

## Background of American Foreign Policy

### The Early Republic

After the American Revolution, the foreign policy thrust of the United States focused mostly on regional rather than international issues. Coalescing the various states with diverse interests into a unified nation proved to be a challenge for the new republic. Sectional differences, especially between the northern and southern states, would continue unabated until the American Civil War. Compounding these issues was America's uneasy post-war truce with Great Britain and France. Negotiations for the gradual withdrawal of British forces and France's increasing pressure on the U.S. to repay loans and expenses incurred from the French's support during the war caused relations with both countries to become increasingly strained. When war broke out between the European powers, the United States was pressured to choose sides but instead adopted a policy of neutrality. Indeed, in George Washington's farewell address he cautioned that the new nation should avoid foreign entanglements, stating that:

*“Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities.”*

Despite Washington's warnings, the United States found itself in an undeclared war with France in 1798, mostly due to President John Adams' failed attempts at diplomacy. Although peace with France was achieved in 1800, his presidency never recovered.

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The Democratic-Republican Party, led by Thomas Jefferson's rise to the presidency, ushered in several years of peace until the War of 1812 with Great Britain. After the U.S. victory, Americans embraced nationalism as the country moved to greater independence and became a global power to be reckoned with.

In 1823, President James Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine in response to the emerging independent Spanish colonies in Latin America. The edict stated that any efforts by European powers to colonize the land or peoples of the Americas would be considered acts of aggression. At the same time, the U.S. was expanding its territory further west, fueled by the philosophical fervor of “manifest destiny,” the belief that America was destined to expand across the continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. This culminated in a series of Indian Wars in addition to the annexation of Texas and areas in the west. The issue of slavery was exacerbated by this territorial expansion, as both southern and northern states battled over whether it should be extended into these new lands.



After several decades of peace following the American Civil War, the United States found itself embroiled in a foreign policy dispute over the Spanish colony of Cuba. When Spanish military leaders were sent to the island to quell a Cuban insurrection, the United States became concerned as many American businessmen had investment interests in the country. Under the leadership of military commander Theodore Roosevelt, the U.S. liberated Cuba in 1898 and through the spoils of victory gained possession of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines (which regained independence after World War II).

## World War I

Empowered by its success in the Spanish-American War, the United States adopted a decidedly interventionist and imperialist foreign policy doctrine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. President Theodore Roosevelt sought colonies and ports all over the world to exert American influence. He took advantage of political strife between Panama and Colombia to build a canal in Central America. However, he did mediate to prevent a war between Russia and Japan and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for brokering this peace. Roosevelt was largely credited (and criticized) for expanding the American presence throughout the world.

After Woodrow Wilson became president in 1913, U.S. foreign policy took a different direction. In the events leading up to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and for several years afterward, Wilson pursued a policy of non-interventionism in European affairs. After Germany sunk several American warships in the Atlantic Ocean, Wilson reluctantly called for war, which Congress declared in 1917. The U.S. joined the Allied Powers of France and Great Britain in their fight against the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires (the Central Powers). After the Allied victory in 1918 and the peace negotiations offered in the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson tried in vain to garner U.S. support for joining the "League of Nations," an international organization whose mission was to maintain world peace. The League was roundly rejected by Congress in favor of a resumed policy of isolationism.

## World War II

Like the first World War, World War II was precipitated by major unrest in Europe. Germany, emboldened by the leadership of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party, commenced a series of invasions in Eastern Europe with the goal of seizing *Lebensraum* ("living space") for the Aryan people. Although the war is generally accepted to have begun in 1939 when the British Empire, France, and Poland declared war on Germany, the United States did not enter the war until 1941 when the Japanese attacked the naval base of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii as a preventive strike to keep the United States from interfering with the country's military operations in Southeast Asia. President Franklin D. Roosevelt described the attack as "a date which will live in infamy." On December 9, 1941, Congress passed a formal declaration of war against Japan which officially brought the United States into World War II, fighting along with the



Allied Powers of Russia, France, and Britain. Soon after, Roosevelt authorized the forced interment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans into relocation camps across the country, one of the most shameful chapters in American history.

The war ended with the unconditional surrender of Germany and the Axis Powers. However, Japan refused to abide by the conditions of the peace settlement and was still making preparations for a U.S. invasion when, in August 1945, President Harry Truman ordered the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands of people. Several days later, Japan announced its surrender to the Allied Powers.

## **The Cold War**

After the war, the United States reoriented itself from a long-standing policy of isolationism to one of potential intervention around the globe. Once uneasy allies, the United States and the Soviet Union saw its relationship deteriorate as the former gained increasing power in Eastern Europe. The U.S. adopted a policy of containment to enhance America's power abroad and used various military, political, and economic strategies to stall the spread of communism. The Truman Doctrine pledged to provide aid to countries to prevent their falling into the Soviet sphere. Additionally, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was created in 1948 as a direct response to the Soviet threat. An intergovernmental military alliance consisting of European states and the United States, NATO pledged to unify in collective defense should any of its member countries be attacked by an external party. Historians often point to these events as precursors to the Cold War.

The Cold War, a period of political tension, economic competition, and military brinkmanship, dominated foreign policy from the Truman to the Reagan Administration. The Korean War, erection (and subsequent fall) of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, and the nuclear arms race were issues that became integrated parts of the U.S. political and military landscape. A thaw in relations between the two countries finally began to take form in the late 1980s. Soon after, the Soviet Union collapsed amid a faltering economy and numerous revolutions among its member countries. With the official fall of communism in 1991, the United States became the world's sole remaining superpower.

## **Post Cold War and 9/11**

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States was presented with different challenges, most notably the threat of nuclear terrorism and unrest in the Middle East. In 1991, the George H.W. Bush (Bush "Senior") Administration successfully suppressed an invasion of the small nation of Kuwait by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. After the conflict, the United States mostly scaled back its military budgets and major foreign policy edicts to focus on economic matters for the remainder of the decade.



Years of economic prosperity came to an end with the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the U.S. Pentagon in Arlington, VA. The attacks, conducted by terrorist members of the militant Muslim group Al-Qaeda, resulted in one of the most significant and aggressive overhauls of American foreign policy in the nation's history. President George W. Bush (Bush "Junior") embraced a unilateral "war on terrorism" to combat the growing threat of fundamentalist, anti-American terrorism in the Middle East. The policy resulted in military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan and, domestically, enhanced powers given to the federal government to monitor potential threats with controversial Patriot Act. Although the George W. Bush Administration justified the Iraqi invasion due to its certainty that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), none were found. The continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen their support dwindle among political leaders and the American people.

In recent years, the United States has increasingly been called upon to administer aid to foreign countries, both military and economic, to assist recovery efforts from war and natural disasters. In 2009, most U.S. assistance went towards establishing and stabilizing democratic regimes in the Middle East. However, a significant amount of aid was also directed to the plight of refugees, food emergencies and disasters, and other humanitarian crises. The Obama Administration has sought to reframe foreign policy regarding U.S. aid as not only a moral issue, but also one that helps to strengthen America's security and economic conditions.

