

# **Theoretical Roots of US Foreign Policy**

**Machiavelli and American  
Unilateralism**

**Thomas M. Kane**

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## THEORETICAL ROOTS OF US FOREIGN POLICY

By the end of the 1990s, America's overseas critics had begun to describe the sole remaining superpower as, in the words of one writer, the 'original rogue state'. This book strives to explain why the United States finds unilateralist policies so attractive and finds a promising explanation in the works of Niccolo Machiavelli. In his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli constructed a theory about the grand strategy of republics, suggesting that foreign entanglements are peculiarly dangerous to republican societies, and that republics can master these dangers by adopting long-term strategies of imperialism. The author analyses Machiavelli's thoughts on these subjects and discusses contending interpretations of Machiavelli's work. He goes on to consider the accuracy with which Machiavelli's theory can explain the historical development of US grand strategy and adds material to the debate over whether the American system of government is, in the opinion of J.G.A. Pocock, anchored in Machiavelli's thought or, according to Leo Strauss, founded in 'opposition to Machiavellian principles'.

This book will be of great interest to all students and researchers of American politics, international relations theory and strategic and security studies.

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# THE ROGUE SUPERPOWER

‘It’s not likely we’ll be asking permission.’

(An American general, speaking under conditions of anonymity,  
regarding the circumstances under which the US would attack  
suspected terrorist bases in Somalia, *circa* 2002<sup>1</sup>)

By the end of the 1990s, America’s overseas critics had begun to describe the sole remaining superpower as, in the words of one *New Statesman* writer, the original rogue state.<sup>2</sup> The former French prime minister Lionel Jospin levelled a similar charge in more diplomatic language by describing US policy as unilateralist.<sup>3</sup> European Union (EU) Commissioner for International Relations Chris Patten repeated these sentiments and added: ‘Gulliver can’t go it alone.’<sup>4</sup>

Scholars and pundits have noticed the same trend. Veteran international relations (IR) scholar Joseph Nye, for instance, titled a recent work *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone*.<sup>5</sup> Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara not only condemns unilateralism but suggests that the United States should return to the liberal internationalism of Woodrow Wilson.<sup>6</sup> Samuel Huntington, famous for his argument that the twenty-first century will witness a clash of civilizations, warns that the United States cannot afford to alienate the rest of the world.<sup>7</sup>

One normally presumes that states are entitled to act unilaterally. This is what it means to be sovereign. The United States, however, seems unusually determined to exercise this right. Furthermore, Washington asserts its independence in ways that even its allies find jarring. In the first years of the twenty-first century, to name only a few particularly well-publicized incidents, the United States repudiated its anti-ballistic missile treaty, imposed tariffs and economic sanctions in violation of global free trade agreements, attacked Iraq against the wishes of fellow members of the UN Security Council, excused itself from following the Geneva Convention in its treatment of certain prisoners taken in Afghanistan, withheld its support for an international ban on landmines, withheld its support for controls on small arms, threatened to withdraw its signature from treaties establishing an international criminal court and refused to join international regimes to restrict carbon dioxide emissions.

In short, the United States withholds its support from a variety of apparently worthwhile causes. Meanwhile, the United States government frequently reserves the right to act as it sees fit, regardless of opposition from other nations and international bodies. These facts are in themselves troubling, because America's wealth and military preponderance give it great ability to support international accords – and to undermine them. Without US support, these projects and others like them may fail. Many also suggest that, given America's many advantages, Americans have a duty to support projects of this nature.

American unilateralism is also troubling at a more general level. The period since the decline of the Soviet Union has been one in which there has been an unprecedented degree of co-operation among the developed nations. International harmony would have been worth preserving in any era. In an age of nuclear weapons and global environmental threats, this spirit of co-operation seems absolutely indispensable. Many argue that America's willingness to respect the sensibilities of other nations will play a decisive role in determining whether this global consensus can last.<sup>8</sup>

The journalistic commentator Henry Porter, for instance, laments the fact that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had been unable to prevent the nuclear sabre-rattling between India and Pakistan. Writing in the summer of 2002, Porter suggests that the 'sheer force of American unilateralist military action' had set a bad example for the rest of the world, reducing Kofi Annan to impotence.<sup>9</sup> International relations scholar Bruce Cronin expressed the concept in more abstract terms:

[H]aving socialized the key states into accepting the assumptions and norms underlying the [global] order, the hegemon is placed in a position where it must follow the rules and institutions it had helped to establish, even when it is not in its interest to do so. To do otherwise would undermine the very order it has created.<sup>10</sup>

Given the well-known dangers of America's tendencies, one must ask why the US behaves as it does. Those who oppose the effects of American unilateralism need to know how to combat it, and when it is most likely to rear its head. Those who would defend American policy need to be able to explain why the US acts as it does, and how it justifies overriding the sensibilities of other nations. This book explores the roots of US unilateralism and finds that there is a logic to America's behaviour.

