

CHAPTER 2

Historical Context and the Future of U.S. Global Power

▣ LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the core concepts of isolationism, and determine whether or not U.S. foreign policy has been isolationist.
2. Identify the European and colonial roots of U.S. foreign policy.
3. Explain how and why U.S. foreign policy—in national security and economics—evolved as the United States became a global power in the twentieth century.
4. Describe how the global environment and globalization affected American power from the cold war through today.

▣ SUMMARY OVERVIEW

This chapter frames modern foreign policy within its historical context, illustrating the evolution of U.S. foreign policy and clearly identifiable trajectories of development from the era of colonialism through the modern day. The context of foreign policy is broken into two parts. The first provides a general history of U.S. foreign policy. In this section, the text addresses the misperceptions or “myths” about American foreign policy historically such as the conflict between the myth of early isolationism and the reality of internationalism. The skewed, mythical history has been replaced with a reality of gradually increasing internationalism laid out in three eras from the more comparatively contained “continental era” through the slightly more international “regional era,” ending with the modern “global era”. The second part of the chapter addresses how environmental context has impacted shifts in U.S. power and structured corresponding patterns in policy. Focusing on three eras—early cold war, post Vietnam War and post cold war—the text illustrate how a change in domestic consensus and relative power internationally has shifted both how American policymakers approach events as well as the ease in which policies can be carried out. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion overview of an important debate: the future of U.S. primacy on the global stage.

▣ CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. THE MYTH OF ISOLATIONISM

- Overview of extensive U.S. military involvement
 - Prior to World War II: 163 armed interventions
 - Average of one per year
- A. **European and English Colonial Roots**
 - European competition—Role in creation of the United States
 - Colonialist dissatisfaction and push for independence

II. THE CONTINENTAL ERA

★ **A CLOSER LOOK Historiography and Competing Interpretations of U.S. Foreign Relations**

- Nation-building
 - Weak state surrounded by European colonial claims
 - Highly dependent on trade with England
- Continental expansion goal
 - Land needed for security and economic growth
 - Means of Expansion
 - Purchase from weaker European powers
 - Predominantly inhabited by Native Americans
 - Northwest Ordinance of 1787
 - Expansion carried out by government officials (army)
 - Private citizens and entrepreneurs as agents of expansion
 - Leads to the development of an “imperial republic”
- Activities beyond borders: sporadic
 - Commercial, political, military
 - Establishment of first diplomatic consulate (Canton, China, 1899)
 - Latin America
 - Monroe Doctrine
 - Clayton-Bulwer Treaty
 - Efforts tended to be sporadic and not consistent

III. THE REGIONAL ERA

- Made possible by the end of the Civil War
 - No more immediate threats in the Western Hemisphere
 - Consolidation of American imperial power and colonies
- At home: Manifest Destiny
- Abroad: Promotion of political stability and economic expansion
 - Latin America
 - Rapid expansion of trade
 - Promotion of friendly regimes
 - Olney Proclamation (1895)
 - Leads to carving out an American “Sphere of influence”
 - Expansion of trade ties with China
 - Increased involvement in European Affairs
 - World War I, Treaty of Versailles, League of Nations
 - End of World War I would lead to “height of isolationism” in the 1920s and 1930s.
 - Evidence for
 - Rejection of League of Nations
 - Growing public isolationist sentiment
 - Reluctance to be involved in European affairs
 - Evidence against supposed isolationism
 - Continued involvement in Latin America
 - Role of America in global economy
- “Formal” and “Informal” empire: Inconsistent

IV. THE GLOBAL ERA

A. World War II and Immediate Postwar Foreign Policy

- Restore stability and prosperity—Bretton Woods system
- Construct new international political order—United Nations

B. The Cold War Era

- Era of considerable continuity based on two goals
 - Goals: national security (high policy) by containment and deterrence; Truman Doctrine
 - Fear of Soviet communism key problem for most Americans
 - Goals: economic prosperity (low policy) by liberal economic order; Bretton Woods II
 - “Hearts and minds” strategy
 - Focus on free trade and fixed exchange rates

C. The Post-Vietnam War Era

- Challenges to policy
 - Military: Failure of containment policy in Vietnam
 - Economic: Breakdown of Bretton Woods
- Two images of American policy: Virtue and arrogance
- Three patterns foreign policy emerge
 - Containment loses policy monopoly.
 - Foreign economic policy gains emphasis.
 - Loss of policy consistency

