

# THE JACKSONIAN TRADITION AND THE UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY

## The Influence of History on the Ideas of the Bush Administration.

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**Documento de trabajo N°21**  
Área de Relaciones Internacionales  
FLACSO / Argentina  
Septiembre 2008

The essential objective of this essay is to illustrate how Jacksonianism has influenced the foreign policy of the Bush Administration providing, at the same time, the necessary public support for the adopted policies.



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**Contents**

Contents .....3

Introduction .....4

Andrew Jackson and the foundation of Jacksonianism .....5

    The Basis .....5

    The Jacksonian Code: Five principles shaping politics .....6

    Weapons, war and foreign policy .....8

Jacksonianism and the Bush Administration .....11

    The battle to win hearts and minds .....11

    Foreign policy as a repetition of history .....12

Conclusions .....16

Bibliography .....17

## Introduction

American military supremacy is a reality in world politics. There is widespread consensus among scholars around the globe following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent foreign policy of the Bush Administration, based on the 'war on terrorism' has been a breaking point for both US' domestic policy and the international system. For the first time since Pearl Harbor, the United States suffered a direct assault in the heart of its homeland from an unusual and barely known rival using non conventional ways of attack. The immediate consequences of this strike are known historically: a month later the United States was invading Afghanistan and on March, 2003, a new invasion was launched on Iraq, engaging the country in two wars without a foreseeable end.

This essay states that the roots of Bush's foreign policy might arguably be traced deeper in a school of thought known as Jacksonianism. The Jacksonian tradition has first been exposed by Walter Russell Mead in his work *Special Providence* where he describes four basic ways of looking at foreign policy in America throughout the centuries: *Hamiltonian*, *Wilsonian*, *Jeffersonian* and *Jacksonian*. "These four schools have shaped American foreign policy debate from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first. They are as important under George W. Bush as they were under George Washington" (Russell Mead, 2001). In his work, *Jacksonians* have been defined as a large populist school, which believes that the most important goal of the United States in both foreign and domestic policy should be the physical security and the economic well being of the American people (Russell Mead, 2001).

Following the basic assumptions of this tradition it is possible to identify a particular vision of foreign policy and a specific conception of how to manage the relation with other countries in the international system. This vision has influenced Bush's foreign policy, largely inspired by the decision of a small group of intellectuals, members of his administration, usually labeled as Neoconservatives<sup>1</sup>. Self-defined as traditional national-interest conservatives –essentially realists-, they are also characterized as unilateralists seeking a more expansive and muscular approach to

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<sup>1</sup> The most prominent figures of this group are Vice President Dick Cheney, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice among others.

world affairs that have pressed to end with America's long-standing multinational foreign policy which has relied heavily on the United Nations.

The essential objective of this essay is to illustrate how Jacksonianism has influenced the foreign policy of the Bush Administration providing, at the same time, the necessary public support for the adopted policies. In the first section, I will describe the basic assumptions of the Jacksonian tradition, both at the domestic and the international level in order to recognize its relevance in today's political situation. In the second section, I will refer to the mentioned assumptions, focusing on foreign policy and will try to demonstrate how Jacksonian principles influenced the Bush Administration's foreign policy since September 11. Finally, conclusions will follow.

## **Andrew Jackson and the foundation of Jacksonianism**

### ***The Basis***

Hidden behind the main figures of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson and Alexander Hamilton, American history has paid little attention to the seventh president of the Union, Andrew Jackson. More so than any of his predecessors, Jackson was elected by popular vote and as President he sought to act as the direct representative of the common man. During his two terms in office, and unlike previous Presidents, he enhanced presidential authority over Congress using his power of veto and his party leadership to assume command. He destroyed the nationalistic American System of national banking and designed a new ideology for the Democracy (The White House, 2008; Henretta, Brody, & Dumenil, 2008). His Indian Removal policy set a new way of thinking about the 'other' and how to fight against them.

