

American Internationalism In The Twentieth Century: The Search For a "New World Order"

With the end of the Cold War and the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union, the architects of American foreign policy are faced with a less dangerous, but perhaps more complex arena in which to act. As foreign policy experts propose varying objectives and levels of American engagement in a world no longer marked by the relative simplicity of a bipolar struggle, it is useful to consider the general principles upon which American policymakers have acted over the last century, as well as the cultural beliefs, and economic and political necessities that have stood at the foundation of those principles. [Part one of a two-part series].

By Mark Meier

New Problems and Old Patterns

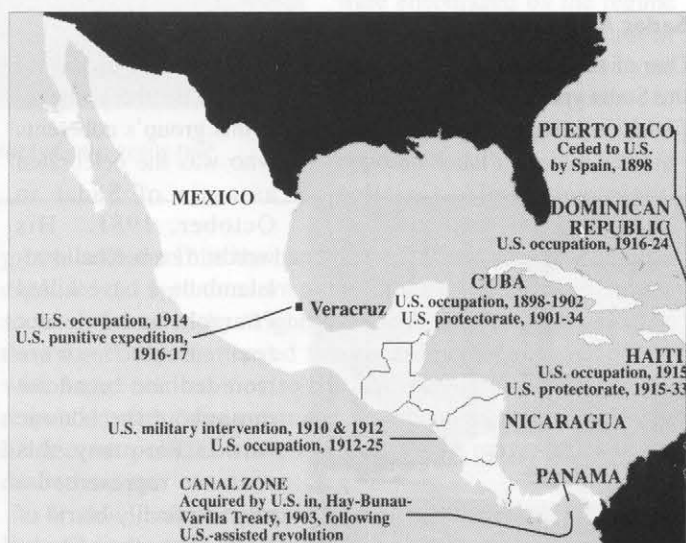
Since George Bush took the Oath of Office in January of 1989, many of the seemingly eternal truths underlying America's foreign policy have been cast aside. Dramatic events worldwide, most importantly the demise of the Soviet Union and its grip over eastern Europe, confront the Clinton administration with a paradoxical position. On the one hand, American policymakers may look back on the past five decades with a degree of triumph, as the plan of containing the spread of Soviet influence has been realized. On the other hand, this very triumph has undone what former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger has called the "*sanctas simplicitas*" of the Cold War, and in the process has spawned a new set of foreign policy problems.

Conflict with the Soviet Union, whether hot or cold, no longer looms over American foreign policy. But, by the same token, it no longer provides a defining mission for American policymakers. Current problems in former Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet republics and East Asia as well as recent conflicts in Iraq and Somalia now vex America's foreign policy architects. Celebration over America's "victory" in the Cold War has quickly given way to new doubts and debates over America's global role and responsibilities.

As the Clinton administration searches for a foreign policy suitable to a "new world order," the themes and patterns of American diplomacy over the last century help to demarcate the framework and parameters within which they will act. Two significant shifts have occurred in this nation's basic approach to relations with the rest of the world. In the first of these shifts, leading to, and drawing momentum from, the Spanish-American War, the United States moved from nearly complete isolation to more active engagement as the twentieth century began. A curious blend of moralism and economic

self-interest provided the philosophical underpinning for this involvement. Woodrow Wilson raised the mission of American diplomacy to a near-messianic level in World War I. Moreover, while U.S. foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s reflected a degree of withdrawal from Wilsonian zeal and activism, there was still a concerted attempt to further the economic interests of America.

The second of these shifts (which will be discussed more fully in the second installment of this series) occurred as a result of World War II and the rise of Soviet power. While maintaining the fundamental combination of moral and economic motives for engagement, the U.S. moved toward significantly broader, more complex, and more formal ties with a variety of nations—all aimed at checking the power of communism in general and the Soviet Union in specific. New battle lines were drawn even before the smoke of World War II had cleared, and American foreign policy was dominated for



U.S. activity in Central America and the Caribbean in the early 20th century. [Electromap, Inc.]

Mark Meier is a PhD candidate in American History at the University of Pennsylvania.

the next four decades by the need to contain the Soviet Union.

