

## **History 282 US Diplomatic Discussion Transcript for August 20, 2020**

### **Main Reading: articles by Walter Russell Mead**

The initial reading assignment in this class offers a broad but concise overview of some key themes in American diplomatic history, most notably the fact that there's a lot of misunderstanding and indifference out there regarding this important subject. That makes it exciting to study. Most people—even most policymakers—don't really know much about the details of past US diplomatic decision-making. They don't know most of the principles, beyond some presidents and a handful of secretaries of state. They remember little about the context. They struggle to explain the nuances of the strategic choices and their consequences. Students in this class should feel more capable of doing so by the end of the semester. Reading George Herring's massive volume is like diving deep into the ocean of topics that Walter Russell Mead has just alluded to here in this thought-provoking piece. What students should be doing from this point forward, is keeping track of the themes, episodes and people that are most compelling to them so they can start prioritizing subjects for papers & projects.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

#### **GENERAL OVERVIEW**

**STUDENT COMMENT:** At the very start of the Mead article, it was fascinating to read that there was once a time in our nation's history where it was thought that we had no relevant foreign affairs. To learn that 100 years after the Revolutionary War, ambassadors outside the country believed the United States did not have any "foreign policy worth noting" is mind boggling to say the least. In today's society, it appears as if the United States is involved in every major international affair, good or bad. This demonstrates how much of a global power the United States has become over the last century and a half.

**STUDENT COMMENT:** I believe that the U.S. struggles with contradicting sides of itself. I found it interesting how the reading began with how little American officials think of the history of U.S. foreign policy, considering how its events have led to its current standing as a global power in a world run by globalization and connection. The dual-sided nature of Mead's organizing questions is indicative of that mindset, and modern-day debates show how many people devalue foreign policy. The reading mentioned that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, agricultural products made up the vast majority of American exports, and that foreign investment was even more integral to the U.S. economy than it is in today's highly-globalized world. Today, advocates for an isolationist nation, for the country to return to what it "once was," may not see that foreign involvement has shaped the U.S. and contributed to its success since its founding. It was difficult to determine from Mead's reading, but I wonder if the lack of interest and the prevalent ignorance of foreign policy trickles from the highly-educated officials to everyday citizens, or vice-versa? This would surely influence how the problem could be resolved.

STUDENT COMMENT: Mead does an excellent job critiquing isolationist narratives of early American history by integrating both US foreign and domestic policy in that time period, and showing how many issues that affected normal people had significant foreign policy components. His argument suggests an answer to his final framing question about whether or not the United States should “shun foreign quarrels.” By establishing that US policy has always been deeply influenced by global affairs and describing the historic public interest in intervention (pg. 175), Mead implies that such an isolationist attitude is unsustainable. I find this question of American isolationism to be particularly interesting, because it highlights both a variety of tensions in America: between periods of looking outward and inward, between the government and the public, and between the legislative and executive branches of the American government. The Trump administration’s foreign policy approach of scaling back commitments, and the widespread criticism of this course, shows that this long-running debate is nowhere near finished.

STUDENT COMMENT: As Mead succinctly put it: “Until well after the Civil War, the United States existed in a permanent war atmosphere (166).” The United States was constantly challenging other governments ... for quite some time. The other countries, in one way or another, sought to test the might of the U.S. but through tactical policies the U.S. secured her spot among the other European powers, eventually surpassing them.

### **ON IMPORTANCE OF TRADE AND GLOBAL MARKETPLACE**

STUDENT COMMENT: One question that Mead raised that I had not previously considered was about whether the national government should cooperate with business in order to strengthen their economy through trade. In the case of the United States (and probably most other countries), once we began to invest in foreign markets, we became completely tied up with the international economy. By trading internationally, countries can produce a surplus and trade for the resources they need, but because they then will be bound up in multiple economies, they will be subject to other economies’ financial problems. During the 19th century, the domestic success of the U.S. was threatened by financial problems arising in other countries. For example, the American Panic of 1893 was a direct result of the Argentine loan market collapse. This is an interesting question to grapple with because I believe that the pros of increased revenue and receiving the resources we need outweigh the cons of occasional financial uncertainty, but I have never experienced a world in which the economy is not dependent on trade nor a world in which the economy is on a steep decline (I was only 7 in 2008).

