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Stranne, F. (2016)

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Putting out fire with gasoline

The intellectual pursuit of how one should best describe Barack Obama's foreign policy legacy has already been going on for the past couple of years. Many believe that the United States after nearly eight years with Obama has, not only lost control of the Middle East and the terrorist threat in general, but completely lost both the initiative and leadership when it comes to world affairs (references). The dispute over what Obama actually inherited from his predecessor George W. Bush, or what responsibility he himself bears for any development, is one of the most prominent disputes (for example, see articles by Rose and Stevens in *Foreign Affairs* October, 2015). Naturally, there are those who argue that Obama, despite a pressurized situation and the legacy of two wars has succeeded in creating more stability in the world and that his diplomatic success with Cuba and Iran is the sign of a changed approach from Washington; something that promotes sustainable security policy development (Rose Oct. 2015). However, among those who embraced Obama in 2008, having high hopes of his political promises of change, there has been expressed criticism and many have claimed that behind his rhetoric hides an aggressive calculating militarism. This has been expressed e.g. by the expansion of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), commonly known as drones, as well as ill-conceived operations as in e.g. Libya; leading to Obama being perceived as a somewhat extension of Bush rather than as a president who has offered change. Therefore, how to interpret Obama's political legacy is just as diverse as the political analysts themselves. Nonetheless, this debate resembles those after each presidential term i.e. looking for examples of what makes a particular president unique and just what he has left behind. Parallel to this, every presidential administration is placed within certain traditions of thought that are narrowly divided between those with more isolationist tendencies and those who advocate an active leadership with a strong military dominance in the world.

In all these discussions, the crucial and distinguished historical patterns found in American foreign policies, that continually leads to Washington interpreting the world and acting on a given logic are overlooked. By individually evaluating the different administrations, the long pattern of movement becomes invisible as well as how each administration takes over in a structure that is characterized by a *progressive continuity* and constant expansion of USA's power and influential spheres that have been driven by distinct core ideas. These core ideas, that on the one hand have made the United States the successful superpower has, at the same time, created various internal enemies and counter-productive strategies which can be seen as the introduction to the country's somewhat decline. Instead of analyzing each individual administration, American (foreign) policy should be viewed by the patterns of movement that have governed the journey from the original 13 colonies to the world's strongest superpower. Taking this into account, all presidential administrations have acted within this logic. The differences have been about how the context is viewed from time to time and what has been considered necessary in promoting this direction, while at the same time preserving the foundation. This core (nucleus) and the driving processes have not changed but have been reformulated in line with other developments such as industrialization, an ever-increasing mass-consumption society and as a consequence of changes in the country's military capability (Stranne 2011). Isolationist tendencies (which in fact have never been practiced in any significant way) as well as interventionism which, in practice, should also be understood as strategies in order to maintain progress. The purpose has always been to make sure that the world is transformed in accordance with US interests and constantly expanding the US sphere of influence.

The progress made over time has continually created more and more power and influence for the United States and made the country without doubt the most successful in the history of mankind. The ideas that

built this success are also something that people from other continents have both looked at and admired and in many cases aimed to emulate. Therefore, the sense of exceptionalism and righteousness has always been kept alive. However, these core ideas that on the one hand have created successes have also blinded the political and military elite in Washington and prevented them from identifying the limitations of the system and consequently unable to know when it is time to change direction. At the same time that these core ideas have created the possibilities for the emergence of the world's most powerful nation, there has also been an inherent weakness in this that has gradually undermined Washington's ability to make long-term sustainable decisions. Viewed on a wider perspective, we find an ongoing successful expansion of American power and spheres of influence but also inherent contradictions, arrogance and a aggressive militarism, which has legitimized far more aggressive policies than the Founding Fathers ever intended. This have simultaneously created both external and internal enemies. The turning point came through the collapse of the Cold War and the Gulf War in 1991, when a point (phase) was reached when it became possible for Washington to try to *dominate* the Middle East. I.e. by establish permanent military bases/military troops in Saudi Arabia. Through these actions, the US went into the fourth phase of American political history which can be described as "Imperium Americana" (see below). With the ending of the Cold War and the sense of having achieved their ultimate goal, Washington misled itself in believing that the 21st century now completely belonged to the US and that they, with its new position could determine the development for everyone else. But in truth, it was probably also the beginning of its decline; although it did not have to be so; had they taken a different path. The question is if the country has the ability to change this direction and become a legitimate hegemony in the world today. However, the risk is great that liberal interventionism and open door limited policies (Layne 2006) will continue to imply short-termism in security political analyses and continue to make the US more aggressive. In ongoing talks at influential think tanks in Washington DC and through interviews with people within them as well as in the US Congress, no other conclusions can be drawn than the fear of losing control will lead to new counter-productive strategies, where one is "putting out fire with gasoline".

The grand strategy

To suggest that the US has pursued expansionist foreign policies which has also created disproportionately costly commitments abroad that have not (necessarily) made the US safer (stronger) is not unique (see items; Gardner 2008 & 2009; Klare, 2004; Kolko 2006; Schmitz 1999 & 2006). Some argue that this constant expansion and the means used have been both good and necessary (Boot 2002, Kagan 2006). However, it is not unusual to hear others argue that the United States has become overstretched and increasingly more insecure as the number of military bases around the world has increased and the involvement in other countries' development (see e.g.: Layne 2006; Johnson 2005 & 2008; Soros, 2004). It is not unusual to suggest that the United States is not only defending itself, but instead both chase ghosts in the fight against terrorism by putting itself in war-like situations without clear boundaries as well as fighting unidentified enemies that risk the creating of perpetual war for perpetual peace (Vidal 2005).