D. The Post-Cold War/Globalization Era

- Changes: Reactive rather than proactive
 - Loss of communist threat
 - Economic changes
 - Fickle domestic support
- 1. **THE GEORGE H. W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION.**
 - No dominant foreign policy pattern; pragmatism
- 2. **THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION.**
 - Reactive rather than proactive foreign policy

V. THE GEORGE W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND SEPTEMBER 11

- Post September 11, 2001
- Changes: Bush Doctrine and war on terrorism
 - Deterrence, containment, preemption
 - Build-up of defense
 - Unilateralism
 - Spread of liberalism, democracy

★ THE LIBERTY-SECURITY DILEMMA War, Peace, and the Pendulum Effect

VI. THE BARACK OBAMA ADMINISTRATION AND THE GREAT RECESSION

- Effects of global recession
- Emphasis on multilateral policy responses
- “Arab Spring”

VII. GLOBALIZATION, AMERICAN POWER, AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

- The global environment as context for policy

- Underlying: Parameters for policy
- Immediate: Crises
- How the context shapes policy
 - Psychological environment—Perceptions
 - Objective environment
- Three stages of the global environment and American power:
 - Cold War: American Hegemony (1940s-1960s)
 - Bipolar global conflict between U.S. and U.S.S.R.
 - U.S. as a global economic leader
 - Rise of interventionism
- A. The Global Cold War and American Hegemony**
 - After WWI and WWII, America and the Soviet Union became key players in global affairs.
 - American-Soviet conflict became inevitable
 - Free world vs. a totalitarian world
 - America as “World’s policeman” and “World’s banker”
- B. Global Complexity and American Decline**
 - Pluralism and interdependence
 - Relative Decline in power
 - Relative economic decline
 - Inability to use force to promote interests
 - Vietnam War symptomatic of increased resistance to U.S. power
- C. Soviet Collapse, September 11th, and American Renewal**
 - Collapse of communism, rise of globalization
 - End of Cold War Rivalry
 - Rise of globalization
 - Free trade increases (NAFTA, WTO)
 - Boom and bust of global systems
 - Continuation of global conflicts
 - Terrorism
 - Traditional disputes/rivalries
 - Various sources of global conflict
- ★ **A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE Competing Global Theories**

VIII. IS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY THE AMERICAN CENTURY?

- America: Decline or revival?
 - Declinists:
 - Growth and decline cycles
 - Imperial overstretch
 - Revivalists:
 - Self-renewing genius
 - Exaggerated claims of decline
 - No true rival
 - Soft-power vs. hard power
- A. The Challenge of Hegemony and Legitimacy**
 - Hegemony and legitimacy
 - Reactions to hegemonic states
 - Align with the power (bandwagon, bond, penetrate)

- Reign in the power (balancing, balking, binding, blackmail)
- Delegitimize the power
- How others view United States primacy
- How the United States views itself

▣ CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Why does the myth of isolationism exist? What other myths surround U.S. foreign policy?
2. Should the United States become more isolationist today or should it increase its involvement in global affairs?
3. Which interpretation (or combination of interpretations) best explains the historical patterns of U.S. foreign policy: Orthodox, revisionism, or post-revisionism?

▣ LECTURE LAUNCHERS

1. What does it mean to be isolationist? Does it require a state to have no interactions with the rest of the world?
2. Debate: Is the United States likely to be more or less isolationist in the near future? In what aspects do you think the U.S. should be more or less involved in global affairs?

▣ IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Divide the class into three groups: Classical realists, liberal internationalists, and social globalists. Have each group develop a comprehensive foreign policy based on their perspective of international relations to the following scenario:

Following a popular revolution, the monarchy in Widgetstan is replaced by a populist government that is hostile to the United States. Widgetstan has been the major supplier to the United States of widgets, which are vital to the American economy and military might. Although there are a few other providers of widgets in the world, no other sources can replace the widget supply from Widgetstan. The new government is led by people who feel that the monarchy was a puppet of the United States and sold widgets to the United States for its own gain, while the population of Widgetstan lived in poverty. Develop a comprehensive foreign policy towards Widgetstan that your group best thinks will secure a supply of widgets.
2. Have the class debate the merits of the United States ceasing participation in major international institutions. Some examples: The United Nations, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

▣ KEY CONCEPTS

bipolarity A situation where two states in the international system control the majority of economic and military resources. The Cold War world was a bipolar world because of the dominance of the United States and U.S.S.R.

cold war A state of political tension where states engage in military and economic rivalry without engaging in direct and full-scale war. Commonly this term is used to describe the relationship between the United States and U.S.S.R. from about 1945 to 1990.