### **ON FOREIGN ENTANGLEMENTS**

STUDENT COMMENT: The organizing question I found most intriguing from Mead is "Should Americans seek to minimize foreign entanglements and shun foreign quarrels to focus on strengthening democracy at home?" as I find it near impossible to imagine an America which is

not heavily involved in foreign affairs. Mead not only gives an answer as to why James Bryce's claim that the United States had no foreign policy was incorrect, he also provides grounds as to how these acts of foreign policy have benefited the growth and formation of the country. As Mead mentions, foreign relations was a key point in American independence in the Revolutionary War and without an alliance with France, America would not have been successful in the War (174). Before the United States had even been founded as an independent nation, it was dependent on foreign relations. The country was birthed on the tactic of foreign relationships and that has been a strength utilized by the country since its foundation.

STUDENT COMMENT: The question "Should the United States avoid foreign entanglement?" was striking to me. From Japan to the member states of NATO, the United States has its allies all over the world and enjoys its role as the leading power. It is the world power in the economy, military, technology, communication, and many other areas. Or, maybe even the question, "Can the United States avoid foreign entanglement?" is more appropriate in this context. In many cases, throughout history, intervening in various international incidents benefitted the United States, and the country used diplomatic relations to defend American national interests. For instance, the alliance with France helped the young republic gain independence, and the American domestic economy could grow by exporting cotton and wheat to England in the 1800s. Furthermore, the last 70 years was the victory of the American foreign policy in terms of keeping world peace and order. There has been no great power war since WWII, and except for a few proxy wars, the last few decades were unprecedentedly peaceful. This long peace maintained because there was no other country that was as powerful as the United States and could challenge it. However, there are some rising powers like China, Russia, and India who may ask America to abdicate from the world power title in the near future. This is why I do not believe that the United States can/should reduce its entanglement and influence overseas.

### **ON INTERNATIONAL ORDER**

STUDENT COMMENT: Of the organizing questions Mead presents in his article, I think the most interesting is the one regarding whether or not U.S. foreign policy should focus on creating and maintaining the facets of a liberal international order, such as the spread of democracy and the creation of a system of international law. I find this interesting because since at least the end of the Second World War, the answer has seemed to be a definitive "yes," but in recent years with the ascent of Donald Trump on a platform of "America First," it seems as though the opinion of a substantial portion of the American public has shifted on this matter. With all of the "pulling back" President Trump has done from climate agreements to funding international organizations like the WHO, I think this question will be fundamental for whoever the next President is (whether they take office next year or in another 4) in defining America's role in the world, as there will be a lot of work to do if America hopes to reclaim their spot at the center of the international order it helped build.

STUDENT COMMENT: To me, the question of expansion of democracy around the world, while protecting the human rights of people and maintaining world order or distribution of power among nation-states remains to be the most critical, and thus intriguing. This is because, when we discuss American foreign policy, it is inevitable that democratic values around the world are taken as the norm or the standard, and a leader that deviates from it is automatically considered an authoritarian ruler 'controlling' its citizens, which may or may not be the case. This pursuit of democracy across the world is often the justification of American intervention in foreign countries, which has been inconsistent, where other incentives have come into play and it has become more than just an interest in extending democracy across borders.

STUDENT COMMENT: So, why does the United States do this and should it continue to intervene with other countries? In the past, I would have said that the United States doesn't need to constantly meddle in the affairs of other countries. Now, looking back on the history of U.S. diplomacy and the historical influence of foreign nations on the domestic politics and economy of the United States, I understand why the U.S. tends to intervene in other areas of the world. I think it began with the United States wanting to expand its influence globally, sending merchants and, subsequently, diplomats and armed forces to various countries throughout Europe and Asia. Having U.S. citizens all over the world and establishing relationships with various countries made the United States more involved in global politics. This involvement made citizens more in favor of the United States exacting its influence on other countries when it saw something occurring in another country that the U.S. did not agree with. This is how I interpreted what we read and connected it to the question, but I am sure there are more reasons that the United States involves itself with global order and the defense of human rights as well as "the extension of democracy."

### **OTHER QUESTIONS**

STUDENT COMMENT: One other question Mead could have included in his discussion about recurring themes in American foreign policy is one regarding American exceptionalism such as "Is American exceptionalism a valid concept, and should it influence how the U.S. formulates foreign policy?" While American exceptionalism is focused on the identity of America and doesn't explicitly concern foreign policy, I think that a person's belief in or rejection of American exceptionalism can heavily influence their views on foreign policy, and thus that it would be an interesting question to add to Mead's list.

STUDENT COMMENT: One notable absence in Mead's organizing questions are those related to alliances: should the United States seek allies, or forge an independent path on the world stage? If it does find itself aligned with a bloc of nations, should it act as a leader or a follower? While Mead does discuss the various antagonistic relationships of the US throughout its history, he does not devote significant attention in the article to allied foreign policy in wars, interventions, and peacetime. As these questions cut across all of those that Mead uses to frame his article, it is strange that these considerations are not well incorporated.