The overarching result of these transitions has been to steadily increase the level of American engagement in world affairs. Defense budgets and foreign aid programs have risen steadily since the end of World War II. Whether post-Cold War policy should maintain or decrease this level of engagement is a focal point of current debate. As such, the question of how the Clinton administration should utilize the "peace dividend" made available by the Cold War's end is clouded by new crises and the continuing influence of moral and economic motives for engagement.

The Gulf War neatly encapsulates these issues. The Bush administration's policy demonstrated a blend of old values and potential new methods. U.S. intervention was defended on both moral grounds (you may choose here between the defense of a democratic government in Kuwait, which is difficult for some critics to swallow, or the upholding of international rule of law by punishing Iraq's aggression against its weaker neighbor) and economic grounds (the strategic importance of the Gulf region, based on its oil reserves, has been a linchpin of U.S. foreign policy for decades). At the same time, however, the multi-lateral nature of action against Iraq—including the support of our former enemies—represents a clear break with the past.

It would seem that we may be at the threshold of a third historic shift in America's foreign policy. Actions in Somalia, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet republics may one day be regarded by historians as the defining moments of this shift. But for now, no clear principles or patterns for the conduct of foreign policy have yet emerged. In the absence of a clearly-defined new direction, an understanding of older patterns is essential, as they will certainly continue to exert influence on American international activity.

In The Beginning . . . Isolation

Throughout the nineteenth century, America was able to deal with the rest of the world (meaning principally Europe) at its discretion. In practice this meant very little involvement at all. For a variety of reasons, Americans were willing and able to ignore the world arena. The Monroe Doctrine, proclaimed by President James Monroe in 1823, offered a basis in principle for American isolation.

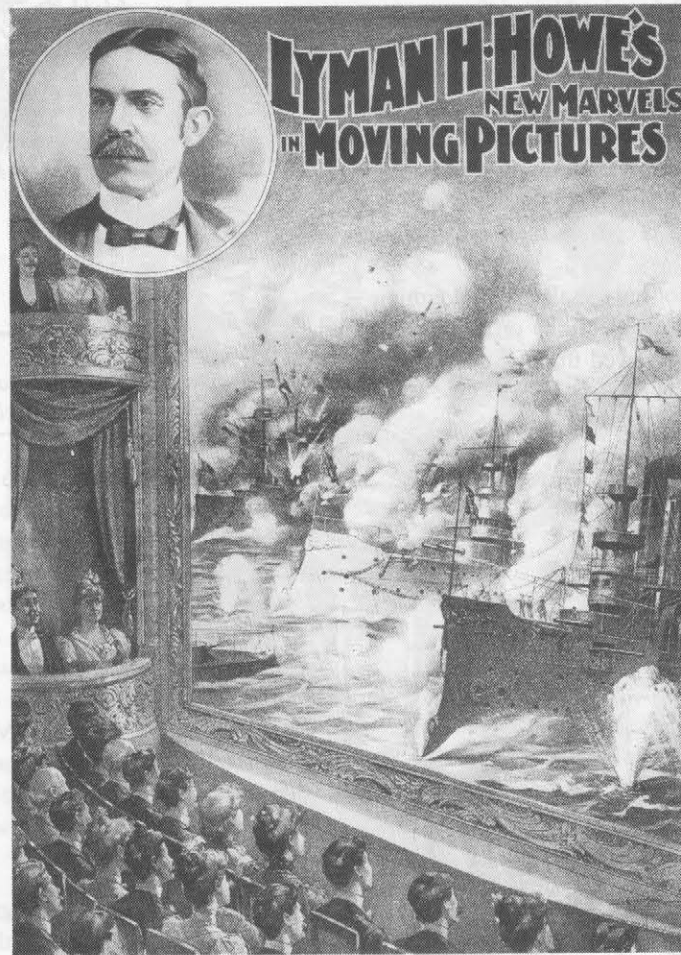
Monroe declared that European powers should no longer pursue colonies in the Western hemisphere, effectively roping off the Americas as the United States' sphere of influence. In return, Monroe pledged that the United States would not intervene in the affairs of Europe. The relative peace prevailing in Europe from Napoleon's defeat in 1815 to the early twentieth century ensured that America could uphold her end of the Monroe Doctrine. The nations of Europe focused their colonial aspirations on Africa and Asia while Latin American colonies were left to gain their independence throughout the century.

