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Partisan Politics at the Water's Edge: Lessons from the Dubai Seaports Imbroglio

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“I’m shocking myself. I’m the diplomat here,” explained a bewildered Bill O’Reilly last February on Fox News in defending the Bush administration’s decision to allow Dubai Ports World, a state-owned company in the United Arab Emirates, to manage several U.S. ports. “If America spits in the eye of the UAE, which is a huge help in the war on terror right now, if we tell these people to take a hike just because they’re Arabs, we’ll lose the help of all the rest of the Arab world.”



(William Thomas Kane/Getty Images)

When Bill O’Reilly warns against spitting in another country’s eye, something strange is afoot. Ever since September 11, commentators like O’Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, and *The New York Post* editorial page have been the Republican Party’s foreign policy id. They give voice to the unapologetic nationalism that frames much of the GOP’s foreign policy. They represent the tradition that Walter Russell Mead has called “Jacksonianism” – populist, militaristic, jealous of national sovereignty, more interested in making other countries respect and even fear America than in making them love us.

The story of how Bill O’Reilly and George W. Bush moved away from Jacksonianism – and Democrats moved towards it – says a lot about the shifting currents in American foreign policy. As Mead argues in his 2001 book, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World*, Jacksonians can be isolationist when they don’t feel threatened by foreign enemies; they don’t like foreign policy as social work. But when such enemies emerge, they demand a maximalist, bone-crushing response.

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The GOP: From Jacksonian to Wilsonian

From 2000 until 2003, President Bush's foreign policy nicely followed this arc. As a candidate, he expressed skepticism about the Clinton administration's efforts to build democracy in countries like Haiti, which posed little threat to U.S. security. And in his first eight months in office, he withdrew from a host of international treaties that ostensibly impinged upon American sovereignty. His top foreign policy priority was missile defense—an effort not to transform the world, but to protect America from it.

But when the United States was attacked on September 11, Bush responded in classically Jacksonian, which is to say maximalist, terms—declaring a war not only on jihadist terrorists, but also on the rogue states that allegedly harbored them and sought weapons of mass destruction. His supporters repeatedly contrasted their broader definition of the war on terror with a narrower one, limited to al Qaeda, and centered on law enforcement. And in their new interventionist mode, Bush officials were as insistent on the United States' freedom of action as they had been before September 11. Nations that tried to modify or constrain America's new anti-terror war were treated as adversaries.

In late 2002 and early 2003, President Bush justified the Iraq war in fundamentally Jacksonian terms: as a proactive response to a looming threat. Freedom for the Iraqi people was appended to speeches that otherwise focused overwhelmingly on Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction and ties to terrorists. While some pro-war commentators did envision a post-Saddam Iraq serving as a democratic model for the Middle East, it was not a major theme in the president's nationally televised speeches.

Then, in 2003, things began to change. As it became clear that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction would not be found, Bush began deemphasizing the threat Saddam had posed and stressing the importance of spreading democracy throughout the Islamic world. In other words, the rationale for war became less Jacksonian and more Wilsonian. For a Republican president, this was ideologically uncharted terrain. To be sure, Ronald Reagan had talked about spreading freedom. He created the National Endowment for Democracy, and he turned against pro-American dictators in the Philippines and South Korea, acknowledging that spreading democracy would prove the best bulwark against communism.

As Bush's rationale for war shifted, some realist-minded conservatives—columnist George Will and the editors of *National Review*, for instance—made it clear that while they endorsed his initial argument for war, this new justification was a bridge too far. But in a highly polarized political environment—with Republicans overwhelmingly pro-war and Democrats overwhelmingly critical—such distinctions were largely lost. O'Reilly and other conservative commentators had put their faith in Bush, and his war, and derided his critics as latter-day George McGovern. And as Bush's rhetoric became expansively Wilsonian—culminating in a second inaugural address that pledged American support for “the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every



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nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” –most conservative commentators followed his lead.

Bush’s Wilsonianism has had consequences. It has made his administration more sensitive to America’s reputation in the Islamic world than it was immediately after September 11. It has provided a new rationale for development aid, something not traditionally high on the Republican agenda. And it has created a new, high-level interest in public diplomacy – underscored by Bush’s decision to put his longtime confidante Karen Hughes in charge of improving America’s image in the Middle East.

This is the political context within which the UAE ports deal emerged. To be sure, America’s image in the Arab world wasn’t the only reason for the Bush administration’s defense of the deal. The UAE hosts more U.S. Navy ships than any port outside the United States, and it boosted Boeing’s fortunes by buying \$9.7 billion worth of planes last fall. Still, Bush justified the deal as critical to winning Arab hearts and minds. And O’Reilly was even blunter, declaring that if “we throw the Arabs out without cause, that’s flat out racism. What say you, Hillary Clinton?”

