Justifying the Unjustifiable: why Cold War American interventionism always had a strong ethical dimension

Dr. Agis Papageorgiou, London School of Economics

Abstract

This article challenges the assumption that Cold War American interventionism has been inherently immoral. To do so, it explores the marriage between American missionary exceptionalism and the necessities of realist foreign policymaking, to argue that we can identify the moral dimensions of American interventionism not in deontological, but in consequentialist terms. This article introduces its own theoretical framework to grasp the inherent ethical side of Cold War US foreign policymaking, through which it explores the influence of American Exceptionalism in the conceptualization of American foreign policy in the context of the Cold War – and superpower competition with the Soviet Union, and world communism more broadly. The fundamental principle that this article proposes is that Cold War American administrations operated with a consequentialist mindset, in which containing and defeating communism was not only a strategic and geopolitical interest in realist terms, but also a moral imperative, in existential ones. This only means that the injustices committed in interventions such as in Chile or in Vietnam, were otherwise considered not only as strategically indispensable, but also as the right thing to do because of the wider moral purpose that they served.

Title: The consequentialist ethical dimensions of Cold War American foreign policymaking

The study of international ethics can often seem like an academic minefield. Morality is next to impossible to define, but as universal moral axioms are subconsciously accepted, they are often applied to the study of state behaviour on the international level. In that sense, many of America's interventions during the Cold War – such as the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile, or that of Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran – are considered *de facto* immoral. Many realists could argue that such interventionist endeavours may have been immoral, but

otherwise strategically essential, while liberal internationalists may refer to them to point out the inherently immoral character of US foreign policymaking. However, this article suggests that those Cold War interventions which are widely seen as immoral, had a strong ethical dimension, exactly because of the impact that missionary American exceptionalism had in Cold War foreign policymaking, and the establishment of a consequentialist set of ethics, instead of a deontological one. In other words, Washington's existential urgency to contain communism was always considered as the highest moral purpose, and the ends that could justify the means.

American exceptionalism has defined American political development, and the longest ideological war that the US has ever fought. Memorably conceptualized by Alexis de Tocqueville, its fundamental premise is that America is intrinsically and culturally different, compared to other nations, mainly due to its socio-political value system.[1] Glenn Hastedt has explored the influence of exceptionalism on American foreign policy and proposes four axioms through which American exceptionalism has assigned to American foreign policymaking a teleological element: first, that America is God's "chosen nation", second, that America's mission is to transform the world in its sociopolitical image, third, that America's mission is to fight "evil" on the international level and, fourth, that "evil" must be "decisively and permanently defeated."[2] Hastedt concludes that these axioms are valid in both "isolationist" and "internationalist" policymaking; but Cold War American interventionism has always had an internationalist flair to it. Above all, however, Cold War American interventionism has always had a mission, which stemmed from the premises of missionary American exceptionalism: to protect liberal democracy; or, in other words, to contain communism.

Missionary Exceptionalism and Woodrow Wilson's prophecy

Woodrow Wilson's missionary vision emphasized particularly the long-term influence that the US should have on the international level. Wilsonianism was more influential than Wilson himself. Wilsonianism recognized two fundamental elements within international relations: first, that democratic nations tend to value and preserve peace and, second, that they rarely engage in aggressive acts against each other.[3] There is a wide consensus on how Wilsonian internationalism and missionary American exceptionalism informed the ideological foundations of the post-WWII liberal world order – influencing America's internationalist foreign policy in the second half of the century.[4] Likewise, Roosevelt's post-WWII plans for European restoration and the promotion of liberal democracy were Wilsonian in spirit.[5] Even NATO, despite being envisioned as a military alliance – which it remains to this day – has liberal founding principles "at heart" exactly because post-WWII America had both the "power and the vision" to develop the liberal world order that Wilson had first advocated for.[6]

That is why within the study of international relations, Wilsonianism has become a synonym for liberal internationalism. Tony Smith argues that Wilson, guided by his firm belief in America's mission to lead the post-WWI international order, interpreted American interests as parallel to European ones. Smith also affirms that Franklin Roosevelt's universalist "Four Freedoms" as expressed amidst WWII, as well as his signing of the Atlantic Charter along with Winston Churchill, were of Wilsonian origins.[7] Geir Lundestad elaborates that America's belief that its exceptional principles were "in the interests of the whole world" found a practical application, as after WWII America "would participate in an entirely different way than

previously" in world affairs.[8] And as Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meisner argue, the shift in Americans' understanding of their country's duty to actively promote liberal principles placed the concept of "constitutional democracy" at the core of American foreign policymaking.[9] Missionary exceptionalism became thus the modus operandi of foreign policymaking

Nikolas Gvosdev, Jessica Blankshain, and David Cooper provide a coherent explanation of how American exceptionalism has defined American policymaking in psychodynamic terms. They argue that "Americans as a people take this exceptionalism to heart as a core defining national trait" adding that exceptionalism is a "pervasive belief within the American psyche that influences how Americans think about the role of their country in ways that differ." They also explore how exceptionalism has informed conflicting and contradictory foreign policy approaches, from the isolationist Monroe and Trump doctrines to Kennedy's and Reagan's highly interventionist ones, arguing that because of exceptionalism's influence, the US can never espouse a truly "realpolitik" foreign policy.[10] In other words, Gvosdev, Blankshain, and Cooper showcase how American exceptionalism and American foreign policy are intertwined by definition.

