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## THE AMERICAN APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Discuss how America's experiences molded its national style.
- Describe the roots of American Primacy.
- Discuss how America's moral mission led to the development of its foreign policy.



Stefan Rousseau - WPA Pool/Getty Images

G7 leaders at a meeting in Hiroshima, Japan, visit the memorial for atomic bomb victims.

These are fragile times. We confront the most dangerous and unstable period since World War II. The balance between the U.S.-led “Western bloc” and the Soviet-led “Eastern bloc” that developed after 1945 gave way to a period of unipolarity (where a single power dominated the international system) epitomized by the global coalition that came together under American leadership in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. But the dominance of the United States in the few years after the Cold War ended was

short-lived. The structure of power that would emerge—and is still emerging—would be marked by new global dynamics about which policymakers and scholars have extensive debates. The 1990s gave rise to increasing economic interdependence, greater unification of many European countries in the European Union, a number of civil wars on several continents, engagement in efforts at nuclear proliferation by “rogue states,” and meteoric growth of China’s economic power.

Other challenges face American foreign policy in the first decades of the twenty-first century. The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, altered American foreign policy in drastic ways. Vladimir Putin began his reign in Russia in 2000 and consolidated power while raising questions about the intentions of Russia’s foreign policy. The Arab Spring of 2011 prompted demands for democracy, but tyrants and military warlords took over with ruthless force. Three years later, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) bombed its way into power and controlled much of Iraq and Syria. The civil war in Syria, which started in 2011, left more than four hundred thousand casualties and more than twelve million people uprooted. While Russia’s president seized the Crimean Peninsula from southern Ukraine, China’s leader staked claim to rich territorial waters held by other Asia-Pacific nations.

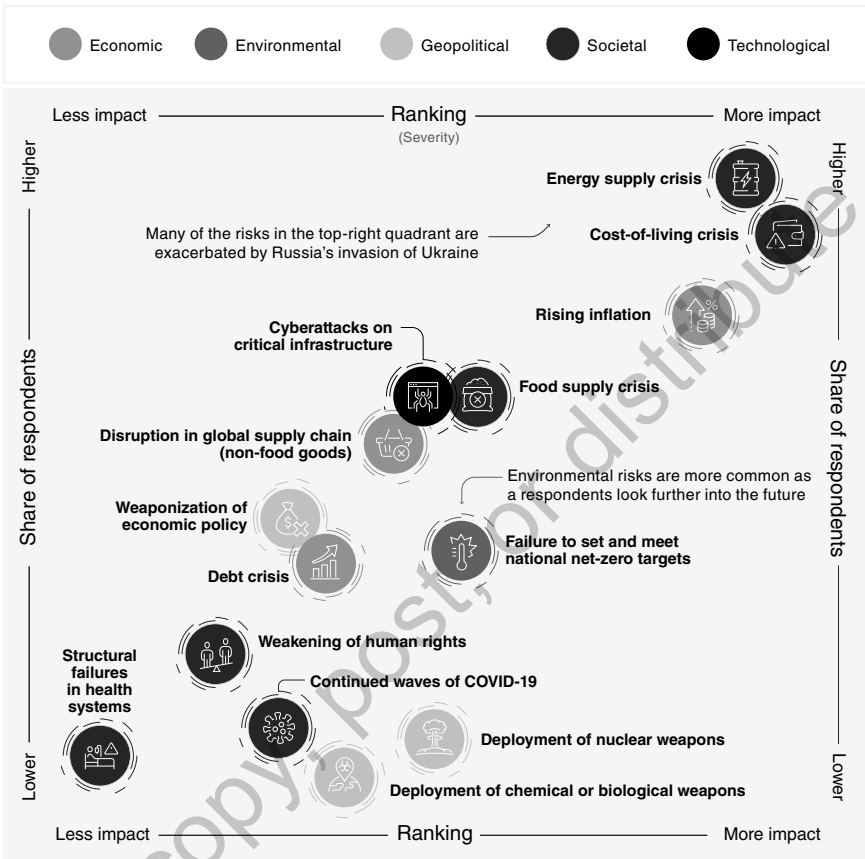
Also since the end of the Cold War, leaders and publics, to varying degrees, over time have acknowledged that challenges of a different nature surround us: Covid-19 demonstrated the destruction of infectious disease; more refugees and displaced people than ever before in history seek shelter, food, and well-being; natural disasters and other effects of climate change have brought environmental and human damage beyond imagination; and authoritarian governments attempt to roll back efforts to promote freedom and human rights. Figure 1.1 shows that experts view environmental issues as creating the most risks in the long term, replacing more economy-oriented challenges in the short term.

