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**AMERICAN  
FOREIGN POLICY  
SINCE WORLD  
WAR II**

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# 1

## THE AMERICAN APPROACH TO FOREIGN POLICY

In the spring of 2014, President Barack Obama ventured to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. The commander in chief was struggling to manage multiple upheavals overseas that forced changes in his long-term foreign policy agenda and threatened to keep him from achieving his most coveted domestic goals. Obama, who came to power in 2009 an instant war president, was keenly aware that nearly seven thousand American troops had been killed by the end of 2014, and another fifty thousand were wounded, in the Iraqi and Afghan wars that cost American taxpayers an estimated \$2 trillion.<sup>1</sup> With American citizens tiring from the seemingly endless wars that followed the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the president announced a new national security strategy that would lower the nation's military profile and rely instead on peaceful solutions to regional conflicts. In Obama's words, "U.S. military action cannot be the only—or even primary—component of our leadership in every instance. Just because we have the best hammer does not mean every problem is a nail."<sup>2</sup>

The president was also aware how much American actions had cost the United States in "soft power," or its cultural appeal and reputation as a benign rather than threatening global hegemon.<sup>3</sup> Bush's preventive invasion of Iraq in

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Casualty Status, Fatalities as of October 21, 2014," [www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf). See also Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, <http://icasualties.org/>, Americans wounded as of October 21, 2014; and National Priorities Project, "Cost of National Security," <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/cost-of/?redirect=cow>, accessed on October 21, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy," West Point, New York, May 28, 2014.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).



Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

President Barack Obama arrives at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, to deliver a May 28, 2014, speech regarding the possible use of U.S. military force in the many regional conflicts that posed challenges to American foreign policy.

2003, which lacked the backing of the United Nations Security Council, offended citizens and governments around the world while provoking further terrorist attacks on American targets. For his part, Obama's use of unmanned drone bombers frightened the international community. Subsequent revelations that the National Security Agency was engaged in massive U.S. surveillance of American citizens and close allies abroad further punctured American soft power.

By 2014, Obama could not ignore the public's desire for "normalcy" in foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Nor could the president ignore long-term projections that America's decades-long period of American primacy was coming to an end. This emerging shift in the balance of power had two primary sources. The first source, internal in nature, stemmed from the nation's massive national debts, chronic trade deficits, and record levels of income inequality, none of which could be remedied amid a withering power struggle between Congress and the White House. The second source of the expected power shift came from external challenges to American primacy in the global balance of power. Specifically, the National Intelligence Council predicted in 2008 that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would overtake the United States in most vital categories of world power by the 2040s. According to the council, "the transfer of

<sup>4</sup>Dina Smeltz, *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012), 8.

global wealth and economic power now under way—roughly from West to East—is without precedent in modern history.”<sup>5</sup>

Critics of Obama’s foreign policy blamed the president for the nation’s apparent decline on the world stage. From their perspective, the White House’s lack of resolve in the regional conflicts and focus on problems at home created a dangerous power vacuum in the balance of power. “American foreign policy may be moving away from the sense of global responsibility that equated American interests with the interests of many others around the world,” historian Robert Kagan warned. “Unless Americans can be led back to an understanding of their enlightened self-interest, to see how their fate is entangled with that of the world, then the prospects for a peaceful twenty-first century in which Americans and American principles can thrive will be bleak.”<sup>6</sup>

This book places these and other American foreign policy dilemmas in historical context. We explore the past to gain a broader sense of the nation’s current place and future prospects in world politics. After World War II, American forces maintained unmatched military power, having defeated the fascist states of Germany and Japan.<sup>7</sup> The United States was victorious again in 1991 after nearly a half-century of struggle with the Soviet Union, whose communist system, nuclear arsenal, and network of client states threatened the United States. For many Americans, the Soviet Union’s collapse confirmed that America’s democratic system was superior to the one-party governments, repressed freedoms, and state-owned industries of the communist bloc. “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of history,” analyst Francis Fukuyama observed, “but the end of history as such, that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>8</sup>