Democratic Contortions

It’s a good question. If the UAE port deal exposed new foreign policy currents within the GOP, it highlighted an equally peculiar evolution within Democratic ranks. In the 1990s, it was Democrats who championed global democratic transformation. As Clinton National Security Advisor Anthony Lake announced in a September 1993 speech, “democratic enlargement” would replace containment as America’s grand strategy in a post-cold war world. In the 2000 campaign, it was Al Gore’s Wilsonianism that, more than anything, distinguished his foreign policy vision from George W. Bush’s. Gore proposed “forward engagement,” a strategy to heal other societies before their pathologies threatened America. Bush, by contrast, warned that “I just don’t think it’s the role of the United States to walk into a country [and] say, ‘We do it this way; so should you.’”

Mead calls Clinton foreign policy an alliance between Wilsonians and a group he calls “Hamiltonians.” The Wilsonians wanted to push the frontiers of freedom in the belief that democratic states would be less likely to wage war. Hamiltonians wanted to spread free trade and investment in the belief that commerce would foster prosperity and, ultimately, peace. (As Thomas Friedman put it, no two countries with a McDonald’s franchise had ever gone to war with against each other). At times, commercial and moral imperatives collided – over free trade with China, for instance. But in general, the two groups coexisted, bound by a shared belief that American security rested on making the world more like America.

But if Wilsonian and Hamiltonian thinking dominated Democratic foreign policy in the 1990s, in the Bush era the party has partially rebelled against both. Most Democrats still like the idea of spreading democracy. The trauma of Iraq, however, has left them

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more reluctant to do so through military force than they were in 1999, at the close of the air war in Kosovo. And after watching jihadists exploit anti-imperial feeling to gain a wider following throughout the Middle East, some Democrats have grown sympathetic to a more realist strategy which aims to reduce America's aggravating presence in the Islamic world. Indeed, the most popular Democratic foreign policy idea of the moment—energy independence—evokes the most popular Republican foreign policy idea of the 1990s: missile defense. Both are supposed efforts to reduce American vulnerability to foreign threats, rather than to eliminate those threats at their source. "Forward engagement" has been turned on its head.

This new strain in Democratic thinking was starkly apparent in the debate over the port deal. To be sure, many Republicans also opposed the sale. Yet very few Democrats—from whom one might have expected greater sensitivity to Arab popular opinion—supported it. In fact, some Democrats fell back on frankly nationalistic rhetoric typical of Bill O'Reilly. "We have to have American companies running our own ports," declared Senator Barbara Boxer (Democrat of California). The UAE ports deal became for Democrats what the Panama Canal treaty was for Ronald Reagan and other conservative Republicans in the late 1970s: a way to rally the populist, nationalist, Jacksonian spirit gaining force in a discontented America. Experts said there was little harm in letting the UAE operate U.S. ports, just as they had said there was little harm in letting Panama assume control of the canal. Diplomats worried about the effect on Middle Eastern opinion if the United States reneged on the ports deal, just as they once worried about the reaction in Latin America if the Panama Canal stayed in U.S. hands.

And yet the American people didn't much care. As Mead writes, "Jacksonians believe that Gordian knots are there to be cut. In public controversies the side that is always giving you reasons why something can't be done, and endlessly telling you that the popular view isn't sufficiently 'subtle,' 'complex,' 'sophisticated,' or 'nuanced'—that is the side that doesn't want you to know what it is doing, and is not to be trusted." The UAE ports deal was the first major foreign policy controversy since September 11 on which George W. Bush played the sober-minded expert, while his Democrat opponents played the rabble-rousing demagogues. And not coincidentally, it was the first in which Democrats won in a rout.

Here They Go Again

But there was something else at work in Democratic opposition to the port deal. The UAE takeover wasn't only about national security; it was also about economic globalization. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration's Hamiltonianism repeatedly put it at odds with the Democratic Party's base. In 1993, liberal activists wanted the administration to focus on economic stimulus. Instead, Clinton stressed deficit reduction, so as to impress the global bond market. Clinton also clashed with labor unions—and many Democrats in Congress—over the North American Free Trade Agreement, ratification of the World Trade Organization, and trade with China. He won these

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skirmishes, but in contrast to other New Democrat stances—on welfare reform or crime, for instance—he did not move the center of gravity within his party. Even as the economy boomed in the second half of the 1990s, many Democrats remained deeply skeptical of Clinton’s Hamiltonian effort to remove barriers to global trade and investment. And in 1997, most Democrats defied Clinton and voted against granting him a freer hand to negotiate trade accords—an embarrassing political defeat.