At this momentous point in world history, four pivotal questions confront students of American foreign policy:

- Can the United States maintain its military primacy in the midst of threats around the world?
- Can the United States remain the locomotive of global economic growth amid growing competition?
- Can the United States regain the widespread respect it held during and after World War II?

Can the United States lead to address the issues of most concern in the twenty-first century? As we will examine throughout this book, the world’s balance of power since World War II was driven by the strength of the United States. Only this country offered its allies the military security, financial and trade institutions, supports for stable democracy and civil societies, and the foundation of global governance, including international law and the United Nations. This system functioned properly after

**FIGURE 1.1 ■ Most Pressing Global Risks in 2023 According to Sample of Experts and Decision-Makers**



visualcapitalist.com



Source: WEF Global Risks Report 2023

Source: Visual Capitalist. Original data from WEF Global Risks Report 2023.

World War II, allowing governments opportunities to pursue trade, resist corruption, and benefit from freedom. Today, many world leaders believe America's greatest years are past. If they're right, the future of world politics cannot be determined with clarity.

## LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Our study begins with the recognition that American citizens and their leaders, like those of other countries, have a unique perspective of the world beyond their national borders. National "styles" of foreign policy vary considerably, but all governments exhibit consistent patterns as they respond to developments around them. Many factors affect how governments conduct foreign policy, including the pressures imposed

by the international system, global governance, and the constant demands of domestic politics. Taking into account such factors, including historical experiences, nations navigate their relations with allies and adversaries.

## IMPACT AND INFLUENCE: WOODROW WILSON



President Wilson with French president Raymond Poincaré

The American style of foreign policy was personified nearly a century ago by President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister, often described world politics as a struggle between good and evil. The United States, he believed, had a moral responsibility not merely to promote its own self-interests, but also to free the interstate system from its anarchic structure and warlike tendencies.

Wilson led the United States and its allies to victory in World War I, and then chaired the U.S. commission at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He proposed "Fourteen Points" to reform world politics, including global disarmament, decolonization, freedom of the seas, and the abolition of secret diplomacy. Wilson also called for an "association of nations" to maintain order through a system of collective security. More than sixty foreign governments approved his plan and created the League of Nations. But Wilson, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, could not persuade leading members of the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and the United States never joined the League of Nations.

With nonthreatening neighbors to the north and south and open seas to the east and west, the United States could focus on its own economic and political development. The ability of the United States to maintain its detachment from major conflicts overseas cannot be attributed only to the nation's distance from Europe. The nature of democracy has to be considered as well. The United States saw itself as the world's "first new nation" whose government would hold its leaders accountable to the public at large.<sup>1</sup>

As a consequence of early America's detachment from the European powers, both politically and militarily, its national style was molded by its domestic experiences and cultural traditions. Early in its history, the government had considerable freedom to put its Constitution into practice, develop an advanced market economy, and expand its territory across North America. The era of American primacy began amid the ashes of World War II, and it maintained its strength through nuclear deterrence. In 1945, the author George Orwell imagined a world with a "peace that is no peace."<sup>2</sup> Once the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity in the 1950s, the Cold War was the defining reality of great-power politics. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States became preeminent into the twenty-first century. Still, Americans remained anxious long after the 9/11 attacks, the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rising threats from Russia and China, and newer kinds of issues that used to be considered domestic problems.

