

Hulsman, John C. & A Wess Mitchell. *The Godfather Doctrine: A Foreign Policy Parable*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 96pp.

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The Godfather Doctrine: A Foreign Policy Parable should be considered on the terms in which it was intended. Hulsman and Mitchell frame the intent of the parable in a straight forward manner: “the purpose of using the parable is to convey, in succinct form and to a primarily non-academic audience, the story of American geo-political decline and the competing policy options that are now available for dealing with that reality” (163). Reading against the spirit of the parable reveals a number of weaknesses, most notably the absence of reference to current academic output; however, taken in the manner intended, *The Godfather Doctrine* is both accessible and illuminating.

America is in a geo-political arena which, Hulsman and Mitchell concede, is “a world none of us studied in school” (6), following the seismic shifts of September 11, the War on Terror and its legacies. In this new epoch the three foreign policy models Hulsman and Mitchell perceive to be pervasive in Washington and as options for future consideration are the Neo-conservative, Liberal Institutional and Realist doctrines. In introducing the parable Hulsman and Mitchell declare their intentions in advocating the realist option which they believe “has something unique to say about America’s growing predicament in world affairs” (11).

Intimate knowledge of the 1972 film is not as important as exposure to the iconography of Al Pacino’s performance as Michael Corleone, which will be enough to carry the reader through and be absorbed into the parable. The author’s analogous reading finds these three strands of American Foreign policy personified in characters in the film and proceeds to read their successes and failures through these policy positions.

In *The Godfather*, Don Vito Corleone, the head of the most powerful New York Crime family is gunned down in a gang land “hit”; the motive is ostensibly to encourage the Corleone family to share its influence with the other Crime

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families. For the purposes of the parable this is America's September 11, the point at which the dominant power is rendered vulnerable. The Don's three sons, Tom, Sonny and Michael, in successive reigns at the head of the family, represent the policy responses to the crisis.

Tom Hagen or the family Consigliere (Advisor) is the liberal institutional personification of Wilsonianism, advocating dialogue to affect a swift return to the pre-crisis order (30). Sonny, on the other hand, is "the cinematic archetype of the modern-day neoconservative hard-liner" (38), more inclined to the rhetoric of vengeful crusade than to compromise. The Corleone family, under the leadership of the three brothers, heads into a devastating war and the parallels Hulsman and Mitchell draw to the Bush years are self evident.

For the authors, Michael's willingness to favour "a 'toolbox' in which soft and hard power are used in flexible combinations and as circumstances dictate" (48) is enough to identify him as the Realist proto-type. The hybrid approach Michael deploys succeeds in returning the family to its rightful place at the head of the table in a new order of his own design.

Hulsman and Mitchell cast the Realist model, manifest in Michael's ascension to power, as a policy which America would do well to adopt in the post-Bush years. For America this would involve reconsidering international institutions as "conduits of influence" (56), whilst not surrendering the ability for military options. The impending crisis of Iranian nuclear ambition and the emergence and prosperity of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) (34) provide easy foil for the parable and parallel the competing crime families Michael must navigate.

In the realist mode, for Michael and for America too, the goal is to become and remain "first among equals" (60). By a veiled dominance, the Realist pursuit is and will remain "the welfare of actual Americans now inhabiting an actual American" (55). The immediate temporality of the realist approach reconstitutes the scope of foreign policy; no longer playing for a hundred years hence in the Wilsonian model or reliant on the short term shock and awe of Neo-conservative militarism. The American Realist model in the parable is a mandate of influence building through economic, co-operative and co-opting means ultimately "to preserve its position in a dangerous world" (60), or to pull strings as in *The Godfather*.

In Hulsman and Mitchell's parable the Realist model does not anticipate anything better than the preservation of position. The "utopian and blissful future that none of us will see" (55) which characterises liberal internationalism for the authors has

many failings but the aspirations it embodies further highlights the lack of any such goals inherent in the fruition of the Realist project.

The obvious omission from the parable is Fredo, the fourth brother; the ineffectual sibling who is marginalised in *The Godfather* and compromises the family in *Godfather Part 2* to the extent that Michael executes him at the family compound. This telling omission highlights the failure of the parable in giving *The Godfather* its due in the relativity of the parable. Those familiar enough with the Godfather epic will point out easily that the “tool box” Michael employs is gradually turned towards his own family and he can never escape the machinations of manipulation, evasiveness and violence. *The Godfather* is more akin to a tragedy and the moral which resonates loudest is that in protecting his family (Mafia and otherwise) Michael brings about and bears witness to its demise. The moral for American foreign policy which can be taken from *The Godfather* may not be as palpable as Hulsman and Mitchell suggest.

The Godfather Doctrine presents a compelling interpretation not only of the current geo-political reality and a potential route forward for America but also of *The Godfather*. The vigour of the parable is engaging in the first instance and it is a testament to the strength of Hulsman and Mitchell’s account that supplementary connections and cultural readings can be drawn out.