

Book Review

THE GODFATHER DOCTRINE: A FOREIGN POLICY PARABLE, by Hulsman J.C. Hulsman and A.W. Mitchell, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, 85 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-14147-3

The Godfather Doctrine is an expanded version of an essay published in *The National Interest*, a US popular journal largely focused on foreign policy issues. The book version is short and sweet, consisting of an introduction, the original article itself (with some modifications) and an epilogue outlining the responses to the original article and extending the analysis beyond its original Middle East focus. While 85 pages long, the book itself is small in size, and is easily read within an hour. The authors are both international relations and foreign policy consultants

The main premise of the book is that foreign policy in the US has two extreme camps. The ‘neo-conservatives’ – championed by George W Bush and the Republican Party base their policy on the assumption that the US represents the model of governance which all nations aspire to, and if they don’t then we bomb them until they do. Different systems as seen as a threat to their way of life, while security can only be assured if everyone adopted the same democratic values that they do. In contrast, the other camp is the ‘liberal institutionalists’, championed by the Democrat Party, who aim to achieve regional security through negotiation and rely on international treaties and bodies (such as the UN) to achieve these aims. The contrast in views to those of the neo-conservatives was clearly demonstrated at President Obama’s speech in Cairo in June 2009, aimed at smoothing tensions in the Middle East. Obama stated ‘*I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.*’¹ In contrast, the authors indicate that the neo-conservatives view democracy as an export commodity.

In simpler terms, neo-conservatives use sticks, while the liberal institutionalists use carrots as their primary approach to foreign policy. However, the authors point out that using sticks has not proven to be successful in the Middle East (with the war in Iraq being the case in point), while using carrots would only be successful if the world was run by rabbits. They advocate a third approach, which they term ‘realist’ – and it is based on both carrots and sticks. In their realism model, carrots are tried first, but if they are not successful, stocks – in the form of economic sanctions rather than invasion – are proposed. The basis for this is that the influence of the US in world politics is declining – something not recognised by the neo-conservatives – and the ability of the US to flex its muscle (economic as well as military) alone is diminished. However, talk alone is not considered sufficient unless there is some potential adverse actions to back the negotiations.

This message in the book is portrayed through the use of the 1972 movie ‘*The Godfather*’. The use of television and films to illustrate concepts is well recognised in economics teaching

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/04/obama-speech-in-cairo-vid_n_211215.html

(e.g. Leet and Houser 2003, Mateer 2004, Considine 2006, Sexton 2006), and the authors apply a similar approach to portray their message. In the movie, the head of a mafia family that is declining in its power base is gunned down, and it is up to his three sons to carry on the business. One of the sons is considered a liberal institutionalist, and attempts to fend off a mob war through negotiations. A second son is considered a neo-conservative and seeks to take out the opposition permanently – shoot first and ask questions later. The third son – the realist – sides initially with the liberal institutionalist, but at the end of the film is the one to gun down the other families when the negotiations do not appear to be going their way. The realist is the only one to recognise that the influence of their family within the mob is declining, and that new approaches will be necessary.

The main focus of the book was on the Middle East, and Iran and Iraq in particular. The authors advocate negotiations to end the nuclear program in Iran backed with the carrot of increased foreign investment and the threats of investment freezes and trade sanctions as the stick. Such an approach provides a response by the US irrespective of which way Tehran goes. However, the final chapter (the extension to the original essay) adds a new dimension to foreign policy, and that is essentially not backing lost causes. In this case, the push by the liberal institutionalists (including Obama) to reward Georgia for its move to democracy by membership of NATO despite the fact that Georgia is indefensible. The perception is that universal membership of NATO would result in a ‘free and whole Europe’ much in the same way that the European Union ended the possibility of war between member countries. However, the EU is an economic union whereas NATO is military, and it is unlikely that NATO could fulfil its military obligations to Georgia in the advent of further Russian hostility. The realist view, then, is to walk away from battles that you know you are unable to win.

An irony that seems to escape the authors is that the development and illustration of the ‘realist’ philosophy is based on a fictitious character in a fictitious movie. Had it been called anything else but ‘realism’, then this would have been less of an issue. Without the parable, however, it would have been a very small book indeed, and it is a good story nevertheless which makes the book an interesting read. It is also an interesting conversation piece. Having it on my desk at work, most people entering my office noticed the title (the cover is very attention grabbing) and wanted to know what it was about, leading to some interesting discussions on foreign policy.

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