This book explores how America's national style has influenced its conduct of foreign policy as a great power. From the aftermath of World War II into the new millennium, we consider how the ambivalent views of Americans—a fluctuating love-hate relationship with the outside world—reflect historical patterns established long before the United States joined the ranks of great powers. The first half of this book (Chapters 2–7) examines how this approach to foreign affairs both complicated and contributed to America's victory in the Cold War. The second half of the book (Chapters 8–14) describes how foreign policymakers consolidated the nation's primacy after the Cold War and confronted an array of new challenges.

## THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN PRIMACY

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American foreign policy since World War II is largely the story of the tension between world politics and the nation's political culture. It is also marked by competing ideas about international politics, realism and idealism. Both the monumental achievements of the United States and its failures can be attributed to this uneasy relationship.

From a realist perspective, international politics is anarchic, a system that emerged in the seventeenth century, where each nation depended on itself for maintaining its sovereignty and security. Leaders in such a system feared potential competitors in such an unstable context, and interactions were a zero-sum game (if one state wins, the other loses). Americans, however, felt free of overseas pressures and secure in their own

system of government and civil society. American foreign policy continues to reflect the cultural beliefs that prevailed long earlier. The experience of the United States today can be traced in large measure to these persistent influences.

However, idealism is a second perspective that runs through American thought on international relations and foreign policy. In this view, states sometimes have collective interests and thus can cooperate to bring about the common good; their interactions are characterized as a positive-sum game (we can all win without being less secure). International institutions can be created to incentivize and monitor cooperation.

Prior to the world wars, the United States did not maintain a global military or diplomatic presence. The nation was secure in the Western Hemisphere, which during the century after the American Revolution had witnessed the dismantling of European colonial control. Still, the great powers of Europe engaged in unending spasms of political violence that threatened to draw in the United States, a prospect that had little appeal. "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," President George Washington observed in his 1796 Farewell Address. "Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course." Washington's successors followed his advice, expanding westward without assistance and avoiding peacetime military alliances for more than 150 years.

### Shifts in the Balance of Power

The United States was able to enjoy an unprecedented degree of security because a balance of power, created at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, existed on the European continent and was effectively maintained by Great Britain together with Austria, France, and Russia. The Concert of Europe, devised to implement the decisions of the Congress of Vienna, imposed a rare degree of stability on Europe. It also allowed the United States to fulfill Washington's pledge to avoid "permanent alliances." That balance was shattered, however, by Germany's unification in 1871 and the subsequent demise of several European empires. Unable to strike a new and stable balance of power, a fragile peace emerged after World War I.

The United States retreated into its hemispheric shell after World War I, but only after a failed attempt by President Woodrow Wilson to make the world "safe for democracy." Wilson, an idealist, proposed that a treaty be approved to prevent future wars through a system of collective security. He was so convinced of the righteousness of his cause that he personally represented the United States at the Paris Peace Conference. In 1920, Wilson persuaded European leaders to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the war, and to join the League of Nations. In seeking to transform world politics, however, Wilson neglected American politics, particularly the role of Congress in ratifying treaties. Many legislators questioned whether the league would undermine the nation's sovereignty by forcing the United States to deploy troops overseas even when its own vital interests were not at stake. The security of Europe was not considered integral to the security of the United States. The Senate rejected the treaty, and the United States never joined the league.

Although the postwar U.S. economy rivaled that of all Europe, the U.S. government refused to define for the nation a political and military role consistent with its economic power. American intervention was decisive in Germany's defeat, but its leaders wanted nothing to do with great-power politics. On the contrary, the United States sought to abolish war through the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, which renounced war as "an instrument of national policy." Then, as Adolf Hitler consolidated his power in Germany in the 1930s and as Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, moved into Africa, Congress passed two Neutrality Acts that prevented an assertive U.S. response.