### **Unilateralism defined**

If one is to write about unilateralism, one must define it. The term need not be pejorative. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the word 'unilateral' means only 'performed by or affecting only one person or group'.<sup>11</sup> In current discussions of international relations, however, the word has come to imply policies formed without regard for other states that might be affected, especially policies

that defy others' wishes or policies that reject what others see as duties. This book uses the word in the more recent sense.

### **The deep roots of unilateralism**

Why does America insist on standing alone? One may attribute some of Washington's behaviour during the early twenty-first century to the political convictions of its Republican president, George W. Bush. Certainly, Bush's verbal gaffes provide material to political humorists who wish to portray him as ignorant and parochial. Still, even a cursory survey of history shows that it would be simplistic to blame American unilateralism on a single man.

America has not been uniformly unilateralist throughout its history. Indeed, the US has a great tradition of internationalism, which has manifested itself in ways that range from its long-standing aspiration to 'liberate' China and India through peaceful trade to its central role in the founding of the United Nations.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, unilateralism has been a recurring theme throughout American history. George Washington famously warned his countrymen to avoid 'entangling alliances'.<sup>13</sup> Although American president Woodrow Wilson took the lead in founding the League of Nations, his country refused to join it. Many hold America's notoriously isolationist foreign and economic policies of the 1920s and 1930s partially responsible for the Great Depression and the Second World War.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that this issue has come up so often indicates that it is more than a question of personalities. Unilateralism seems to be more than a question of ideology as well. Indeed, it can be difficult to determine who is responsible for America's isolationist tendencies. Although one can identify unilateralism as a distinct theme in America's foreign policy, most American political groups mix calls for greater independence with calls for greater involvement, depending on the issues under discussion.<sup>15</sup>

Since the 1990s, commentators have tended to associate unilateralism with the American right. Those who lean leftward typically wish to enlist US support for an assortment of well-intentioned international projects, while those who lean rightward typically remain sceptical. On different issues, however, liberals and conservatives reverse roles. During the 1980s, for instance, it was frequently the right that wanted the US to take a more active role in co-operating with anti-Communist forces abroad, while the left questioned both the wisdom and the morality of American interventionism.

Even after the Cold War, American liberals have expressed concern about some of their country's overseas entanglements. 'Time to Bring the Troops Home', writes Asia scholar Chalmers Johnson in a *Nation* article opposing America's military presence in the Far East.<sup>16</sup> Johnson goes on to assert that the United States 'is virtually the only nation on earth that maintains large contingents of its armed forces in other people's countries' and that, '[t]o those unlucky enough to live near them', US forces appear less like 'peacekeepers' than occupiers.<sup>17</sup> Since Johnson is undoubtedly aware that the United States maintains its forces in Japan and elsewhere

on the basis of mutually agreed-on defence treaties with the host countries, one must conclude that he thinks less co-operation and more unilateralism would, in this case, be the principled course of action. Meanwhile, moderate conservatives such as Henry Kissinger continue to caution against isolationism.<sup>18</sup>

International relations scholars commonly distinguish between realists, who see foreign policy primarily in terms of their own country's national interests, and idealists, who see foreign policy in terms of morality. Again, however, the debate over America's degree of engagement with the rest of the world is more than a debate between realism and idealism. As noted above, idealists on both the left and the right have alternately castigated unilateralism and advocated it. Realists are equally split over this issue. Samuel Huntington makes a spirited pragmatic argument to the effect that America risks becoming a 'hollow hegemon' unless it becomes more responsive to the rest of the world, but other self-described advocates of 'clear-eyed realism' suggest that America should voluntarily relinquish its position, allow its power to subside, and leave international action to other nations.<sup>19</sup>

### **The pressure for unilateralism**

Unilateralism, it seems, is not simply the favoured policy of a particular intellectual or political movement. There appears to be some underlying force that nudges Americans of many academic and ideological persuasions toward unilateral behaviour. Scholars have recognized this and attempted to identify the force. Henry Kissinger, writing in 1968, warned:

