

American Internationalism in the 20th Century: The Search For a “New World Order”

With the end of the Cold War, 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. [Part II of II].

by Mark Meier

The end of the Cold War presents a curious dilemma for American foreign policymakers. For over forty years, anti-communism stood as the catch-all motive and rationale for U.S. global intervention. Now, without as clear an enemy to democracy and free trade, American ideologues find themselves bereft of an easy explanation for international intervention. In response, the U.S. is struggling to redefine its ‘national interests’ and how best to attain them.

Since the United States stepped from isolationism onto the world stage following the Spanish-American War (1898), American global activism has been based generally on a combination of moral and economic motives to foster liberal democracy as a way of life and free trade as the international economic structure. During the first decades of the twentieth century, internationalism ebbed and flowed in intensity from the almost missionary involvement of President Woodrow Wilson in the First World War to the relative retrenchment under the Republican presidents of the 1920s and 1930s.

However, the circumstances of World War II (1939-45) brought global activism back to the forefront. In the post-World War II era of the Cold War, America pursued a course of global involvement that was unprecedented and unique in its history. This particularly active internationalism manifested three characteristics: persistent and vehement opposition to communism, particularly represented by the Soviet Union; a greater willingness than ever to participate in international security agreements and alliance structures,

such as NATO and the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO); and increasing militarism, a blurring of the distinction between diplomatic and military strategy.

Postwar global activism was also characterized by increasing domestic criticism and, during the Vietnam War, the breakdown of consensus over the postwar American mission. Critics claimed that the strength of U.S. anti-communism on occasion subsumed the general liberal tenets that underlay such opposition to communism. U.S. policy was opened to charges of using methods and supporting governments that were antithetical to the world order that it espoused. Moreover, while it is difficult to separate ideals from interests, other analysts asserted that American support of free trade acted to the U.S.’s advantage economically, and was not ideological in motivation.

The Clinton presidency enjoys the dubious honor of blazing a new trail—of sculpting a new age of American global involvement to reflect a changing world and a different America. However, despite all of the confusion and self-questioning, past themes of U.S. foreign policy continue to guide and influence internationalist decision-making. Even with a young team in the White House, Cold War patterns of involvement and modes of thinking—interventionist, militaristic—will take many years to transform entirely. By the same token, while American moral and economic internationalism seemed far more clear in an age when America’s moral and economic stature were held in higher regard, the long-standing impulses to bring the liberal-democratic-free trade ideology to other countries still make their presence strongly felt.



A Soviet cartoon depicts Truman's mix of atomic and dollar diplomacy. [Krokodil]

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Wartime Diplomacy and Global Responsibility

During World War II, traditional patterns of internationalism

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were in many ways put on hold as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) sought to prevent any interference with Allied commitment to and cooperation in the war effort. Nonetheless, American commitment to a world order based on free trade and national self-determination caused some friction among the Allies. At the Atlantic Conference meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1941, the president attempted unsuccessfully to pressure the British to give up their colonial possessions, as well as the economic barriers that the Commonwealth had constructed.

The pattern established by FDR in his dealings with the Soviet Union during the war also reflected the overwhelming importance of keeping the alliance together. Roosevelt was content to temporize and to discuss in only the most vague, non-committal ways the shape of the postwar world—a source of sharp criticism of his administration by early 1945. On issue after issue, from the fate of liberated Poland to the treatment of the defeated Germans, Roosevelt appeared to equivocate in the face of Soviet demands. In fairness, by 1945 there was little that the president could do, particularly with regard to Eastern Europe where the Soviets held *de facto* control. By the time of Roosevelt's death in April 1945, his successor Harry Truman inherited a situation where temporizing and empty agreements would no longer suffice.

The transition from Roosevelt to Truman was a fateful one for American foreign policy. Truman was almost completely unschooled in foreign affairs. In addition, Roosevelt tended to keep his Vice President uninformed on critical issues involving the shape of the postwar world (most notably the development of atomic weapons). Lacking Roosevelt's personal skills and self-confidence in dealing with foreign relations, Truman was influenced to a far greater degree by his advisors, particularly in the State Department.