The United States was forced back into the fray when Europe's balance of power was upset by the eruption of World War II in 1939 and the German defeat of France in 1940. With America again facing the possibility of Great Britain's defeat and the control of Eurasia by Germany, President Franklin D. Roosevelt undertook several measures to help London withstand any Nazi assault. Roosevelt, however, registered little concern about Japan's military expansion across East Asia. By the time Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, a second and even bloodier world war was inevitable.

## From Cold War to New World Order

The United States gained unmatched military power after World War II.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1950s, however, the Soviet Union (USSR) caught up with Washington in terms of the most potent metric: nuclear weapons. At the same time, the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) made U.S. leaders fearful that communism would spread worldwide. When the Cold War ended in 1991, American leaders turned to the United Nations, "geoeconomics," and humanitarian missions in such places as Haiti, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia. These problems were of less concern to most citizens, who showed little interest in foreign affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The nation's power was tested when al Qaeda terrorists destroyed the two World Trade Centers in New York City on September 11, 2001. For the first time, American citizens could no longer consider themselves secure in their homeland. Neither could the nation devise an effective means to retaliate against terrorists. In asymmetric warfare, large armies are not required, hit-and-run attacks are common, civilians and troops mingle in urban neighborhoods, and success for terrorists is a populace that lives in constant fear. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 failed in its mission. It left more than four thousand American casualties and millions of Iraqis without a coherent government. All of this opened the door for ISIS terrorists to claim a caliphate, or an Islamic government. President George W. Bush's attack lacked the approval of the UN Security Council, offended governments around the world, and provoked further terrorist attacks on American targets. When President Obama's last year approached, he could not ignore the public's desire for "normalcy" in foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

A growing number of Americans felt the United States was in decline, that American primacy was coming to an end. The apparent shift in the balance of power had two primary sources, one internal and the other external. The first stemmed from the nation's

massive national debts, chronic trade deficits, record levels of income inequality, and the inability of political leaders to agree on crucial decisions. The external source came from challenges to American primacy in the global balance of power. To Russia's Vladimir Putin, Western states "continued stubborn attempts to retain their monopoly on geopolitical domination."<sup>6</sup> Chinese president Xi Jinping, meanwhile, created an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that rivaled the World Bank, based in Washington, D.C. The National Intelligence Council predicted in 2008 that China would overtake the United States in most vital categories of world power by the 2040s. According to the council, "the transfer of global wealth and economic power now underway—roughly from West to East—is without precedent in modern history."<sup>7</sup>

Donald Trump's rise to the presidency was a surprise to many voters. Aside from his massive wealth, he relied on a core of disenchanted citizens from rural regions who felt their standards of living were falling. These "populists" also believed that the United States was strongest when it was left alone, especially in world trade. Trump, whose mantra was "America First," had little room for global governance, especially the United Nations. He was committed to building a wall between the United States and Mexico, and he prevented citizens from several Middle Eastern countries from coming into the United States. At home, populists were prone to anti-Semitism and racial discrimination. Meanwhile, the president confronted charges of collusion with Russia, including actions that favored Trump in his 2016 election. After Joseph Biden won the 2020 election, some Trump supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, shocking many around the world that American democracy could take such a turn.

President Biden had to contend with familiar issues and also newer challenges increasingly at the forefront of international relations since the 1990s. We see a dichotomy within the American public among "new" and "old" issues. In 2022, widespread opinion about the most important region of the world for U.S. security shifted from the Middle East to Europe, undoubtedly due to the war in Ukraine; support for increasing the U.S. commitment to NATO was also predominant (Figure 1.2). When asked to rank foreign policy priorities, 30 percent chose the traditional ideas of "Ensuring the physical defense of our country," and 9 percent chose "Constraining potential aggressors in the world," but more transnational issues rank highly. Twenty-four percent selected "Leading international cooperation on global problems"; 20 percent chose "Seeking economic gains for the U.S. economy in global trade"; and 15 percent noted their priority as "Protecting democratic values and ideas in the world."<sup>8</sup>