There are a number of researchers who believe that the United States has in many years pursued a policy that creates more enemies and more instability than promoting the preconditions for safety and security, which can be explained by short-term analyses of the world as well as on false assumptions regarding military solutions' ability to contribute to peace. Several prominent US researchers have pointed out, not least, how the war against terrorism has meant a death-blow to US power i.e. the country losing major moral, political and economic influence. These researchers also claim that the country abused its position of power when the George W. Bush administration incorporated the delusion that the US could completely reshape the world according to its own interests and ultimately democratizing the Middle East.

Leading scientists such as John Mearsheimer and Andrew J. Bacevich have long criticized the US security apparatus by highlighting how different decisions since the Second World War have led to both inaccurate and awkward outcomes. Bacevich's latest book: "*The Short American Century - A Post Mortem*" (2013) highlights how the United States through its significant position has overexploited its capacity and instead become dictatorial and abusive of its powers; something that has created the decline. Mearsheimer describes in his article: "*Imperial by Design*" (2011), how the overthrowing of regimes in the world has become a tradition "of the US security apparatus which has contributed to this setback. Often (and for some time), these operations have instead led to hardline dictators coming to power; several of which eventually have led to the anti-American resistance (e.g. Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954). Mearsheimer states that the belief in Washington that the United States are able to reshape and dominate the world only leads to endless problems rather than the opposite. According to Mearsheimer, liberal imperialism (interventionism) that has guided Washington is not a recipe for safety and security. The effects of this became most apparent when the Bush administration policies evolved into a grand strategy that dealt with social "engineering on a grand scale" (Mersheimer 2011:25); a strategy that would inevitably lead to disasters as they tried to implement democracies in areas with no such experience.

That various attempts to impose democracy upon other states with military intervention have practically never been a successful factor as Stephen Kinzer shows in his book, "Overthrow" (2006). His review of 14 different operations where the United States have overthrown regimes they disapproved of show, that only once, have such actions contributed to a favorable development of democracy. Kinzer says that this must be understood as a "*continuum rather than a series of unrelated incidents*" (Kinzer, 2006: 2). From the Spanish-American war and the overthrowing of President Zelaya in Nicaragua in 1909, the United States have been perceived to have the right to intervene anywhere in the world where they wanted to influence political developments (Kinzer, 2006: 3). The initial driving force behind such reasoning was to secure American business interests and promote markets for American goods. However, as a consequence, such actions have only created "turmoil" and made America more insecure as well as producing generations of anti-American militant groups. Looking back at the era of "regime change" has only created an endless spiral of violence and insecurity as new regimes fail to meet US interests. Therefore, US "security interests" have constantly expanded. This has been defended in idealistic terms with the view of saving others from oppression and the spreading of openness and freedom. Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan confirm, in light of this tradition in every way what Kinzer has highlighted. After Iraq and Libya, the Middle East has now experienced an increase in sectarian violence; where violence in the region is of historic proportions. In Afghanistan, the Taliban are once again increasing its influence, and opposition to the US military presence is once again prevalent.

The fact that US strategy of fighting against terrorism has created more uncertainty is supported empirically in a recognized study concerning the reasons behind various terrorist acts in the world between 1980-2009 (Pape and Feldman 2010). The authors have been able to demonstrate a clear link between terrorist attacks and occupation, i.e. that the attacks are primarily directed against the occupation forces. Acts of terrorism increases as the number of civilian deaths escalate in the presence of an occupying power (Pape/Feldman 2010). The past decade of war has not reduced but significantly increased the number of terrorist attacks as well as support for terrorist organizations. The fact that so many people are willing to sacrifice and risk their lives to attack US targets have not seriously been discussed in the United States. The perfunctory response has been that it is Islamic fundamentalists who hate Western society, but the truth is that an overwhelming proportion (95%) of all attacks are due to the people opposing the occupation or the violent behavior of the occupation forces and/or support for the illegitimate national regimes that prevent changes that would harm Western interests (Pape/Feldman 2010: 329). The report from the Pentagon (the so-called "drone document") admits that nine out of ten people killed by drones are not the intended targets but still fall under the title (EIKAS - Enemy Killed In Action); therefore, making it more acceptable to the public (<https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/the-kill-chain/>). The report also describes how there is a real risk that a drone war creates more terrorists than it eliminates; something even the former US Secretary of Defense and one of the brains behind the fight against terrorism, Donald Rumsfeldt, suspected to be a consequence. However, US public debates rarely

or never discuss the causes behind the various attacks against US targets and the population is largely unaware of the country's political and military operations in the world today (references).