Partly as a result of the generation gap, the American mood oscillates dangerously between being ashamed of power and expecting too much of it. The former attitude deprecates the use or possession of force; the latter is overly receptive to the possibilities of absolute action and overly indifferent to the likely consequences.<sup>20</sup>

Both crusading and idealistic abstention from power politics can inspire unilateralist behaviour. One must ask, however, why the American mood should oscillate more than the mood of any other country. One must also note that, although the 'idealistic element of American youth' that dominated national life in the late 1960s has mellowed with age, America's foreign policy continues to feature both unilateral involvement and unilateral abstention. Just as it would be simplistic to attribute unilateralism entirely to the personalities of particular presidents, it would be simplistic to attribute it entirely to the political fashions of particular generations. The idealism of the 1960s may have reflected aspects of America's tendency towards unilateralism, but those who wish to understand the origins of this tendency must look deeper.

Bruce Cronin attempts to explain US behaviour in terms of America's position within the international system. Cronin identifies the United States as a hegemon: a powerful country that upholds the rules that govern trade and other relations

throughout the international community.<sup>21</sup> Although a hegemon may achieve its position through sheer power, it enforces international rules by mutual consent. Hegemony is a social role, and the hegemon needs recognition from the rest of the international community in order to retain its position.<sup>22</sup> The hegemon, however, faces a dilemma:

[T]here is a tension between a dominant state's role as a hegemon (defined in terms of leadership) and its role as a great power (defined in terms of material capabilities). These roles often call for contradictory performances. While secondary states expect the former to often act on behalf of the common good (as defined by the politically relevant powers), domestic political actors expect the latter to act in pursuit of parochial interest. Thus, there is a contradiction between the propensity for a powerful state to take unilateral action in promoting its self-defined interest and its desire to maintain long-term systemic stability at a minimal cost. This tension explains the contradictory behavior that hegemonies often exhibit.<sup>23</sup>

Cronin illustrates his point with a case study of America's relations with the United Nations. In the 1940s, the US argued for a strong Security Council. As recently as 1991, Cronin tells us, the US 'determined that its pursuit of a post-Cold War hegemony was tied to its legitimacy as a global leader'.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the United States legitimized its war to restore Kuwait's independence as a UN action. During the 1990s, however, various Security Council members began to question America's continued attempts to hold Iraq to the terms of the 1991 peace agreement. America and Britain eventually resorted to bombing Iraq without seeking the UN's blessing.<sup>25</sup>

Cronin's work draws valuable attention to the tension between US domestic policy and US foreign policy. One must, however, ask why this tension is inevitable. The simple fact that America is a hegemon does not fully explain it. To begin with, those who are interested in the actual policies the United States might adopt will wish to know where America's domestic interests diverge from America's interests as a global leader.

The truism that individual interests must always differ from group interests does not fully answer this question. As hegemon, the United States presumably had the opportunity to write the rules of international relations in its own favour. Was it too benevolent to do so? Has it lost the power to do so? Is there some other principle of international politics that made this turn of events inevitable?

Even if one accepts that the US has become the custodian of a system that reflects its principles but not its narrow self-interest, this does not fully explain American unilateralism. There are instances in which America's unilateral behaviour seems like simple hypocrisy. Given America's customary support for free trade, the Bush administration's decision to impose tariffs on steel imports appears to fall into this category. Other issues, however, are not so clear cut.

Even in Cronin's own example, the United States had no self-evident domestic motive for launching air strikes against Iraq. Certainly, the United States has interests in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the security of the global oil supply, but so do most other countries throughout the world. The US action may have been right or it may have been wrong, but it did not benefit Americans any more directly than it benefited Asians or Europeans. Some might say that the US benefited from the opportunity to demonstrate its military might, but this would seem to be in keeping with America's role as hegemon, not in opposition to it. One may argue that America's action was arrogant, aggressive and ill advised, but it is difficult to argue that it was motivated by domestic self-interest.