## DESTINY AND MORAL MISSION

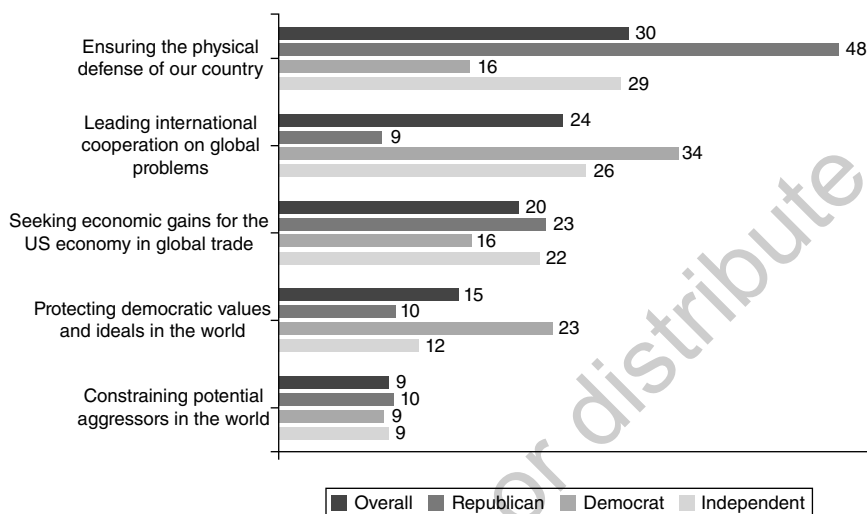
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The defense of the United States has always involved more than physical security. By drawing the distinction between the New and Old Worlds, Americans assumed their values to be universal, their government inspired by "special providence."<sup>9</sup> Still, policy-makers disagreed how they would achieve their foreign policy goals. The first and more



**FIGURE 1.2 ■ Foreign Policy Priorities in Public Opinion, 2022**

Which of the following priorities do you think should be the most important for the making of U.S. foreign policy today? (% most important)



Source: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/2022-chicago-council-survey>.

modest path—leading by example—would encourage citizens to focus on domestic development, restrain Washington from reckless foreign adventures, and prevent the rise of an expensive and potentially oppressive military establishment. The Figure 1.2 1-2second path—intervening overseas and acting as the world’s policeman—would accelerate the historical trend toward global freedom and vindicate the nation’s moral mission. As the United States grew in stature, so did its appetite for enlightening citizens in faraway lands.

American primacy would not take the form of an empire or the seizure of sovereign authority. Instead, the United States would expand its sphere of influence, or *hegemony*, from its base in the Western Hemisphere to the international system as a whole. Neither the premodern empires nor the Concert of Europe of the eighteenth century came close to having such reach. American hegemony was first secured in the nineteenth century, when the Monroe Doctrine established influence spanning North and South America. The scope of U.S. hegemony extended further in the twentieth century when its economic and military supremacy was revealed in the world wars.

Going global after World War II seemed natural for American foreign policy. Such an extension of power by any other state would be distressing. While the United States benefited by its unmatched strengths, small- and middle-sized nations enjoyed security and economic support and diplomatic ties with the “benevolent hegemon.”<sup>10</sup> American values were presumed to be universal, and American hegemony seemed natural and beneficial

to all nations. The United States would underwrite the costs of global “public goods,” including the promotion of human rights and the provision of the world’s largest volumes of development aid to poor countries. In sum, the all-powerful “liberal leviathan” worked toward constructive ends in keeping with America’s style of foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, the United States used idealist and realist means to maintain its security.

After the Cold War ended, debates about what would replace it abounded. Would there be a unipolar world with the hegemony consolidating and continuing or would other actors rise?

