

Why Donald Trump Should Heed Plato on Foreign Policy

Looking ahead to what will be the most defining feature of the Trump administration, Pat Buchanan has noted that it is "[Time for a Trump Doctrine](#)." With Hillary Clinton's defeat, the nation has the opportunity to resolve the tension between the Obama Doctrine (that the U.S. is not responsible for the management of the Middle East[1]) and the Bush Doctrine (that the U.S. should intervene to democratize the Middle East). "Great nations need organizing principles,"[2] and the forthright articulation of a Trump Doctrine (e.g., concerning the nation's stance towards Russia and the Middle East) will define the future of U.S. foreign policy by implicit reference to the experience of past presidents.

An apparent contradiction within my earlier essay, "[The Truth about Plato's 'Noble Lie,'](#)" seemed to reside in its recognition that, whenever a national security doctrine is in effect, sometimes leaders will have to classify secrets and keep them hidden from the populace. The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, when the Plato Doctrine is interpreted as being a national security doctrine that has the consent of all the citizens. Because of the prior consent of all the citizens, which is the implicit basis for a national commitment to operate according to a national security doctrine, the executive branch is not deceiving the citizens whenever it decides to keep some information classified. For it is only doing so in service of the implementation of the larger organizing principle of the nation's national security doctrine, to which the people have agreed.

However, the charge of anachronism against my thesis is much more serious. The objection that Plato did not in fact have nation-states in mind ought to be levelled against my contention that Plato's "some one noble [doctrine]"

corresponds with the national security doctrines of nations.[3] My conviction, however, is that Plato's philosophical form of reasoning in this regard (i.e., concerning what I am calling "The Plato Doctrine") admits of an analogical application to political matters in any time and place. In short, I would argue that his teaching about what today we would call a "national security doctrine" is pertinent to any polity (small or large, i.e., whether it be city, state, or empire) in which an overarching "organizing principle" is visible that, more or less, unites all the citizens in their foreign policy stance. Moreover, such unity would seem to appear to be most enduring whenever there are institutional mechanisms for an ongoing democratic audit of the foreign policy actions of the executive branch.

It is no accident, in this regard, that Plato's Republic deliberates concerning a nation's national security matters with the terminology of "Rulers" (arkhontes) and their "Auxiliaries" (epikouroi). Both are referred to in the text as "Guardians" (phylakes).[4] Plato's national security doctrine names that "some one noble" thing that unites the citizens, but it comes in two parts. The first (the Autochthony Story) inspires territorial loyalty among the Guardians (it persuades the rulers to rule by saying that the Earth was their Mother),[5] and the second (the Story of the Metals) describes the natural hierarchy within the Guardians' territorial jurisdiction (thus persuading the people being ruled, the bronze and iron ones, to accept their being ruled because of the natural merit, the "gold standard" qualities, of their ruling Guardians).[6] This two-part story (about territorial loyalty and territorial jurisdiction)[7] is therefore one doctrine, persuading both the rulers to rule and the ruled to be ruled. The Plato Doctrine thus brilliantly addresses the two sides of "the political problem", the one problem of government: who will rule and who will be ruled.[8]

It is traditional to speak of the national security grand

strategies of American presidents as "Doctrines." Although they are attributed to the president, they are also meant to reflect the self-governing, republican tradition of a democratic national consensus concerning current foreign policy exigencies. The rulers rule in the name of the ruled, with an ongoing evolution of Doctrines in a deliberative process that reflects the ongoing national experience in a global context.

The Nixon Doctrine was "the idea put forward during the Vietnam War that the United States would not serve as the world's policeman but would rely on other countries to defend themselves." [9] James Mann has told the fascinating story of how this Nixon-Kissinger realist policy of détente during the Ford administration gave way, after Nixon's departure, to a new grand strategy. [10] Kissinger's influence waned, as the new White House chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld and deputy chief of staff Dick Cheney rose under the Ford administration to effect a change in grand strategy, i.e., from realism to an idealism that demanded a place for morality in foreign policy in terms of a more aggressive confrontation with the Soviets. [11]

The Carter Doctrine "declared the Persian Gulf vital to America's strategic interests" in the context of the struggle with the Soviets; yet the logic of this doctrine still applied after the demise of the Soviet Union (since other powers besides the Soviets might try to dominate Middle East oil supplies). [12] The Reagan Doctrine ("support for freedom fighters is self-defense") subordinated morality in foreign policy to the fight against the Soviets, as enemies of the Soviets became, not unproblematically, "freedom-fighter" allies in America's struggle. [13] Yet in Reagan's last two years, the outgoing president's increasingly dovish détente policy toward Gorbachev's changing Soviet Union was assailed by the realist hawks who took over in the incoming Bush administration. [14] Still, when the Soviet Union fell, the

41st president's optimistic Bush Doctrine of the "new world order" was a newly dovish American commitment to work with old allies and new partners in "an historic period of cooperation" for global security, best exemplified in the first Gulf War coalition (albeit hawkishly tempered by the other elements of that "new world order" strategy: viz., American preeminence; American willingness to intervene globally where previously prohibited by the Cold War; and American willingness to act alone with force to prevent aggression and preserve the balance of power).[15]

But this "new world order" of American cooperation failed to materialize in the 1990s. The Clinton Doctrine was really, in a word, "globalization," i.e., an international version of his domestic focus, "It's the economy, stupid!"[16] Because, as grand strategy, it was merely economic in nature, it was in the long-term (as is visible now from the standpoint of the Trump era) a strategic failure.[17] Global markets were not the panacea ushering in the "end of history" after the Soviet collapse. American economic and military preeminence failed to prevent the rise of terrorist threats. In this wider context, and spurred on by 9/11, the Bush Doctrine of the National Security Strategy of the United States of America (NSS) of September 2002 shows an evolution in grand strategy that takes into account its historical precursors of presidential Doctrine.