In reality, it does not matter if the US is exceptional or not, but whether Americans believe it to be, and whether this means that Washington has indeed a mission to carry out in its foreign policy. The premise within this worldview is that exceptionalism's appeal and influence depend on Americans' deep belief that their nation is unique.[11]; a belief may be unfalsifiable, but that does not mean that it cannot have practical implications, as is the case with religion. Through this lens, America's promotion of freedom, democracy, and liberal principles has informed its foreign policy not just as an "idealist preoccupation" but as a

"national security orientation" as well. Missionary American exceptionalism, therefore, provides a "huge domestic constituency for democracy promotion"[12] that is bipartisan and consistently relevant in foreign policymaking. In other words, exceptionalism does not presuppose a specific policy mix but informs instead both Republican and Democratic administrations' foreign policies.

In retrospect, the shift that Wilsonian missionary exceptionalism brought in American foreign policymaking could not have been more profound. Henry Kissinger, one of the most prominent realist foreign policy thinkers and practitioners, admits that "some of the finest acts of twentieth-century diplomacy had their roots in the idealism of Woodrow Wilson: the Marshall Plan, the brave commitment to containing communism, defence of the freedom of Western Europe, and even the ill-fated League of Nations and its later incarnation, the United Nations."[13] Kissinger elaborates that "the genius of Woodrow Wilson has been its ability to harness American idealism in the service of great foreign policy undertakings."[14] Essentially, the Wilsonian-led shift from exemplary to missionary exceptionalism provided American foreign policymakers with an axis to reshape the post-WWII international order that even a staunch realist like Kissinger acknowledges.

But Kissinger's own admission is informed by the reality that Cold War American foreign policymaking merged two crucial dynamics into one: American exceptionalism and realism. From the outset of the geopolitical clash with the USSR, the US' emphasis on promoting the values that had defined its political development since the 18th century merged with its prioritization to maintain its national security – and by extension its sphere of influence. As Andrew Preston suggests, the glue that bound this merger together was the fear that world communism instilled in American foreign policymakers, which defined the attitude of Cold

War administrations towards the communist world.[15] This article does not suggest that the existential foe of the US was the USSR mainly as its rivaling superpower, but instead that the USSR was its main foe exactly because it promoted communism as an alternative value system. In other words, this article suggests that the main goal of Cold War American foreign policymaking was the containment of communism as a whole, which – mainly – coincided with the containment of the USSR, especially during the immediate post-WWII era.

Cold War interventionism and the realist presupposition

Realism focuses on the state as a level of analysis. Since the ancient city-states, the concept of *balance of power* – the settings in which two states balance each other's power so that neither can become dominant and rise as a hegemon[16] – has become fundamental in understanding international conflict.[17] Thucydides is considered the father of realism, while his account of the Peloponnesian War between democratic Athens and authoritarian Sparta highlighted how the two city-states' opposing value systems defined their conflict.[18] Because of this feature, Thucydides' work became popular during the Cold War, as the clash between the US and the USSR, two great powers with radically different value systems, mirrored the one between Athens and Sparta.[19] In modern times, Nicolo Machiavelli's *Prince* is considered a landmark realist work, in philosophical terms; interestingly, American foreign policy has often been defined as *Machiavellian*[20] as Machiavelli's *Prince* emphasizes how sheer power can both inspire fear in enemies and admiration in allies.[21] Of

course it is widely known that term “Machiavellian” has predominantly negative connotations and is associated with immorality.

Several prominent realists have explored the notion of morality within realism. In his *Twenty Years Crisis*, a landmark work, Edward Carr considers liberal internationalism utopian, impractical, naïve, and inapplicable, using the Wilsonian-inspired League of Nations’ collapse to support his case. Carr then argues that realism can far better express international relations within international anarchy because of its thorough consideration of power and state competition.[22] However, despite his emphasis on these elements, Carr believes that ethics should not be overlooked, and that power should be supplemented by morality. However, Carr emphasizes that international moral standards can only be a product of hegemonic power. Adopting a Hobbesian narrative, Carr concludes that morality can be prioritized only when a nation achieves a hegemonic status and the subsequent consent of others.

Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* is another essential present-day realist work. Like Carr, Niebuhr also criticizes the League of Nations’ inefficiency to argue that forming an international community, albeit well-intentioned, is not sufficient to restrict rogue nations. And again, like Carr, although Niebuhr does not discredit the significance of morality in international politics, he nonetheless believes that international treaties and covenants are too simplistic and superficial to regulate state behaviour within international anarchy. Niebuhr based his analysis on his perception of human nature, arguing that personal interests cannot but generate conflicts with those of others.[23] The subsequent rise of Nazi Germany was interpreted as a vindication of Niebuhr’s warnings about the naivete of supranationalism.[24]

After WWII, Hans Morgenthau emerged as another prominent realist thinker. In his seminal work *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau reaffirms the core realist principle of *balance of power* as a classic conceptualization of state competition, foreseeing that it would define the future, just as it had defined the past. Morgenthau does not exclude the influence of morality in politics either but warns that individuals' luxury to act according to their moral code is not applicable on the state level. Elaborating on American foreign policy, Morgenthau argues that America's interests as a superpower inevitably conflict with the promotion and protection of human rights, using Washington's interventions in Cambodia and Vietnam as an example.[25] In practice, Morgenthau suggests that state competition within international anarchy makes moral axioms largely inapplicable or obsolete.