It is convenient, and at least partially accurate, to claim that the United States' entrance upon the world stage at the end of the nineteenth century was spurred by the completion of territorial expansion across the North American continent. The isolation of the U.S. had been compounded by Americans' inward-directed attention to economic development and domestic expansion, and to the resolution of their sectional dispute in a bloody civil war (1861-1865). By the early 1890s America was a rising industrial power and the American frontier, which had moved steadily westward throughout the century, was considered "closed."

By the end of the decade, America had fought Spain in its first war against a European power (albeit a power in decline) in eighty years. In victory, America unlocked new frontiers and opportunities beyond its shores. If we see the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century as a nation entering young adulthood, then the Spanish-American War and its consequences may be seen as America's first full-scale foray into the adult world of foreign affairs and power politics.

From Isolation to Empire

Many explanations have been offered for America's decision to go to war with Spain in 1898. The ostensible reason for American involvement was to uphold the Monroe Doctrine and to end the Spanish hold on its increasingly restless colonies in the Caribbean, particularly Cuba. Attempts at a peaceful settlement seemed to offer some promise, but the sinking of the U.S. warship *Maine* in Havana harbor provided an American press and Congress apparently hungry for war with reason enough to drive the Spanish out of the Americas once and for all. There was little evidence implicating the Spanish in this act of sabotage. Nonetheless, so



The end of isolation: public viewing of the Spanish-American War (1898) [Metro Toronto Reference Library]

many Americans (for nearly as many reasons) wanted the U.S. to intervene that President William McKinley, it seemed, had little choice.

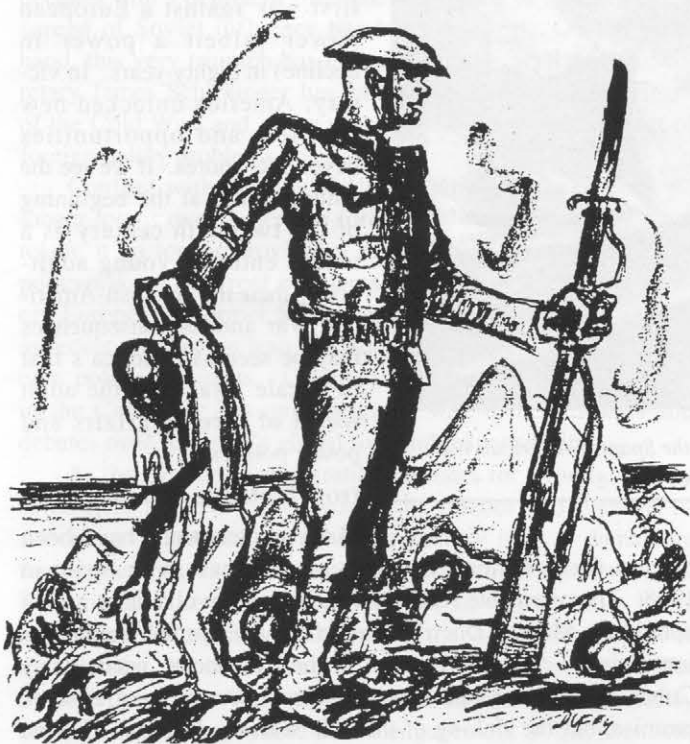
Moral and ideological motives as well as economic interests were critical components in arguments for U.S. intervention. Spain represented not only the old imperial, non-democratic order but also, because of its protected colonial markets, an obstacle to U.S. free trade. Nevertheless, the critical factor may have been a simple matter of timing. America intervened against Spain not only for moral or economic reasons, but also because it *could* intervene, having matured to the point where it could effectively assert its will. The consequences of this course of action were, to a degree, unanticipated by American policymakers at the time, but they were to leave a permanent mark on the conduct of foreign affairs.