In David C. Unger's "*The Emergency State - America's Pursuit of Absolute Security at all Costs*", he argues that the US quest for total security since the CIA and the National Security Council's founding in 1947 has transformed the United States into a thoroughly securitized state that has made the country *more vulnerable, more isolated and less free*. He also implies that this has undermined its economic power (Unger 2012: 3) and he points out that Bush's policies did not come from nowhere. Instead it should be understood as part of the logic of the "emergency state", initiated by Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower that have proved to be counterproductive. Furthermore, Unger also questions the revolutionary in Bush's decision to attack Iraq for preventive purposes. He believes that for the past seven decades, Washington has automatically thought that the surest way to protect America is to combat potential threats abroad and that they had been fully occupied in doing just this (Unger 2012: 286). Since the ending of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, the United States have been under the illusion that they can "police the entire planet"; however, during the last decade this has only led to an increased, not decreased, number of people who, not only thinking badly of Americans, but are prepared to attack them (Unger 2012: 287). Unger argues that the United States must reduce the motives that encourage the terrorists and stop behaving, as terrorists claim, namely, as a modern colonial power.

The number of studies and research that outline US's weakening as a result of excessive militarism and counterproductive strategies is substantial. However, the key here is that the vast majority perceive a qualitative change from the Second World War, and claim that what happened then, in terms of the development of the military-industrial complexes, the establishing of safety organizations as well as the increasing (economic) power positions in the world explain this development. Such an analysis is somewhat lame in my judgment, as it misses the long pattern of movement of American foreign policies that enables us to understand it as part of *its total historical development*. Furthermore, certain basic concepts that have always existed since the United States was first created have added to this development.

Core ideas

It is not unique to argue that there are certain beliefs and concepts that have governed American foreign policy behavior. There are an abundance of researchers who have shown us how there are great contradictions in the American world of ideas and concepts that have legitimized violent behavior towards others; based on the idea that America is exceptional, has a defined destiny to lead the world as well as having a mission to promote democracy and human rights; even if violent means are required to achieve this. The importance of exceptionalism and manifest destiny is well documented by e.g. Graebner 1968; Johannsen, 1997; Merk 1963; McDougall, 1997; Stephanson 1995 and Walker 2009. Unilateralism and the constant pursuit of absolute security is described in e.g. Chase & Carr, 1988; Gaddis 2005, Kagan 2006. Racism's significance as a legitimized factor for military aggression can be found in, e.g. Hietala, 1997; Hunt, 1987; Weinberg 1958, Zinn 1995. How this has developed and taken shape through history, but also how it can be linked to economic interests are documented and highlighted in, e.g. Bacevich 2005 & 2010; Boot in 2002; Gardner 2008 & 2009; Klare, 2004; Kolko 2006; Layne 2006; Rosenberg 1982, Schmitz 1999 & 2006.

Targeting the domain

To get some interesting answers to the questions concerning how to understand American foreign policy in general, or why Obama as acted as he has, we need to combine research concepts and practice and ask more challenging questions. Whilst looking for an understanding of the security policies the United States has adopted over the years, one should look behind the prevailing paradigm and, above all, see the different presidential administrations as a continuum, and as part of the (expansive) overall picture. We

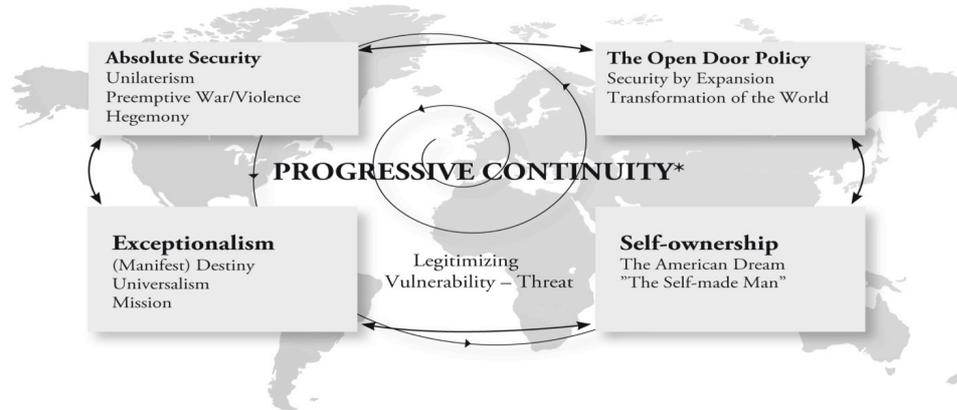
need to go behind the obvious and instead address the inherent logic found in the basic concepts and how they have spurred the development and created a *progressive continuity*. Furthermore, we also need to look above the popular division of isolationists and interventionists (and the scale between) that often define how the various administrations' actions are interpreted. Individual historical actions (of the different administrations) are not unique consequences of individual interpretations of the society, but follow each other and can be explained by the same overall and controlling logic, based on a core. It is by cutting through the visible and instead seeing the implicit and underlying patterns that shape American politics and the administrations' assumptions of the world that you start to discover areas of interest. To show a comparison, it is similar to a "Houdini Challenge" - there is a need to get out of the admittedly different, but still tight boxes in which we generally interpret US actions in world politics. With a superpower that tends to be lost and exhausted but, at the same time, with the world's strongest military capabilities and more and more voices calling for more aggressive foreign policy, we must provoke new thoughts and explanations for why the United States, just as empires before them, has tended to overexploit its position of power, and is now moving towards an (inevitable) decline.