As John Mearsheimer suggests "great powers are logically inclined to act according to balance of power logic" and that one cannot expect that "a potential rival will hew to liberal dictates during a serious dispute." Mearsheimer concludes that surviving can mean "pursuing ruthless policies" and although this is an uncomfortable reality, there is no other alternative within international anarchy.[26] To that end, Kenneth Waltz, another prominent realist, argues that the Cold War "has its origins in the anarchic ordering of the international arena."[27] Waltz's assumption is based on the observation that on the international level, states must be constantly ready to counterforce an opponent state's demonstration of power – or succumb to it.[28] In short, from Thucydides to Waltz, realists agree that international anarchy inevitably limits the applicability of good intentions and compromises ethical state behaviour – as morality is conventionally understood mainly by liberal internationalists.

Realism offers the most suitable framework to assess the Cold War, which spanned across all continents and lasting for more than four decades.[29] In his famous "Long Telegram" George Kennan argued that the Soviet understanding of the evolution of history was at odds with the American one, making thus the two superpowers' coexistence impossible.[30] A year later, in 1947, Kennan suggested a "policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world."[31] *Containment*, which eventually became Washington's core strategic doctrine almost until the end of the Cold War, aimed at isolating the USSR, and at preventing communism from spreading.[32] Kennan's story is well-known, but revisiting it allows us to comprehend the paradigm shift in the conceptualization of American foreign policymaking during the Truman administration.

Of course, this article recognizes that the Cold War cannot be synopsized in one single era, as the conflict between the US and the USSR – but also world communism in general – went through several different stages. Every scholar of the Cold War knows that there are several qualitative differences between different stages of the conflict, like for instance between the early – and highly confrontational – years from 1947 and until the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the latter era of détente. The dynamic nature of the conflict can also be easily summarized by the different approach of the Reagan administration; Reagan started his term as a devoted Cold Warrior, but radically changed his approach towards the USSR when Mikhail Gorbachev emerged as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Yet, despite the differences in American foreign policymaking between different eras and presidencies, the imperative to contain communism remained at the forefront of American foreign

policymaking, while each and every administration proceeded with at least one ethically dubious intervention to serve this exact purpose.

Challenging the consensus: deontology vs consequentialism

Deontology offers a first interpretation of ethical foreign policymaking. In normative ethics, it emphasizes the nature of an action and assesses whether it falls within the thresholds of universal ethical conduct, irrespective of the consequences it may bring[33]; the means matter and not the ends, so to speak. From a distance, deontology and American exceptionalism seem to be in tune. If America professes to be a moral superpower in the service of freedom and democracy, then its interventions must be consistent with the principles of missionary exceptionalism. In other words, this philosophical argument suggests that American interventionism is bound by certain deontological standards, outside of which interventions are not justifiable; respecting the intervened nation's democratic integrity and self-determination is imperative.

This deontological narrative informs the frequent criticism that American foreign policy is hypocritical, as it exposes the "gap" between America's professed ideals and actual foreign policymaking.[34] As Stephen Huggins argues, the "enduring sense" that America is morally superior is an outcome of the established deep belief in American exceptionalism which has provided Washington with the moral justification to intervene abroad. Huggins elaborates on this conventional criticism of American interventionism – shared by most skeptics of American exceptionalism – arguing that America's missionary motives are challenged by ethically questionable interventions such as "the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."[35] Based on Huggins' reasoning, we could easily list many more

examples when American interventionism did not meet the standards of missionary exceptionalism. Yet, this interpretation would be terribly one-sided, because of the shallow interpretative limits of deontology.

The second interpretation is that of consequentialism, which informs the core of this article's proposed framework. In contrast to deontological ethics, consequentialism suggests that the morality of an action stems from the outcomes that it produces; the ends matter more than the means in this case. Consequentialism largely falls within classic Benthamite utilitarianism, according to which moral actions are considered those which produce more overall net good[36] and in which disrespecting others' rights is permissible – which is unacceptable in deontology.[37] From a consequentialist perspective, the morality of American foreign policymaking depends on whether US interventions contribute to the wider good, irrespective of the harm that they might cause in the process. In consequentialist terms, thus, the US' mission to contain and defeat the USSR, which proposes a rivaling value system to the world, is prioritized before any deontological objections. In other words, containing and defeating communism on a global level is the only imperative – and hence became the US existential mission.

Michael Sandel, one of the world's leading political philosophers, offers an example that allows us to comprehend how utilitarian ethics apply in practice. Sandel argues that utilitarian ethics mainly work on the assumption that committing a seemingly immoral act – the kind that deontologists would never condone – rests on another assumption, that not doing so would lead to undesirable consequences.[38] Exploring this point in the context of the Cold War allows us to comprehend why the US proceeded with ethically questionable interventions: if Washington did not intervene in countries like Greece, Cyprus, Vietnam, Chile, Iran, and so

on, then it would be only a matter of time before the USSR took advantage of the power vacuum left by the US in each country.

