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John C. Hulsman & A. Wess Mitchell: The Godfather Doctrine

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“The Don, rest in peace, was slippin’.

Ten years ago could I have gotten to him?”

—Virgil “the Turk” Sollozzo

Introduction ≡

The age of American global dominance is drawing to a rapid and definitive close. In the space of barely a decade, the United States has slipped from a position of seemingly inexhaustible national strength to one of breathtaking vulnerability. Crowning its victory in the Cold War, the American Republic sat atop an economic, diplomatic

and military power base rivaling that of the Roman Empire. American businesses set the pace of global commerce; American diplomats piloted international institutions whose rules we ourselves had written; and American armies were underwriters of peace in the world's remotest regions. America's was a power so irresistible, and an influence so pervasive, that no country, large or small, could reasonably hope to succeed in an international undertaking without Washington's blessing.

That world is gone. America in 2009 is economically palsied, diplomatically isolated, and militarily exhausted. Rather than a triumphant stroll along the flagstone-paved pathway to a new American Century, the country's current course looks more and more like a grim and unforgiving trudge

down the steep and rocky slope of decline. Upon assuming office, the forty-fourth president will inherit two simultaneous land wars, a rapidly arming Iran, a brooding and reanimated international jihad, a tottering atomic Pakistan, a \$500 billion budget deficit, a devastating mortgage and investment banking crisis, a \$700 billion bailout of the financial sector, and the weakest dollar in modern American history. He will also be the first U.S. president since the end of the Cold War to face a world in which America must share its seat in the global cockpit with other Great Powers. A resurgent and energy-rich Russia, a geopolitically awakened India, and a booming and proud China—all see themselves as rising powers gaining traction at the expense of the United States. They will expect to have a say in how the world is run.

Just as the challenges facing the United States are growing more numerous, the tools for managing them will be scarcer than ever. With a national image still deeply disfigured around the world by the Iraq War and a Western alliance system on the verge of rupture, the next president could well find himself commander-in-chief of the loneliest nation on earth.

This is not the America that emerged victorious from the life-or-death struggle of the Cold War. Chastened and confused, America must find the courage, resources, and, above all, creativity to navigate a world unlike anything that U.S. statesmen in living memory have had to confront. For we live in a world none of us studied in school. It will neither be wholly dominated by one great empire nor be the chessboard on

which many countries with roughly equal power vie to establish their dominance. We are entering new geopolitical territory. For a long time, the United States will remain chairman of the global board of directors. But it is not enough merely to look to America anymore. The confusing thing will be that there are new and rapidly growing board members, and that the board's membership will vary depending on the issue. Brazil will be new to the board, as will China. Gone is the comforting simplicity of the old Cold War era, with one enemy to fight, one ideology to defeat, one opposing system to understand. Ours is a strange and complicated new world.

To survive and prosper in this radically transformed age, America's leaders, we believe, must adopt a radically new

strategy—one that is fundamentally different, in its core assumptions and preferred instruments, from the alternatives currently posed by either of the nation’s two major political parties. Like most Americans, we believe that the “neoconservative” approach to foreign policy that has held sway in Washington for the past eight years has been disastrous and must be discarded. But we also believe that the intellectual alternative put forward by the Democratic Party—“liberal institutionalism”—will also leave the nation ill-prepared for the epochal change that lies ahead.

Instead, we believe that, in a time of unprecedented crisis, the United States must employ the least ideological and most thoroughly tested approach to foreign policy at its disposal—a school of thought

known as “realism.” At its root, realism can be reduced to a simple proposition: that, in order to anticipate and adapt to change in international politics, you must first understand the nature, uses, and limitations of power, tailoring strategies to the actual capabilities a country possesses. In this, it differs from its intellectual competitors, both of which—despite their seeming partisan animosity—share a preoccupation with how other states are governed on the inside. If only foreign governments could be brought—through force of arms or force of diplomacy—to resemble our own, so the reasoning goes, America could finally and definitively inoculate itself, and the rest of the world, against the old contagions of war, crisis, and geopolitical competition. History could then come to an end as the rest of

the globe would look like America, sharing both its values and its interests.

This is a laudable dream, as dreams go. But it is well beyond the current power of the United States, or indeed any power in recorded history, to accomplish. The pursuit of such an unrealistic dream will soon morph into the unending nightmare of national decline as the rest of the world, not convinced that it should give up its ambitions to follow an arrogant America, fights back militarily, economically, and diplomatically. Saying that we mean well is unlikely to convince the rest of the world to forsake its own dreams, values, and interests.

Such a gargantuan undertaking would have been beyond America even during its heyday following 1945. In the new multipolar era, it should be comical to think

the United States need merely dictate, and others will follow. But such a view is still all too popular in both parties. This is because both neoconservatism and liberal institutionalism—much as their adherents often personally dislike one another—share an understandable vice, that of nostalgia for a world that has passed them by. It is entirely human to want to continue to live in the simple Cold War world, where America was dominant, its choices clear, its strategy set. As a result, America increasingly finds itself with a unipolar mind-set and a bipolar toolbox in a multipolar world. When this dangerous affection for a past that cannot be re-created in today's changed world is linked with universalist policy goals that no great power could ever hope to enact, the end result is a great acceleration in

America's decline. For realists are surely right that, to make the world better, we must see it as it is, warts and all, rather than as we would like it to be.