conservative realism A theory of international relations that tends to see the world as relatively anarchical and conflictual in which the primary actors are (sovereign and independent) states, the most important issues revolve around national security and the use of force, and the principle motivation is the promotion of national power and wealth and prestige. So-called “realists” focus on the tremendous uneven distribution of power among states, on great power conflicts (and alliances and empires), the rise and decline of power, the maintenance of stability and order, and the utility of force as a means to settle disputes and international conflict. Conservative realists tend to be more pessimistic about the future possibilities of a world of greater peace, prosperity, and human development.

containment strategy Initially embodied in the Truman Doctrine, announced in 1947 and directed at containing Soviet expansion through military, diplomatic, and economic means.

declinists A school of thought that is pessimistic over the future of American power in the global system. Declinists tend to argue decline occurs if the gap widens between a great power’s ends and means—between its foreign policy goals and its ability to carry them out. In their mind, the United States is getting weaker in the world.

empire A term used to describe the areas of the world controlled by a central government including the boundaries of the state and any additional territory under its control.

global context- or setting, environment, or milieu Refers to phenomena beyond or external to the institutions, beliefs, and processes of human interaction in government and society.

globalization The process of creating a single, integrated international political economy of growing interdependence and complexity.

hegemonic power A state that is able to control world events through its implied military, economic, and cultural power.

high policy Terms used to distinguish the differing levels of importance between national security concerns (high-policy) and economic policy concerns (low-policy) that allowed national security concerns to dominate American foreign policy during the cold war.

imperial overstretch A condition when a great power finds its military, economic, and political capacity to protect its global interests and agendas begins to decline usually through over commitments.

imperial republic A description of the American experience of internal colonialism on the North American continent. Although the United States was a republican government, it had many imperial subjects (Native Americans and other colonial subjects).

international crises (Commonly defined in terms of surprise, a threat to values, and little time to respond) are events that catapult an issue on the political agenda and often play an influential role in the politics of U.S. foreign policy.

isolationism A foreign policy that features uninvolved involvement in world affairs.

- liberal idealism** A perspective of international relations that sees the world as defined by cooperation and interdependence. States are important international actors, but the dominance of states has diminished with the advent of other influential actors, such as international organizations, multinational corporations, ethnic groups, and so on. Liberal idealists tend to be much more optimistic about the potential for greater cooperation and peace, prosperity, and human development throughout the world. In their view, the state is not a hypothetical single, rational, national actor in a state of war (as it is in the realist ideal), but a coalition or conglomerate of coalitions and interests, representing individuals and groups and transnational actors.
- low policy** Terms used to distinguish the differing levels of importance between national security concerns (high-policy) and economic policy concerns (low-policy) that allowed national security concerns to dominate American foreign policy during the cold war.
- manifest destiny** Founded on the a priori conviction of the uniqueness of the American nation and the necessity of an American empire.
- nation-building** The building of an independent country safe from its neighbors through constructing a strong national economy and establishing a stable democracy.
- origins of the cold war** Though there are several interpretations, in the 1950's, many believed that the cold war began due to Soviet-communist expansionism.
- orthodox interpretation** An interpretation of the history of U.S. foreign policy. This view tends to depict the United States as isolationist prior to such events as the Spanish-American War and World War I and then not isolationist following these events despite evidence of heavy U.S. involvement during the isolationist periods.
- paradox of American power** A description of the contradiction that even though the United States continued to be the most powerful country in the world but no longer was as able to exercise the kind of economic, political, and military influence that it enjoyed at its height during the late 1940s and 1950s.
- postrevisionism** An interpretation of the history of U.S. foreign policy. According to this view, although U.S. foreign policy was never isolationist, it did experience both continuity and change over time. On the one hand, the United States steadily grew in power and expanded throughout North America and the world over 200 years. On the other hand, the United States experienced changes in its foreign policy; most important, the scope of its involvement abroad grew over time.
- psychological versus objective environment** Explained by Harold and Margaret Sprout (1965) in *The Ecological Perspective on Human Affairs*: "So far as we can determine, environmental factors (both nonhuman and social) can affect human activities in only two ways: such factors can be perceived, reacted to, and taken into account by the human individual or individuals under consideration. In this way, and in this way only ... environmental factors can be said to 'influence,' or to 'condition,' or otherwise to 'affect' human values and preferences, moods, and attitudes, choices and decision." In contrast, environmental factors limit the execution of human undertakings. "Such limitations on performance, accomplishment, outcome, or operational result," the Sprouts assert, "may not—often do not—derive from or depend upon the individual's perception or other psychological behavior."

revisionism An interpretation of the history of U.S. foreign policy. Revisionists rejected the isolationist thesis and tended to depict the history of U.S. foreign policy as being much more “continuous” and globally expansive since its beginnings.

revivalists Those who argue the United States will increase its power in the global system. From this perspective, a decline in relative American power may actually translate into an overall increase in America’s position in the world community if the nation’s economy is strengthened because of inherent leadership advantages the U.S. possesses.

social globalism A perspective of international relations that tends to see the existence of a global system as one in which power and wealth is incredibly unevenly distributed throughout the world.

sphere of influence An area over which a state is able to wield political, economic, and military control over.