Winning the peace, however, proved more difficult for the United States than winning its wars. As smoldering ethnic and religious conflicts reignited in many regions, government officials in the 1990s could not agree on a defense strategy to replace communist “containment,” the doctrine that had linked all Cold War administrations. President Bill Clinton pledged to “engage” friends and foes alike, but Congress later froze U.S. membership dues payments to the UN, slashed foreign aid, and blocked a variety of international agreements. For its part, the general public showed little interest in

<sup>5</sup>National Intelligence Council, “Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), vi.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Kagan, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire: What Our Tired Country Still Owes the World,” *New Republic*, May 26, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>For a recent history of World War II, see Max Hastings, *Inferno: The World at War, 1939–1945* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *National Interest* (Summer 1989): 4.

foreign affairs.<sup>9</sup> That tranquility gave way to the 9/11 attacks by al Qaeda terrorists, who espoused a radical brand of Islamic militarism that threatened all industrialized nations. The United States lost more than lives on 9/11. Its sense of invulnerability, engrained for more than two centuries, was shattered. The national faith faded further in 2008 as reckless lending and accounting practices by U.S. financial institutions led to an economic calamity second in scale only to the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Not only were basic institutions and millions of personal livelihoods at risk, but so was the American dream of unending prosperity.

Events overseas forced the president's hand in 2014 as a series of regional crises called for swift and assertive U.S. responses. Russian president Vladimir Putin brazenly seized the strategically vital Crimean Peninsula from southern Ukraine, a move that prompted pro-Russian militants in eastern Ukraine to demand independence—and long-sought membership in a resurrected Russian empire. Spreading bloodshed in the Middle East further dominated Obama's attention. Far from becoming a democratic island in the sea of Mideast tyrannies, Iraq became a "failed state" after a decade of war, unable to provide basic services such as electricity. A civil war in neighboring Syria, which left nearly two hundred thousand dead by the end of 2014, created its own political void that was eagerly filled by Islamist terrorists. One group, declaring itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), effectively controlled much of the two countries by 2015. Chinese leaders, meanwhile, flexed their muscles by staking claim to vast and resource-rich territorial waters being held by other Asia-Pacific nations.

In the face of mounting appeals at home and in many capitals overseas for the assertion of American leadership, Obama reluctantly chose a military path to restoring order in the Middle East. The United States would unleash aerial attacks on ISIS bases and weapons depots while training and equipping paramilitary forces, from within and outside Syria and Iraq, to retake the territories captured by the Islamist insurgents. Obama defended his actions on the basis of the nation's global obligations. "America leads. We are the indispensable nation," he told a *60 Minutes* interviewer. "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>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>When asked to identify the biggest foreign policy problems facing the United States in 1999, respondents in a national survey most often replied, "Don't know." John E. Reilly, ed., *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1999* (Chicago: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999), 11.

<sup>10</sup>See David E. Sanger, *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>President Obama interview on *60 Minutes*, September 28, 2014, [www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-60-minutes/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-60-minutes/).

At this momentous point in world history, several questions confront students of American foreign policy. Can the United States restore its military clout after more than a decade of war? Can the nation regain its stature as the locomotive of global economic growth? The answers to these questions, in turn, lead directly to normative judgments about America's future obligations: Should the United States maintain its role as the "world's policeman" by intervening in distant conflicts and seeking to remake foreign governments overseas in its own image? Or should American leaders recognize their growing limits, avoid nonvital wars of choice, and approach foreign policy with "prudence and self-restraint"?<sup>12</sup>

### Learning from Experience

Coming to terms with these questions begins with recognition that American citizens and their leaders, like those of other countries, have a unique perspective of the world beyond their national borders. Many factors affect how governments conduct foreign policy, including the pressures imposed by the international system, the demands of civil society, and the structure of political institutions. Taking into account such factors, along with shared historical experiences, each government adopts a distinctive approach to world politics. National "styles" of foreign policy vary considerably, but all governments exhibit consistent patterns of behavior as they respond to developments around them.

