The foreign policy (or lack thereof) of the current presidency has led to a flurry of publications highlighting the purported influence of ‘Jacksonianism’ on the Trump administration’s thinking. Indeed, at least since Walter R. Mead’s influential book, the four ideational traditions in U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy he identified—Jacksonianism, Hamiltonianism, Wilsonianism, Jeffersonianism—have captured the attention of researchers trying to account for both continuity and change in American foreign policy. The recent focus on Jacksonianism is preceded by extensive scholarship on principles most closely connoted with Wilsonianism and Hamiltonianism: internationalism and interventionism, the active promotion of liberal values, democracy, human rights, and free trade; in short, the remaking of the world in America’s image. In their excellently detailed and theoretically rich article, Clarke and Ricketts take it upon themselves to highlight the fourth tradition, namely Jeffersonianism, and showcase its analytical value in


elucidating what remains a topical puzzle: the seemingly inconsistent and contradictory nature of the Obama administration’s foreign policy, particularly vis-à-vis Libya and Syria.

The authors argue that what they perceive as the current literature’s “inability to characterise President Barack Obama’s foreign policy adequately” (495) stems from the failure to account for Jeffersonian influences on President Barack Obama’s rhetoric, decision-making, and corresponding U.S. behaviour. In an impressive, theoretically rich exegesis of Jeffersonian thought, the authors then develop the core ideational tenets and principles of this grand strategic tradition. In that regard similar to Jacksonianism, Jeffersonian principles focus on the “perfection and protection” of the virtues of the republic. Instead of espousing populist values and military strength, however, Jeffersonianism highlights the maintenance of a functioning democratic system, prescribes inherent restraint (even detachment) in foreign affairs, and supports the use of force primarily for the purposes of self-defence, the protection of commerce, and the maintenance of neutrality (501). This, the authors argue, is quite different from simply “isolationism.” Instead, the avoidance of entanglement in the affairs of other states, and the focus on balance of power, on “unmolested commerce” and the principles of free trade, is informed, in their narrative, by Jefferson’s prudent estimation of the interests of what was, in his time, a “small but prosperous neutral power dependent on external trade” tasked with preserving “individual liberty and republican government” at home (502). The article is strongest in the authors’ meticulous, elegantly presented and all-round convincing presentation of Jeffersonian principles, which succeeds in establishing this tradition more firmly alongside its more prominent counterparts and contributes in important ways to the broader research field on the ideational underpinnings of U.S. grand strategy.5

The authors proceed to argue that the principles they have identified can help explain what is often depicted as the contradictory quality of Obama foreign policy: “Such contradictory assessments are the result of a failure to account for the introverted influence of the Jeffersonian tradition” (504). In particular, the “various crises that have confronted the [U.S.] since 9/11” have opened up political space for the resurgence of such views—an assessment that broadly compares with those expressed elsewhere that the post-Cold War era and/or 9/11 respectively have increased ideational competition over America’s interests, strategies, and role in the world.6 The authors criticise these approaches for their lack of synthesis and the failure to “account for the broader themes within Obama’s foreign policy approach” (506).

They therefore have set themselves the task to provide such synthesis, and try to demonstrate the uniquely Jeffersonian element in, variously, Obama’s rhetoric, decision-making, and resulting American foreign policy. It is to the authors’ credit that they focus on the Obama administration’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Libya and Syria to “situate Obama’s strategic response to these civil wars within a well-formed tradition of American foreign policy” (508). This poses a particular challenge, as an analysis highlighting common principles across


6 Holland, “Obama as Modern Jeffersonian.”
both cases would have to account for U.S. support for intervention in the one case, and non-intervention in the other. Indeed, the authors argue that Obama’s response to both civil wars “prioritised American domestic ideals” (507) and direct American national security interests (510). Libya did not touch upon such core interests, and thus Obama, viewing the situation instead as a “European problem,” decided to support the intervention by “leading from behind” and “offloading” responsibilities (509): the authors agree with Jack Holland’s characterisation that Obama “utilised all available technological sophistication, coupled with elegant and lofty rhetoric, in order to minimise the costs and risks to the United States” (509-10). A similar principle was at play vis-à-vis Syria: Obama withstood pressures to intervene in a conflict he perceived as irrelevant to vital national interests, and instead opted for a more limited strategy of providing military assistance and concentrating on the fight against the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria” (ISIS).

While empirically rich (as much as the current lack of primary data that afflicts all research on topical administrations allows), the case analysis cannot fully live up to the authors’ promise. It is not evident that the authors’ assessment that Obama did not want to commit military force “if there [wasn’t] a threat to national interests” is enough to qualify him as a Jeffersonian. Here, it seems that the authors’ case analysis could profit from a further focus on the domestic side of the story that is so important in the authors’ rich exegesis of Jeffersonian thought. Similarly, the authors’ focus on synthesis may have led them to overemphasise coherence in foreign policy decision-making. Infusing the empirical analysis with an argument around Jeffersonian principles makes sense, to be sure, because it helps flesh out the topical relevance of this foreign policy tradition. Conversely, however, the authors could probably have reached the same analytical conclusions from their cases (namely that the Obama administration had a more restrained understanding of the national interest compared to, for example, Obama’s activist, even expansionist, predecessor) by employing simpler, binary categories.

The authors themselves stress that Mead’s traditions were aimed squarely at moving beyond such binaries and false dichotomies towards a more nuanced account of American foreign policy (496). But then part and parcel of this move is a more ‘realistic’ conception of conflicting and ever-competing streams of thought. Rather than categorising Obama (or the Obama administration?) as (predominantly) Jeffersonian, then, additional focus could perhaps have been put on fleshing out how the different traditions interact in foreign policy. The authors point to this themselves when they highlight the different voices and viewpoints present in the administration (are Obama, his Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and State Department Director of Policy Planning Anne-Marie Slaughter all similarly Jeffersonian?). Obama himself, who is mostly depicted as a Jeffersonian, seemed to think preventing a massacre in Libya is in America’s interest (511). Is this about domestic ideas, protecting commerce, or vital security interests, or might Obama be torn between principles

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7 Holland, 49.


9 Dueck; Posen and Ross.
of Jeffersonianism and others (perhaps more Wilsonian in nature)? Finally, Jeffersonian principles end up causing either reticent action (in Libya) or, for the most part, inaction (in Syria), only in part. Evidently, as the authors suggest, external factors such as “the inability to get multilateral cover” and “uncertainty over whether [intervention in Syria] would be the first step in an escalatory ladder leading to sustained […] military involvement” formed the other part of Obama’s calculus (511). This point towards a potentially fruitful integration of ideational drivers of foreign policy with external factors in a theory of strategic choice. As such, Clarke and Rickett’s article has enriched the field with a theoretically sophisticated take on the Jeffersonian tradition. By engaging critically with questions of foreign policy change and continuity, the authors offer a nuanced and intriguing account of Obama’s strategic choices. This makes their article a must-read for any scholar or practitioner seeking to understand the ideational underpinnings of past and current American foreign policy.

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