In the course of liberating Cuba, the United States also gained control over the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. America, a young nation rapidly growing in economic stature, now possessed more of the trappings of "adult" life—overseas territories. A quasi-missionary impulse, founded on the premise that the American way of life was supreme and worthy of export, provided one motive for acquiring these territories, as America took on the mission of preparing their inhabitants for liberal democracy.

This missionary motive was not universally shared among Americans, however, as there were objections on moral and racist grounds. Some Americans believed that their country's



'El gigante del norte' (*The Giant of the North*). [Critical] A Latin American view of Uncle Sam's 'dollar diplomacy.'



'The Rights of Small Nations: Haiti.' [Good Morning, 1921] A negative look at American occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934.

actions were antithetical to democracy, bordering on imperialism. The U.S. decision to annex Spain's former possessions threatened (as the 1899 platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League claimed) to "extinguish the spirit of 1776 in those islands." Other critics, less concerned with the sovereignty of Filipinos, Puerto Ricans, *et al.*, argued that America could never prepare these non-whites for self-government. While such criticisms were never completely addressed by American policymakers, President McKinley, in response to the anti-imperialists and in accordance with his own anti-imperial tendencies, promised to give autonomy to the newly acquired lands (especially Cuba) as soon as possible.

A New Empire

Having set a new, more aggressive tone for American diplomacy in its war with Spain, the United States embarked upon a pattern of intervention in Latin America by which it fully earned the label *gigante del norte* (as well as other, less innocuous names). In addition to annexing Puerto Rico (and later portions of the Virgin Islands), the U.S. intervened in Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, and supported a Panamanian rebellion against Colombia which resulted in U.S. possession of the Canal Zone.

Control of the Philippines also heightened U.S. interest in East Asia, particularly the potentially limitless marketplace of China (which has tantalized Western nations for centuries). American pursuit of an "Open Door" to economic activity in Asia, and its rather forceful claim-staking in Latin America were early harbingers of the long-term patterns of American diplomacy.

The motives involved in this unprecedented expansion are critical to understanding the policy of subsequent decades. The dominant set of ideas held by makers of American foreign policy at this time has been labeled the "New Empire." The proponents of this "New Empire" exhibited a seamless and inseparable combination of moral/ideological motivations and economic considerations. Capitalism and free trade were as much a part of the unique superiority of America as its democratic government. The strength and health of each depended upon expansion. This expansion was not, however, to be accomplished through the "Old World" method of brute imperialism, but would depend largely upon free trade.

This emphasis on economics would give rise to one of the principal criticisms of American foreign policy in the first decades of the twentieth century. Some critics saw in America's search for an "Open Door" in Asia and stable markets in Latin America a disproportionate influence of business interests, and attacked such policies as "dollar diplomacy." To Europeans, American policy seemed hypocritical. It appeared that the "New Empire" wanted the benefits of colonialism without the burdens. Nonetheless, the "New Empire's" advocates prevailed. The rise of these ideas, combined with the new-found power that permitted America to act on them, marked the birth of American internationalism. In the crucible of World War I, Woodrow Wilson would give this internationalism its most emphatic expression, leaving an indelible mark on American diplomacy.

Woodrow Wilson and the American Mission

Wilson came to the White House in 1912 with little experience in foreign affairs. This is not to say, however, that he did not have an interest in defining America's role in the world. Wilson's policies, both domestic and foreign, were built upon a very basic set of assumptions—a combination of his deeply-felt religious beliefs and his optimistic view of man and society. America, Wilson felt, was politically, socially, and morally unique. With this uniqueness, however, came a heavy responsibility.

Arthur Link, the foremost Wilson historian of our time, paraphrases Wilson's sense of this mission as "advancing democracy and the cause of human rights throughout the world . . . [in serving] mankind through leadership in moral purposes and in advancing peace and world unity." For Wilson, just as for the "New Empire" advocates who preceded him, free trade would serve a critical role in accomplishing these goals. This mission was the fundamental underpinning of Wilsonian inter-

nationalism. It would influence several generations of U.S. foreign policy architects, ultimately to rise to the spotlight in the post-World War II era as the premise for America's Cold War with the Soviet Union.