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. The government had considerable freedom to put its Constitution into practice, develop an advanced market economy, and expand its territory across North America. But this aloofness from global politics became difficult to sustain once the United States emerged as a great power early in the twentieth century and played a decisive role in the two world wars. The era of American primacy began amid the ashes of World War II and continued through the Cold War and into the twenty-first century. In the current, highly volatile security environment, many citizens—including the president—have wondered aloud whether the time has come for America to come home.

This book explores how America's national style has influenced its conduct of foreign policy as a great power. Beginning in the aftermath of World War II and stretching beyond the global war on terror, it will consider how the ambivalent attitude of many Americans—a fluctuating love-hate relationship with the outside world—reflects historical patterns established long before the United States

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<sup>12</sup>Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana." *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (2012): 203–213.

joined the ranks of the 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 (Chapters 8–14) describes how foreign policy makers consolidated the nation’s primacy after the Cold War and confronted an array of new challenges. Of particular concern in the final chapters is the U.S. response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the financial crisis of 2008, the aftershocks of the Arab Spring, and power plays by Russia and China, two former Cold War rivals that sought to dislodge America from its stature as the world’s lone superpower.

### **The Roots of American Primacy**

American foreign policy since World War II is largely the story of the tension between the interstate system and the nation’s political culture. Both the monumental achievements of the United States and its failures can be attributed to this uneasy relationship. In the anarchic nation-state system that came into place a century before America’s independence, each state must ultimately depend on itself for its preservation and safety. Heads of state in such a system tend to regard their counterparts as potential competitors, and it does not take much for one state to arouse another’s suspicions and to conjure reciprocal images of hostility. This unstable global context, however, historically has been alien to many Americans, who have felt free of overseas pressures and secure in their own system of government and civil society. Although such aloofness was possible during the nation’s formative years, as noted above, it proved more difficult to sustain in the era of American primacy. Still, American foreign policy continues to reflect the cultural attitudes and beliefs that prevailed earlier. The experience of the United States today can be traced in large measure to these persistent cultural influences.

### **Shifts in the Balance of Power**

Prior to the twentieth century, 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 President George 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, Europe plunged into the First World War in 1914. After three years of unprecedented carnage, American forces entered the conflict and helped bring about a fragile peace in 1918.

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 proposed that a League of Nations be established to prevent future wars through a system of collective security. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Wilson was so convinced of the righteousness of his cause that he personally represented the United States at the Paris Peace Conference. Almost single-handedly, 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 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, in which sixty-two countries 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.

### **Redefining American Security**

Before 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 Washington observed in his 1796 Farewell Address. “Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue



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## Impact and Influence: Woodrow Wilson

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National Archives

The American style of foreign policy was personified nearly a century ago by President Woodrow Wilson (left). 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-inter-

ests, but also to free the interstate system from its anarchic structure and warlike tendencies.

Shown here with French president Raymond Poincaré, 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.

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a different course." Washington's successors followed his advice, expanding westward without assistance and avoiding peacetime military alliances for more than 150 years.

By 1900, the United States, along with Japan, had joined the ranks of the great powers through a combination of regional military expansion and global trade. But unlike Japan, which lacked many vital natural resources and began the twentieth century as a "predator" state, the United States was largely satisfied, with both its ample domestic resources and the absence of foreseeable threats across its borders. Maintaining that security, while effectively distancing the United States from the disputes of the other great powers, had served the nation well. The rise of Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia, however, threatened America's "splendid isolation" in the Western Hemisphere.

The timing of the U.S. entry into the world wars was determined by events overseas. Berlin's decision in 1917 to launch submarine warfare forced the United States into military action, and Tokyo's decision in 1941 to attack the U.S. fleet at anchor in Hawaii led to the American declaration of war against Japan. Great powers usually do not leave decisions about their security to their adversaries. The strategy of the major states in the state system is—or should be—to oppose any state that would constitute a grave threat to their own security. That the United States twice allowed others to dictate its security strategy stemmed from its own peculiar national style.

The defense of the United States has always involved more than physical security. The German threat during World War I was not one of immediate invasion, nor was an invasion the primary threat even after Germany's defeat of France early in World War II. Rather, the United States was forced to intervene because American *society* was threatened. If Germany controlled Eurasia, the United States would have to be on constant alert for attack. To maintain its hemispheric security, it would have to transform itself into a "garrison state"—a disciplined, militarized society that would sacrifice democracy in the name of security and individual liberty in the name of self-defense.

