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Speak Softly...With Everyone You Can

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Speak Softly...With Everyone You Can

Abstract

From the Monroe Doctrine to the Bush Doctrine, United States foreign policy has been predicated on the assumption that somehow it knows what is best for the rest of the world. Monroe feared a potential encroachment from Russia and meddling in the "American" Hemisphere by the European powers and issued what originally appeared as a modest statement about resistance to intervention by any other country than the United States. Ironically enforced by the British Navy at that time, the Monroe Doctrine went far beyond its modest beginnings to set a precedent for the development of U.S. foreign policy. The logic of the doctrine would later be buttressed by other presidential decrees and doctrines, most notably the Roosevelt corollary, which extended U.S. "police power" over the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean; the Truman Doctrine, which sought to contain the Soviet Union through the establishment of allies and a ring of missiles in Europe; the Reagan Doctrine, which sought to "roll back" communism through the use of "proxy wars" in Latin America (the soft underbelly of the United States), Africa (most notably Angola), the Middle East and Central Asia (e.g. Afghanistan); and the Bush Doctrine, which justifies pre-emptive use of force against any threat that is deemed to be "imminent" (see the 2002 National Security Strategy).

Keywords

Human rights, United States foreign policy, National security, Economy

Speak Softly...With Everyone You Can

by Todd Landman

From the Monroe Doctrine to the Bush Doctrine, United States foreign policy has been predicated on the assumption that somehow it knows what is best for the rest of the world. Monroe feared a potential encroachment from Russia and meddling in the "American" Hemisphere by the European powers and issued what originally appeared as a modest statement about resistance to intervention by any other country than the United States. Ironically enforced by the British Navy at that time, the Monroe Doctrine went far beyond its modest beginnings to set a precedent for the development of U.S. foreign policy. The logic of the doctrine would later be buttressed by other presidential decrees and doctrines, most notably the Roosevelt corollary, which extended U.S. "police power" over the whole of Latin America and the Caribbean; the Truman Doctrine, which sought to contain the Soviet Union through the establishment of allies and a ring of missiles in Europe; the Reagan Doctrine, which sought to "roll back" communism through the use of "proxy wars" in Latin America (the soft underbelly of the United States), Africa (most notably Angola), the Middle East and Central Asia (e.g. Afghanistan); and the Bush Doctrine, which justifies pre-emptive use of force against any threat that is deemed to be "imminent" (see the [2002 National Security Strategy](#)).

Like Barack Obama, I was a freshman in the 1980s at the University of Pennsylvania, which also had its anti-apartheid and anti-Reagan Doctrine protests. While the Vietnam "syndrome" limited the willingness of the United States to engage directly in conflicts around the world and the Iran-Contra affair taught us about the abuses of executive authority (as the Nixon years did when I was a child), we implored our university to divest from South Africa to punish an unacceptable regime that had endured for an unacceptable period of time. My studies also led to a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of widespread human rights abuse committed by the military authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Many of these regimes enjoyed staunch support from the Reagan administration, which drew its foreign policy inspiration from Jeane Kirkpatrick's misconceived notion that right wing authoritarian regimes were somehow more susceptible to democratization than left wing authoritarian regimes. The paradigmatic case was Pinochet's Chile, where the full extent of U.S. involvement and complicity in what took place there between 1973 and 1989 has finally been authoritatively documented in Peter Kornbluh's [The Pinochet File](#) (see also [my 2004 review essay on this book published in HRHW](#)).

Beyond the more famous cases from Latin America, the Reagan Doctrine also led the U.S. to commit covert funds, weapons, and materiel to Afghanistan through Pakistan to support the Mujahadeen's battle against Soviet occupation, where the consequences have included the disenchantment with the United States, recruitment into Al Qaeda terror networks, and at least until the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, a training base for Osama Bin Laden. Again, like in the case of Chile, the links between U.S. policy and the most perverse of unintended consequences has been authoritatively documented in Steve Coll's [Ghost Wars](#).

And it is to the unintended consequences of American foreign policy that I would like a McCain or Obama administration to pay close attention. McCain's hero is Teddy Roosevelt, but the "big stick" of American unilateralism, carried out with alacrity during the Bush years has led to huge loss of life around the world and significant discredit of the American ideal among many of its

trusted friends and allies. [Fifty years](#) of human rights achievements that had been originally crafted by Eleanor Roosevelt became undermined in one fell swoop with the establishment of the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay . The general disdain for hard-fought international human rights standards in the name of fighting terror that developed within the upper echelons of the Bush administration was raised to high relief by the abuses committed at [Abu Ghraib](#). Mr. McCain's personal experiences with the excesses of "reasons of state" in Vietnam must surely make him wary of the pursuit of national objectives at any cost and his measured approach to committing U.S. troops abroad (perhaps with the exception of the war in Iraq) suggests that an administration under his leadership will be less bellicose than its predecessor. But his gaffes with respect to Iran suggest that voters ought to think hard about what kind of image and what kind of foreign policy America will have with McCain and Palin in the White House.

Obama takes his inspiration from John F. Kennedy (or at least his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and not the Bay of Pigs) and seeks a more consultative base for his foreign policy rather than the big stick of the "neo-Rooseveltian," as [Newsweek](#) describes McCain. But JFK also had his fair share of unintended consequences, not least of which the Alliance for Progress, a foreign aid and technical assistance package extended to Latin America in the 1960s trained the military personnel and laid the foundations for the authoritarian period that soon followed. Obama's Asian experiences have sensitized him in some degree to the plight of poor Muslims and poor people more generally and suggested one strand for U.S. foreign policy address the long term structural problems associated with maldistribution of wealth within the world. His choice of running mate suggests that he will have a firm knowledge of the travails of the Reagan and Bush Doctrines. Moreover, as a lawyer and community activist in Chicago , Obama should be well-versed in the power and meaning of human rights. But I do hope that the pressures of being the President and the many contradictions that come with holding that office will not distract him from a commitment to our most basic of human values.

Dr. Todd Landman is Director of the Centre for Democratic Governance, Department of Government, at University of Essex. He is author of [Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics](#), 3rd Edition (Routledge 2008), [Studying Human Rights](#) (Routledge 2006), and [Protecting Human Rights](#) (Georgetown 2005); co-author of [Governing Latin America](#) (Polity 2003) and [Citizenship Rights and Social Movements](#) (Oxford 1997); and co-editor of the [Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics](#) (Sage 2009). Dr. Landman has served as international human rights and democracy consultant for UNDP, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, CIDA, DFID, DANIDA, IDEA, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands, Foreign Ministry of Mongolia, International Centre for Human Rights Policy, and Minority Rights Group International. His personal website can be found at <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~todd>.