In spite of Wilson's conviction that the U.S. bore a unique responsibility to the world, he strained to preserve U.S. neutrality throughout the first three years of World War I. This was in part due to the power of precedent. Both George Washington's farewell warning to avoid entangling alliances and the Monroe Doctrine stood as barriers to U.S. involvement in European affairs. Added to this were Wilson's own pacifism and distaste for the "corruption" of European power politics. In the decade and a half prior to the war, the United States had involved itself internationally, particularly in China and Latin America, but had always done so on its own terms, refusing to become enmeshed in the alliance structures which eventually gave rise to World War I.

Historians have noted, with some justification, that the neutrality practiced by America from 1914 to 1917 tended to favor the Allies. Leaving aside the question of whether this was intentional or not, it is clear that the combination of moral and economic motives that marked Wilsonian internationalism strongly influenced the conduct of American neutrality. To Wilson, the autocracies in Germany and Austria-Hungary represented the worst of Europe's corruptions. They were clear enemies of the liberal democratic world order which America represented. Compounding this—and one of the key reasons for America's eventual entry into the war—was Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare. Wilson regarded the attacks as a damning breach of international law and interference with free trade.

America's economic ties to Western Europe also complicated the issue of neutrality. In 1914, U.S. trade with the Allies (principally Great Britain and France) totaled \$825 million. By 1917, just prior to U.S. entry into the war, this trade had grown to \$3.5 billion. In that same period, American trade with Germany dwindled from \$170 million to \$1.7 million, due in large part to the British blockade of Germany. The increase of trade with the Allies (which represents their arming by American industry) combined with the willingness of the U.S. to tolerate the restriction of trade with Germany, while condemning Germany's interference with free trade, is a clear indication of American economic priorities. It was not without some basis in fact that many opponents of America's entry into the war claimed that the decision was driven by business inter-



"A Fair Field and No Favor." [Harper's Weekly, 1899]
Uncle Sam: "commerce, not conquest."

ests, blasting it as the culmination of “dollar diplomacy.”

While there was a grain of truth in these accusations, it does not do justice to the magnitude of Wilson’s decision, which was both agonizing and unprecedented. To justify this full-fledged and costly involvement in world affairs, both to himself and to the American people, Wilson portrayed American involvement as a moral crusade, the climax of America’s mission to the world. His impassioned words and actions suggest that he truly saw the situation in this way. The crusade would bring about the peace and stability necessary to foster liberal democracy and free trade throughout Europe and eventually the globe. In short, this was to be the “war to end all wars.”

America’s Victory, Wilson’s Defeat

When Wilson arrived in Europe in December of 1918 to personally usher in the new world order that he had both envisioned and promised, he was greeted by cheering crowds who seemed to want desperately to believe in his vision. Behind the exuberance of this welcome, however, lay a shattered

Europe which would pose tremendous obstacles to Wilson’s plan. Besides the nearly 40 million casualties (including over 8 million dead), economic hardship and political chaos threatened the nations of Europe. The Austro-Hungarian empire had disintegrated, the Kaiser had abdicated in Germany, and Russia was rocked by the Bolshevik Revolution and ensuing civil war.

In an address to Congress in January of 1918, ten months before the armistice, Wilson outlined his plan for peace and the rehabilitation of Europe. The famous “Fourteen Points” presented in that speech are the most explicit articulation of the priorities of Wilsonian internationalism. In addition to promising autonomy and national self-determination to the peoples of Eastern Europe (including Russia) and the Balkans, and a call

for disarmament, Wilson demanded “the removal...of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions” and the creation of “a general association of nations.” It was over this last point that Wilson fought the political battle which proved to be his undoing.