The same cultural influences shaped the nation's actions during and after the Cold War. Yet during this more recent period, the threats posed by adversaries prompted American leaders to create a massive military machine that would be maintained in war and peace. After World War II, the U.S. War Department became the U.S. Defense Department, a change that underscored the permanence of American military primacy. The nation's security, including its cultural values, would be always threatened, whether by communist governments, terrorist groups, or other adversaries seeking to strike a blow against American power.

### **The American Sense of Destiny**

The style reflected in the U.S. response to war in Europe and later to the Cold War was the product of domestic experience. 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 great-power politics for such a long time 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>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

Democratic theory posits that people are potentially rational and moral, which means that they can settle their differences by reasoned deliberation and moral exhortation. Americans generally believed that peace—the result of harmony among people—was a natural condition, whereas conflict was a deviation caused primarily by wicked leaders—that is, those whose morality and reason had been corrupted. “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>14</sup>

The American experience seemed to support this conclusion: the United States was a democracy, its economy was growing steadily, and it maintained cordial relations with most foreign powers. Democracy and peaceful behavior were thus logically viewed as synonymous. Americans rarely wondered whether democracy was responsible for the peace they enjoyed or whether it was the product of other forces. The frequent wars in Europe provided the answer: 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 and to lead humankind away from its wicked ways to the New Jerusalem on earth. 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>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>These assertions form the basis of democratic-peace theory, a prominent school of thought in the study of world politics. For an elaboration and critique, see Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil* (New York: Routledge, 2008), chap. 4.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Armin Rappaport, ed., *Sources in American Diplomacy* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 53.

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>16</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>17</sup>

By drawing the distinction between the New and Old Worlds, by warning Europeans to keep their hands off the Western Hemisphere, and by depicting themselves as agents of providence, Americans effectively paved the way for U.S. primacy on a global scale. This primacy would not take the form of an *empire* or the assumption of sovereign authority over distant territories. Instead, the United States would expand its informal sphere of influence, or *hegemony*, from its base in the Western Hemisphere to the international system as a whole. Such an extension of power by any other state would be highly distressing. And yet American values were presumed to be universal, and American hegemony seemed natural and beneficial to all nations.

### 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. As noted, 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.

The association of peace with democracy was not the only reason for Washington's skepticism of power politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The European countries were, by and large, three-class societies. In addition to a middle class, they contained in their bodies politic a small

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<sup>16</sup>For a historical review of this early clash between liberalism and realism in American foreign policy, see Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Howard Jones, *The Course of American Diplomacy: From the Revolution to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1988), 143.

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>

This widespread agreement on the fundamental values of American society and Europe’s intense class struggles reinforced the American misunderstanding of the nature and functions of power on the international scene. Dissatisfied groups never developed a revolutionary ideology in the United States because the growing prosperity spread to them before they could translate their grievances against the capitalist system into political action. African Americans were an important exception as they never shared this wealth or political power. The “peculiar institution” of slavery so defied America’s democratic values that it thrust the country into civil war. Otherwise, the United States was politically secure, socially cohesive, and economically prosperous. It resolved most political differences peacefully, and its people could believe in an evolutionary, democratic, economically prosperous historical process.

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 Washington proclaimed in his Farewell Address, “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 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>19</sup> Because Americans viewed the power of the state as threatening, they struggled to restrict this power. It was with

<sup>18</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 56.

<sup>19</sup>David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

this purpose in mind that the drafters of the U.S. Constitution divided authority between the states and the federal government and, within the latter, among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The principles of federalism and separation of powers were deliberately designed to limit the power of the central government.