Among the traditional political spectrum Jacksonians have always been associated with Jeffersonians, with whom their political fortunes were linked for many decades. Both currents are profoundly suspicious of elites, preferring a loose federal structure with as much power as possible retained by states and local governments. Despite the similarities between them, their differences run very deep, so deep that during the Cold War they were firmly on opposite sides of most important foreign policy questions. Jeffersonians were the most dovish current in mainstream political thought, while Jacksonians were the most consistently hawkish. Both currents are civil libertarians,

passionately attached to the Constitution and especially to the Bill of Rights, and deeply concerned to preserve the liberties of ordinary Americans. But while the Jeffersonians are most profoundly devoted to the First Amendment, protecting the freedom of speech and prohibiting a federal establishment of religion, Jacksonians see the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, as the citadel of liberty. Jeffersonians join the American Civil Liberties Union; Jacksonians join the National Rifle Association. In so doing, both are convinced that they are standing at the barricades of freedom (Russell Mead, 2001).

The Jacksonian tradition founded by Jackson at the beginning of the nineteenth century remains fresh and alive in American society and has been shaping the political arena at home and abroad for hundreds of years. For foreigners and for some Americans, the Jacksonian tradition is the least impressive in American politics. It is the most deplored abroad, the most denounced at home. Jacksonian chairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee are the despair of high-minded people everywhere, as they hold up adherence to the Kyoto Protocol, starve the UN and the IMF, cut foreign aid, and ban the use of U.S. funds for population control programs abroad. They often figure as obstructionists to the other schools, as the least likely to support Wilsonian initiatives for a better world, to understand Jeffersonian calls for patient diplomacy in difficult situations, or to accept Hamiltonian trade strategies (Russell Mead, 2001).

Jacksonianism is less an intellectual or political movement than an expression of the social, cultural and religious values of a large portion of the American public. It is doubly obscure because it happens to be rooted in one of the portions of the public least represented in the media and the professoriat (Russell Mead, 2001). Jacksonian America is a folk community with a strong sense of common values and common destiny; it is neither an ideology nor a self-conscious movement with a clear historical direction or political organization.

### ***The Jacksonian Code: Five principles shaping politics***

Jacksonianism has influenced America's foreign policy for years. This influence is deeply rooted in a profound group of principles that shape the current significance of Jacksonianism and the foreign policy they designed for America. In this sense, this current has been driven by a 'Code of honor' that remains as a core value for tens of millions of middle-class Americans. The unacknowledged code of

honor that shapes so much of American behavior and aspiration today is a recognizable descendent of the frontier codes of honor of early Jacksonian America. The appeal of this code is one of the reasons that Jacksonian values have spread to so many people outside the original ethnic and social nexus in which Jacksonian America was formed (Russell Mead, 2001). Embedded in this code of honor rest five principles essential to understand how Jacksonianism shapes foreign policy in the twentieth century.

*Self-reliance.* For many Americans, real Americans are people who make their own way in the world, holding their places in it through honest work. They do not rely on welfare, or on inherited wealth or connections. The first principle of Jacksonian code of honor lies on earning and keeping a place in the broad Middle Class, the folk community of working people that Jacksonians believe to be the heart, soul and spine of the American nation. It remains a serious disparagement even to imply that a member of the American middle class is not pulling his or her weight in the world. Following the same perspective, Jacksonian honor must be acknowledged by the outside world, being aware that Americans stand on their dignity and rights and that many will still fight, sometimes with weapons, when they feel they have not been treated with the proper respect<sup>2</sup>.

*Equality.* Among those members of the folk community who do pull their weight, there is an absolute equality of dignity and rights. Any infringement on equality will be met with defiance and resistance. The Jacksonian is, and insists on remaining, independent of church, state, social hierarchy, political parties and labor unions. They may choose to accept the authority of a leader or movement or faith, but will never yield to an imposed authority.

*Individualism.* The Jacksonian has the right to and also a duty to seek self-fulfillment. In Jacksonian America, everyone must find his or her way: each individual must choose a faith, or no faith, and code of conduct based on conscience and reason. The Jacksonian feels perfectly free to strike off in an entirely new religious direction. Despite this individualism, the Jacksonian code also mandates acceptance of certain social mores and principles: loyalty to family, raising children "right", sexual decency (heterosexual monogamy—which can be serial) and honesty within the community.

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<sup>2</sup> Respect is also due age, Jacksonian America honors age: Andrew Jackson was sixty-one when he was elected president for the first time; Ronald Reagan was seventy.

