

# Book Review: Enemies of the American Way: Identity and Presidential Foreign Policymaking

by Blog Admin

December 6, 2012

Why do presidents, when facing the same circumstances, focus on different threats to national security? **Enemies of the American Way** attempts to answer this question by investigating the role of identity in presidential decision making. The book explains why presidents disagree on what constitutes a threat to the US security via the study of three US presidencies in the 19th century (Cleveland, Harrison, and McKinley). **Paul Brighton** values the author's contribution for reminding us of how individual presidents' own preconceptions shape global foreign policy.



**Enemies of the American Way: Identity and Presidential Foreign Policymaking. David Bell Mislán. Continuum. July 2012.**

David Bell Mislán

Remember George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil"? It seems a long time ago: and yet the issue of how we define our enemies, and the nature of the threat they pose, remains a live issue. And although President Obama articulates matters very differently from his immediate predecessor, much of the post-election commentary has focused on the nature and extent of the threats posed by countries like Iran, North Korea – not to mention Syria and China, for largely or entirely different reasons.

David Bell Mislán's *Enemies of the American Way* attempts to approach the problem of defining international threats through two contrasting methods: by attempting to fit it within a number of theoretical frameworks, and by studying three presidents from over a century ago.

Grover Cleveland was the only President to serve two non-consecutive terms. He broke a long Republican stranglehold on the White House in 1884 to become the first elected Democrat since Buchanan before the Civil War. He then lost his bid for a second term to Republican Benjamin Harrison, whose grandfather, William, had also been President, though only for a month. Harrison, in turn, lost his bid for re-election to a resurgent Grover Cleveland, who went on to serve a full second term. In 1896, William McKinley reclaimed the White House for the Republicans, winning again in 1900, both times at the expense of the populist agrarian Democrat William Jennings Bryan. McKinley, however, was assassinated in September 1901, just six months into his second term. (Not, as Mislán states, in February, before it even started). It is at this stage that the period embraced by the book ends, leaving the colourful Theodore Roosevelt years still ahead.

Mislán has two approaches. First he gives us an occasionally slightly laboured identification of theoretical frameworks. First there is balance of threat theory (offensive capability/offensive intentions, etc.). Then domestic politics and sectional interests (House and Senate/perceived "national interest", etc.). Social Identity theory (individual identification with membership of social groups is then applied. But finally, Rule-Based Identity comes to the rescue, and provides a template that satisfies Mislán. The answer, it turns out, is "identity salience", or "the definition of the self in terms of group membership shared with other people".

This means that Rule-Based Identity is more likely to mean that Americans regard themselves not so much as "Americans" as, for instance, "baseball-playing Americans". "What matters for the survival of group identity, and the identification of threat, depends on how a group identifies itself."

Which is all very interesting, but where do Presidents Cleveland, Harrison and McKinley come in? You never



thought you'd be so pleased to welcome back these three long-dead leaders; but, after the theory, it's a positive pleasure to get down to brass tacks with them.

Cleveland's threats were the British, the Germans and the Spanish: but always by proxy. There was never any question of the USA facing a head-on conflict with them. It was all vicarious: Britain over Canada and then over Venezuela; Germany over Samoa; and, notoriously, Spain over Cuba. This last, of course, the occasion of Hearst's famous dictum to the effect that his staff must furnish the pictures: he'd furnish the war! For Cleveland, Mislán argues, Americans were rugged individualists, humble, faithful, hard-working and, above all, just. It was all the fault of other international rascals who had not the same high standards: Cleveland was otherwise happy to let sleeping dogs lie.

Harrison was also an essentially peaceable President. However, he too had his standards, and his sense of high national self-esteem made it hard for him to put up with perfidious Albion's past support of the Confederates in the Civil War. (The support was not, of course, unanimous, but it was extensive, and across parties). Ironically, Harrison, who admired much of Britain's political culture, regarded the quintessential late-Victorian Prime Minister Lord Salisbury as one of the most predatory figures on the world stage.

Harrison's Americans were exceptional because of their unique polity and system of government. America's history, self-determination and civic-mindedness made the country and its people inherently superior. So, for Harrison, the attempt to take over Hawaii was not out of a sense of aggression or expansionism: it was simply his knowledge that they would be so much better off; and they would be protected from the terrible prospect of rule by Germany, France, Britain or Italy – between whom he scarcely distinguished.

For McKinley, Harrison's fellow-Republican, the perception was similar: but, because he lived in slightly more turbulent times, he was enraged by the contrast between America's humanity and the inhumanity of the rest. That, essentially, was the reason for the intervention against the Spanish in Cuba in the 1890s. Unlike Harrison, McKinley never saw the British as a real threat, and studiously avoided taking a high moral tone over the Boer War. He was happy to counter what he saw as German aggression over the Philippines and Spanish action in Cuba. However, there were no permanent threats and enemies: just individual responses on merit.

*Enemies of the American Way* is at its best in dealing with specific historical events. When Mislán returns to his theoretical frameworks and applies them to directly to the events of these "Gilded Age" presidencies, the effect can feel laboured: the results either already apparent from what has been recounted, or resting on too little data for them to have any more general applicability. However, he has done a service in reminding us how important individual presidents' own preconceptions and mindsets were then and still are now in shaping global foreign policy.

---

**Paul Brighton** is Head of Department of Media and Film at the [University of Wolverhampton](#). He grew up in Wolverhampton. He attended Wolverhampton Grammar School, and won an Open Scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He got a First in English and, after postgraduate research at Cambridge, worked for the media. He was a BBC Radio presenter for twenty years, before becoming Head of Broadcasting and Journalism at University of Wolverhampton. His book "News Values" was published by SAGE in 2007. He is now Head of Media, Film, Deaf Studies and Interpreting; and his next book "Original Spin: Prime Ministers and the Press in Victorian Britain" will be published by I.B. Tauris next year. [Read reviews by Paul.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective \(13.9\)](#)
2. [Book Review: The Reckoning: Debt, Democracy and the Future of American Power \(11.3\)](#)
3. [Book Review: The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Volume 4: The Passage of Power \(10.7\)](#)
4. [Book Review: American Neoconservatism: The Politics and Culture of a Reactionary Idealism \(9.7\)](#)

5. Book Review: The Spirit of Compromise: Why Government Demands It and Campaigning Undermines It (9)