It was hardly surprising that in these circumstances the solutions to international problems in America's first century were considered to be a matter of economics—not politics. Economics was identified with social harmony and the welfare of all peoples; politics was equated with conflict, war, and death.<sup>20</sup> Just as the “good society” was to be the product of free competition, so the peaceful international society would be created by free trade. Trade depended on mutual prosperity; by contrast, war impoverished and destroyed and created ill will among nations. Commerce, which benefited all the participating states, created a vested interest in peace; war was economically unprofitable and therefore obsolete.<sup>21</sup>

### Foreign Policy as Moral Mission

Americans' perception of their nation as *exceptional*, or qualitatively different from others, is based not on a common ethnic identity, language, or religion, but on widely shared beliefs about individual liberties, limited government, and a vigorous civil society. Such principles form a “civil religion” in the United States that defines the relationship between state and society and provides the basis for American nationalism.

Because Americans have commonly viewed themselves as part of an exceptional society, their attitude toward government has been animated by a sense of moral mission. John Winthrop, the Puritan defector from the Church of England and first governor of Massachusetts, declared New England in 1630 to be a “city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” The European settlers of North America, he proclaimed, would establish a haven of piety far from the corrupted halls of religion and government in the Old World.

References to religious values have since been common in the discourse of American politics. To Thomas Jefferson, Americans were “the chosen people of God.”<sup>22</sup> In the midst of the Spanish-American War, President William McKinley claimed that he received divine guidance to “educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them.”<sup>23</sup> And as Ronald Reagan observed late in the Cold War, “There is sin

<sup>20</sup>See Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Republic, 1789–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 17.

<sup>21</sup>These ideas were most thoroughly advanced by Scottish economist Adam Smith in his 1776 book *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>22</sup>Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Imperial Temptations: The New World Order and America's Purpose* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1992), 30.

<sup>23</sup>Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 112.

and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might."<sup>24</sup>

This sense of divine mission extends to American citizens as well. A 1998 survey of the citizens of forty-three countries found that Americans ranked first in believing in a "personal God," in following "absolute guidelines about what is good and evil," and in assigning religion a "very important" role in their lives.<sup>25</sup> Such views, in turn, shape the foreign policy views of American citizens. In a 2004 survey, nearly three-fourths of respondents believed "following moral principles" should be a top foreign policy priority (see Table 1-1).<sup>26</sup>

Although more pronounced in recent years, these religious attitudes have long influenced American foreign policy. Frequently, their impact has been vital, especially on the use of force. The immoral enemy who threatens the integrity, if not the existence, of the nation's democratic principles has to be destroyed. American power, then, has to be "righteous" power; only by exercising it fully can Americans ensure salvation. Thus the world wars of the early twentieth century became profound moral as well as geopolitical challenges. Making the world "safe for democracy"—Woodrow Wilson's stated objective during World War I—was to be achieved by democratizing the populace of the offending nation—in this case, Germany—and making its new rulers responsible to the people they governed, thereby converting the

**Table 1-1** American Foreign Policy Priorities: American Public Opinion, 2004

	Percent who believe ___ should be the "top priority" in American foreign policy
Following moral principles	72
Being cautious	66
Being decisive	62
Being practical	58
Being compassionate	54
Being flexible	40
Following religious principles	33
Being idealistic	25
Being forceful	23

Source: "Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq: Eroding Respect for America Seen as Major Problem," August 18, 2004, the Pew Research Center For the People & the Press, a project of the Pew Research Center.

<sup>24</sup>Remarks made to the National Association of Evangelicals, March 8, 1983, and reported in Strobe Talbott, ed., *The Russians and Reagan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 113.

<sup>25</sup>Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Foreign Policy Attitudes Now Driven by 9/11 and Iraq," August 18, 2004; Ronald Inglehart, Miguel Basanez, and Alejandro Moreno, *Human Values and Beliefs: A Cross Cultural Sourcebook* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup>Religious beliefs are so closely tied to foreign policy opinions that a "divine divide" has appeared in recent surveys. See Daniel Yankelovich, "Poll Positions," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (September–October 2005): 2–16; and James L. Guth, John C. Green, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and Corwin E. Smidt, "Faith and Foreign Policy: A View from the Pews," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 3 (Fall 2004): 3–9.

menacing regime into a peaceful democratic state and banishing power politics for all time. Once that aim was achieved, the United States could again withdraw into itself, secure in the knowledge that American works had once more proved to be “good works.”