Strategic analysts tend to be skeptical about unipolarity. First, the dominant power may be tempted to exploit its stature by taking advantage of weaker states. Second, the unipolar balance of power will inevitably be short-lived as the growing costs of maintaining its control will exhaust the hegemon.<sup>12</sup> Finally, second-tier powers will, either alone or in hostile blocs, try to weaken the hegemon.<sup>13</sup> While skeptics drew upon modern history in making these claims, they failed to account for the unique nature of American power. To one observer, “The current world would be very different if it had been the U.S. and Western Europe rather than the USSR that had collapsed.”<sup>14</sup>

Obama expressed the nation’s idealism when he called for a world “where the aspirations of individual human beings really matter, where hopes and not just fears govern, and where the truths written into our founding documents can steer the currents of history in a direction of justice.”<sup>15</sup> Resorting to the enthusiasm common among past leaders, Obama claimed in 2014 that “We are the indispensable nation. We have capacity no one else has. Our military is the best in the history of the world. And when trouble comes up anywhere in the world, they don’t call Beijing. They don’t call Moscow. They call us. That’s the deal. That’s how we roll. That’s what makes us America.”<sup>16</sup> His commitment to cooperative and multilateral institutions was starkly different from the Bush administration before him or the Trump administration after.

## A Skeptical View of Power Politics

The American perception of an international harmony of interests contrasted sharply with the state system’s emphasis on the inevitability of conflict and differing interests among states. Americans traditionally regarded conflict as an abnormal condition, whereas the rest of the state system perceived harmony to be an illusion. The United States, long isolated from Europe and therefore not socialized by the state system, did not accept the reality and permanence of conflicts among its members. Indeed, differences between nation-states were considered unnatural. But when they did occur, they were attributed to wicked leaders (who could be eliminated), authoritarian political systems (which could be reformed), or misunderstandings (which could be resolved through diplomacy). Once these obstacles were removed, peace, harmony, and goodwill would reign supreme.

“Power politics,” the defining element of Old World statecraft, was an instrument used by selfish and autocratic rulers for whom war was a grand game. They could

remain in their palatial homes and suffer none of war's hardships. The burdens fell upon the ordinary people, who had to leave their families to fight, endure higher taxes to pay for the war, and possibly see their homes and families destroyed. The conclusion was clear: undemocratic states were inherently warlike and evil, whereas democratic nations, in which the people controlled and regularly changed their leaders, were peaceful and moral.<sup>17</sup>

The European countries were, by and large, three-class societies. In addition to a middle class, they contained a small aristocracy, devoted to recapturing power and returning to the glorious days of a feudal past, and a much larger proletariat consisting of low-paid farmers and industrial workers. By contrast, America was, as French political observer Alexis de Tocqueville observed in 1835, "born free" as an egalitarian, democratic society. "As a result, one finds a vast multitude of people with roughly the same ideas about religion, history, science, political economy, legislation, and government."<sup>18</sup>

European politics was power politics, reflecting the feudal origins of European regimes. To quarantine itself from Europe's hierarchical social structures and violent conflicts, the United States had to maintain its hemispheric detachment, which was the morally correct policy. "Repudiation of Europe," novelist John Dos Passos once said, "is, after all, America's main excuse for being."

From the beginning, Americans professed a strong belief in what they considered to be their destiny—to spread *by example* freedom and social justice. Early settlers considered it their providential mission to inspire other societies to follow their lead, and the massive wave of immigration of the late nineteenth century reinforced this sense of destiny. The United States, then, would voluntarily reject power politics as unfit for its domestic or foreign policy. The Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed in 1823, first stressed this ideological difference between the New World and the Old World. President James Monroe declared that the American political system was "essentially different" from that of Europe. In this spirit, Monroe warned, "We should consider any attempt on [Europeans'] part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."<sup>19</sup>

This view also allowed the United States to behave hypocritically by acting like other nations in its continental expansion while casting its motives in the noblest of terms.<sup>20</sup> In advocating U.S. expansion into Mexico in 1845, for example, journalist John O'Sullivan argued that it is "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of Liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation a Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions . . . governed by God's natural and moral law of equality."<sup>21</sup>

Private enterprise and economic development further reinforced this disregard for power politics. John Locke, the British political theorist who inspired the American Founders, believed the role of the state should be to promote "life, liberty, and the

pursuit of property.” The best government, Thomas Jefferson declared, was the government that governed least. Arbitrary political interference with the economic laws of the market only upset the results—widespread prosperity and public welfare—these laws were intended to produce. The United States, therefore, would not isolate itself from the outside world in a commercial sense. Indeed, economic expansion based on foreign trade was a central element of early American foreign policy.

