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The American Foreign Policy Legacy

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# The American Foreign Policy Legacy

*Walter Russell Mead*

## A NEGLECTED TRADITION

JAMES BRYCE, a future British ambassador to the United States, wrote at the end of the nineteenth century that the role of foreign policy in American life could be described the way travelers describe snakes in Ireland: there are none.

At the time, however, most Americans would have taken issue with Lord Bryce's claim that the United States had no foreign policy worth noting. Americans of the day widely believed that their government maintained an active, indeed global, foreign policy. And with good reason. The Spanish-American War had just ended, and U.S. forces were still waging a bitter war against guerrillas in the Philippines. Debates raged about whether the United States should annex Cuba, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, and if so, on what terms. It was a time, in fact, when many Americans were struck by a sense that the United States was coming of age in the international arena.

That Lord Bryce, a British diplomat, would have discounted and minimized the importance of U.S. foreign policy despite such events is perhaps not surprising. But the fact that so many important American writers and thinkers today would join him in a wholesale

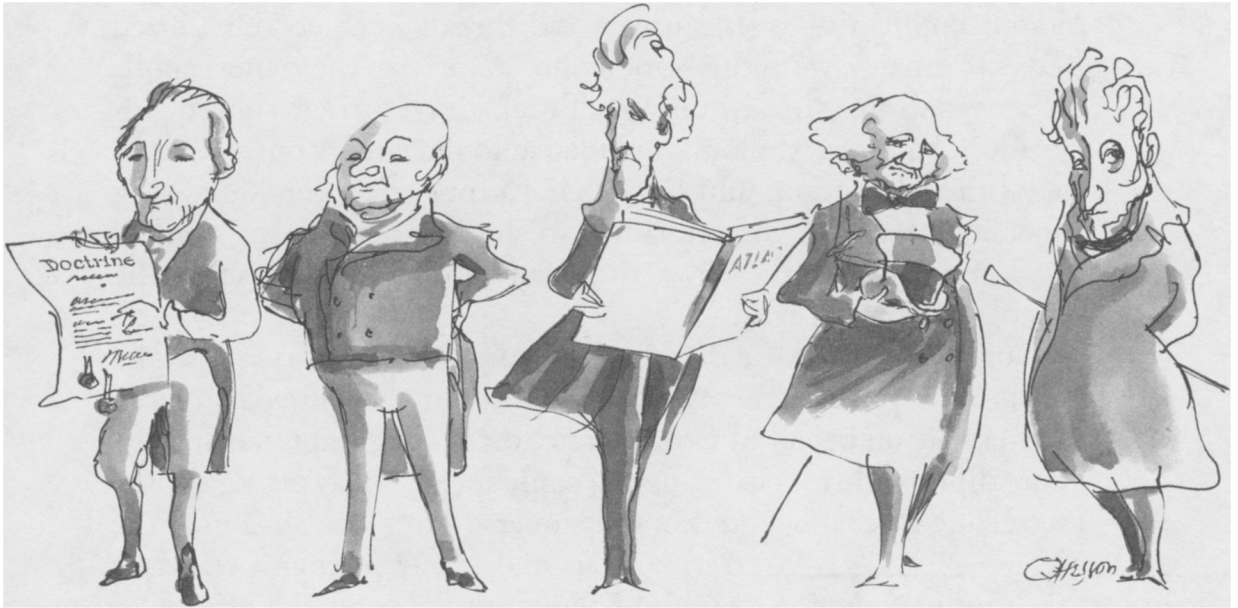
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dismissal of Washington's foreign policy legacy is more startling. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of contemporary U.S. foreign policy is the ignorance of and contempt for the country's own foreign policy tradition—a perspective shared by many otherwise thoughtful people. This lack of interest is especially prevalent, and especially worrying, among high-level government officials and the scholars and analysts who work in universities, the national media, and the so-called think tanks—all of whom are responsible for developing, studying, and carrying out the foreign policy of the United States.

This lack of interest is intensified by ignorance. Although the history of U.S. foreign policy from Pearl Harbor onward is known to most educated Americans, developments before the Second World War lie buried in obscurity. This oversight is tragic, given the many common themes that run from America's foreign policy past into the present. Ever since George Washington's administration, Americans have debated the following questions: Should the national government cooperate with business to build the economy through



trade and tariffs? Should the extension of democracy, the defense of human rights, and the construction of a world order based on international law stand at the center of U.S. foreign policy? Is the hope of a peaceful world order a beguiling illusion, and should the United States therefore build up a strong defense system to protect itself? Should Americans seek to minimize foreign entanglements and shun foreign quarrels to concentrate on strengthening democracy at home? To ignore the history of these debates is shortsighted, for a thorough understanding of how these issues have shaped U.S. foreign policy in the past can help shape the present—both for policymakers and for the American public.