I want to present three different areas that take us beyond the dominant assumptions and provide new explanations for how we understand US security policies. Analyses, all based on extensive historical synthesis, presented in *George W. Bush - a (r) evolution of American foreign policy?* (2011) and its conclusions, together with a series of new interviews and observations made in Washington from 2013 to 2014, can help us to interpret Obama's legacy and what might await a future president in 2017 and onwards. (1) First of all, it is about seeing and understanding the core ideas that have shaped the entire US foreign policy thinking and how they have pushed each other in a mutual, reinforcing and expansive logic and (2). Partly, it is about splitting American history in four different eras based on the understanding of how the various concepts/ideas with help of ideologues and financial incentives at given breakpoints have prompted Washington to take new expansive steps.

The core ideas that have been most prominent in American self-understanding have, in fact, become their own worst enemies and have blinded Washington from thinking innovatively and daring to deal with the treats from the outside world other than by military means. Therefore, it is your own internal enemies which also allow one to repeat "is putting out fire with gasoline" and to act counterproductively rather than on the basis of sustainability.

Progressive continuity

When looking closely at the founding of America and its development in relation to the ideas that have shaped the country, a certain pattern emerges; a logic that has established standards and partly fixed structures regarding foreign policy. In fact, these standards and structures that are incorporated into today's foreign and security policies stem from the ideas that originally shaped the Constitution and American nationalism. It concerns two basic foundations to which a number of other elements quite quickly were established and which, I consider, together created a *self-reinforcing logic* that has legitimized and even demanded a more expansive foreign policy i.e. a progressive continuity where ideas are transformed throughout history but still retain their essence. These ideas have adapted to new contexts and developments, and have become more expansive (figure 1).



*Mutually reinforcing elements that created an expansionary logic and continuous expansion of U.S. sphere of influence, which have had certain effects.

The two fundamental basics: *exceptionalism* (from which Manifest Destiny, universalism and mission have emerged) and *self-ownership* (which later developed into the American dream and the self-made man) are at the heart of the American nationalism. These two core values combined early on with a number of other guiding ideas and principles, such as the sense of vulnerability, the pursuit of absolute security and that the United States had only to rely on itself, which required a fundamental unilateral approach to the outside world. Something that was manifested in the Monroe Doctrine and exposed the so-called need for the United States to act in their own interests (Boot 2002; Smith 1994). Security was also linked quite promptly to the expansion which well coincided with the country's economic ambitions, the settlers' entrepreneurial spirit (as the self-ownership idea was supported) and the enormous assets the continent offered. Even early on, the Americans considered themselves forerunners in the development of humanity and believed that there was little reason for restraint. Therefore, it was only natural for the US to civilize those who stood in their way as it represented a superior idea (Kagan 2006). Furthermore, the perceived vulnerability and the idea of universal valid values created, early on, the legitimacy of preventive military action to ensure that nothing stood in the way of American interests and the distribution of its ideas.

Exceptionalism

Through the formation of the American nation (the Declaration of Independence and Constitution), an outstanding new political system based on people's will and not on inherited power was, in fact, created. With the Constitution, the foundations for the world's first true democracy to be developed were set up and, at the same time, was the sentiment that this was of historical significance. The aim was a free society for all people, even if they formed a republic and not a democracy as we know of today (Ellis 2007; Spiller 2005). The political significance of exceptionalism in this process can not be underestimated, but permeates the self-image of what the United States is and what role it should play in the world. With the declaration of independence, the US broke away from the old world which sometimes is interpreted as a form of isolation, but was, in fact, quite the opposite (Kagan, 2006: 42). It was a document whose purpose was to establish a new nation through the formation of a foreign political policy and help secure the young and fragile nation in a hostile world environment. It gave the US the right to establish contacts with other nations than Britain, as well as being able to protect themselves against those that stood in its way. Therefore, even from the beginning, foreign policy and national identity were intimately connected (Stranne 2011). With Monroe, a doctrine for increased security as well as establishing the possibility for the US to be able to advance across the continent was created (Merk 1966: viii).

It was also clear, from the beginning, that there was something unique about America (Thomas Paine had formulated it well), and the unifying base of the nation was ideas; not a common history or origin. This has made it necessary for the political and economic elite to support nationalism in relation to the common values and ideas where the sense of exceptionalism has played a particularly significant role (Campbell 1998: 91; Marcus 1999: 402). The implication of the concept has, however, gradually been expanded as it restricted the freedom of other people in a way that was contrary to its own freedom ideals. Therefore, the US justified its actions by adding a predetermined destiny (Manifest Destiny) and mission to exceptionalism; which increased the opportunities to expand at other persons' expense (Hietala 1985: 250ff; Graebner 1968; Merk 1963; Zinn 1995). In the early 1900s, this was done with the argument (Wilson) "*to teach the inferiors to choose the right government and rescuing the uncivilized from themselves*" (Hunt 2007: 58; McDougall 1997: 131). Wilson's grandiose ideological policy meant that there were no longer any limits upon US involvement as well as an active international foreign policy in the name of national greatness and freedom for mankind; a development that had already started with the so-called Roosevelt Corollary two decades earlier. Americans have never had to reconsider the relevance of exceptionalism's significance because the actual development, not only constantly confirmed the sense of superiority, but because its fundamental ideas incorporate a perceived superiority over others. With a superior political system, sanctioned by God himself, one has never had to question the appropriateness of conducting an expansive foreign policy when the need existed (Weinberg, 1958).