Exactly because defining morality is next to impossible, these two schools offer two directly opposite worldviews to ethically assess any nation's foreign policy in general.[39] However, as Felix Oppenheim remarks in his study of international ethics, although deontology and consequentialism are indeed the two major rival moral codes in ethical foreign policy analysis, the West has largely accepted that the deontological worldview – in which acting in ways that benefit the interests of others as well – by far exceeds the consequentialist one in terms of public appreciation.[40] This article extends Oppenheim's argument to discuss a fundamental problem in appreciating consequentialist ethics: exactly because values such as democracy and self-determination carry significant moral – or more accurately, deontological – weight within the West, any act that violates them is seen as immoral. Interventions which violate these moral axioms *feel wrong* despite their potential geopolitical successes.

Naturally, thus, liberal internationalism seems like a more ethical school of thought than realism, as its prioritization of values aligns far better with deontological ethics. Robert McElroy, a scholar who has worked extensively on the ethics of American foreign policy and who is overly critical of realist interpretations of morality, argues that the international system can only be derived by a set of moral norms. McElroy suggests that the two "maxims" are first, that moral norms can be identified by their universalizability and second, that these norms are distinctive because they force a state to take others' interests and points of view into account.[41] At its core, this is a highly deontological interpretation, in which ethical foreign policy is one that considers and respects the interests of other nations as well. Through this lens, most Cold War American interventions are unreservedly unethical.

Several other scholars of international ethics espouse McElroy's view. As Manfred Halpern suggests "there is no obvious synthesis between morality and intervention",[42] in a phrase that perfectly summarizes the backlash that the US faced whenever it intervened in other nations' affairs. And through this deontological lens, the US has faced moral scrutiny in what concerned its multiple – and multifaceted – interventions around the world, which have defined Cold War foreign policymaking since 1947.[43] As Jeffrey Sachs argues in his – highly deontological – interpretation of Cold War American interventionism, the US has engineered ethically questionable interventions to stir other nations away from Soviet influence, often irrespective of whether there was a credible threat of losing them to world communism. Through this argument, Sachs suggests that the balance of power politics that defined the conceptualization of Cold War foreign policymaking are inherently immoral.[44]

Similarly, as John Gans put it in 2019, people "must appreciate that [the] US national security process is designed to drain decisions of their morality."[45] This is another deontological assessment which suggests that American foreign policymaking is immoral by definition, as too often Washington's foreign policy endeavours rely on questionable means to serve geopolitical purposes. Such deontological assessments are reasonable – but they are far from the only credible ones; in his study of the history of ethical systems, Kennan Malik concludes that there is no external authority that defines what is ethical and what is not, irrespective of our social conventions.[46] Extending this argument – and considering Oppenheim's suggestion that deontological ethics feel more inherent to the West – this article emphasizes that despite its appeal, deontology should not be considered as *the* optimal

worldview to assess ethical foreign policy, but just *a* worldview. This article argues that consequentialist ethics are just as valid as deontological ones.

And just as liberal internationalism is compatible with deontology due to its emphasis on values, so is realism with consequentialism due to its emphasis on survival. As Ronald Stupak and Peter Leitner argue in their ethical interpretation of realism, "realists must be prepared to acknowledge that noble goals are always realized with imperfect means and methods."[47] At its core, this is an entirely consequentialist argument, which suggests the use of questionable means is permitted if it serves higher "noble" goals. Similarly, John Bew suggests that Machiavellianism influenced the conceptualization of Cold War American interventionism, giving a new meaning to ideas expressed by great foreign policy thinkers, often from competing schools, such as Wilson, Carr, or Niebuhr.[48] This article believes that the moral value of consequentialism as expressed through "Machiavellian" foreign policy decisions has been largely neglected – especially in what concerns Cold War American interventionism.

Frances Harbour acutely observes that even the staunchest of realists "do not usually talk about 'consequentialism'" despite their entirely utilitarian interpretation of states' urge to prioritize their national interests. Harbour also suggests that prioritizing one's survival is by definition a moral choice, even if other nations' interests may be disregarded or disrespected in the process, and adds that states must often decide whether they will respect what are considered moral conventions and perish, or violate them and survive.[49] And in the context of the Cold War, Harbour's assessment aligns with Waltz's defence of Machiavellian foreign policy in the face of deontological criticisms.[50] Consequentialism, thus, has received less

attention than it really merits – despite allowing us to comprehend better the moral reasoning behind what seem like entirely unethical decisions.

This article argues that consequentialism is particularly applicable to Cold War American foreign policy. Specifically, it suggests that all Cold War American administrations, from Harry Truman's to Ronald Reagan's, orchestrated and implemented ethically dubious interventions for the sake of the broader goal within Cold War American foreign policymaking, which was to contain world communism. And if leaders have a "special ethical responsibility" to protect their countries' interests as Jack Donnelly argues[51] then we can comprehend how these administrations embraced consequentialism. This article suggests that the reason why Washington considered these often viewed as unethical, from a deontological worldview, interventions as ethical is the profound influence of missionary exceptionalism on Cold War foreign policymaking: containing communism – and everything it stood for, geopolitically, socio-politically, culturally, and even religiously – was elevated as America's fundamental mission.

The origins of Washington's consequentialist foreign policymaking have been hiding in plain sight. That is because Woodrow Wilson, who secured re-election capitalizing on his promise to keep the US out of the war, essentially made a consequentialist argument when he asked Congress to declare war on the Central Powers – which would end or destroy the lives of many American soldiers – because the US needed to "make the world safe for democracy." Wilson knew that by joining the war he was assigning to the US a role that the country had been rejecting since its foundation, and that by doing that, American soldiers – and presumably American foreign policymakers as well – would have to act immorally; Wilson himself noted the "profound sense of solemn and even tragical character of the step" he was taking. But crucially, he also said that "we are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know

that in such a government […] we can never have a friend" and that without confronting and defeating the Central Powers, "there can be no assured security for the democratic Governments of the world."[52] This was Washington's first *telos*.