▣ WEB LINKS

Articles debating if U.S. leadership is in decline:

Victor Davis Hanson. “American in Decline?” *Hoover International Journal*, June 16, 2011. (<http://www.hoover.org/publications/defining-ideas/article/82581>).

Robert D. Kaplan. “U. S. Hegemony May Be in Decline, but Only to a Degree,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2008. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/16/AR2008121602480.html>).

Articles about the legitimacy of U.S. leadership

Kevin Slaten, The Decline of U. S. Hegemony: Regaining International Consent as a Result of Loss of Legitimacy. *The Journal of Politics & International Affairs*, Winter 2009. (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2009/03/15/decline-of-u.s.-hegemony-regaining-international-consent/1vwn>).

Adam Clayton Powell III, “U. S. Leadership Still Viewed Positively, but With Major Declines in Africa,” Newswire, University of Southern California on Public Diplomacy at Annenberg School, April 19, 2012. (http://uspublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/us_leadership_still_viewed_positively_but_with_major_declines_in_africa/).

▣ INSTRUCTOR RESOURCES

Alstyne, Richard W. Van. *The Rising American Empire*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1974. Print.
A classic realist revisionist account of the history of U.S. foreign policy.

Cox, Michael. (2002) “September 11th and U.S. Hegemony—Or Will the 21st Century Be American Too?” *International Studies Perspectives* 3: 53–70. Print.
Excellent overview of the long-running debate about the rise, decline, and revival of American power.

Hendrickson, David C. (2004) “A Dissenter’s Guide to Foreign Policy.” *World Policy Journal* (Spring): 102–13. Print.
Excellent book review essay on competing interpretations of the future of

American power.

Judt, Tony. (2004) "Dreams of Empire," *New York Review of Books* (November 4). Print.
Excellent book review essay on competing interpretations of the future of American power.

Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York: Random House, 1987. Print.

The classic statement on the rise and decline of American power in world affairs.

Kuttner, Robert. *The End of Laissez-Faire: National Purpose and the Global Economy After the Cold War*. New York: Knopf, 1991. Print.

Excellent overview of the international political economy since World War II and the role of the United States within it.

LaFeber, Walter. *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad Since 1750*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1994. Print.

Good overview of the history of U.S. foreign policy.

----- . *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1948–2006*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006. Print.

Informative history of U.S. foreign policy since World War II.

Lizza, Ryan. (2011) "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama's foreign policy." *The New Yorker* (May 2). Print.

Excellent overview on Obama's initial education as a liberal internationalist, and his evolution as a practitioner to be increasingly pragmatic and realist.

Melanson, Richard A. *Writing History and Making Policy: The Cold War, Vietnam, and Revisionism*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1983. Print.

In-depth summary of competing interpretations of the origins of the cold war.

Nobles, Gregory. *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest*. New York: Hill and Wan, 1997. Print.

Excellent overview of American continental expansion.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

A synthesis of Nye's works, hard and soft power, and America's future role in the world.

Perkins, Dexter. *The American Approach to Foreign Policy*. New York: Scribner, 1968. Print.

A classic orthodox interpretation of the history of U.S. foreign policy.

Ryan, Alan. (2008) "What Happened to the American Empire?" *New York Review of Books* (October 23). Print.

Excellent book review essay on competing interpretations of the future of American power.

U.S., White House. (2002) *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. September, Washington, D.C. Print.

The official national security strategy of the Bush administration after September 11.

16 Chapter 2: Historical Context and the Future of U.S. Global Power

Walker, J. Samuel. (1981) "Historians and Cold War Origins: The New Consensus," in Gerald K. Haines and J. Samuel Walker, eds., *American Foreign Relations: A Historiographical Review*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981, pp. 207–36. Print.

Excellent and succinct overview of competing interpretations of the cold war.

Walt, Stephen. *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. Print.

An excellent discussion of the kinds of responses other countries are likely to take to address American hegemony.