Since the close of World War I, the State Department had provided the breeding ground for a new generation of foreign policy experts committed to a concept of active internationalism. They considered America's policy objectives a seamless web of moral virtues and economic interests. Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, typified this new generation, and was a persistent spokesman for internationalism within the administration. Hull believed that global free trade would foster international interdependence, thus reducing the risk of hostilities between nations, and that the United States could and should assume the leading role in spreading the virtues of capitalism, free trade, and democracy.

Truman reacted more intransigently towards the Soviet Union, at least in part due to his sense that the atomic bomb gave him a trump card. At the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 (after Germany's surrender but before Japan's), Truman attempted to use "atomic diplomacy" to pressure the Soviets

into more cooperative positions on the reconstruction of Germany and the fate of Eastern Europe. Stalin was nonplussed by such tactics, and the conference ended without establishing any agreements. It was the last such conference among the Allies, and was a harbinger of the contentious relationship between East and West which would dominate world affairs for the next forty years.

Pax Americana and the Dawn of the Cold War

The course of events between 1945 and 1950 were critical in establishing the imperative for, and tone of, the American crusade. By 1950, the U.S. had committed itself to military and economic involvement in Europe and Asia on an unprecedented peacetime scale. America resolved to contain communism and even roll it back, and internationalism gained ever increasing momentum from this resolve.

In the spring of 1947, Truman announced that the U.S. would provide aid to Greece and Turkey to assist in combating leftist insurgents. He further declared a broader principle that the U.S. would aid any governments which faced similar insurgencies—the 'Truman Doctrine'. In the summer of 1947, Truman's Secretary of State George Marshall proposed that the U.S. extend massive economic aid to reconstruct the shattered nations of Europe. When the Marshall Plan was approved the next year, the Soviet Union strongly encouraged Eastern European nations not to participate.

The 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia firmly entrenched a pro-Soviet government in that country, and also established that the Soviets were willing to sacrifice national self-determination for a secure buffer zone in Eastern Europe. In late 1948, the Soviet Union closed the border between East and West Germany, and the U.S. responded by airlifting supplies into West Berlin. Finally, in the dizzying year of 1949, the U.S. and the nations of Western Europe formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Soviets successfully exploded an atomic bomb, and mainland China became communist under the government of Mao Zedong.

In 1947, in the midst of this hectic five year period, George Kennan (a Foreign Service officer assigned to the Soviet Union)

outlined in an anonymously published article what he believed were "the sources of Soviet conduct." In addition to revolutionary Marxism and the paranoia of Josef Stalin, Kennan believed that traditional Russian imperialism would exert a lasting impact on Soviet foreign policy. The United States' response, Kennan argued, ought to aim to contain the Soviet Union within the territory it currently held, while doing everything in its power to "increase the strains under which Soviet power must operate." In the same article, Kennan eloquently described the sense of American mission (a phenomenon under



*Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson.
[U.S. Embassy, Ottawa]*

Wilson, now about to become an article of faith):

[The] thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin's challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.

This strategy of containment quickly took root in the Truman administration (and guided U.S. policymakers into the 1980s). While economic aid to Western Europe served U.S. economic interests by revitalizing America's trading partners, it was cast by the Truman administration as a necessary measure to check the expansion of communism. The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO were the first U.S. steps in constructing a policy of containment, but did not yet address the question of military security, which was becoming increasingly important.