The extent to which any of these presidential Doctrines are "lies" or not is a deliberative matter. Their ultimate evaluation, in other words, is subject to the truth of experience. A democratic audit of executive power, therefore, always aims to read "the verdict of history", in order to implement any needed revisions to the defining Doctrine of the executive branch. A detailed consideration of each president's Doctrine would show how the Doctrines demonstrate a historical evolution in the nation's foreign policy thinking, because while each doctrine contains some measure of truth, the very

fact that the presidential Doctrines have not ushered in “the end of history” shows that they also contain a measure of falsity. This uncertainty in, and the need for the progressive re-formulation of, executive Doctrine is part of the perennial political condition of mere mortals—the very condition which I believe Plato recognized.

In the area of national security, while some immediate security problems are immediately addressed, other more long-term ones are frequently bequeathed to future presidents to address. Such foreign policy Doctrines are noble doctrines in the Platonic sense; namely, they enunciate some one traditional element of American national security strategy in order to meet the practical exigencies of the day. Each “some one noble thing” is therefore bequeathed to historical memory, by its association with the ruler exercising supreme command at the time: the president. Although propagated by the president, the ultimate evolution of each Doctrine, however, lies with the citizenry’s response to the presidential action. This essentially democratic feature of any national security doctrine is what Plato recognizes at the conclusion of his discussion of how such doctrines are formed historically: “And this will go where the report of men shall lead it.”[18]

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[1] “‘The Obama Doctrine’: Examining White House Foreign Policy,” interview with Jeffrey Goldberg on NPR (March 10, 2016).

[2] Hillary Clinton, quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” The Atlantic (April 2016).

[3] I offer therefore a fourth interpretive possibility beyond the three discussed in D. Dombrowski, "Plato's 'noble' lie," *History of Political Thought* 18.4 (1997): 565-578: "The purpose of this article is both to examine Plato's own use of the noble lie in politics and to examine it within the context of contemporary political philosophy, a context wherein at least three different assessments of the noble lie are possible. First I will consider the strengths of those (e.g. Karl Popper) who see the noble lie as part of, or at least leading to, totalitarian politics. Second I will also consider the degree to which contemporary (Leo Straussian) defenders of Plato can adequately defend the noble lie. Thirdly, I will articulate and defend a third (John Rawlsian) view that mediates between the above two views, albeit in a way that finds the noble lie morally objectionable even if it is not necessarily seen as part of totalitarian political aspirations. In effect, I lean more towards the Popperian assessment of the noble lie than towards the Straussian one, even if it must be admitted that the Popperian assessment is hyperbolic." (Dombrowski's abstract)

[4] Rep. 414a-b. Cf. Nicholas P. White, *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 102.

[5] Rep. III. 414d-e. "I tell, indeed; and yet, not knowing what sort of boldness or kinds of words to use, I shall speak. But first I will undertake to persuade the rulers themselves and the soldiers, and then the rest of the city, that so it is that the things with regard to which we both trained and educated them, they were regarding all these things concerning themselves to suffer and happen like dreams, but they were once in truth down within the earth being molded and trained, i.e. themselves, and their weapons and the rest of their

equipment being fashioned; and when they were perfectly worked-out, the earth also being their mother delivered them, and now it is necessary (since it concerns the land, their nurse and mother, in which they are) for them to both take counsel and to defend if one should attack her, and to consider the other class of citizens as being brothers and born of the earth.”

[6] Rep. III. 415a-c. “But, all the same, hear also the rest of the story. Indeed, all of you in the city are brothers (as we shall say, mythologizing to them), but the God who molded you – however many of you are fit to rule – mingled gold with you in your genesis (for which reason they are most honored); and however many are Auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in both the farmers and the other craftsmen. Since all therefore are kinsmen, for the most part you may breed similarly with your same kinds, but it is possible that a silver one may come into being from a gold one, and a golden offspring from a silver one, and all the rest thusly from one another. Consequently the God commands the rulers, first and foremost, that they thus will be good Guardians of nothing else, and they will not guard anything so intently as the offspring, whatever is mixed in the same souls of them, and if a bronze or iron offspring should be born to them, they will pity it in no way, but assigning it the status befitting its nature they will thrust it into the craftsmen or into the farmers; and, in turn, if from these some golden or silver offspring should arise, having granted it its honor, they shall deem some worthy of Guardianship, and some of Auxiliary office, on the grounds that there is an oracle that the city will be destroyed at that time whenever the iron man or the brass man guards it.”

[7] For the unique importance of these concepts in the

evolution of the Western nation-state, see Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002).

[8] Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 26. On this fundamental problem of political life, see especially pages 28-33 (*ibid.*).

[9] James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004), 89.

[10] *Ibid.*, 56-59, 61-74.

[11] *Ibid.*, 69-73.

[12] *Ibid.*, 90.

[13] *Ibid.*, 122.

[14] *Ibid.*, 168.

[15] *Ibid.*, 194.

[16] Ibid., 220. Cf. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), 65.

[17] The so-called “Clinton Doctrine” (i.e., “the best way to maintain stability in large areas that hold U.S. interests is to combat instability in small areas, before the conflicts can intensify and spread”) was arguably a merely ad hoc strategy implemented in the absence of a grand strategy. It subordinated U.S. grand strategy to economic globalization.

[18] (Rep. III. 415d)