Wilson proposed the formation of a League of Nations, which would act multilaterally to uphold international law. American opposition to the League was generally based on the suspicion that, by committing unreservedly to carrying out the decisions of the League, the U.S. would lose its prerogative to make its own foreign policy choices. Fresh in the minds of many Americans was the way in which alliance systems had irresistibly dragged the nations of Europe into a disastrous World War which no one seemed to have wanted. Also

imprinted in many Americans’ minds was the idea that Europe was a “tar baby” best left to its own devices. While some of these fears were exaggerated, they were sufficient to stymie Wilson’s plan for peace. Two years after his triumphant arrival in Europe, Wilson, physically crippled by a stroke, had seen his ideas repudiated, and his party was decisively defeated in the presidential election of 1920.

Americans had been willing to carry out the demands of Wilsonian internationalism up to a point, but the end of the war had dimmed the missionary zeal which Wilson’s plan for peace demanded. One should not underestimate the symbolic importance of the 1920 presidential triumph of Warren Harding and his promise of “normalcy.” The urge to withdraw from international activism in the wake of the war was nearly irresistible. However, although conventional wisdom tends to regard the 1920s and early 1930s as a period of isolationism, one might just as well be impressed by the continued level of engagement which American foreign policymakers were able to sustain in such an atmosphere.

Muted Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s

Americans’ refusal to participate in the League of Nations signaled a preference for the traditional American practice of acting unilaterally in world affairs, unbounded by alliances or security agreements. This return to form was a setback to Wilsonian internationalism. Nevertheless, an internationalist foreign policy was still pursued in less formalized ways, again reverting primarily to economic means. As such, historians often refer to the diplomacy of this period as “conservative” or “independent” internationalism.

America offered substantial (although in the end insufficient) financial assistance to both the victors and the vanquished in the post-war period, trying in more limited ways to nudge Europe along the course Wilson had charted. In addition, the perennial concern over open, stable markets in Asia and Latin America persisted throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Republican presidents of the 1920s, acting as overseers of an enormous post-war economic boom, turned away from the crusading diplomacy of Wilson, preferring instead to rely on the less demanding ways of “dollar diplomacy.”

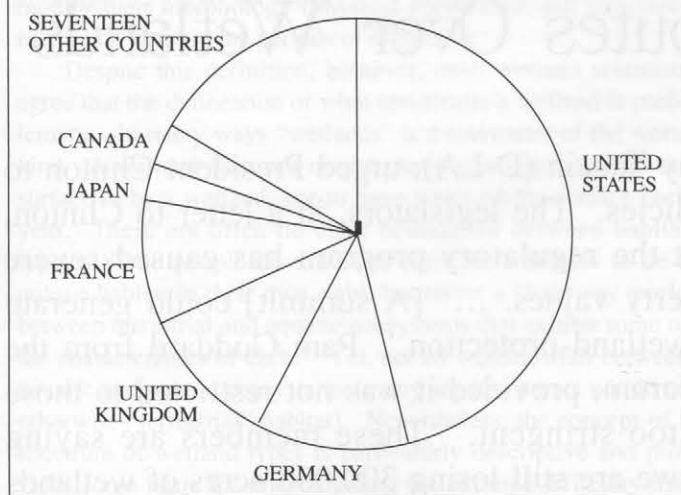
Coinciding with the American economic boom of the 1920s was a growing economic interdependence throughout the world, of which U.S. policymakers seemed somewhat unaware. Following the crash of 1929 and the onset of the world-wide depression, the U.S. withdrew to a position of economic nationalism. They preferred to expend capital, both economic and political, on problems within America’s borders. This inward attention reduced the events in Europe in the 1930s—including the rise to power of fascist governments in Italy and Germany, the Spanish Civil War, and Soviet purges and collectivization—to an easily ignored, distant threat.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose ability to sense the mood of the American electorate was unparalleled among U.S. presidents, steered a course of neutrality throughout the 1930s primarily because his constituents demanded a higher priority for cushioning the blow of the depression. Critics of Roosevelt, among both his contemporaries and later generations, have often failed to take into account the enormous obstacle that the economic downturn posed to a more active foreign policy. The popular mood as well as the mood of Congress



Woodrow Wilson, 1856-1924. [Cartoons, 1912]

RELATIVE VALUE OF INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION, 1925-29



[Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *The United States in the World Economy* (Government Printing Office, 1943), p. 28.]

favored strict neutrality. Nevertheless, in the interpretation and implementation of foreign policy, Roosevelt was able to use his discretionary powers to the benefit of the allies.