For similar reasons, American leaders divorced force from diplomacy during the nation’s early years. In peacetime, diplomacy was supposed to preserve the harmony among states. Although Americans regarded diplomacy as a rational process for straightening out misunderstandings between nations, they also were extremely suspicious of it. Diplomacy, in their view, required bargaining and compromise among states that would lead inevitably to the sacrifice of the nation’s moral purity. For this reason, the U.S. government refused to create a large, permanent diplomatic corps until long after the nation’s arrival as a great power. As for the use of military force, early American leaders feared that a standing army would ultimately threaten the central government and the liberty of private citizens. When military muscle was required, the Department of War would be called on to mobilize a largely reserve force, which would be disbanded after the conflict.

This pattern has been observed historically in American foreign policy: a pendulum-like swing “back and forth between the extremes of an indiscriminate detachment from great-power politics and an equally indiscriminate internationalism or globalism.”<sup>27</sup> Wilson’s frustrations over the League of Nations most clearly illustrate this schizophrenic approach, as the U.S. government veered from its attempt to save the world toward an equally determined effort to escape from it. According to Harvard professor Stanley Hoffmann, “Both extremes have in common the intention to avoid the contamination of unhealthy foreign troubles.”<sup>28</sup>

Both impulses have been evident since the Cold War. Bill Clinton’s policy of engagement coincided with Congress’s backlash against UN peacekeeping and foreign aid. Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush, was primarily concerned with domestic issues until the 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted his declaration of a global war on terror. In Iraq, Bush converted this effort into a moral mission that would make the Middle East safe for democracy. Most recently, the withering costs and disappointing outcomes of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars prompted Barack Obama’s call for the nation to avoid foreign entanglements and to focus instead on “nation building at home.” His view changed, however, when regional crises in several areas prompted the president to assume the duties and moral obligations of the world’s “indispensable nation.”

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<sup>27</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 15.

<sup>28</sup>Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver’s Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 98.



Although Americans traditionally have regarded their values as universal and their government's actions on the world stage as inspired by "special providence," they frequently have disagreed about the appropriate *means* for achieving foreign policy goals.<sup>29</sup> The first and more modest path—leading by example—would encourage citizens to focus on domestic development, restrain Washington from reckless foreign adventures, and prevent the rise of a strong, expensive, and potentially oppressive military establishment. The second path—proactively intervening overseas and acting as the world's policeman—would accelerate the historical trend toward global freedom and vindicate the nation's moral mission.

"Exemplarists" followed George Washington's call for detachment in the nation's first century, whereas "vindicationists" such as Woodrow Wilson have generally prevailed since the United States became a great power.<sup>30</sup> When George W. Bush took office in 2001, he embraced the nation's earlier tradition. "I think the United States must be humble," Bush said in a presidential debate in October 2000. "We must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to chart their own course." However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks unleashed a "perfect vindicationist storm" as they combined overwhelming American military power, a direct attack on the United States by "nonbelievers," and a surge of religious fundamentalism among American citizens.<sup>31</sup>

President Bush, who was instantly converted to the cause of vindicating American values rather than taking a more passive approach, established the promotion of democracy as the nation's primary mission. As Bush proclaimed at his second inaugural address in 2005,

The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. . . . Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time. So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.

Bush's sweeping call for "ending tyranny in our world" once again revealed America's foreign policy style at work. World politics was indeed a struggle

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<sup>29</sup>Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

<sup>30</sup>H. W. Brands, *What America Owes the World: The Struggle for the Soul of Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>31</sup>Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and U.S. Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* 29 (Spring 2005): 140.

between good and evil, as Bush's predecessors believed, and it was a moral imperative for the United States to support democratic freedoms throughout the world. At West Point in 2014, President Obama cautioned the cadets against the temptations of moral crusades, arguing instead that "American influence is always stronger when we lead by example." The president, however, expressed the nation's idealism when he declared that "American leadership requires us to see the world as it should be—a place 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." As always, American foreign policy looked beyond national interests to achieve the greater good.

