing or even backfiring, the typical response by policymakers is to explain problems away with empty counterfactuals about how the strategy is essentially sound and could have worked better under alternative circumstances — with the proposed “solution” typically being to double-down on the current policies, rather than to rethink their aims and methods. This is virtually the definition of fundamentalism.

And yet, it is fundamentalists who win elections. This is no less true in America than in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Uprisings. It is a problem intrinsic to democracy itself. While doctrines will generally give rise to terrible policies,^{xvi} they make excellent soundbites and political slogans.^{xvii}

The public loves the melodrama created by the apparent clashes of these lofty ideals. Perhaps more importantly, voters like simple narratives about what is happening and why; they like hopeful and bold (even if poorly substantiated) visions of the future. Constituents want complex issues related in an accessible fashion, short enough to fit between commercial breaks, distill into an op-ed column, or squeeze into a 140-character tweet. And so, for these reasons, voters are more likely to elect someone who has some neat, tidy ideological package to offer.^{xviii}

This may be why Americans, despite being generally and consistently averse to military interventions,^{xix} tend to elect politicians who are likely to resort to force to resolve foreign policy challenges, while decrying their political opponents as “weak” or “isolationist.”^{xx}

Pragmatism over Idealism or Populism

Perhaps the one exception to the aforementioned trend has been Barack Obama, who has tended to base critical policy decisions on what the public wanted in the moment rather than subscribing to any particular doctrine.^{xxi} But ironically, many voters seem to resent him for this,^{xxii} as the midterms underscored yet again. And it’s hard to blame them:

Americans are notoriously ignorant and reactionary about issues related to foreign affairs and national security — and far too disengaged from our military.^{xxiii} But for all that, we have the good fortune of living in a representative (rather than direct) democracy, where citizens elect politicians who are supposed to have the temperament and expertise to make tough, often controversial, decisions on their behalf. While accountable to citizens via occasional elections, precisely what American politicians are not supposed to do is reflexively defer to the public in the interim. The rightly (if improperly) maligned foreign policy track record of the Obama administration should serve as a cautionary tale for why not.

American leadership doesn't want for populism or idealism — what it lacks is pragmatism.^{xxiv} But given the proclivities of the American voter, perhaps the best that one can hope for is leaders who are great at exploiting narrative tropes to explain their policies to the public while their actions are determined by careful, informed, and realistic assessments of the challenges the U.S. faces. However, Americans shouldn't hold their breath in anticipation of such a noble liar anytime soon (certainly not for 2016): our politicians tend to be cynical in all the wrong ways.^{xxv}

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