Through a constant feeling of vulnerability, the goal has also been to strive for absolute security; quite often by acting preemptively against possible threats. The essence is that even the pursuit of absolute security has been considered supportive of the continuous expansion and reshaping of the world to the American system (where the economic driving force for expansion and the open-door policy can emerge). Americans have never considered themselves to be able to trust anyone, but have at the same time, been obsessed with the idea of achieving absolute security (Chase/Carr 1988: 12). Legitimacy has been created for active and preventive action against potential/future threats due to the sense of vulnerability. Therefore, offensive actions have been considered necessary in ensuring the country's own safety by preventing others from acting first. Even George Washington claimed that "*offensive operations, often times, is the surest, if not (in some cases) the only means of defense*" (Washington June 25, 1799, in Washington, Writings 1836 Vol XI: 443). During the late 1800s and early 1900s, a number of countries were annexed "*for safety*" (Chase / Carr, 1988: 119ff) and the entire Cold War can be described as a conflict of facing potential threats (Kolko 2006). Furthermore, the incredibly extensive intrusion the US undertook in other countries throughout the Cold War should not be underestimated or overlooked; as well as the methods the country was prepared to use to reach their goals of preventing socialism/communism from spreading or which irregularities could be overlooked regarding the political leaders they supported.

Through modern warfare, improved intelligence and new communications as well as its growing economic position, the US took its exceptionalism, the pursuit of absolute security, unilateral policies and preventive warfare to new dimensions. It used its military power or intelligence operations in several countries e.g. Iran, Guatemala, Brazil, Congo, Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Chile as well as intervening in several other countries' elections (Harvey 2005: 53f). The success of some of these operations gave the United States a self-confidence that led them into increasingly open and problematic situations but also becoming increasingly legitimate in the defense of its own security (Layne 2006). Already here, signs of weakening started to emerge as their pursuit of communists most likely strengthened the communist liberation movements more than it prevented its advance (Fulbright 1967: 85). Despite such actions taking place, nothing restrained Washington in how they saw the need to continue with such interventions. Therefore, the US has continued in the same way in different parts of the world i.e. supplying arms to their future opponents (e.g. in Afghanistan in the 1970s/80s and most recently in Iraq and the surrounding region). The quest for absolute security has blinded Washington from the possibility of allowing the outside world to develop in a direction which they considered problematic. The idea of themselves being an exceptional country with universal valid values has simultaneously both legitimated militaristic policies to take shape and blinded Washington in seeing where the limits are. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there were, in their eyes, no longer any obstacles to prevent them from dominating the world.

Self-ownership

When it comes to self-ownership, durability and driving force are not as clear but, at the same time, both real and important. The very concept, by contrast, has needed to be reformulated to adapt to the development of capitalism and the changing conditions and terms of modern society. However, this has not meant that the original beliefs and ideas have disappeared; only that they have become more diffuse and involve a complex relationship between economic freedom, ownership, the American dream and the capitalist economy; which basically means that people have equal rights to own means for their own existence. In reality, it has been a myth, a vision of the land of opportunity for "all", but nevertheless an important element of the political core that is about freedom and individualism. As an expansive force, the US has been indispensably powerful as the dream of deciding your own future (not being dependent or subordinate to any other person or government and thus, being truly free) and having the opportunity to achieve boundless success was unique. Something which became an essence of the political idea we call American. This created a sense of togetherness based on the opportunities the young nation offered on an "untouched" continent full of resources. When self-ownership and the idea of equality which, among other things, was formulated by Thomas Jefferson eventually needed to be adapted to newer, modern times and newer economic realities, it was reformulated (by the likes of e.g. Abraham Lincoln) to a more neutral concept of allowing all people equal opportunity to create success. After 1870, the American dream continued to develop; consolidating the idea of the individual's opportunities but also the individual's personal responsibility to take advantage of the offers available and to ensure their own success. What was initially the idea of self-ownership regarding the establishing of your own farm or starting your own business, could now also involve selling your labor in order to, in the longer term, invest the gains and create the possibility of becoming truly independent. Together with exceptionalism this creates the feeling of what it is to be part of the American system. This has also been a safeguard regarding stability and order, which has meant that the US has been able to focus its power on economic expansion and administering the business interests that arise from these ideas. As citizens have not lived under the notion that the state should ensure their safety, they have not demanded anything in case they failed. Now that the American dream is being seriously challenged for the first time, we also see the embryo of a broken social stability and an even more aggressive foreign policy in the hope of finding new doors to open in the global market so that the wheel can be kept in motion.

The key here is, however, that the idea of self-ownership is at the heart of the country's foreign policy actions. Maintaining the notion of self-ownership and the American dream has required expansive policies to ensure its survival (access to resources and new markets); first across the continent (initiated by Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase) followed by the rest of the world through the introduction of the open-door policy in the late 1800s, something that could effectively be connected to the sense of exceptionalism. When self-ownership was reformulated to the more open American dream, something more than just words was required. The widening class divisions that arose during the Depression of 1893 made the financial elite draw attention to the benefits of foreign markets, and that under-consumption at home could be offset by selling goods abroad; thereby also avoiding new class divisions in the future (Zinn 1995: 276). Senator Albert J. Beveridge clarified this and later linked it with fate when he, in 1897, claimed that: "*American factories produce more than the American people can use [...] Fate has marked out our policy, world trade must and shall be ours*" (Rosenberg 1982: 22; Zinn 1995: 278). Economic growth justifies new forms of interventionism when it is combined with the idea of exceptionalism and fate. At the same time, this created liberal developmental-ism in the United States that would mature to new levels during the 1900s. For most Americans, the country was a role model; something that deepened the sense of an American mission. Lincoln had during his presidency also articulated the concept of fate and convinced many of the need to let the world's light and freedom flourish and spread (Johannsen, 1997: 17), also to be taken up by the administrations of McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson and institutionalized in different ways. However, it is important to stress that the individual did not experience this liberal development-ism or American culture as anything of value or ideological, but as something universally valid.