The Militarization of the Cold War: NSC-68 and Korea

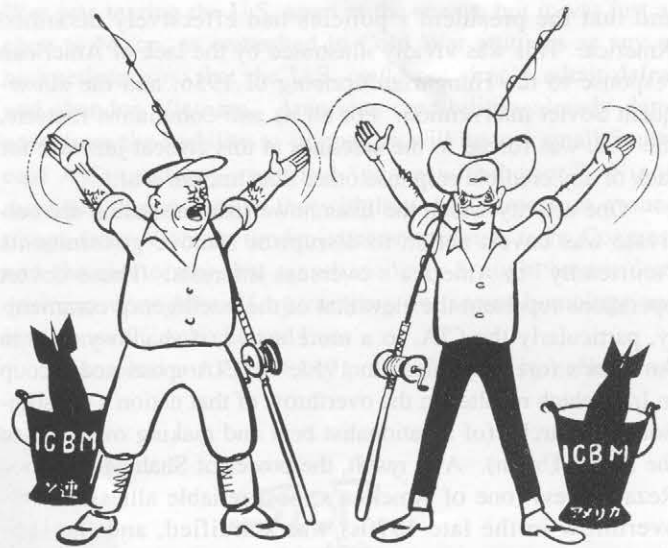
While America rapidly demobilized after World War II, the Soviets maintained a relatively large military. U.S. strategists could count only upon their monopoly of atomic weapons to prevent Soviet adventurism, and this was not regarded as either a long-lasting or reliable solution. In 1947, the National Security Act was passed, which created the National Security Council. The NSC was intended to coordinate U.S. diplomatic, military, and intelligence planning. Its creation was the beginning of a close relationship between military and diplomatic strategies—the hallmark of Cold War foreign policy.

In early 1950, the NSC introduced NSC-68, one of the most significant documents of the Cold War. NSC-68 proposed a five-year plan for rearming the U.S. and defending against the Soviet Union. The crux of the plan was a tripling of the U.S. defense budget—a political hard sell for the Truman administration, which was already drawing fire for problems in the domestic economy.

Fate intervened, however, in the form of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950. Truman's response was quick and decisive, as the U.S. took the lead role in a United Nations effort to push back the North Koreans. While Korea proved to be a military and political quagmire for the Truman administration, it fostered support for the NSC's recommendations. The U.S. defense budget immediately jumped to the levels prescribed by NSC-68, where they remained for the next forty years.

A "New Look" Under Eisenhower

All three principal components of U.S. Cold War policy were thus firmly entrenched by the end of the Truman administration—anti-communism, alliances and militarism—and they represented dramatic departures from earlier incarnations of American internationalism. All were products of suspicion toward, and competition with, the Soviet Union, and demonstrate the way in which anti-communism indelibly changed



"Braggers." Nikita Khrushchev and Dwight Eisenhower practice the art of brinkmanship. [Nasu]

American internationalism. At heart, long-range visions of a *Pax Americana*—a U.S.-led free trade and liberal democratic world order—still guided U.S. internationalism. However, the presence of a (seemingly) immediate military and ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union gave new urgency to this mission, and shaped both short-run policies and long-range thinking.

Much of Dwight Eisenhower's appeal in the 1952 presidential election stemmed from the impression that he could bring strength and stability to U.S. foreign policy, along with the immediate cessation of the Korean War. Eisenhower did not consider the possibility that the U.S. would relinquish its role as guardian of the free world. The U.S. further aligned itself with other nations through treaties and security agreements, and continued to focus efforts on rebuilding Germany and Japan, which were regarded as the linchpins of economic security in Europe and Asia. However, he also had little inclination (as a fiscal conservative mindful of balanced budgets) to continue the pattern of costly defense spending sparked by NSC-68 and the Korean War. With the first detonation of a hydrogen bomb in March of 1954, a potential solution appeared and the "New Look" defense policy was born.

The "New Look" was predicated on an American advantage in nuclear weapons technology and delivery systems, which provided far more "bang for the buck" than conventional weapons. This policy was based on the assumption that the United States would not hesitate to use such weapons in whatever quantities necessary for the defense of Western Europe or its Asian allies. The tactic of "brinkmanship" practiced by Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, required that the Soviets believe that the U.S. was willing to stand at the brink of nuclear war.

For whatever advantages were gained from the "New Look"—either in terms of deterring Soviet expansionism or providing defense on the cheap—it also served to limit the range of effective military responses. It circumscribed the flexibility of Eisenhower's foreign policy to the potentially catastrophic use of thermonuclear weapons. The administration became increasingly vulnerable to the charge that it was inert

and that the president's policies had effectively disarmed America. This was vividly illustrated by the lack of American response to the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and the subsequent Soviet intervention. For all its anti-communist rhetoric, the U.S. was forced to the sidelines at this critical juncture for lack of any credible response other than nuclear war.