Liberal internationalists have claimed Wilson – and the ideals found within missionary American exceptionalism and Wilsonianism, and even morality in international relations more broadly – as their own. Arguably, Wilson's radical envisioning of the League of Nations and his internationalist philosophy that inspired Franklin Roosevelt, whose vision in turn reshaped post-WWII international politics, indicates that they are right to do so; yet, only in peacetime or in peace-building settings. In times of crisis – or as was the case during the Cold War, of great power competition – Wilson's missionary exceptionalism, as indicated in this speech, provided both the operational and ideological axis for all future American consequentialist foreign policymaking and interventionism. One could argue that this speech resonates with the ethos of the Just War Tradition[53] as Wilson notes how the aggression of the Central Powers is essentially what permits the American entry into a brutal military conflict. Yet, Wilson also provides a strong mission to Washington, noting that the US "can never have a friend" in a government like Germany, as it opposes everything that Washington stands for.

But, if this is a good enough reason to trigger America's intervention in WWI, then it certainly seems like an equally valid reason to never have a friend in a rivaling superpower like the USSR, and in any country that promotes the value system of communism during the Cold War. The key difference is that, in contrast with WWI and WWII which were fought through direct military means – hence the Just War Theory can be invoked – the Cold War was fought through covert action and proxy wars, in which the violation of third countries' sovereign rights was indispensable to achieve the aim of containing communism. In other words, we may have

been reading Wilson wrongly for almost a century: what Wilson effectively said in his war declaration request was that to make the world "safe for democracy" several deontological lines must be crossed, and that there was no alternative to that, exactly because it was the moral and existential duty of the US to achieve a higher end. This is the essence of consequentialism, and it is what the Cold War was all about.

Indicative case studies

To comprehend how the proposed consequentialist foreign policy framework can be invoked, we need to explore a few case studies. After all, Cold War American interventionism has been marked by controversy, exactly because many interventions are considered entirely inconsistent with America's professed idealism. As a practical introduction to consequentialist reasoning, we should twist Huggins' reasoning on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Truman's two objectives were to diminish the number of American casualties and end the war with an unyielding Japan.[54] Although in deontological terms the instant – and extremely violent – murder of thousands is clearly unjustifiable, the bombings were entirely justified from a consequentialist perspective, as they helped the Truman administration achieve what it viewed as higher purposes. This thought exercise encapsulates the consequentialist ethos.

We should note though that the proposed consequentialist foreign policy framework emphasizes the decision-making process regarding an intervention. It explains the rationale behind ethically contestable interventions, which were nonetheless considered indispensable by the administration which engineered them, as they were considered indispensable to the strategic imperative of containing communism. In other words, violating its own principles in the short-term was expected to facilitate a long-term success for both the US and its allies. However, that has not always been the case, as several interventions have backfired, causing

long-term complications for Washington; interventions such as those in Vietnam, or Iran, may have been informed by this consequentialist mindset, but they proved to be strategically unwise in the long-term, as America's defeat in the first case caused the infamous "Vietnam Syndrome" while US-Iranian relations suffer to this day. In other words, invoking consequentialist ethics did not necessarily lead to successful interventions.

Likewise, we should note that not every American intervention during the Cold War can be interpreted or synopsised through the proposed consequentialist lens. For instance, American interventionism during the Korean War – which was initiated as a response to North Vietnamese communist aggression – or during the Berlin Blockade – which, again, was a response to Stalin's initiative – cannot be considered devious, from a deontological point of view. Likewise, Washington's support towards European integration through the Marshall Plan after WWII, and since the days of the European Coal and Steel Community, might not have been informed by a pure vision to re-democratize Europe, and clearly aimed at containing communism in the Old Continent, but again cannot be considered immoral or inconsistent with the fundamental ideals of American exceptionalism. In that sense, the proposed consequentialist framework is not omnirelevant, and can mainly be invoked in instances when the balance of power between the US and world communism looked like it could shift towards the latter's favour.

Thus, consequentialist interventions have often led to entirely unwanted consequences for Washington. As the violation of deontological norms and practices is essentially a prerequisite to consequentialist interventionism, the rise of anti-American political actors and popular sentiments is entirely to be expected, especially if such interventions fail to achieve their long-term purpose. Therefore, we should interpret consequentialist foreign policy as an interventionist ethos that prioritized American security and the US teleological struggle against communism, rather than an infallible strategic doctrine.

I. The Eisenhower administration

Truman's immediate successor provides us with several questionable interventions, such as the overthrow of the Iranian Mossadegh government. Mohammad Mossadegh was perceived as a potential threat, as his increasingly warmer relationships with the USSR in the early 1950s could potentially block American access to Iranian oil. Thus, Eisenhower cleared *Operation Ajax*, which led to the return of the monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the selection of Fazlollah Zahedi as Prime Minister.[55] The operation succeeded in imposing a strong pro-American Iranian government that supplied oil to the West on favourable terms, while serving Washington as a significant American ally, and that while bordering the USSR. In deontological terms, Iranian self-determination was unquestionably violated, as Mossadegh had been democratically elected; yet, in consequentialist terms, the coup was entirely justifiable, as it – briefly, as it turned out – maintained Iran within the American sphere of influence.