### Challenges to American Exceptionalism

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.<sup>32</sup> 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

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<sup>32</sup>The U.S. government resorted to military force on more than three hundred occasions between 1798 and 2010, a third of these occurring since the Cold War. Formal war declarations were issued in just eleven instances, the last one for World War II. Since then, Congress has approved most military interventions through less formal authorizations. Richard F. Grimmett, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 10, 2011).

expansion by the fear of economic stagnation and social upheaval at home.<sup>33</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>34</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>35</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>36</sup> Members of Congress have also resorted to these tactics. In the midst of a 2001 dispute between the United States and China, U.S. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) portrayed the Chinese government in stark terms: “The Communist Chinese are arming themselves to sink American aircraft carriers, to kill thousands upon thousands of American soldiers. Make no mistake about it, China’s military might now threatens America and world peace.”<sup>37</sup>

The bitter domestic debates over America’s intentions and conduct in the three global conflicts of the twentieth century were revealing given the favorable outcome of each for the United States. Such divisions continued after the conflicts of the post-Cold War era. Efforts by the United States in 1993 to bring

<sup>33</sup>William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959). See also Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963).

<sup>34</sup>Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 480.

<sup>35</sup>See Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46 (Spring 1992): 395-424.

<sup>36</sup>David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 34. See also Jarrod Hayes, *Constructing National Security: U.S. Relations with India and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup>Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), “Wake Up, America. Engagement with China Has Failed,” U.S. House of Representatives, H1564-H49 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001).

order to Somalia and later in that decade to stop ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia provoked charges at home of neo-imperialism. Even the attacks of 9/11 provided an opportunity for self-criticism. Noam Chomsky, a prominent critic of America's world role, predicted that the war against terrorism would be difficult to win because the United States was itself "a leading terrorist state."<sup>38</sup> The second war in Iraq, launched in 2003, especially provoked criticism because the Bush administration's stated rationale for the war—removing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction—proved erroneous. President Bush's shift toward democratic state building in Iraq, a mission that drew on America's traditional values and sense of identity, fueled charges that American leaders were acting hypocritically by supporting military dictators (in Pakistan) and repressive monarchs (in Saudi Arabia), by violating the human rights of war prisoners, and even by secretly spying on Americans at home.

All of these critiques share a common skepticism regarding the "exceptional" nature of American political institutions, cultural values, and global aspirations.<sup>39</sup> From this standpoint, the United States has always been a conventional world power. Preoccupied with self-interests and hypersensitive toward external threats, American leaders also tend to be sorely uncritical of their own shortcomings. To journalist George Packer, Americans who wondered why much of the world turned against the United States during the Iraq War were pursuing "the wrong line of inquiry. The most pressing questions were about us, not them: our leaders, our institutions, our ability to act as a cohesive nation and make rational decisions, our power to take action abroad in a way that would not be a self-defeating waste."<sup>40</sup>

Today's managers of American foreign policy must reconcile their actions with a rapidly changing strategic environment that calls into question long-standing perceptions of world order. Their confrontation with Islamist terrorism has thrust the United States into a seemingly permanent war that is fought in many locations, against many enemies, and in many ways. The neat divisions of the past, including those that view warfare as a fleeting exception to the "normal" state of peace and tranquility, are no longer present. The revival of power politics, reflected in Russia's land grab in Ukraine, requires the exploitation of its unmatched military might. It is not difficult, however, for American leaders to maintain their moralistic style of foreign policy given the nature, actions, and designs of their unsavory foes.

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<sup>38</sup>Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>39</sup>Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009). See also Stephen M. Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy* (November 2011): 72–75.

<sup>40</sup>George Packer, "Coming Apart: After 9/11 Transfixed America, the Country's Problems Were Left to Rot," *The New Yorker* (September 12, 2011): 62–71.

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 relationship 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 severely tested during the Cold War, which dominated global relations for nearly half a century and shaped the domestic and foreign policies of nearly every other country. Washington’s erratic behavior since that conflict, and its current struggle to solve problems at home while fending off multiple security threats abroad, are equally vital to world politics today and tomorrow. As the chapters that follow will demonstrate, the lessons of the past are critical as students of American foreign policy, along with their national leaders, consider the future opportunities—and limitations—of the United States in managing the turbulent world beyond its shores.

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