Security was effectively connected to growth. An American empire was now built that could be wrapped in fancy rhetoric and design compared to previous empires. This "empire by consent" claimed, not to have the ambition to become a dominant empire but a democracy and strong force for opportunities for everyone (Sherry 1995: 125). The start of the Cold War and economic institutions that were created under

US leadership increased this "open door policy". Naturally, there were clear, geopolitical ambitions in this, but the economic interests became an important catalyst for also increasing America's strategic importance and its ideological ambitions (Layne 2006: 33). After the end of World War II, the US was able to establish the financial institutions that were required to help ensure its unique position. This was increased further through the Washington Consensus, where the power and the connection between Wall Street, the US Treasury and major institutions i.e. IMF, WB and WHO developed even more (Harvey 2005: 73). This has also demanded that the US could guarantee certain stability in the regions perceived as important when keeping the economic machine ticking and where military bases around the world were considered to be required.

A mutual reinforcing logic

I consider, that together, the sense of exceptionalism and self-ownership conception have formed the backbone of American politics and has been apparent throughout this country's history; something that has influenced American foreign policies and had significant consequences (as summarized above). The two idea elements have steadily strengthened each other's being and formed logic for constant expansion and how to relate to the outside world. Once these two basic principles combined with each other, it became an extremely powerful and an expansive precept for expansion without any apparent limits. This economic expansion is justified by the political ideas of exceptionalism. At the same time, the political expectations to incorporate more and more areas could be strengthened by the economic ideas and incentives. An important conclusion is that a mutual reinforcing logic between the political and economic idea policies was immediately created that continuously validated each other; each made valid but also constantly expanding each other's content. The mutual reinforcing process that the idea-element created can be divided into different phases and important breakpoints in which various reformulations of the fundamental concepts have taken place to suit the idea of the United States to new contexts. These phases follow each other and build on each other's content, inherit each other's basic essence but are, at the same time, extended; therefore, revolutionizing in its own time and logically following each other. The core is retained but revolutionary new steps were taken in which the meaning of the ideas extended to include new expansive themes. Thus, there is both a constant and a progression; something I decided to call progressive continuity.

Four phases of American history

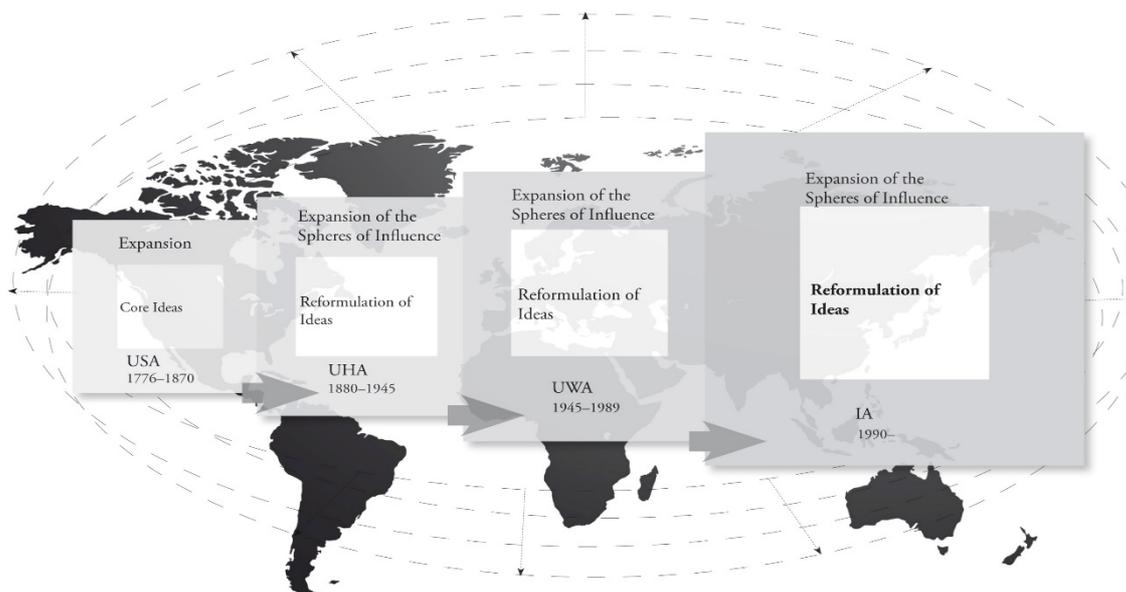
By using this classification, we can understand the presidents of modern time in a continuum of past policies rather than as individual practitioners of their contemporaries; as well as how they relate to the basic ideas that constitute the basis of how they look at themselves and the world. Therefore, the important aspect that emerges is, among other things, that different presidents from different eras seize the opportunities on offer to expand the country's power and influence when these opportunities arise and when different factors correlate. The differences in the various administration's policies can be found in how they operate the core ideas and their inherently expansionist nature to current contexts and handle policies in relation to this.