The same reasoning can apply to the 1954 Guatemalan coup. The Eisenhower administration believed that Jacobo Árbenz, who was supported by Guatemalan communists, personified the threat of losing Guatemala to communism.[56] To prevent this, Eisenhower permitted the overthrow of the Árbenz government, which alarmed the Soviets who in their turn decided to ship arms in defence of Árbenz. In response, a rapid Senate resolution initiated by future President, Lyndon Johnson – and which passed with a margin of 69 to 1 – reaffirmed America's opposition to Soviet interference in Latin America. As a result, the Árbenz government was overthrown and replaced by US-backed and CIA-trained dictator, Carlos Castillo, in another deontologically reprehensible yet entirely justifiable – from a consequentialist perspective – intervention.

II. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations

We can also interpret the 1963 overthrow of the Vietnamese Diem administration through the proposed framework. John Kennedy's belief that President Ngo Diem was incompetent in combating Northern Vietnamese communists caused significant tensions between the two leaders, with Kennedy deciding not to block a military coup against him, which led to his assassination.[57] In deontological terms, permitting a coup against a democratically elected president is impermissible, yet can be justified through a consequentialist lens because the higher purpose was to prevent Vietnam from falling to communism. This was an extreme manifestation of a broader pattern of consequentialist interventionism aimed at promoting and supporting pro-American actors in regions contested by the two superpowers.[58]

Likewise, we cannot but include the escalation of the Vietnam War by the Johnson administration in these examples. As Eric Goldman argues, despite Johnson's shallow foreign policy knowledge, he was as adamant as Kennedy that communism had to be contained. After the North Vietnamese attacked two US warships, Johnson pursued a congressional resolution to dispatch American troops in the region, which was approved with 416 to 0 votes in Congress and 81 to 2 in the Senate.[59] The gargantuan margins in favor of Johnson's Vietnam resolution – which mirror those of Eisenhower's Guatemalan one – show the bipartisanship that such foreign policy endeavours enjoyed. It was the Johnson administration that escalated the Vietnam War, making it an American conflivt[60] – and unreservedly a must-win.

III. The Nixon administration

Another indicative case study concerns Richard Nixon's opening to China. Sino-American relations had generally been bad since the communist revolutionaries' victory in 1949 in the Chinese Civil War, with America choosing to recognize Taiwan and the Republic of China diplomatically, instead of Beijing and the People's Republic of China. Yet, in an astonishing move, Nixon capitalized on the Sino-Soviet split and successfully pursued an opening to China in 1969, famously declaring America's pledge to defend the Chinese against a potential Soviet attack.[61] Nixon's visits to China and the signing of several bilateral trade agreements demonstrate the merits of consequentialist interventionism. Although Maoist China was an opposite of the US on political and sociocultural levels, working with the Chinese communist regime was morally justifiable exactly because its outcome would be the further isolation of America's arch enemy in that political time—the USSR.

In an even more profound case, Nixon's intervention in Cambodia exposes once more his consequentialist approach. In 1970, the geopolitically neutral administration of Prince Norodom Sihanouk was deposed by a successful coup led by the right-wing general, Lon Nol, who established a military dictatorship. As a result of Nol's success, the North Vietnamese intervened in Laos, which mobilized the Nixon administration to support the Cambodian dictator. As Nixon put it, America's failure to support Nol would make her look like a "pitiful, helpless giant" and would allow "the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy [...] threaten free nations and institutions."[62] For Nixon's consequentialist policy, supporting a right-wing dictator was morally permissible, exactly because it would keep Cambodia safe from communism.

Finally, the Nixon administration provides us with another similar consequentialist intervention. When it seemed that the election of Salvador Allende as President of Chile was

inevitable, Nixon decided first, to strangle the Chilean economy and second, allowed the CIA to explore how Allende's electoral victory could be neutralized.[63] Allende was elected President in 1970 and governed until 1973 when General Augusto Pinochet proceeded with a successful coup against him, which also resulted in Allende's murder. Although the Nixon administration initially denied any participation in the coup and any provision of support towards Pinochet's authoritarian regime[64] later evidence suggests otherwise.[65] In another instance, thus, for the sake of containing communism in Latin America, Nixon justified the violent overthrow of a democratically elected government. The deontological alternative – respecting Chilean self-determination – would undermine America's Cold War end goal.

IV. The Carter administration

If Nixon is widely regarded as an immoral political agent due to the Watergate scandal that cost him the Presidency, the same does not apply to Jimmy Carter, as throughout American political history, no President has entered the White House with stronger deontological convictions. Carter regarded Washington's frequent political compromises as "morally wrong"[66] while he was a liberal internationalist who interpreted America's foreign policy through Wilsonian lenses[67] and resented the possibility of permitting American casualties abroad for the sake of political gains.[68] Still, even Carter, the zealot moralist among the Cold War occupants of the White House, proceeded with consequentialist interventions in the name of containment. First, Carter intervened in Zaire, which had become increasingly susceptible to communist infiltration by Angolan rebels, by providing financial and military support to the authoritarian – but pro-American – regime of Colonel Mobutu Seke Seko; as reprehensible as Mobutu's murderous reign probably seemed to Carter, he nonetheless supported it for the

greater cause of Cold War American foreign policy. The Zaire situation shifted Carter's African policy from promoting racial justice to pursuing containment, just like his predecessors had done too.[69]

