Mini-Essay 1

To what extent does ideology -- as outlined and discussed by Hunt -- influence contemporary US foreign policy? You may give examples from “Constructive Engagement in South Africa”.

Hunt examines at great lengths in his book “Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy” the way in which the United States’ relatively brief but extraordinarily well-documented history in the field of political theory remains a key factor in contemporary decision making when it comes to foreign policy. These historical influences are often based off of the worldview of the American Founding Fathers such as ways of confronting political dilemmas overseas whilst maintaining a focus on home affairs and a constant re-evaluation of what America’s role in the world should be. These form what Hunt calls an American ideology that is prevalent in the country’s foreign policy.

This essay shall discuss the ideological background towards contemporary foreign policy decisions; and more specifically the Reagan administration’s participation in constructive engagement with South Africa, as the President attempted to promote the scaling back of the Apartheid regime in the country whilst maintaining the country’s government as an ally in the continuing Cold War.

The Apartheid regime in South Africa discriminated heavily against the black majority population by denying them access to many public services and amenities – including voting rights. This was an affront to the principles of liberty, democracy and freedom that the Founding Fathers of the United States so explicably supported.

President Andrew Jackson, in his farewell address at the end of his term of office, summarised America’s role in the world by saying that “Providence has… chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race.” (Hunt, 2009, p. 30) These values are so ingrained in the people of America and those that take office in the country that they form an ideology. Therefore, as
President, Ronald Reagan was left with no option but to work towards ensuring that those principles that so define the ideal worldview of Americans were enjoyed by South Africans of all ethnicities. It was incumbent upon him in his own eyes, his electorate’s eyes and the world’s eyes to work towards a more inclusive society for South Africa.

However, in balance with this set of American principles of morality were another set – that of capitalist advantage and domestic improvement. South Africa was a major ally against the communist Soviet Union, and one that it could ill-afford to lose in the volatile Southern Africa region, where a proxy war had already erupted in Angola. Reagan noted this in a speech by saying that South Africa is “a country that strategically is essential to the free world” and “it has production of minerals we all must have” (Contructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990, p. 1) By maintaining support for the South African government, America and its’ businesses were allowed preferential trade agreements and access to South Africa’s vast natural resources. These created jobs, wealth and lower prices for consumers in America – something that is imperative for foreign policy actions according to Americans subscribing to the principles of Thomas Jefferson, as he believed that “agrarian prosperity and the purchase of essential manufactured goods depended on access to foreign markets.” (Hunt, 2009, p. 22)

Balancing these two sets of principles has been a core dilemma of United States foreign policy since the times of Hamilton and Jefferson, who discussed these principles at length and had what Hunt called differing “visions of national greatness” (2009, pp. 21-28). Hamilton believed that when America was strong and “ascendant in the system of American affairs” it would be “able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!” (Hunt, 2009, p. 24) Jefferson on the
other hand tended to focus on his ideal American: the agrarian who owns his own land and who he believed to be the marker for Governmental decisions. In the case of South Africa, Reagan was conflicted between the moral imperative to do good and the protection of domestic American interests.

Another ideological perspective, with which Hunt believes many historical actions of the United States can be associated, is that of race. At the time of constructive engagement with South Africa, civil rights had only been granted to the black population of the United States fully for just twenty years. The worldview of the American elite, including numerous Presidents, had been heavily influenced by racial thinking and prejudicial judgements on the character of countries’ populations based upon the ethnicity of those living there. As Hunt notes, early 19th century “conception[s] of race, defined by the poles of black and white, carried over into American foreign policy.” (2009, pp. 51-52) While the America of today and of the 1980s would like to consider itself to be free of this racial thinking, it is certainly possible that at the time of constructive engagement there remained an element of it within the ideologies of those in the Reagan administration, who had been born of a time where segregation still existed in the United States. Had the oppressed population of South Africa been of the Anglo-Saxon lineage that was so favoured by the Founding Fathers of America then perhaps the United States would have taken a much stronger stance on the issue with the South African government.

While Soviet influence and potential domestic concerns were at the fore of Reagan’s policies relating to foreign relations, it is also true that he wished to avoid any possibility of war abroad in any case, with sixteen years of overseas involvement in Vietnam still haunting the American public and political class. These ideals were at play in the case of South Africa as well, as stated in the case study:
“Civil war might allow the Soviet Union or Cuba to expand its influence in the region through military support for black liberation. It would certainly cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The president and his advisors felt strongly that any policy which heightened the possibility of such a conflict would be morally as well as strategically unjustifiable.” (Constructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990, p. 1)

These fears were created ideologically from the moral, economic and racial thinking of the American elite as detailed by Hunt.

Therefore the maintenance of the South African government was important to Reagan’s government, and so only limited economic sanctions were attempted to coerce some policy changes without driving the South African government towards retaliation. In turn, South Africa introduced some political reform to allow more rights to minorities within the country, but not necessarily for black people. These reforms were “hailed as ‘significant’ by the Reagan administration, and dismissed as ‘cosmetic’ by others”. (Constructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990)

As with many American foreign policy decisions, there was internal dissent within the United States concerning the Government’s policy positions relating to South Africa. Beginning with activist groups such as TransAfrica, who believed “the oppression of South Africa’s black population was so intolerable…that the international community should pay whatever economic or strategic price necessary to secure their freedom” (Constructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990, p. 3), pressure grew within the United States to take a firmer stance with South Africa. In 1985, the Congress took stronger action than the President was willing to as “the
Republican-controlled Senate Foreign Relations Committee broke ranks with the president to approve a sanctions bill, and the full House approved an even tougher measure." (Constructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990, p. 5) This shows that while a general American ideology can be defined in the terms that Hunt discussed them; there is not one universal way for American political leaders to apply it nor one universal way in which the American public support it.

South Africa retaliated by threatening to expel “over a million ‘illegal’ migrant workers from the Front Line states if the US withdrew its investments” (Constructive Engagement in South Africa: The Ethics of Persusasion, 1990, p. 5). Despite the strong internal pressures, the Reagan administration continued with their constructive engagement policies, continuing to strike a balance between the different principles behind their involvement in South Africa.

Hunt’s discussion of American foreign policy as an ideology is a thorough review of the way in which American elites have developed a world view, spanning from the actions and ideals of the Founding Fathers through to the modern day. While the context of the United States foreign policy has certainly changed, many of the ideals – moral, economic and racial – remain. These were used and balanced against each other prominently as President Reagan tried to force social change in South Africa whilst maintaining them as an important economic and strategic ally in their fight against Communism.

**Bibliography**