These so-called breakpoints and the new phases occur in times when the reformulation of ideas have created legitimacy and incentives for broader, political ambitions, economic development as well as when external contextual changes have taken place. Another very important aspect that emerges is that the breakpoints always taken place after an intellectual struggle concerning America's choice of path for the future, but where those supportive of expansion have emerged victorious from the battle. Dominant people, think tanks, and/or business interests have clearly stated the need for expansion and an expanded American "commitment" as well as why it could be considered justified using military force (and even occupation) to create better conditions and possibilities for the United States and, in their eyes, the outside world.¹ This is particularly interesting as we appear to be facing a new breakpoint at this very moment,

¹ These are more than often built on exaggerated threats or outright lies to obtain popular support for increased militarization that have been

where America's relative weakening, as a result of the war against terrorism, has made for the establishment to call for a more vigorous foreign policy (references from the ongoing election).

Through this, and due to the various ways of abusing its position of power, we can see the possibility of a new fifth phase taking shape. And, for the first time, a phase in which US power influence has weakened. With the help of an understanding of how the basic ideas (as presented above) have pushed both US domestic and foreign policy, four different phases appear in US history where we can see how, by using and transforming core ideas, has created a development process that has taken 13 small colonies to the world's leading superpower. I have chosen to name these phases after the expansive themes they represent. The phases are: (a) The United States of America; (b) The United *Hemisphere* of America; (c) The United *World* of America; and finally, the phase we now live in but is probably going into something new (d) Empire Americana. The title of each epoch implies the ambitions the United States has had concerning its own power at various times.



These breakpoints have occurred during periods in which the ideas and actions have strengthened each other in a way that has made new expansive steps become possible, reasonable and "necessary", while the surrounding context has created opportunities for new expansive stages (world economic system, technology, etc.). Internal material circumstances have changed in a way that has made it possible for the US to expand its sphere of influence in connection with these breakpoints, but, also as the ideas have reformulated and adapted to new circumstances. Within each phase, however, the ideas have constantly been reinforced in a progression process that has neither rested nor stopped. The ideas as well as the action's reformulation and expansion have taken place throughout history, in a way that the periods are not fixed but in constant motion. It should also be understood as a non-intentional process in which a number of elements have worked together and had a common interest of strengthening America's position of power. This has happened without any underlying agenda (no mastermind conspiracy) or a given target. What has happened is that progressive dynamics have been created that have led to a continuous expansion and have been logical for those who have had influence over the development.

It is this self-reinforcing dynamic that has made the United States unable to neither relax in its ambitions nor identify the limits of when involvement outside its territorial limits has contributed to more uncertainty than certainty. It has prevented those in power deciding when strategies have become too costly economically, politically or moralistically as well as when they become counterproductive rather than creating the long-term stability that had helped to consolidate the USA's position of power and made the country a legitimate hegemony. By abusing its position of power, the country has put itself in the decline we are now seeing. Through the prism of exceptionalism and self-ownership as well as the elements linked to them (about how to interpret safety), one has not seen the fine lines concerning limits and boundaries.

As with the origins of the Cold War, when the United States used the opportunity to widen its sphere of influence and exert great influence on the outside world, the country could, once again, repeat history and seize the opportunity to lead the world towards the future when the Soviet Union collapsed. However, the first sign of the country's declining power may well derive from the establishment of permanent military bases in Saudi Arabia in 1991. Therefore, in one way, becoming even greater but, at the same time, seeing the beginning of its future decline. When, as a response to the terrorist attacks of 2001, the US was not able to ask the question "why" but instead was unanimous upon starting a war against a diffuse enemy without clear limits and boundaries, and consequently chose to invade an innocent country (Iraq), it proved that it was not just arrogance, but it also showed how costly US ambitions abroad had become. It was with this understanding that Obama ran his campaign and moved into the White House with the ambition to make changes. However, it was from the outset of the above described core ideas and its solid presence in the entire political system that his ambitions have not been able to be implemented.

Obama and beyond

So how can we interpret Obama on the basis of the presented models? And above all, what is waiting after him if the framework of analysis that has been presented is correct? Initially, one might think that his policies have demonstrated a new line in US foreign affairs. He has, among other things, brought to an end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He has opened up relations with Cuba and signed an historic agreement with Iran; despite decades of deep hostility and huge domestic political resistance. However, even this follows an historical pattern in which periods of protracted conflict and morally dubious operations abroad have always been followed by (official) restraint. For example, the Nixon Doctrine was, in the same way, a reaction to a costly war in Indochina stating that other countries in the future would have to fight their own wars, albeit with the support of US military aid. The opening towards Iran is also similar in several ways to Nixon's opening towards China in 1971 (a policy change that was followed by the signing of the SALT I agreement (1972) and Brezhnev's visit to Washington (1973)). The period after the Vietnam War was characterized by a new approach to the outside world i.e. détente with diplomatic overtones; even if, at the same time, the CIA made sure to continue the support of right-wing dictatorships, mainly in Latin America and Africa, where it was required to maintain a firm grip on the political and economic developments in the countries where the US had a vested interest (Blum, 1998; Johnson 2005; Schmitz 2006). In the same way that Obama now (parallel to an easing of tension to the outside world) has politicized and intensified drone strikes (strikes that, according to many analysts, in several cases, violate international law) and does not give in, in areas perceived as of economic importance such as, the East Asian Sea area, and supports, where it is deemed necessary, a series of questionable regimes (such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt).