When September 11 moved national security to political center stage, these international economic issues faded from public view. But they remain politically potent, particularly among a Democratic base which, according to polls, does not view the war on terror as its guiding prism for seeing the world. It is revealing, for instance, that after the 2004 Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, when the Democratic presidential nomination came down to a contest between John Kerry and John Edwards, Edwards staked his hopes not on Iraq or terrorism, but on trade, which he made the centerpiece of his insurgent campaign. In the Bush era, in fact, Democrats seem to have grown even more hostile to global economic integration than they were in the 1990s—as evidenced by the refusal of even self-described New Democrats in the House of Representatives to support the president’s Central American Free Trade Agreement last year.

Some commentators have even suggested that by aggressively opposing economic globalization, Democrats can reclaim the votes of culturally conservative, economically discontented blue collar whites who have largely deserted the party over the last four decades. That was the theory underlying Richard Gephardt’s Japan-bashing in the 1988 presidential campaign—an effort to replace Ronald Reagan’s cold war nationalism with a post-cold war variant featuring protectionist economics. And it is the implicit message of Thomas Frank’s 2004 surprise best seller, *What’s The Matter With Kansas*, which argues that Republicans have successfully wielded cultural populism because Democrats have abandoned economic populism and instead allied themselves with corporate interests.

Indeed, Democratic criticism of the ports deal had a distinctly anti-corporate tinge. As a blogger on the popular liberal website MyDD.com put it, “President Bush and the Republican Congress have shown they believe in one thing above all: The primary role of government is to make the business of corporations—American or not—easier.” And this anti-corporate emphasis made the party’s newfound Jacksonianism easier to swallow. As the party of multiculturalism, many Democrats remain uncomfortable with unvarnished nationalistic appeals. Many criticized Gephardt’s anti-Japan rhetoric as jingoistic. And most Democrats have proved unwilling to seize on the public’s discontent over illegal immigration for the same reason; they fear that doing so would fan the flames of racism.

The UAE ports deal presented a similar dilemma, since there was little doubt that public hostility to the takeover was at least partly fueled by anti-Arab feeling. But liberal Democrats solved it by insisting that their animus was not towards Arabs, but towards backroom corporate-government collusion. In this way, they framed the Bush administration’s relationship with Dubai Ports World as heir to its cozy relationships with unpopular American companies such as Enron and Halliburton. The answer, many

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suggested, was not to deny Arab corporations a role in port security, but to deny *all* corporations such a role—placing port management in government hands instead.

In *Special Providence*, Mead calls this tradition of anti-corporate suspicion “Jeffersonianism.” Jeffersonians have long worried that Wilsonian-Hamiltonian efforts to remake the world benefit not all Americans, but only a wealthy, privileged few. Indeed, they fear that such crusades ultimately threaten democracy at home. As Mead writes, “Jeffersonians note that in one democracy after another, great commercial interests have subverted the political process to its destruction.” If Wilsonians are the “Trotskyites of the American revolution; they believe that the security and success of the Revolution at home demands its universal extension throughout the world...Jeffersonians take the Stalinist point of view: Building democracy in one country is enough challenge for them, and they are both skeptical about the prospects for revolutionary victories abroad and concerned about the dangers to the domestic Revolution that might result from excessive entanglements in foreign quarrels.”

Jeffersonian themes—weak in the Democratic Party of the 1990s (and largely confined to Ralph Nader’s Green Party)—have grown far stronger in the Bush era, as many liberals have accused the president of using an endless war on terror to suppress domestic criticism and shift power to an unchecked, unaccountable executive branch. In their criticism of the ports deal, many liberal Democrats used Jeffersonian language to make their Jacksonianism intellectually respectable. And on Iraq, where anti-nation building hawks like Representative John Murtha (Democrat of Pennsylvania) have made common cause with anti-war doves in support of immediate withdrawal, another Jeffersonian-Jacksonian coalition has taken shape.

Stay Tuned

If George W. Bush continues to make Wilsonianism his ideological north star—and succeeds in bringing other prominent Republicans with him—a Jeffersonian-Jacksonian themed foreign policy will grow increasingly attractive to Democrats, particularly those ambivalent about the Clinton legacy. It’s even possible to imagine a 2008 presidential campaign in which the Republican, say John McCain or Sam Brownback, proposes “forward engagement” to keep America safe by reshaping the world, and a Democrat, say Russ Feingold or even Al Gore himself, proposes a more “humble” foreign policy, in which America focuses on problems at home.

No wonder Bill O’Reilly finds it all confusing. On the surface, we live in an age of stark, fixed partisan differences. Just below the surface, however, the politics of American foreign policy are far more fluid—and far more bizarre.