As the actions of Germany, Italy, and Japan grew more bold and threatening in the late 1930s, Roosevelt was able to shape America's official policy of neutrality such that the U.S. became the "arsenal of democracy," arming its future allies for nearly three years before its entry into war. Without offering an apology for Roosevelt's handling of foreign policy in the 1930s, it seems fair to say that he was caught in the classic dilemma of American presidents, walking a fine line between heeding the desires of the electorate and leading it.

Internationalism: How Easily Discarded?

There are several themes, arising in recent discussions of America's post-Cold War policy options, which are interesting to consider in light of its foreign policy in the first four decades of this century. Most recent commentators have suggested some degree of withdrawal from earlier commitments, but the degree of this withdrawal is hotly contested. If we choose to view our current situation as roughly similar to the immediate post-World War I period, this retrenchment seems a natural reaction and falls within the parameters of past American isolationism and inward looking policies. In addition, given the economic difficulties which the U.S. is facing, a sense of economic nationalism akin to that found in the Great Depression is also not unexpected.

But internationalism is not so easily discarded. Even as current commentators have spoken of retrenchment and of investing the "peace dividend" at home, many have also articulated the long-standing American desire to continue to reshape the world in its image. The "messianic" fight against despots continues to rage in such areas as Iraq, Somalia and former Yugoslavia where Americans continue to struggle to "make the world safe for democracy." Moreover, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, now painfully discarding the com-

mand economies which functioned for over forty years, are favorite targets for a new generation of "dollar diplomats." Although policy proposals today tend to sound more pragmatic than Wilson's idealistic promises, there is still considerable support for an economic crusade to stabilize the development of free markets (and consequently liberal democracy) in these areas.

The precedents and patterns of American foreign policy in the multi-polar world of 1900 to 1941—the growth of internationalism to its Wilsonian peak followed by muted internationalism driven by moral and economic motives—are very instructive. But they do not tell the whole story of American internationalism in the twentieth century. As I will discuss in the second installment of this essay, American foreign policy in the Cold War era was marked by the resurgence of a Wilsonian brand of near-messianic internationalism. Unprecedented levels of overseas commitments resulted in costly interventions in Korea and Vietnam and lesser actions world-wide.

The legacy of Cold War foreign policy and, thus, the importance of understanding both halves of this story is underscored by the still-volatile situation in the former Soviet Union. With every challenge to Yeltsin, the minds of some American policymakers quickly turn back to the framework of antagonistic communism and the patterns of the Cold War, which offer a simple way of understanding a very complex world.

Suggestions For Further Reading

There are several first-rate overviews of American diplomacy in the twentieth century. One of the most interesting, because it is written by one of the principal architects of America's Cold War policies, is George Kennan's *American Diplomacy* (1951, revised and expanded in 1984). Also of interest is volume one of Kennan's *Memoirs* (1967), which covers his early years as a diplomat. For a highly critical view of American foreign policy, see William Appleman Williams' *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959).

Walter LaFeber's *The New Empire* (1963) is a good survey of America's war with Spain and rise to world power, while Lester Langley's *The Banana Wars* (1983) is a newer history of U.S. "dollar diplomacy" in Latin America.

A brief, sympathetic introduction to Wilson is Arthur Link's *Woodrow Wilson: War Revolution, and Peace* (1979), while N. Gordon Levin's *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* (1968) offers a longer discussion.

L. Ethan Ellis' *Republican Foreign Policy, 1921-1933* (1953) is an old, reliable introduction to the diplomacy of the twenties. Hamilton Fish Armstrong, former editor of *Foreign Affairs* and card-carrying Wilsonian, has left behind an interesting view of America's inter-war diplomacy in his memoirs, *Peace and Counterpeace: From Wilson to Hitler* (1971).

The best place to begin a study of Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy is Robert Dallek's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (1979), although Robert Divine's *The Reluctant Belligerent* (1979) is also a good, if more brief, study.