The Brazilian Economy — Mr. Mead, you classify the foreign policy of U.S. governments in terms of the thinking of four U.S. politicians: Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Alexander Hamilton, and Woodrow Wilson. Obama would seem to have a Jeffersonian style, avoiding military interventions and favoring the defense of democracy from home. Is that a good characterization?

Walter Russell Mead — While Obama was running for president, I did classify him as Jeffersonian. He opposed President Bush’s intervention in Iraq and said that America needed to return to a more constitutional and more legal approach in its foreign policy. Since moving to the White House, however, he seems to be finding inspiration in
a different tradition: that of President Woodrow Wilson, who advocated promotion of democracy and human rights across the planet. Take the example of humanitarian intervention in Libya. Indeed, it is surprising that the UN Security Council voted in favor of this intervention but it was rejected by the U.S. Congress.

Josef Joffe — Besides Jefferson and Wilson, we see in Obama a bit of George W. Bush: that is a great surprise! The Obama administration continues the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan, has not closed Guantanamo prison, and has resumed military tribunals for prisoners at Guantanamo, which was something he vehemently opposed as a candidate.

What are the consequences of Obama’s positions for the United States and its foreign relations?

Joffe — You have three presidents for the price of one . . . . You have a traditional liberal-isolationist, who follows the tradition of Jefferson; an expansionist-idealist like President Wilson, who believes he can make the world safer through democracy; and the nationalist-activist, the president who believes in applying U.S. military force around the world.

How do you assess the president’s visit to Brazil and what can we expect from this relationship?

Joffe — The Brazilian media highlighted the visit positively, as President Obama offering deference to President Rousseff by coming to Brazil before she visits Washington. But I think the gesture goes further. It is part of Obama’s strategic approach of pressing the reset button. Just as he is trying to do with the Islamic world, with Russia, he is seeking to rebuild the relationship with Brazil, which became a little distressed during the Lula administration. So, it’s a clear sign of interest in re-engaging in search of a constructive relationship for both countries, and it goes beyond the symbolic.

Mead — I understand that in the U.S. No other president in American history has led three military campaigns at once.

“While Obama was running for president, he opposed President Bush’s intervention in Iraq and said that America needed to return to a more constitutional and more legal approach in its foreign policy. Since moving to the White House, however, he seems to be finding inspiration in a different tradition: that of President Woodrow Wilson, who advocated promotion of democracy and human rights across the planet.” Walter Russell Mead
thinking about Brazil is growing. There are a number of countries with whom we share values, history, economic interests. Of course, sometimes we have our disagreements, with France on Airbus, say, or with Brazil on ethanol. But I think we believe that a global free trade system is better able to ensure prosperity for the poorest and the population as a whole. And, like the United States, Brazil is demonstrably a country that believes in the idea that democracy brings peace and prosperity. For that reason I think it is natural that President Obama would want to visit Brazil, talk about the future with the president of Brazil, as it must do with the German chancellor and the British or the Japanese prime minister.

Recently, Obama announced his candidacy for reelection. Could this change the way he conducts U.S. foreign relations?

*Joffe* — If you asked me that question two years ago, I would say no, not really. But Obama was elected opposing the policies he now continues, such as the war in Iraq and the action in Libya.

“On Brazil the Americans have a clear policy ... there are no problems about it.”  
*Walter Russell Mead*  

“*We see in Obama a bit of George W. Bush: that is a great surprise!*” *Josef Joffe*

It is an interventionist foreign policy. Since the campaign, there has been the global economic crisis. . . . Today factors related to the domestic economy will determine Obama’s success. I do not believe that issues like Afghanistan, Iraq, or Libya will be as influential in the opinion of Americans in relation to the election.  

*Mead* — With respect to Brazil, I think there will be no changes from the current policy line regardless of who wins the next election. On Brazil the Americans have a clear policy ... there are no problems about it. Some Republicans have criticized Obama’s statement that he would like to buy oil from Brazil. But the intention was not to criticize Brazil but to point out a contradiction in Obama’s speech, which advocates energy independence but also announces interest in Brazilian oil. Brazil, however, is not a controversial issue for U.S. policy.

What legacy do you expect President Obama will leave?  

*Joffe* — So far Obama has been very flexible. He began his campaign with a leftist agenda, with the promise of transforming the U.S. into a European-style social democracy. Then he garnered three wars, had to manage the Gulf oil spill crisis, and certainly had to give up an ambitious domestic
policy agenda. It is difficult to say what he could do in two more years, let alone six.

*Mead* — In foreign policy, I can say that his legacy is not what we expected. It is like what happened with President Eisenhower: He was elected in opposition to President Truman, who called for continuing the fight against communism. When he was elected, however, Eisenhower pursued a very similar policy, which helped create a consensus in America about the Cold War. It is possible that, given the continuity between the policies of George Bush and Obama, a new consensus will emerge — not about what Bush did, and certainly not the way he did it, but seeing Democrats supporting a similar policy.

Could you imagine a different Obama in a second term without the problems raised by the economic crisis?

*Mead* — There is a famous story about British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. He was asked by a young journalist what can most easily steer a government off course. He replied, “Events, dear boy. Events.” If we are speculating about the future with President Obama, we might ask: What will happen, for example, if Iran decides to test a new nuclear weapon? Or if the situation in Syria becomes as serious as in Libya? What should be done if the economic and real estate bubble bursts in China and the world finds itself in a completely different economic situation than we have today? Or if there is deeper recession and unemployment rises sharply in the United States? All this can impact the actions of President Obama. Events will rule actions.

*Joffe* — Voters do not like extremes. Obama moved to the left, and ended up handing over control of the House of Representatives to the Republicans, losing seats in the Senate. I think that Obama will continue with a foreign policy that is not too interventionist or too isolationist, too idealistic or brutally realistic. He will continue with the pattern of Libya, a bit of military intervention but cautiously and seeking the help of others. He will not take drastic actions if there are no drastic events warranting it.

*“Obama is seeking to rebuild the relationship with Brazil, which was a little distressed during the Lula administration.”*  
*Josef Joffe*