One activity which the Eisenhower administration did cultivate was covert action to disrupt or remove governments "unfriendly" to America's overseas interests. These covert operations represent the elevation of the intelligence community, particularly the CIA, to a more active, if shadowy, role in America's foreign policy. In 1953, the CIA sponsored a coup in Iran which resulted in the overthrow of that nation's constitutional monarchy (of a nationalist bent and making overtures to the Soviet Union). As a result, the power of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi (one of America's most reliable allies until his overthrow in the late 1970s) was solidified, and the U.S. obtained freer access to Iranian oil deposits in the process. In 1954, the CIA again "sponsored" a coup, this time in Guatemala, against the government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, whom the U.S. government also viewed as a Soviet ally.

Both brinkmanship and covert action remained policy weapons utilized by Eisenhower's successors in the presidency (witness the more recent Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), the "Star Wars" Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and the Iran-Contra dealings).

By the late 1950s, Eisenhower's administration was coming under increasing criticism. The failure to respond in Hungary in 1956, the implications of the successful Soviet *Sputnik* launch in 1957, the Cuban revolution of 1959, and the administration's embarrassment and helplessness when the Soviets shot down a U2 spy plane in early 1960, all seemed to point to a dangerous impotence. Both presidential candidates in 1960, John F. Kennedy and Eisenhower's Vice President Richard Nixon, portrayed themselves as younger, more vital leaders who could stand up to communism and revitalize America's global mission.

The Cold Warrior of Camelot

Kennedy took office in January of 1961 with the promise that



John F. Kennedy: "Pay any price, bear any burden."

the nation would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." It is a startling testament to the atmosphere of the Cold War that such sentiments, expressed over forty years earlier by Woodrow Wilson, had led to his political demise while Kennedy enjoyed unabashed adoration. JFK filled critical positions in the foreign policy and national security establishment with relatively young "action intellectuals". The administration promised to push the Cold War and American internationalism to "new frontiers," bringing a new level of activity and commitment.

One of the earliest opportunities for the Kennedy administration to prove its vitality and mettle came in Cuba, where Fidel Castro's presence was a thorn in America's side. Plans for a U.S.-sponsored invasion and counterrevolution in Cuba had been drawn up, but never implemented, under Eisenhower. Kennedy wasted little time in putting this plan into action, but the resulting invasion of the Bay of Pigs was an unmitigated disaster. However, the early failure seemed only to stiffen Kennedy's resolve, and contributed to his unflinching application of brinkmanship in the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962.

Outside these dramatic examples, the Kennedy administration also worked aggressively in two other ways. Through increasing levels of economic assistance to nations of the developing world, and through institutions such as the Agency for International Development (AID) and the Peace Corps, Kennedy hoped to set in motion a process of "nation-building" which would make the Third World less susceptible to communism and Soviet influence. At the same time, Kennedy pushed for higher levels of defense spending on conventional weapons, and showed no reluctance to post specialized U.S. troops and military advisors to the same areas where "nation-building" was occurring—most notably in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam: The Climax of the American Mission

America's involvement in Vietnam represented the high water mark of the American anti-communist mission. Over the course of the war, the consensus over America's global involvement broke down and threatened to split the country apart. Vietnam graphically demonstrated the manner in which anti-communism often distorted traditional patterns of liberal internationalism. In the name of protecting liberal democracy and free trade from the threat of communism, the U.S. found itself supporting groups that were often antithetical to that liberal world order. Moreover, the U.S. became militarily involved in a region whose direct relevance to national interests was not clear to all Americans.

Prior to World War II, most of Southeast Asia had been carved up among the British, French, and Dutch as colonies, of which French Indochina—including Vietnam—was the largest. Vietnamese nationalists had reason to believe that the conclusion of World War II would bring them independence, especially as France seemed no longer capable of maintaining an empire and the U.S. appeared to uphold the principle of national self-determination world-wide. But for Cold War competition, the U.S. might very well have interceded on behalf of Vietnamese independence, as this fit nicely with the U.S. desire to break down the old colonial order and replace it with

global free trade and a *Pax Americana*.

