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Good, Safe, Strong: Obama and the Impossible Reconciliation

Abstract: The cultural narratives that have animated US foreign policy coalesce around a constellation of the US desire to feel safe, to feel good, and to feel strong. The conflation of the discourses on national security, liberal democratic internationalism, and a powerful desire to lead has frequently vitiated US foreign policy. Using the metaphor of landscape the chapter distinguishes between the US view of the world which frequently constructs an impressionistic depiction of the issues that they ‘look at’. The frame of reference locates US policy within the ‘lessons’ of Vietnam, intervention since, and comfortable paradigms written in the United States. Constrained by domestic desires and agendas, the United States does not always ‘see’ issues clearly.

Keywords: benevolence; economy; history; intervention; landscape; lessons; liberalism; military strength, Obama; realism; security; strategy

Narratives on US benevolence and exception are well known – Americans, whether they admit it or not, want to feel good, safe, and strong. These deep-seated desires have coalesced into a benign metanarrative underpinning US national identity and in turn, constructing a nation. Carefully crafted within US culture, this narrative is near silent on the conquest, displacement, death, and destruction that accompanied the US path to power. So much that Barack Obama, on the night of his 2008 electoral victory, claimed that the greatest strength of the United States is ‘the enduring power of our ideals’. Yet even for Obama, growing inequality at home and misguided adventures abroad had seriously compromised these ideals. His belief in US rejuvenation was rooted in his understanding of US complexity and his conviction that solutions would be found in debate and deliberation, in ‘open-ended experimentation’ rather than a reverence for the ideals as static symbols.

Despite this, Obama operates within a cultural milieu that frequently renders these ideals as unchanging, uncontested, and unproblematic, with policymakers and cultural commentators linking narratives of US exceptionalism with American military might during the twentieth century. Whether it was Wilson’s desire to make the word safe for democracy, Roosevelt’s arsenal for democracy, Kennedy’s pledge to pay any price for the support of liberty, or Reagan’s revived ‘city on the hill’, the narratives reverberate through cultural performance. Americans like to feel good. They also like to feel safe. As shown by the central place of security – both as a concept and as a symbol – within US rhetoric during and after the Cold War. This discourse is rooted in George Kennan’s 1946 proposals on how to manage the threat posed by an expansive Soviet Union. In doing so, his ‘Long Telegram’ created the framework for US involvement in the Cold War – containment – although its author would ultimately regret the idea. But in 1946 and 1947 it seemed to both explain Soviet actions while providing the United States with a way to portray, if not understand its enemy. His words were grafted to other ideas and transformed into a much simpler concept associated with the Truman Doctrine, Truman’s articulation of two ways of life in the world and the demand that peoples and nations make a choice. The discourse of containment became a trap; it provided a frame from which policy makers lacked the imagination or the political and cultural power to extract themselves from it. By 1966, Senator J. William Fulbright invited Kennan to provide testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings in which Kennan observed that containment was not designed for Asia; he intended something much