#### ARTFUL DIPLOMACY

FAR FROM LACKING a foreign policy, the United States has had a successful history in international relations. After a rocky start, the young American republic quickly established itself as a force with which to be reckoned. The revolutionaries shrewdly exploited

tensions in European politics to build a coalition with the French and others against Britain. Artful diplomatic pressure and the judicious application of incentives and threats enabled the United States to emerge from the Napoleonic Wars with the richest spoils of any nation: the Louisiana Purchase. During subsequent decades, American diplomats managed to repeatedly outmaneuver the United Kingdom and the other European powers, annexing Florida, extending U.S. territory to the Pacific, gaining control of the Southwest, and thwarting British efforts to preserve the independence of Texas.

During the Civil War, deft American diplomacy outfoxed repeated efforts by powerful elements in both France and the United Kingdom to intervene on behalf of Confederate forces. Washington displayed a sure diplomatic touch during the conflict, prudently giving in over the seizure of Confederate commissioners from a British ship in the

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*Trent* Affair and firmly forcing a reluctant United Kingdom to observe the principles of neutrality and to pay compensation when it failed to.

After the Civil War, the United States became a recognized world power and established unchallenged hegemony within the western hemisphere. U.S. intervention in the First World War can be considered a failure only compared with the lofty goals set by President Woodrow Wilson. The

United States may have failed to end war forever and establish a universal democratic system—challenging goals, to say the least—but it did well otherwise. The United States still had a disproportionately influential role in shaping the peace, with fewer casualties than any other great power and fewer forces on the ground in Europe. And while the United States thrived in the war's aftermath, monarchical government—the great thrones and houses that once mocked the United States and its democratic pretensions—vanished from the earth.

Moreover, although it may be fashionable today to scorn the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson's main principles—self-determination, democratic

government, collective security, international law, and a concert of nations—survived the Versailles system and still guide European politics today. Wilson may not have gotten everything he wanted at Versailles, and his treaty was never ratified by the Senate, but he fared better than the leaders of France, the United Kingdom, or Italy. Unlike Wilson, none of them gained anything of real value by the peace. The United States was the only winner in the First World War, as it had been the only real winner of the Napoleonic conflicts of the preceding century. The First World War crushed Germany, made the United States the world's greatest financial power, and reduced the United Kingdom and France to a position from which neither could mount an effective opposition to the United States anywhere in the world.

The results of the next world war were similar. The United States entered the conflict later than any other great power, lost less in the fighting, and realized greater gains from the settlement. Although the Soviet Union gained control over the wasted landscapes of Europe's impoverished East, the United States secured the effective leadership of a bloc of countries that included the richest, most dynamic, and most technologically advanced societies in the world.

Since that time, the United States has made some mistakes, to be sure. In general, however, its diplomacy has been successful. The United States not only prevailed in the Cold War, but also ensured the spread of its language, culture, and products worldwide. The U.S. dollar became the international medium of finance; English became the lingua franca of world business; American culture and consumer products dominated world media and world markets. As a result, the United States is now the sole global power.

#### DOMESTIC LINKS

NOT ONLY HAS American foreign policy been more successful than conventional wisdom accepts, it has also played a more pivotal role throughout U.S. history than many Americans know. In fact, the country's leaders often devoted even more of their attention to foreign policy questions before and during the Civil War than did their successors during the Cold War. It is no coincidence that of the first nine U.S. presidents, six had previously served as secretary of state, and

seven as foreign ambassadors. Six of the fifteen American presidents who served before Abraham Lincoln had been both secretary of state and ambassador to the United Kingdom. A seventh, Thomas Jefferson, had been secretary of state and ambassador to France, and an eighth, John Adams, had been ambassador to both Great Britain and France.

It was no accident that the country's early leaders devoted so much attention to foreign policy. The prosperity and happiness of the typical American family were closely tied to international affairs, and the connection was lost neither on the voters nor on those who hoped to win their support. Precise statistics for the period are unavailable, but the evidence suggests that the national economy was at least as dependent on foreign trade in 1790 as it is more than 200 years

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later, and the United States was even more dependent on the rest of the world in the nineteenth century than it was during much of the Cold War. From 1948 to 1957, foreign trade accounted, on average, for 7.3 percent of GNP, whereas from 1869 to 1893, its share was 13.4 percent.