*Financial spirit.* While the Jacksonians believe in hard work, they also believe that access to credit is a right and that money, especially borrowed money, is less a sacred trust than a means for self-discovery and expression. Many Americans have always assumed that they have a right to spend money on their appearance and on purchases that affirm their status. The strict Jacksonian code of honor does not conjoin with what others see as financial probity. What it demands, rather, is a daring and entrepreneurial spirit.

*Courage.* This is the crowning and indispensable part of the code. Jacksonians must be ready to defend their honor in things both great and small. Americans should stand up for their beliefs. In the nineteenth century, Jacksonian Americans fought duels long after aristocrats in Europe had given them up, and Americans today remain far more likely than Europeans to settle personal quarrels with extreme and even deadly violence.

With regard to foreign policy, the Jacksonian tradition presents distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from the other traditions, being able to shape the conduction of international affairs in the United States in a determined way. This issue will be addressed in the next section.

### ***Weapons, war and foreign policy***

Jacksonians provide the basis in American life for one of the most complex of all approaches to foreign affairs: *realism*. They stand together with Jeffersonianism in opposition to humanitarian interventions, or interventions made in support of Wilsonian or Hamiltonian world order initiatives. However, Jacksonians approach foreign policy in a very different spirit—one in which honor, concern for reputation, and faith in military institutions play a much greater role. National politics and national life work on different principles to international affairs.

Firstly, one of the main features of Jacksonian foreign policy is that it is strongly embedded in their code of honor, which shapes the conduction of the domestic policy as well as international relations. As described above, the Jacksonian code of honor is present in every aspect of this tradition, delineating every idea in any issue. Their distinctive way of thinking is strongly criticized by the rest of the country for its lack of qualms and its determination on what they believed is best for the national interest. Jacksonian opinion is sympathetic to the idea that American reputation—whether for fair dealing or cheating, toughness or weakness—will shape the way that others treat them. Therefore, at

stake in a given crisis is not simply whether they satisfy their own ideas of what is due to their honor. Their behavior and the resolution obtained must enhance that reputation —and prestige—in the world at large.

Jacksonians recognize two kinds of enemies and two kinds of fighting: honorable enemies fight a clean fight and are entitled to be opposed in the same way; dishonorable enemies fight dirty wars, in which case conventional rules are flaunted. An honorable enemy is one who declares war before beginning combat; fights according to recognized rules of war, honoring such traditions as the flag of truce; treats civilians in occupied territory with due consideration; and—a crucial point—refrains from the mistreatment of prisoners of war -those who surrender should be treated with dignity-. Adversaries who honor the code will benefit from its protections, while those who want a dirty fight will get one. In their view and in regard to the war waged against Indians by Jackson during his Presidency, Indian war tactics were considered a dishonorable, unscrupulous and cowardly form of war. Anger at such tactics led Jacksonians to abandon the restraints imposed by their own war codes, and the ugly skirmishes along the frontier spiraled into a series of genocidal conflicts in which each side felt the other was violating every standard of humane conduct.

Second, Jacksonians devote themselves to their country, they would give their lives and that of their children's to fight for the American flag. Russell Mead (2001) points out that their love affair with weapons is the despair of the rest of the country; nevertheless, Jacksonian culture values firearms and the freedom to own and use them. To them, the right to bear arms is a mark of civic and social equality, and knowing how to care for firearms is an important part of life. Jacksonians arm themselves for defense: of the home and person against robbers; against usurpations of the federal government; and of the United States against its enemies.

In one war after another, Jacksonians have flocked to the colors. Independent and difficult to discipline, they have nevertheless demonstrated magnificent fighting qualities in every corner of the world. They view military service as a sacred duty, considering that an honorable person is always ready to kill or to die for family and flag. By definition, the work that the Defense Department does—defending the nation—is a service to the Jacksonian middle class and spending money on the military is one of the best things government can do. For Jacksonians, the government should do everything in its power to promote the well-being—political, moral and economic—of the folk

community. Any means are permissible in the service of this end, as long as they do not violate the morality or infringe on the freedoms that Jacksonians believe are essential in their daily lives.