The Truman administration essentially traded its acquiescence to, and later active support for, continued French rule in return for French acquiescence in the reconstruction of Germany as the bulwark of Central Europe. By the time the French met defeat in Vietnam in 1954, the Eisenhower administration was faced with a new set of reasons for checking the expansion of Ho Chi Minh's nationalism in Vietnam: the reconstruction of Japan.

In the late 1940s, and particularly after the Korean War, the thrust of American policy was to rebuild Japan's export economy and insure that Japan would have access to the mar-

War was tearing the U.S. apart at the seams, but it was just as clear to Nixon, as enmeshed in Cold War attitudes as any of his predecessors, that the U.S. could not simply admit defeat and abandon Vietnam. American credibility—already damaged from the inability to impose its will upon a small Southeast Asian nation—required “peace with honor.” Nixon managed to accomplish the withdrawal of American ground troops from Vietnam (under extreme pressure from Congress and the electorate), but simultaneously brought tremendous criticism upon himself by carrying out secret bombings and invasions of Cambodia and Laos.

Nixon had made his early political career by seeking out



Richard Nixon and the anti-war movement.

kets of East Asia. The logic behind this was the same as in Germany—the best check against the spread of communism, and the best way to guarantee a strong U.S. economy, was to rebuild the strongest nations in those regions. Southeast Asia, and Vietnam in particular, fit this equation as a source of raw materials and market for Japan's manufactured goods. (Ironically, it was precisely for these markets and resources that Japan had been willing to risk war with the U.S. only a few years earlier).

Two factors unique to America's Cold War policies also influenced the decision to support South Vietnam. As part of the strategy of global containment of communism, successive U.S. presidents were driven by the notion of ‘credibility’—that the rest of the world must solemnly believe that the U.S. could and would intervene wherever necessary, and with whatever force necessary. Moreover, the domino theory—gospel truth under the Democratic administrations of the 1960s—held that any nation which “fell” to communism, however insignificant it might seem to the national interests of the U.S. (such as Guatemala or Vietnam), took on immeasurable importance as the first of a chain of falling dominos (as Guatemala/Vietnam goes, so goes Central America/Southeast Asia).

For all these reasons, what began as economic aid to the French under Truman grew to a handful of advisors under Eisenhower, and expanded again under Kennedy, finally to explode into full-scale warfare under Lyndon Johnson.

Detente & Old World Diplomacy Under Nixon

Newly elected President, Richard Nixon, inherited an enormous dilemma in 1968. Clearly the Vietnam

communists at home as a member of the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC). Yet Nixon and his chief foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger preferred to use diplomatic maneuvering. They avoided high-intensity conflicts among the superpowers and pursued a policy of detente—the lessening of tension—with the Soviet Union. Detente did not imply disengagement. In the place of the Democratic presidents' willingness to commit the United States overtly in conflict situations, Nixon substituted the ‘Nixon Doctrine’, which committed the U.S. to arming and aiding its “client states” around the world.

The U.S. had already been supplying substantial military aid to some of its allies since the dawn of the Cold War, particularly the nations of Western Europe. However, the Nixon Doctrine shifted the focus of arms sales and military aid from Europe to America's allies in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Under the principle that “my enemy's enemy is my friend,” the U.S. proceeded to ship unprecedented quantities of armaments abroad, to allies who did not always represent the best aspects of a liberal, democratic world order.

Foreign Policy Since Nixon

In 1976, Jimmy Carter promised a departure in foreign policy from Cold War patterns. The Carter administration hoped to bring about a new world order of interdependence, based on a renewed emphasis on human rights and national self-determination, and continued detente with the Soviet Union. This was not simply rhetoric, as the U.S. did begin to show greater sensitivity to these issues, distancing itself from some of the less palatable of its “enemy's enemies.”

Old habits died hard, though, and the Carter

Real security
begins domestically
* * *
Help Rebuild America



A common refrain since Vietnam. [K. Anderson]

KIRK

and if we HADN'T supported
RapistS, MURderERs and TORTURERs in
EL SALVADOR, the COUNTRY could have
been taken over BY COMMUNISTs!