The key was ensuring that no political strings were attached. As George Washington proclaimed, “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.” This dichotomy between economics and power politics came naturally to Americans, for whom the benefits of economic freedom were as “self-evident” as the truths stated in the Declaration of Independence. Abundant natural resources, free enterprise, and supportive government policies enabled Americans to become the “people of plenty.”<sup>22</sup>

## Exceptionalism and Exceptions

One of the most telling characteristics of America’s national style in conducting foreign policy has been the scrutiny and criticism applied during and after every major war to the reasons for the country’s participation in the struggle. Antiwar activists organize demonstrations and encourage resistance, former government officials challenge the country’s behavior on the op-ed pages, and scholars correct the historical record to rebut the conventional wisdom. Such self-criticism is common among democratic states that encourage public dissent. In the United States, however, the public discourse reveals fundamental doubts about the link between the stated goals of American foreign policy and the means chosen to achieve them.

The revisionist historians of the twentieth century advanced two main arguments. First, with the exception of the two world wars, the conflicts in which the United States became entangled did not in fact threaten its security interests. Therefore, the American military interventions that occurred frequently after 1800 were “wars of choice” that were unnecessary or immoral or both. The enemy identified as the *provocateur* actually did not represent a direct threat to American security at all. To the contrary, the threat came from within.

Second, the United States fought wars because its leaders were manipulated by public opinion, by self-serving bureaucrats, and, above all else, by bankers and industrialists—the “merchants of death” of the 1930s, the “military-industrial complex” of the 1960s—whose economic interests benefited from the struggles. William Appleman Williams, the foremost proponent of this view, argued in 1959 that the United States was driven to global expansion by the fear of economic stagnation and social upheaval at home.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Joyce and Gabriel Kolko argued in 1972 that American foreign policy after World War II was propelled “not by the containment of communism, but rather more directly [by] the extension and expansion of American capitalism.”<sup>24</sup>

Those who argued that the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was “all about oil” found sufficient evidence for their argument in the president’s and vice president’s past associations with the oil industry. This viewpoint, originally maintained by a small group of critics, became widespread as the United States intervened repeatedly in regional conflicts during and after the Cold War.

Inspired by the revisionist historians, a new generation of political scientists argued that concepts such as liberty, national interests, and the balance of power are socially constructed by government leaders and are therefore not a legitimate basis for diplomatic relations.<sup>25</sup> In dominating the discourse of American foreign policy, political leaders have routinely glorified the nation’s values, vilified adversaries, and exaggerated overseas threats in order to preserve America’s dominant position in the world. The Cold War, David Campbell observed, “was both a struggle which exceeded the military threat of the Soviet Union, and a struggle into which any number of potential candidates—regardless of their strategic capacity to be a threat—were slotted as a threat.”<sup>26</sup>

In summary, the United States faces the world with attitudes and behavior patterns formed long ago as a result of its vast natural resources, exceptional self-image, and ambivalent relationships with foreign powers. The early success of the United States—first in detaching itself from great-power politics, and then in prevailing in two world wars—fueled the national sense of “manifest destiny.” This record of accomplishment was tested during the Cold War, which dominated global relations for nearly half a century. In the twenty-first century, the same attitudes and behavior patterns do have an effect on U.S. foreign policy, but there are also new reactions to new challenges that have come to dominate the global landscape. As all the chapters will demonstrate, the past and present will allow students to anticipate the future of American foreign policy.

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