Public opinion polls do not support the idea that America's foreign policy unilateralism reflects America's domestic self-interest. Steven Kull, director of the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes, has done research that suggests that Americans favour foreign aid and are willing to pay for it with taxes.<sup>26</sup> His work also indicates that Americans favour more socially conscious trading practices even at the expense of economic growth, and that they are willing to risk troops in internationally run humanitarian military interventions.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Americans even claim to support the United Nations, and a majority of them say that they are willing to have their troops fight for the UN under foreign commanders.<sup>28</sup>

Americans, however 'refuse to submit to simplistic choices'.<sup>29</sup> Kull's work indicates that Americans have complex opinions about what they are and are not willing to do. This would seem to undermine their support for the UN. Americans, it seems, are eager to co-operate with the rest of the world, but only as long as they get their own way. America's leaders are equally headstrong, and the result is unilateralism. If this is a sin, it is closer to pride than to avarice.

Furthermore, as we have seen, the US behaved in much the same way before it became a world power. Robin Higham, introducing *Intervention or Abstinence: The Dilemma of American Foreign Policy*, affirms that, since becoming a super-power, 'the U.S. has conducted itself in its traditional pattern'.<sup>30</sup> Higham portrays the Vietnam War as an interventionist aberration.<sup>31</sup> Cronin contributes to our general understanding of benevolent hegemony in international relations, but he has not identified the causes of American unilateralism.

Raymond Aron, critiquing American foreign policy in *The Imperial Republic*, suggests a more promising approach. Aron, like Cronin, believes that one can explain American diplomacy 'only within the system of inter-state relations to which the protagonist belongs'.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the character of the protagonist. Aron reminds 'the reader of what Europeans too often forget, the major trends in United States diplomacy', which begin, he tells us, with the thirteen colonies.<sup>33</sup>

American political commentators have historically maintained that their special tradition shapes their role in the world. Like Aron himself, they have emphasized the fact that the United States aspires to govern itself as a republic.<sup>34</sup> Political theory has often portrayed republican government as the antithesis of empire. When

republics become involved in international affairs, they risk succumbing to the temptation of imperialism. Modern America differs significantly from the republics of antiquity, and a series of historical events beginning with the Spanish–American war and continuing through the world wars of the twentieth century has given America a special international role, but republican principles still have the power to explain important elements of US foreign policy.

Certainly, nineteenth-century commentators on US foreign policy were quick to invoke republican theory.<sup>35</sup> Not only did these commentators condemn imperialism for its mistreatment of other peoples; they portrayed it as a threat to the liberty of the United States itself.<sup>36</sup> Although the details of republican theory may no longer capture the public imagination, it may still shed light on the dynamics that drive America's dealings with the outside world. Unilateralism and republicanism have often gone hand in hand.

Republics have sought to limit their interaction with the outside world since ancient Greece.<sup>37</sup> Plato and Aristotle, among others, commented on this point.<sup>38</sup> Republics, democracies and other forms of free societies appear to need an exceptionally great degree of national independence. Unfortunately for those who are interested in American unilateralism, most of the great writers on republican theory have given the topic of foreign policy short shrift.<sup>39</sup> There is, however, a thought-provoking exception.

### Enter the Florentine

Niccolo Machiavelli, 'the first great state-and-nation builder of the modern world', not only observed the unilateralist tendencies of republics but endorsed them.<sup>40</sup> His *Discourses on Livy* provides readers with the materials to assemble a comprehensive theory of how unilateralism and multilateralism fit into the foreign policy of a republic. This theory anticipates many of the issues that shape American foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Not only does Machiavelli explain these issues in detail, but he advises state leaders on how to address them. In hindsight, much of his advice appears sound.

Some might object that, after five hundred years, later thinkers must have improved upon Machiavelli's work. Without denigrating more recent scholarship, the author would respond that few thinkers approaching Machiavelli's stature have related foreign policy to the fundamental problems of maintaining an independent state in such a broad-ranging and practical way.<sup>41</sup> Writers on strategy and foreign policy continue to refer readers to Machiavelli's writings, and some twenty-first-century writers stress his special relevance to American foreign policy debates.<sup>42</sup> Specialists in political theory continue to study the Florentine's thought.<sup>43</sup>

None of this proves that Machiavelli is superior to later thinkers. The continuing interest in Machiavelli does, however, show that none of the more recent thinkers have established their own superiority either. Therefore, this book proceeds on the assumption that Machiavelli's ideas remain worth taking seriously. One may choose to reject them – and the author suggests that there are occasions when one should

– but the Florentine presents an important perspective, and those who consider it can justly claim to have deepened their understanding of politics.