Foreign trade was not simply a concern of towns on the eastern seaboard. Agricultural exports streamed from U.S. farms to European markets. Between 1802 and 1860, the value of American cotton exports rose from \$5 million a year to \$192 million a year; between 1866 and 1900 those same cotton exports had an average annual value of \$213 million. The proportion of the cotton crop exported to British manufacturers rose as high as 64 percent. Wheat exports, which were negligible before the Civil War, brought in \$191 million by 1880 and averaged \$88 million per year until the end of the century. Between 1850 and 1900, at a time when up to half of the U.S. population worked in farming, agricultural products made up between 73 and 83 percent of all exports from the United States.

Throughout this time, access to foreign markets was a requirement for American farmers and merchants. The U.S. government, therefore, took an active role in opening up Asia and Africa to American trade. Then, as Americans spread out across the world in search of profits,

diplomats followed. By the time of the U.S. Civil War, the American government had sent official missions to Burma, China, Japan, the Ottoman Empire, Sumatra, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Closer to home, most prominent U.S. political leaders believed that control of New Orleans and its port was essential, not merely to national well-being but to national unity. New Orleans controlled access to the sea for the entire Mississippi-Missouri watershed—from western Pennsylvania to Montana. Without New Orleans, farmers west of the Alleghenies could not ship their produce to world markets. As Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone roamed the Appalachian wilds, informed opinion in the United States and abroad held that the Midwest would not remain in a federal union that could not provide its inhabitants with safe access to these markets. The volunteer backwoodsmen who followed Andrew Jackson to defend New Orleans in the War of 1812 knew why that city was fundamentally important to American prosperity and union, and they understood the importance of the battle they fought there.

Their children and grandchildren never forgot their dependence on foreign customers. The cash income of a typical farming community on the Illinois plains depended on the condition of the European wheat market at any given time. And once a farming community developed banks and sought to borrow money for public or private improvements, it encountered an international system of credit and trade that in some ways was more closely integrated than it is today.

The nineteenth century, therefore, was no time of isolation. U.S. domestic prosperity was threatened or ruined time after time by financial storms that originated overseas. The European depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars eventually spread to the United States. The Panic of 1837 had its origin in London. The Panic of 1857 began after the Crimean War, when troubles in France spread to London's money markets and from there to New York. After the successful laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866, information from London financial markets traveled to Wall Street

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and the rest of the country much more quickly, making the U.S. economy even more vulnerable to collapses and crashes on international financial markets. The American Panic of 1893, for example, was caused by the collapse of the Argentine loan market.

Increasing this vulnerability, foreign investment played a greater role in American prosperity during the nineteenth century than it does today. The United States had to borrow the money for the Louisiana Purchase from the Dutch, and foreigners are believed to have owned more than half of the national debt during Jefferson's presidency. One-third of the investment for building the great American canals came from overseas. Foreigners poured between \$2.5 billion and \$3 billion into U.S. railroads, and by the early 1880s, foreign cattle barons owned more than 20 million acres of the American West.

Those foreign investors exercised tremendous political power in the United States. Many Americans resented this and tried to diminish the influence of these investors, but with little success. President Jackson, in refusing to renew the charter for the second Bank of the United States, cited profits to non-U.S. investors as a prime reason for his opposition. Sixty years later, the Populist Party called for the expropriation of farmlands owned by aliens. Discriminatory legislation aimed at foreigners increased in the late nineteenth century, with 12 states passing laws restricting ownership of land by foreigners.

Anger was also directed at European bankers and moneylenders. Populist agitators lambasted the "Money Trust," a network of banks aligned with British financial interests through the House of Morgan. Noted author, lecturer, and political crusader Mary Lease attacked President Grover Cleveland as an agent of "Jewish bankers and British gold." But like politicians from developing countries who complain today about the International Monetary Fund, American politicians could make little headway against the entrenched power of foreign investors in the U.S. economy. Like it or not, the United States was inextricably bound up in the international economy. Financial disasters that began overseas were not limited in their effects to the major metropolitan centers: unemployment, bankruptcies, disruptions of trade, collapses in prices, and closures of

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banks affected the entire country. Surely the average American in 1845 or 1895 was at least as aware of the links between domestic prosperity and the international economy as his or her counterpart is today—and perhaps even more so.