Yet despite the increasingly obvious inadequacies of its competitors, realism has not taken the American foreign policy community by storm. With their hopeful outlook, refusal to retreat from even the largest of world problems, and principled stand on the merits of democracy, the Democratic and Republican iterations of the "Wilsonian" approach to foreign policy—be it through liberal institutionalism or through neoconservatism—are widely thought to be quintessentially American, and have prospered. It is as if people would rather be demonstrably wrong, but well-meaning, than adopt a point of view that may be right but seems

cold, bloodless, and plodding. By contrast, realism—with its laser-like focus on assessing power relationships and the often discomforting insights this brings—conjures up images of Old World European cynicism. It is gloomy, unsexy—in a word, un-American. America, so the thinking goes, is not suited to playing power politics: *realpolitik* is simply not in our political DNA. As a result, Wilsonian foreign policy strategies have gained a near monopoly among the nation's decision-makers—a monopoly that is likely to dominate the next four years just as it did the previous eight.

This is more than unfortunate. It is dangerous. For we believe that realism has something unique to say about America's growing predicament in world affairs—something that the other schools, for all

their boundless optimism, are not equipped to provide us. Far from an antiquated, foreign transplant, realism as a concept is in fact deeply rooted in the American national consciousness—not only at the top, but in the collective popular imagination. To specifically protect America and its people above all other considerations so they can get on with enjoying the personal benefits of liberty that come from living in a strong, prosperous, powerful country; to believe that too much power in the hands of any one group (or country) has the potential to corrupt and should therefore be balanced; to deny that any government, including our own, has all the answers for what ails the world—all are uniquely American insights that inform modern realism as well.

Instead of being foreign, realism has been a large part of the American discourse since the administration of George Washington and the signing of the Jay Treaty with our then enemy Great Britain. Washington and Alexander Hamilton made it clear that securing peace for the American people should supersede distaste for doing a deal with the formerly hated George III. This hardheaded approach set the fledgling American Republic on its way to its eventual rendezvous with destiny, as the essential modern great power confronting the horrors of both Hitler and Stalin. Contrary to the arguments of realism's foes, Americans have in many ways been realists from the founding. That has been one of the secrets of our success.

That is precisely why it is such a pity, from our point of view, that the pragmatism so inherent both in realism and in American foreign policymaking since the founding has been submerged (but not eliminated) by the recent dominance of the liberal institutionalist and neoconservative schools of thought, which start from utopian premises, not being based upon a practical assessment of the world we actually find ourselves in. The founders would know better.

But if realism's critics are wrong in saying that it is un-American, they are right that it is unsexy: In recent years, realists have shown little interest in making their insights understandable to the American public. Too often they have gloried in their craft as if the world were merely a

mathematical formula that needed working out, one that should be explained only to an inner-circle priesthood of true believers who had enough intellect and guts to see the world as it truly was. To put it mildly, such elitist nonsense is not likely to lead to political success in any democratic country. Realism has come to resemble the worst kind of Shakespearean production, glorifying in the bard's obscurity, forgetting that the secret to his universal appeal is that he wrote the plays using themes and language that everyone of his day could entirely understand. Realism, like Shakespeare, must be for everyone.

We strongly believe that realism, beyond the usual academic cloisters, needs to reconnect with the people of this country, if it is to remain relevant. To make this

point, and to convey what we believe is a message of grave importance for the future of the American Republic, we have chosen an unconventional format for this book. Precisely because the stakes for the United States are now so high and our current policymaking habits so predictably tragic, we—both of whom are prolific foreign policy analysts—believe we cannot afford to simply add another book to the growing list of foreign policy analyses that are being written to advise the next president.

Instead, we have chosen to present an allegory of American power drawn from that most American of mediums—film—and that most American of film dramas: Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*.

The idea of using this iconic 1972 movie to explain U.S. foreign policy was born

in Berlin's Kreuzberg district, a most un-Mediterranean setting, on a November night in 2007. While we had independently realized the film's parallels to the world of geopolitics, it was not until Wess joined John for a *Hefeweizen* one night at his Berlin apartment that we realized the movie's full potential to convey the seriousness of America's current predicament and the strategic alternatives that are available for handling it. For in his chronicling of the rise, fall, and rebirth of the Corleone Mafia empire, Coppola presents two hauntingly prophetic messages that speak directly to America today: that the fall of the powerful is inevitable; and that we have options for how we respond to this tragic truth, make the most of the hidden opportunities it presents, and chart a course to renewed strength.

The travails of the Corleone family in the anarchic and fluid world of organized crime are not unlike those America will face in the anarchic and fluid world of geopolitics. Like Coppola's characters, America today can rest assured that adjustment will come; it is simply a question of on whose terms. And while Americans may not be a cynical people, we are—like the Corleones—a practical people, a people who value their birthright enough to make hard decisions in hard times, outwitting intelligent foes to prosper in a world cut loose from the moorings of everything we thought—and hoped—it would be.

And so we present a parable of American statecraft, offered at a moment of unexampled danger, in the hopes that our

Republic will foresee the coming earthquake, and prosper in spite of it. We present *The Godfather Doctrine*.

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