Carter's embrace of consequentialism did not end at Zaire. In the name of the new Sino-American entente – under the leadership of Mao's reformist successor, Deng Xiaoping – Carter proceeded in what was considered an unthinkable move up to that point, succumbing to Deng Xiaoping's pressure to recognize the People's Republic of China as the legitimate Chinese government. This meant that the US would terminate their longstanding diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, where the republican defeated side of the Chinese Civil War had escaped; in the words of Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, America and China should "cooperate again in the face of a common threat."[70] Washington's abandonment of Taipei was entirely consequentialist, as Carter followed Nixon's lead and withdrew US support towards a long-term anti-Maoist and democratic ally to support communist China, exactly because this shift would serve the end goal of Cold War foreign policy: to isolate, weaken, and eventually defeat the USSR. Of course, the US still supported Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act, and through indirect diplomatic channels, yet the US' recognition of the One-China Policy essentially since Carter's days – and despite the geopolitical and ideological tensions within Sino-American relations – epitomizes the consequentialist influence in US foreign policymaking.

Finally, like his predecessors, Carter embraced consequentialism towards Iran. Since Eisenhower's time, the US provided unconditional support to Iran due to its proximity to the USSR for the sake of maintaining a crucial geopolitical advantage. To that end, and despite Pahlavi's poor human rights record, Carter provided him with all the military equipment that

he had requested. In a remarkable statement during his 1977 visit to Tehran, Carter noted that under Pahlavi's "great leadership" Iran had become "an island of stability in one of the more troubled eras of the world."[71] Pahlavi's regime would be ousted two years later by the Islamic – and anti-American – regime of Ruhollah Khomeini. Still, Carter's support of Pahlavi – with whom he could not have been more incompatible in terms of moral principles – was another deviation from his deontological integrity, and another manifestation of consequentialist interventionism.

V. The Reagan administration

Ronald Reagan's Iran-Contra affair is another profound indicative case that fits this article's proposed consequentialist framework. To overthrow the Nicaraguan Sandinistas' communist government, the Reagan administration backed their domestic opponents – the Contras – whose operations were funded by funds generated from American weapon sales to Ruhollah Khomeini's authoritarian regime in Iran. The key point is that Reagan had previously excluded the possibility of even discussing with Khomeini[72] urging Western Europeans to join the US embargo on Tehran.[73] With the Iran-Contra affair, Reagan crossed numerous deontological lines single-handedly, yet as David Houghton suggests, he viewed this initiative as entirely ethical, exactly because the end goal was to help the Contras defeat the Marxist administration of the Sandinistas.[74] Another aspect of this operation is that it disregarded Congress' right to control arms sales abroad.[75] The Iran-Contra affair could not reveal Reagan's consequentialism more.

The Reagan administration proceeded with more consequentialist interventions. After the Grenadian communist PM, Maurice Bishop, was murdered by his deputy, Bernard Coard, Reagan allowed an operation in which almost two thousand American soldiers invaded Grenada to depose the new Marxist government. Reagan's intervention was immediately condemned by both the United Nations and by Reagan's transatlantic ideological ally – and personal friend – British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, as a clear violation of international law and Grenada's sovereignty.[76] There is no question that Reagan's initiative disrespected Grenadian self-determination, but as his own words indicate, he justified it in consequentialist terms; America "had no choice but to act strongly" against "a brutal gang of leftist thugs."[77] The Reagan administration also proceeded in similar covert interventions – mostly in terms of military and financial support – in Angola and Afghanistan, where pro-American forces rebelled against the respective communist governments.[78]

Reagan is frequently credited with "winning" the Cold War. Although typically the conflict ended during the George HW Bush administration, the clash between the US and the USSR practically ended in Reagan's time. The extent to which Reagan should be credited with this victory is highly debated[79] but this is not the crucial element here. Instead, we should emphasize how in his farewell address, the staunchest anti-communist occupant of the White House, and the one who had engineered these most questionable interventions for the sake of containment, summarized in just three words why his – and his predecessors' – interventions were justified: "America is freedom."[80]

Cold War American Foreign Policy: a consequentialist worldview

Peter Greys suggests that Republicans and Democrats have a different moral outlook on American foreign policy, because their political ideologies contain different values.[81] But as Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall correctly point out, all Cold War Presidents, from Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan operated on the same set of assumptions regarding containment.[82] What these case studies indicate is that both Republican and Democrat administrations implemented ethically questionable interventions – from a deontological perspective at least – throughout the Cold War, because these served Washington's wider goal of containment.

These indicative case studies reveal three fundamental points about Cold War American foreign policy. First, there has been no administration that has not proceeded with an ethically questionable intervention for the sake of containing communism; the examples from the Truman and Carter presidencies, who were self-proclaimed Wilsonians, clearly manifest this pattern. Second, even most realist Presidents, such as Nixon and Reagan, shared either directly or indirectly an affinity for the Wilsonian interpretation of international politics; as President, Nixon had a portrait of Wilson in his office[83] while Reagan "stood at the edge of Wilsonian moralism" according to Kissinger.[84] Walter Mead specifically uses Nixon as an ideal example to argue that realists like him had a deep conviction in the moral rightness of their actions, because they interpreted them as indispensable in the struggle against global communism and Soviet influence.[85] Evidently, the Wilsonian interpretation of America's

mission was a profound dynamic throughout Cold War American foreign policymaking – even during Nixon's or Reagan's time.