For those with an interest in US foreign policy, Machiavelli's work is especially interesting. America's relationship with the Florentine is controversial. Leo Strauss presents one point of view when he writes:

The United States of America may be said to be the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles. According to Machiavelli, the founder of the most renowned commonwealth of the world was a fratricide: the foundation of political greatness is necessarily laid in crime. If we can believe Thomas Paine, all governments of the Old World have an origin of this description; their origin was conquest and tyranny. But 'the Independence of America [was] accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments': the foundation of the United States was laid in freedom and justice. 'Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east by a stronger impulse than the Government of the sword revolved from east to west.'<sup>44</sup>

J.G.A. Pocock, on the other hand, speaks for a body of researchers who claim to have shown that the ideas of the American revolutionaries were anchored in the Machiavellian tradition.<sup>45</sup> There is a great deal of evidence for this position. As Strauss himself notes, America's treatment of its indigenous peoples was certainly 'government of the sword'.<sup>46</sup> The debate, however, remains lively. Recent work reminds us that even the most Machiavellian of the American revolutionaries disagreed with the Florentine on fundamental issues.<sup>47</sup>

If Pocock is right, and the process that began with the American Revolution is essentially Machiavellian, then one must presume that all of Machiavelli's teachings apply to America. Wise Americans will follow the Florentine's advice. Other countries must make their own policy accordingly. One would have to interpret the superficially idealistic sentiments of America's Declaration of Independence in the glare of Machiavelli's arguments about morality.

If, on the other hand, Strauss's argument is more than wishful thinking, those with an interest in the US must look for the point at which American necessities diverge from Machiavellian necessities. Strauss himself is the first to agree that the logic of Americanism and the logic of Machiavellianism often run parallel.<sup>48</sup> If Americans ignore the truth in Machiavelli's writings, they risk the domestic corruption, national decay and eventual foreign conquest he predicts for poorly managed republics. Nevertheless, if they blindly convert themselves to the Florentine's approach, they will lose the anti-Machiavellian freedoms and virtues that they have enjoyed so much and preached so piously.<sup>49</sup>

Accordingly, the remainder of this book investigates the question of what Machiavelli can tell us about America's twenty-first-century international predica-



ment. In the process, this book will contribute material to the theoretical debate as to whether America is fundamentally Machiavellian. Machiavelli seems to have explained the dynamics of many of America's international relationships. The Florentine's advice, however, pushes the US towards policies that its people should struggle to avoid, and the author clings to the hope that they can.

### Using Machiavelli

Machiavelli does not hesitate to give practical advice. Nevertheless, one should not make the mistake of treating his works simply as self-help books for politicians. Although the Florentine may, as he claims, have told us everything he knows about politics, he has grander philosophical purposes.<sup>50</sup> His larger agenda, and not specific problems of statecraft, guides his work.

Commentaries on Machiavelli's teachings fill volumes. Pocock, however, effectively summarizes the main theme in the Florentine's work in his book *The Machiavellian Moment*. According to one of Pocock's two definitions, the 'moment' referred to in the title is the point at which people perceive that their society has no special claim on Providence. Those who have reached this point acknowledge that neither God nor nature has granted them any special privileges. Their community is but one like every other, its resources are finite, and it is vulnerable to all the dangers that have destroyed previous states and civilizations.

People who have come to these conclusions realize that they must grapple with the problem of remaining 'morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events'.<sup>51</sup> This problem lies at the heart of Machiavelli's work. To solve it, the Florentine suggests, folk must draw upon the quality he calls *virtu*.<sup>52</sup> *Virtu* encompasses will, audacity, courage, cunning, and a polymorphous variety of other useful traits, but it notoriously does not include the ethical scruples implied by the word 'virtue' in its more ordinary sense.<sup>53</sup>

Machiavelli prizes *virtu* above all other things. As one of the Florentine's admirers put it, this quality is more magnificent even than the sun.<sup>54</sup> The fact that Machiavelli values this quality so greatly is much of what makes him a dangerous guide for those who treat his books simply as collections of political maxims. Although *virtu* is the key to long-term success, success is not synonymous with *virtu*. One can, after all, achieve one's ends through outside assistance, or simply through good fortune.<sup>55</sup>

Those who rely on external benevolence as a matter of course, however, remain at the mercy of outside forces. Thus, they can never consider themselves either free or secure. They remain subject to what Pocock called 'irrational events' and Machiavelli personifies as the goddess Fortuna. When Machiavelli discusses specific issues of policy, one may safely assume that he is more interested in the larger question of the state's *virtu* than in the specific issues he has chosen to illustrate his points. Generally, the path to *virtu* will include efficiently solving the