### EVER ON THE BRINK

AS THE ABOVE SUGGESTS, the first 140 years or so of U.S. independence were not a quiet time in the country's foreign relations. But far more than just economics was at stake. Virtually every presidential administration from Washington's to Wilson's sent American forces abroad or otherwise faced war crises with a great European power. During the Napoleonic Wars, of course, the United States fought an undeclared naval war with France and both declared and undeclared wars with Great Britain. These wars had immense repercussions on domestic society. Especially disastrous was Jefferson's 1807 embargo that effectively banned all trade between the United States and Europe—perhaps the most painful economic shock the United States ever experienced.

Soon thereafter, the federal union almost collapsed during the War of 1812, when British troops sacked Washington, D.C., and attacked Baltimore and New Orleans. The war's consequences were not limited to the battlefield: U.S. foreign trade fell by 90 percent between 1807 and 1814 as the British Royal Navy blockaded the American coast. The resulting collapse in the prices of tobacco, cotton, and other agricultural products drove thousands of Americans into bankruptcy.

Nor did the crises stop when Napoleon was banished to St. Helena in 1815. Until well after the Civil War, the United States existed in a permanent war atmosphere. Washington and its European counterparts were continually threatening war, levying sanctions, and dispatching their armed forces against one another. Areas of U.S. concern were not limited to the western hemisphere. Marines were dispatched to Algeria, China, Japan, Korea, Liberia, Libya, and Sumatra. The U.S. Navy also built up an important global presence during this period. A permanent Mediterranean squadron was established in 1815 to keep the Barbary pirates in check. In 1822 the United States established its West Indian and Pacific naval squadrons, the latter charged with protecting American whalers and commercial interests in South

America and the islands of the South Pacific. In 1826 this was followed by the creation of a South Atlantic squadron, and the East India squadron was established off the western coast of Africa in 1843. By the end of the nineteenth century, U.S. forces were established throughout the South Pacific, and the United States had fought battles in Korea and China and survived a serious international crisis with Germany over control of Samoa.

In addition to warfare abroad, Americans also wrestled with the possibility of foreign invasion throughout the nineteenth century. From 1816 through the end of the century, engineers and naval experts developed plans for coastal fortifications but faced widespread skepticism that fortifications of any type could prevent modern navies from taking and burning American cities. A substantial portion of U.S. defense spending during this time went for coastal fortification, with results that can still be seen in the impressive forts found along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. These great forts, however, were unable to ease the broad anxiety about the consequences of war. Confidence in the system further declined during the Civil War, when forts such as Moultrie, Sumter, and Fisher fell to enemy attack.

In important respects, the recent debates over missile defense have paralleled the nineteenth-century debate over coastal defense. Then as now, proponents argued that saving even one of the nation's cities from otherwise certain destruction in war would justify the cost of any system; opponents countered not that the threat was illusory but that the available technology was insufficient to provide the desired results.

#### CONTENTIOUS RELATIONS

THE UNITED KINGDOM, as the main power of the nineteenth century, was the country with which the United States most often came close to war. From the end of the War of 1812 to the Venezuela boundary crisis of 1895, scarcely a decade passed in which the United States and the United Kingdom did not come close to blows. Under President Martin Van Buren, U.S. support of rebels against British rule in Canada brought the two countries to the brink of battle. A dispute over the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick led

to the Aroostook War, in which both the United States and the United Kingdom rushed troops to the contested border area.

At the same time, London tried to bring the newly independent Texas within its sphere of influence, and U.S. fears of British hegemony in the region played a large part in the decision to annex the "Lone Star" republic. This annexation, in turn, helped launch the Mexican War. The two Atlantic powers also clashed over British efforts to suppress the slave trade and extend British influence in Central America. Relations between the United States and the United Kingdom did not decisively improve until the final decade of the nineteenth century, when the rise of Russia and Germany led the British to adopt a more conciliatory tone toward the United States.

During this time, the United States also had a rancorous relationship with Spain, forcing Spain to give up Florida and opposing any Spanish attempt to reestablish its rule over its lost South American colonies. Instability in Cuba brought the United States and Spain to the brink of conflict several times before fighting finally broke out in the Spanish-American War, a conflict that eventually put an end to four centuries of Spanish power in the western hemisphere and the Pacific.

Although France and the United States had fewer points of contact in the nineteenth century after Napoleon gave up his dreams of a North American empire and sold Louisiana to Jefferson, relations between Paris and Washington were also rocky at times. Napoleon III openly sought the breakup of the United States and the independence of the South; his attempt to establish a puppet emperor in Mexico while the United States was distracted by the Civil War was the most dangerous challenge to the Monroe Doctrine. French troops did not withdraw from Mexico until General Ulysses Grant, almost immediately after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, dispatched General Philip Sheridan to the Rio Grande with victorious Civil War troops.