Third, Jacksonians stand away from the Wilsonian notion of foreign policy. They declare themselves against the ideal of a world community which is not merely a moral impossibility but a monstrosity. They assume that countries, like families, should take care of their own; if everybody did that we would all be better off. Charity, meanwhile, should be left to private initiatives and private funds; Jacksonian America is not ungenerous, but it lacks all confidence in the government's ability to administer charity, either at home or abroad. They have the least regard for international law and international institutions. They prefer the rule of custom to the written law, and that applies to both the international sphere and personal relations at home. Jacksonians believe that there is an honor code in international life and those who live by the code will be treated under it, but those who violate the code forfeit its protection and deserve no consideration.

Fourth, Jacksonians believe that international life is and will remain both anarchic and violent and in this sense, at times, America must fight pre-emptive wars. The United States must be vigilant and strongly armed. Diplomacy must be cunning, forceful and show no more empathy than of any other nation. There is absolutely nothing wrong with subverting foreign governments or assassinating foreign leaders whose bad intentions are clear. Once U.S. honor was engaged, Jacksonians began to urge a stronger warfighting strategy including the use of ground troops. They do not wish to enter an unnecessary war, but it is inexcusable and dishonorable to lose one once it has begun. Jacksonians are willing to make enormous financial and personal sacrifices if convinced that these are in the nation's vital interests. This mass popular patriotism, and the martial spirit behind it, gives the United States immense advantages in international affairs.

Jacksonians also have strong ideas about how wars should end. "There is no substitute for victory", as General MacArthur said, and the only sure sign of victory is the "unconditional surrender" of enemy forces. Just as Jacksonian opinion resents limits on American weapons and tactics, it also resents stopping short of victory. Unconditional surrender is not always a literal and absolute demand. They hold the idea that all resistance must cease: U.S. forces must make an unopposed entry into and occupation of the surrendering country and the political objectives of the war must be conceded in total (Russell Mead, 2001).

The next section will focus on the influence that Jacksonian America has had and still has in the shaping of the United States' foreign policy.

## **Jacksonianism and the Bush Administration**

### ***The battle to win hearts and minds***

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War American power had been uncontested. The United States turned out to be the sole super power, and the world, unipolar (Krauthammer, 1990/1991; Wohlfort, 1999; Kagan, 2008a). American supremacy is better reflected in the military board which Nye pointed out in 1994 (Nye, 1994), while the economic board has suffered some changes in its structure but continues being multipolar (with the rise of China and the fall of Japan). Military supremacy has been the base of this long process of construction that finds the country with the greatest military capacity and resources. American domestic and foreign policy shows clear evidence of the Jacksonian influence that serves not only to reinforce a certain way of dealing with local and international affairs, but also to gain support among Americans for the decisions adopted in those fields.

In 2000, Bill Clinton left office having fought against two difficulties, in two different areas of his political agenda. In regard to his domestic policy, despite of the support he received to stay in the White House after the scandal, a broad group of Americans felt disappointed by his affair with a young White House intern. He acted against a widespread code of conduct followed by Jacksonian Americans that strongly believe in family honor and honesty within the community as the accurate way of conduct. The second challenge to the Clinton Administration's backing was his decision to intervene in former Yugoslavia, where the Jacksonian opinion saw no clear threat to the interests of the United States.

In this scenario, President George W. Bush got into office deeply supported by Jacksonian Americans strongly disappointed with the former administration's proceedings in the domestic and foreign arena. One of the most important institutions endorsing Bush's candidacy has been the National Rifle Association. This Jacksonian institution became an important lobbyist in America's politics and a firm ally of the administration. In an attempt to give them a positive sign, Bush stated

*"that the text and original intent of the Second Amendment clearly protect the right of individuals to keep and bear firearms"* (NRA, 2004) reversing the Clinton Administration stance that the Second Amendment only applies to state militias.

### ***Foreign policy as a repetition of history***

In foreign policy, the United States government adopted a view of the world that is radically different from that favored by the post-Cold War foreign policy establishment, but which nonetheless had roots in earlier American history. The group of policymakers in charge of delineating the Bush Administration's foreign policy has been the above mentioned neocons. The attacks on the World Trade Center have certainly been the immediate cause of Bush's adoption of many of the doctrines that neocons had been pressing on successive administrations. Placing the 'war on terrorism' at the heart of America's foreign policy has been the major commitment among a very well orchestrated plan that includes: the use of military force, with the approval of military institutions if possible, without that approval if necessary; the use of preemptive strikes rather than conceding to terrorists a first-strike advantage; the inclusion of any nation-states that lend support to or provide havens for terrorists in an 'axis of evil', properly the objects of preemptive military strikes; and the pursuit of the 'nation building' (Kristol, 2004).