While Reagan oversaw the end of the Cold War, many thought the price paid was too high. [Kirk Anderson]

administration never completely broke with the patterns of Cold War diplomacy. The President gave the key appointments of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor to Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski, men well-schooled in the old ways. Considerable support was still provided to client states in sensitive regions, most notably the Shah of Iran and Joseph Mobutu of Zaire. Nevertheless, Carter came under increasing criticism for foreign policy softness. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 prompted an icy, though ineffective, response from the U.S. The Iranian revolution (1978-79) and the ensuing hostage crisis was the final straw that broke the Carter presidency in the 1980 elections.

The foreign policy of the Reagan administration began with much the same tone as that of the Kennedy presidency twenty years earlier. Criticizing the Carter administration for tarnishing American self-respect and status abroad, Reagan exhorted America to "stand tall in the saddle" once again. He promised to rearm the U.S. and resume the mission of containing the ambitions of the Soviet Union. In doing so, Reagan (and Bush after him) combined the willingness of Kennedy to involve the U.S. directly in conflicts while also following (and accelerating) Nixon's pattern of arming and aiding 'the enemy's enemy'.

The foreign policy maneuvers and misadventures of the Reagan/Bush era are still hot topics for debate. The U.S. armed rebels and supported often unsavory governments against leftist power in Central America, especially Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. It supported the Mujahedeen force struggling to roll back the communist government and Soviet forces of Afghanistan. Moreover, the U.S. intervened directly in Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989). However, the most momentous development to come out of the Reagan era was the rapprochement with Mikhail Gorbachev during the president's second term. This was surprising to many since Reagan, a hardened anti-communist, had earlier referred to the Soviet Union as an "evil empire".

The Reagan-Bush years also witnessed the harbinger of the multilateral world that was to come and glimpses of the Islamic threat that now preoccupies Americans. The U.S. supported and armed Iraq during the 1980s' war with Iran (who the U.S. had aided during the 1970s), in order to balance the combatants and check the spread of militant Islam. At the same time, the U.S. attacked Libya in response to evidence of

terrorist involvement.

Where To Go From Here?

Where will the Clinton administration take United States foreign policy from this point? The legacy and extent of Cold War involvement has a momentum to it that makes it unlikely that American internationalism will drastically alter in the near future. Relations with Iraq and Somalia demonstrate a continued commitment to interventionism and the multi-lateral character of the efforts in these regions is a product of Cold War thinking.

Yet, the reluctance of the U.S. to enter into the fray of the Bosnian war reflects a change from postwar patterns of engagement and a new questioning of America's foreign policy. It is unclear to many Americans what U.S. interests are in the Balkans and they are unsure how arming Bosnians or intervening in the conflict will serve American needs.

While the Cold War saw the rise of the military to a central role in American internationalism, many analysts today point to economic, rather than military, security as the key to national interest. Rather than intervention in conflicts and the arming of combatants, there is a call for a return to a foreign policy designed to enhance trade and economic opportunities. The importance of fair trade is increasingly pointed to as the key to America's continued economic health. This is especially true in relations with Japan, where *free* trade is perhaps unlikely but *fair* trade an important goal. With the American economy in a downturn, the pressure for an economic, domestic-oriented foreign policy remains strong. ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

One of the best single works on the diplomacy of Franklin Roosevelt is Robert Dallek's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and United States Foreign Policy, 1933-1945* (1979).

The Cold War in General

The Cold War has, of course, spawned a huge number of books, but several general treatments stand out, including Stephen Ambrose's *Rise to Globalism* (1988) and William A. William's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1962), which is, as might be expected from the title, quite critical of American policy prior to the Vietnam War. The second volume of George Kennan's *Memoirs* (1972), is a fascinating autobiography of one of the chief architects of American Cold War policy.

Eisenhower to Vietnam; Nixon to Reagan

Robert Divine's *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (1981) is a sympathetic view of that administration's policies. The two best places to start on America's role in Vietnam are George Herring's *America's Longest War* (1986) and Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* (1983). A gripping fictional treatment of America's earliest involvement in Vietnam is Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955).

For an overview of American policy since Vietnam, see Raymond L. Garthoff's *Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (1985).