Even without European meddling, the United States often found itself heavily involved in Latin America. As early as 1832, a U.S. fleet went to the Falkland Islands to destroy an Argentine garrison that had harassed American shipping. The Mexican War was, of course, the greatest example of U.S. intervention in the region, but by the

Civil War U.S. forces had been dispatched as well to Argentina, Cuba, Curaçao, the modern Dominican Republic, the Galapagos Islands, Haiti, the Marquesas Islands, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Spanish Florida. In the 33 years between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, U.S. marines intervened in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, and Uruguay.

#### AT THE HEART OF POLITICS

FOREIGN POLICY, then, has always played an important role in U.S. politics. As suggested earlier, the question of American independence was an issue of foreign relations, and the formation of an alliance with the French was the key to the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War. The balance of power between federal and state authorities embodied in the U.S. Constitution was determined in large part by the need to create a national government strong enough to conduct an effective foreign policy. Even the friends of states' rights concluded that it was better to establish a strong central government for the ex-colonies than to face pressures from Europe as a feeble and divided confederation.

This strategy proved well advised, for foreign policy questions dominated the administrations of Washington and Adams. The Jay Treaty, the XYZ Affair, the continued British presence in the western territory formally ceded to the United States by the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the undeclared war with France, the Genêt Affair, the question of whether the United States should "tilt" toward Great Britain, France, or neither—these issues dominated eighteenth-century politics.

Throughout the nineteenth century, foreign policy remained at the heart of American politics. Four great issues preoccupied the country: slavery, westward expansion, tariffs, and monetary policy. Of these, only slavery was a purely domestic matter, and foreign policy was absolutely critical to the course of the Civil War, in which the slavery controversy came to a head. European intervention was the strategic goal of the Confederacy throughout, and the battle for foreign public opinion was a decisive consideration that ultimately helped lead a reluctant Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. "To proclaim emancipation would secure the sympathy of Europe

and the whole civilized world. ... No other step would be so potent to prevent foreign intervention," wrote Lincoln in 1862.

Of the other great issues of the day, westward expansion was obviously a foreign policy matter; the tariff question had both domestic and foreign policy implications (like it does today); and the debate over whether to keep the gold standard or to permit the free coinage of silver was fundamentally a question about the relation of the U.S. economy to the British-dominated international system. William Jennings Bryan said in the conclusion of his 1896 "cross of gold" speech, "It is the issue of 1776 over again. ...

[I]nstead of having a gold standard because England has, we will restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States has it."

Throughout this time, war always lurked on the horizon. During the recurring great-power crises of the nineteenth century, many serious diplomats believed that war was inevitable. The public agreed, and international crises were accompanied by violent waves of popular agitation. Americans in the nineteenth century were no strangers to newspapers with war-scare headlines. Foreign policy issues loomed large in elections. Administrations were constantly aware that Americans would not permit their government to look weak or to appease foreign governments.

Often, indeed usually, the U.S. government held sentiments more pacific and isolationist than did the public. At several points in the nineteenth century, popular pressure for war against the United Kingdom, Spain, or France was almost overwhelming. Popular opinion pressed the U.S. government to involve itself more directly in European affairs than it might have chosen. The Greek war for independence, the Kossuth revolution in Hungary, and the Fenian uprising of Irish immigrants against British rule in Canada were instances in which U.S. agitation was particularly strong, but they were far from the only times when significant parts of the U.S. population clamored to see American arms used to vindicate American principles or interests in far-flung corners of the world.

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American foreign policy  
affects the happiness  
and security not only  
of Americans but of  
people around the world.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

GIVEN THAT THE WORLD is an interdependent place today, and given that both the dangers and the opportunities of international engagement are rapidly increasing, the skillful conduct of foreign policy will be at least as important to the happiness and security of the American people in the future as it has been thus far. Since the United States has become the central power in a worldwide system of finance, communications, and trade, it is not only the American people whose happiness and security will be greatly affected by the quality of American foreign policy in coming years.

Ignorance of past U.S. foreign policy, therefore, must not impoverish future debate. Elites and policymakers would benefit from a richer, deeper understanding of the principles and goals of their predecessors. A better grasp of the U.S. foreign policy tradition will do more than help policymakers craft better policies; it will enable the American public to better evaluate and compare the proposals and policies of contending candidates and political parties. The result will be stronger public support for better policies. 🌐