With American Jacksonians converging on the shared principles of this tradition, the Bush Administration found no restraints to its objectives on foreign policy after 2001. The resulting strategy has been widely supported by Jacksonian America and served as an anchor of what they consider to be the most significant values of the country. Jacksonians and the Bush Administration share a set of common ideas about relevant issues in politics at home and abroad, they both constitute a tendency and a set of beliefs and emotions rather than a movement or set of ideas. After September 11 the venerable Jacksonian approach to foreign policy which is deeply "embedded in our national consciousness" (Gaddis, 2004), came to the fore.

Firstly, most of the policies adopted by the Bush Administration had honor as the core value to be defended by America. The attacks on the heart of America's financial center were a direct strike to perhaps the biggest symbol of American capitalism and the principles that the consecutive governments have tried to spread around the world. The idea of 'enlargement and commitment'

dominant during the Clinton's years showed itself useless at creating a widespread soft power that would guarantee America's safety and dispel potential rivals.

The Jacksonian code of honor ruling international relations has had a major impact in the administration's vision of the world. According to this, statesmen should, above all, have the ability to distinguish friends from enemies, of which there are two different kinds: honorable and dishonorable. The latter fight unscrupulously and cowardly, disrespecting the honor code of international relations. In this regard, the terrorist attacks have been seen as clear evidence that the United States was dealing with a dishonorable enemy, using unconventional methods to damage America's honor. As non state actors with no defined territory and no army, terrorist groups such as Al Qeda became the new enemy to defeat not only for America but for the whole world: "There is no room for neutrality in the war against terrorism (...) You're either with us or against us in the fight against terror (Bush, 2001). Therefore, George W. Bush is seen as the 'commander in chief' and his decision to go to war with Iraq has been backed up by the people, proving that the United States would do anything within its power to protect the national interest, security, and above all, America's honor.

Second, there is a neocon attitude that holds certain statements about how politics should be conducted. One of those attitudes assumes patriotism as a natural and healthy sentiment that should be encouraged by both private and public institutions. Jacksonian Americans believe strongly in the ideals that have defined their nation and they see their nation as a force for good in the world. In this sense, the warlike mindsets of Jacksonians represented political support to go to war or even demanded it if they think that the national interest is in risk. Being conscious of their country's vast power, Americans held up the fact of making democracy possible by deposing dictatorial regimes that threaten American security and world order –using military force if all else fails and relying more on varying 'coalitions of the willing', rather than on the United Nations. The idea of using "*diplomacy if it's possible, and force if it's necessary*" (Stelzer, 2004) is in the core of the administration's thinking and is broadly supported by Jacksonians.

Jacksonianism's importance not only lies here, but in the capacity to collect the values of the 'folk community'. By bringing ordinary people to politics, the warrior culture made it possible to sustain high defense budgets and call for war when considered necessary. The relevance that Jacksonian America gives to military budget and the acquisition of more and better weapons served as

reinforcement for the ever greater expenditures in military resources during the Bush's years. They want America to devote adequate resources to its military to enable the nation to project overwhelming power wherever and whenever its security requires such deployment and will broadly support a president that "urges Americans to speak softly and carry a big stick" (Wolfson, 2004). Thanks to this support is that by 2008, the United States military expenditures accounts for 48 percent (or almost half) of the world's total military spending and is more than the next 46 highest spending countries in the world combined (Shah, 2008).

Third, taking into consideration the administration's perception of the Wilsonian school of thought, the Bush Doctrine has scant regard for Wilson himself, whom they regard as hopelessly naïve. The Jacksonian roots of the intellectuals shaping the foreign policy make them place their faith not in pieces of paper but in power, specifically the United States' power. Setting realism as the basis of his foreign policy, Bush arrived to office criticizing the humanitarian interventions held by the previous administration and with a much more unpretentious strategy, agreeing with the Jacksonian vision that they are a waste of money and resources if they are not oriented to protect the country's national security and if there is no threat to the national interest. His original plan was to pare down the United States global pretensions, concentrating on "what's the best interest of the United States" and claiming that the United States should not "go around the world and say this is the way it's got to be" because that would cause to end up being viewed as the "ugly American" (Kagan, 2008b). President Bush was expected to *"be in a position to intervene when he believes, and can make the case, that the United States is duty-bound to do so. 'Humanitarian intervention' cannot be ruled out a priori (sic)"* (Rice, 2000).