Initially, the general public supported the policy of détente in the 1970s; in the same way people wanted to see new, different policies after George W. Bush in 2008. In the beginning of the 1970s, Americans were war-weary after the laborious and incomprehensible war in Indochina, as they were after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. But, as an immediate reaction to the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, neoconservative (neoon) forces began to mobilize themselves on the basis of the perception that the enemy was winning without fighting and that the US was losing the initiative in the Cold War (Halper/Clarke 2004: 56). The Vietnam War was considered to be a failure due to a series of unfortunate *circumstances*, and not because of motives and the fact that the American values were now under threat (Ehrman 1995: 105 et seq); something that has repeated itself with the war in Iraq. Kissinger's official stance on a new global society during the 1970s became the neoon's main goal and various groups that were created, quickly joined forces in the newly-formed Ford administration (Rumsfeldt and Cheney). A number of initiatives took place in the form of articles, investigations and secret agencies with the aim of influencing public opinion and political leaders to refocus American foreign policies towards a clear, global leadership, i.e. a more war-prone policy (Stranne 2011: 290). Through these efforts, they succeeded in preventing the SALT II agreement being signed, getting Carter to push for US involvement in Afghanistan as well as getting Reagan to re-militarize in order to win the Cold War and, at the same time, conducting shady agreements in the Iran-Contra scandal (the price being, among others, the Taliban taking power in Afghanistan and that the Iranian revolution was also a revolution against the United States). During the late 1990s, when Clinton, after the failure in Somalia, which resulted in the loss of US

soldiers' lives, had toned down his otherwise aggressive liberal interventionism and had not made progress concerning the issue of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, neocons mobilized new efforts to "make America mighty again". In 1997, Project for A New American Century (PNAC) was created by a group of well-known intellectuals who drew up a plan to strengthen the role of the US in the world. This PNAC document, which is partly the basis for the Bush Doctrine (2002) distinguished itself by explicitly understanding that certain "preventive" actions of war were necessary for transforming regions such as the Middle East. A policy strategy that could be carried out after 9.11, in 2001, because the incidents did not require any answers to the questions about *why* the US attacked, but created a new position to further expand and, with the help of PNAC's ideas, plan for an American global dominance.

One can assume that Obama had different ideas about how American foreign policies should be formed when he came to power in 2009. His previous autobiographies reveal a self-critical analysis of US intervention abroad and, the need for new policies. His speech in Cairo in June, 2009, "*A New Beginning*" was a major manifestation of the recognition of other countries and cultures' contributions to civilization as well as an outstretched hand that promised dialogue instead of military force in resolving conflicts. However, his infamous statement in an interview in April, 2009, where he recognized other countries "exceptionalism" became too much for influential elements in Washington, who thereafter considered him a danger to US security (Frum June 6, 2009; Pletka May 31, 2009, Wolfowitz June 3 2009). Obama's stance was confirmation that he was prepared to turn to others in a way that was contrary to the most fundamental of all American policies, namely the American exceptionalism and its duty to lead the world; from the basis of American values and without compromise to others. The pressure on him was enormous and affected his political approach very quickly. As a consequence, his speech in Oslo in December, 2009, was one of the most "bellicose" a president has made in a very long time, and was received with open arms by, among others, leading neocons (Kagan December 13, 2009; Schmitt, 11 December 2009). Obama has since increased drone strikes, given the NSA virtually free hands to monitor both Americans and others, and has increased JSOC's (Joint Special Operations Command) tasks; which include a variety of devious strategies to combat terrorism. During the Arab Spring, the fear of losing control of the Middle East was great; therefore, the US clung on to a series of alliances with regimes that people wanted to challenge. An extremely problematic attack in Libya, the inability to create a sustainable representative government in Iraq etc. appeared to open the field for sectarianism and boundless violence. All this is based on the fear of losing influence in a region perceived as, from a security aspect, essential for the US to control.

Obama's policies have been ambivalent and somewhat anxious as he has not dared to challenge the basic core ideas as well as not being able to explain to the American people why different policies had, in fact, helped the United States to maintain its position of power. We now see, at the same time, how the ongoing election campaign has become a battle of who can prove most determined to tear up already signed agreements, and instead threaten with military means. Meanwhile, the leading think tanks in Washington have for years demanded and actively worked towards legitimizing the reasons to, once again, renovate the defense forces. They are eager to make the American people "aware of", what they perceive as US lost power, and offer mainly military solutions (or readiness to use force) to future challenges. I have personally been on an endless amount of conferences at leading think tank institutes in Washington and in Congress, and there are few occasions that the discussions are not focused on US losing its position of power and the need to return to a policy where the enemy knows that the US will act if they do not agree to their demands. In all the interviews I have done with the representatives, a clear picture of the need to, once again, have a more assertive role in the world emerges. History seems to repeat itself, and the risk is obvious, that a new administration will not ease the tension in the world but instead throw more fuel on the fire.

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