Third, these case studies indicate that this article's proposed framework offers a new way to a series of controversial American interventions during the Cold War. The fact that consequentialism is not as easily digestible as deontology does not mean that it is a less credible ethical theory, as unsettling and disturbing as it may conceptually appear to be. And, in a way, consequentialism could not but inform the moral axis of Cold War American foreign policymaking. According to Arthur Schlesinger, the immense ideological conflict between America and the Soviet Union made the Cold War inevitable, making the containment of communism indispensable for Washington.[86] Robert Powaski concurs with Schlesinger and argues that "there was no alternative" to the Cold War because the competition between the two superpowers was incredibly profound and multidimensional.[87] As Powaski argues, the key element in the inevitability of the Cold War was the incompatibility of the two superpowers' competing "manifest destinies."

In other words, America had no alternative to emerging victorious from the Cold War. No matter how long – and what – it would take, failing to do so would signify that its value system would be replaced by that of the USSR; America would have failed in its mission. Powaski correctly points out that if this mission was based on Wilsonian idealism, so was the case with the Soviet Union and Vladimir Lenin's vision about the eventual victory of socialism.[88] The clash between these two contrasting teleological visions could not have been greater, while the two countries' geopolitical influence amplified it to a colossal extent.

And at least in what concerns America, foreign interventionism was a precondition, if it was going to live up to her self-assigned role to serve the rest of the world through its principles.[89]

This is exactly the point where American exceptionalism and realism meet. Although they may seem incompatible, this article suggests that consequentialist foreign policy was the realist expression of missionary American exceptionalism within the realities of the Cold War. Francis Fukuyama, a skeptic of realism, admits that during the Cold War "realism was an appropriate framework for understanding international politics [...] because the world operated according to realist premises" yet "not so much because realist principles reflected timeless truths, but because the world was sharply divided between states of radically differing and mutually hostile ideologies."[90] In a way, this framework resonates with what Charles Krauthammer defines as "democratic realism" which explains America's urge to intervene in regions where the "defense or advancement of freedom is critical to success in the larger war against an existential element."[91]

However, despite Krauthammer's acute observation, his definition is not entirely satisfactory. First, it would be problematic to associate some of the aforementioned interventions with the notions of "defence" and "advancement" of freedom as this can easily be dismissed as an attempt to sugarcoat extremely contestable foreign interventions. Instead, the consequentialist framework that this article proposes sees such interventions for what many – if not most – of them were: deontologically reprehensible and morally unsettling interventions that too often violated the intervened nations' rights of self-determination, undermined their democratic governance, disrespected their citizens' dignity and human rights, and left thousands, if not millions, suffering. But they can be nonetheless justified from a

consequentialist viewpoint because they contributed to the containment of communism – the *telos* of America's Cold War mission.

Finally, it is crucial to define how the proposed consequentialist foreign policy framework differs from standard realist premises. The essential difference is that, in realism, policymakers and academics accept that ethically dubious and unjustifiable policies are often necessary because of the bigger picture, which is the ugly and anarchic state of international politics. In other words, they believe that within international anarchy, there may be no alternative to the occasional use of questionable interventions like the indicative case studies above. Most realists still see such interventions as unethical, but suggest that morality, as defined by liberal internationalists, cannot be prioritized; this is summarized by Mearsheimer's observations on "offensive realism" which characterizes great power interventionism as a fundamental mechanism to achieve international hegemony.[92] The proposed framework, however, argues that because of the influence of American exceptionalism in Cold War foreign policymaking, these questionable – and frequently reprehensible – interventions that America pursued on a global scale were not considered evil albeit mandatory, so to speak, but as the right thing to do because of the imperative to contain communism.

This detail is crucial in fully comprehending why what were horrendous interventions, from a deontological standpoint, were nonetheless justified by Washington. The proposed framework shows how assisting coups, supporting dictatorships, selling arms to authoritarian anti-communist regimes, or violating other nations' rights to self-determination were not considered unfortunate but necessary, as many realists would suggest, but instead as the only moral option available – either consciously or subconsciously – exactly because of the higher moral end that they served. In his most recent book, John Bolton summarized perfectly what the consequentialist framework that this article proposes is all about. Donald Trump's former

National Security advisor, a man who has publicly argued that planning and implementing coup d'états is not an easy thing to do, confesses in his work that his foreign policy worldview is shaped by "a merger of Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles."[93]

Any scholar of American foreign policymaking – particularly during the Cold War – knows that these two men were instrumental in shaping American interventionism across the world. The examples are endless; this article proposes the consequentialist framework to re-evaluate several seemingly unethical interventions around the globe through the unholy marriage of realism and American Exceptionalism. One does not have to agree with the rightness of the consequentialist mindset to fully comprehend its defining influence in American foreign policymaking. But this article remains neutral towards the consequentialist approach; it recognizes its structure and ambitions, but does not side with consequentialism, or suggests that it was the morally right approach to take, nor did it attempt to play the devil's advocate. It does, however, suggest that in the minds of American foreign policymakers, the devil was not there in the first place to need an advocate; the devil had always been the USSR – as it may be the next superpower with which the US will enter an existential competition.

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