The administration has pledged that world government is a bad idea since it can lead to world tyranny, rejecting, as Jacksonians do, the Wilsonian idea of spreading American democratic and social values throughout the world, and the aim of creating a peaceful international community that accepts the rule of law. In this view, supporting these kinds of commitments would lead America to waste money and resources in countries that should take care of themselves without expecting any aid from a foreign power. They believe the United States should use force when necessary to champion the ideals as well as the interests, not only out of sheer humanitarianism but also because the spread of liberal democracy improves the United States security, while crimes against humanity inevitably make the world a more dangerous place (Boot, 2004). "Unlike liberal Wilsonians, their

promotion of democracy is not for the sake of democracy and human rights in and of themselves. Rather, democracy promotion is meant to bolster America's security and to further its world pre-eminence; it is thought to be pragmatically related to the United States national interest" (Wolfson, 2004).

In this regard, as well as the administration stated, the broader public has always preferred to act with allies or with international organizations – where it is possible. They know that it is not always possible. They are often concerned about the costs of international involvement and tire of shouldering what seems to them to be a disproportionate share of the costs. They prefer to devote resources and attention to problems at home. Americans want their presidents to define objectives clearly and execute them successfully.

Finally, for a greater power, the national interest is not a geographical term, except for issues such as trade and environmental regulations. The United States will always feel obliged to defend, if possible, a democratic nation under attack from non-democratic forces, external or internal (Kristol, 2004). In this sense, the possibility of fighting pre-emptive wars has become a fact in the Iraq war and found his supporters in Jacksonian America. A majority of Americans (56 percent) told Gallup in 2003 that the United States had a responsibility to help other countries rid themselves of dictators and become democratic. Jacksonian Americans prefer to act before the danger is upon them -which is roughly the approach taken by the Bush Administration to what is considered the 'gathering' threat posed by Iraq (Wolfson, 2004). They served as the social cohesion necessary to support the war in Iraq, the deposing of Saddam Hussein and even his death sentence with the belief that it was the best for the national interest. Despite the questions about the existence or non-existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the majority of Americans still believe the war of liberation against Saddam Hussein was justified (Edwards, 2003). One might suggest that in moving against Iraq, the Bush administration simply reflected aspects of the political psychology embodied in the Jacksonian tradition.

In a poll conducted a couple days before the Iraq war started, 58% of Americans declared themselves in favor of the attack, and 53% said Bush was doing a better job handling the Iraq situation than the U.N. was (USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup, 2003). Seven days later, when the war had already started, 75% of the Americans thought that sending troops to Iraq was a good idea, in

November 2005, once it was evident the United States had engaged in a war with no forcible end in sight, the numbers changed radically: 54% of the population recognized that sending more troops to the war in the Middle East was a big mistake (USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll, 2005); showing the disagreement of Jacksonian America with a long and expensive war that no longer applies to national interests.

## Conclusions

When President George W. Bush entered the White House in 2000, he promoted a modest strategy for America's foreign policy. After September 11 this strategy turned into a new set of actions roughly designed by the neocon's ideas and broadly influenced by the Jacksonian tradition of thought. The core principles of this tradition have lasted over the years and specially shaped American foreign policy during the Bush administration.

The importance that Jacksonians give to honor has served as the main support to the war in Afghanistan and the protection of America's national interest as well as the overwhelming military power that the country achieved after the end of the Cold War. The Bush Doctrine has been able to accomplish its objectives thanks to the support given by strongly committed Americans willing to situate the United States interests over their own. Jacksonian consent to depose rogue leaders threatening America's security has provided the foundations for Iraq's pre-emptive attack and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

A historical approach allows for greater insight and reveals how present actions can be the reflection of the past, which are now utilized to design current foreign policy. Likewise, history lets us recognize its persistence over the years evident in the continuity of a mindset that still shapes American's hearts and minds.

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