

# THE UNITED STATES

## Inextricably Linked with Nations Across the Globe

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*It is therefore manifest that an enduring idealism shapes the character of American foreign policy. But it is only part of a dynamic and complex process. It must constantly be balanced against cold-blooded strategic imperatives.*

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Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has written that American foreign policy is defined by its oscillations between crusading idealism and blinkered isolationism. This familiar dichotomy—a nation alternately tilting at windmills or cynically interring its collective heads in the sand while tidily, ultimately obscures the currents that have long guided U.S. foreign policy. The belief that the United States is uniquely destined to serve as an engine for the spread of democracy, free markets, and individual liberty has been an abiding element of America's encounter with the world. Policymakers have, of course, disagreed on the means by which to promote these goals, or the ability of the United States to affect such change. But American leaders from across the political spectrum have long held that the success of the American project in no small measure hinges on developments in the rest of the world.

That such bitter rivals as Presidents Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) and Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) shared similarly expansive views of America's interests in the world, marked by a belief that the United States' fortunes were inextricably linked with the character and conduct of nations across the globe, underscores the broad-base of this worldview. While Wilson argued that "We are participants, whether we would or not, in the life of the world... What affects mankind is inevitably our affair..." Roosevelt's idea of America's global role was no less far-reaching: "There is such a thing as international morality. I take this position as an American... who endeavors

loyally to serve the interests of his own country, but who also endeavors to do what he can for justice and decency as regards mankind at large, and who therefore feels obliged to judge all other nations by their conduct on any given occasion." It is therefore manifest that an enduring idealism shapes the character of American foreign policy. But it is only part of a dynamic and complex process. It must constantly be balanced against cold-blooded strategic imperatives. Roosevelt justified these exigencies and the compromises that would necessarily follow, by cautioning that "in striving for a lofty ideal we must use practical methods; and if we cannot attain all at one leap, we must advance towards it step by step, reasonably content so long as we do actually make some progress in the right direction." Thus rather than veering between isolationism and engagement, America's foreign affairs can better be understood as a reflection of the constant tension between its conflicting ideals and interests.

American diplomacy in the 20th century, then, is largely the story of how policymakers have sought to strike the right equilibrium of interests and ideals. Articulating this balancing act, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently observed that: "American foreign policy has always had... a streak of idealism... It's not just getting to whatever solution is available, but it's doing that within the context of principles and values. The responsibility, then, of all of us is to take policies that are rooted in those values and make them work on a day-to-day basis so that you're always moving forward toward a goal... So it's the connection, the day-to-day operational policy connection between those ideals and policy outcomes." Terming the administration's approach 'practical idealism,' Rice, as clearly as any of her predecessors, identified the crux of the challenge that has confronted the United States' interaction with the world in the 20th century. At critical junctures in the last century, the conflict between America's interests and ideals has appeared in stark relief. And during these



President Woodrow Wilson



President Theodore Roosevelt

times, American foreign policy has manifested both utopian optimism and ruthless pragmatism, often simultaneously.

Woodrow Wilson's very name has become synonymous with American idealism. His determination to "make the world safe for democracy" galvanized the American public, as an erstwhile isolationist nation entered the First World War. The former professor's advocacy for self-determination profoundly resonated with nationalists around the globe, and Wilson himself was regarded as an almost messianic figure. A *Washington Post* reporter chronicling Egypt's revolt against British rule in the spring of 1919, noted that the Egyptian nationalists were "fired by Wilsonian ideals" and observed that "as the rioters march and riot, they shout the Wilsonian precepts." Egyptian nationalists, invoking Wilson's credo, beseeched the U.S. Senate to support Egyptian independence. Wilson, however, rebuffed their pleas and affirmed the United States' support for British rule in Egypt. Though American support for liberty during and after the war remained largely rhetorical, Wilson's doctrine proved pivotal in the spread of democracy in the 20th century.

Wilson's crusading was, however, coupled with hardnosed realism. For example, while he deplored the Turks' reported harsh treatment of the Armenians, Wilson resisted noisy demands to declare war against the Turks for fear of jeopardizing the American missionary presence in the Middle East. Indeed, the United States' unwillingness to deploy American troops to bolster the nascent Armenian state in the wake of the First World War contributed to Armenia's hasty demise. Wilson's prosecution of the war also belied any hint of starry-eyed idealism. The full might of America's war machine was to be brought to bear, as the president averred "force without stint or measure." Thus in America's part in the First World War we see a strategy animated by a hybrid

of narrowly defined interests and deep-seated American principles.

The United States' experience in World War II would even more conspicuously demonstrate the conflict between American values and geopolitical exigencies. Almost a year prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) (1933-1945) delivered his famous Four Freedoms address in which he declared that humans "everywhere in the world" were entitled to freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These principles would become a rallying cry for the United States upon its entrance into World War II and provided average Americans with an ideological framework for the fight. Yet while artist Norman Rockwell was immortalizing the Four Freedoms in a series of paintings in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Roosevelt was negotiating a partnership with the totalitarian Soviet Union. Josef Stalin's Russia, beset by bloody purges, show trials, and state-orchestrated famines, made for a dubious ally in advancing the principles championed by Roosevelt.



The Navy battleship *USS West Virginia* shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941.

In July 1941, Roosevelt sent his trusted advisor, Harry Hopkins, on a long trek to Russia to judge Stalin's commitment and viability as a strategic partner. Hopkins pointed to the ideological quandary posed by allying with the Soviet Union; the visit highlighted "the difference between democracy and dictatorship," he reported to



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (right) meets with his vice president, Harry S. Truman, at the White House in 1944.

Roosevelt. The president responded by delivering one billion dollars in aid to the USSR, the beginning of what would be a massive influx of American largess, and authorized the production of a series of propaganda films to be shown in the United States that featured Stalin as a decent man and rationalized the Soviet Union's violent excesses. Roosevelt's desire to maintain the American-Soviet alliance compelled the president to compromise an abiding commitment to support for self-determination abroad. Reflecting on the eclipse of traditional American values by strategic interests, President George W. Bush lamented that America's diplomacy during World War II attempted "to sacrifice freedom for the sake of stability."

Roosevelt's embrace of the Soviet Union did not however suggest a jettisoning of American ideals. Though FDR had aligned the United States with a brutal regime, the president also seized the opportunity to advance democracy and self-determination by laying the foundation for an international order consistent with American ideals. Much to the chagrin of his European allies, FDR was an avowed foe of imperialism and sought to dislodge the British and the French from their far-flung colonies. At a dinner party with Morocco's ruler during the Casablanca Conference in 1943, Roosevelt offered his backing for Moroccan independence, while Churchill sat across the table, seething and fearful for the fate of Britain's own colonies. In addition, Roosevelt denounced British dominion in West Africa and French rule in Indochina as inconsistent with the Allies' professed war

aims. Roosevelt also aspired to rectify the mistakes of the flawed post-World War I settlement. He conceived of an international organization that would effectively ensure collective security and avert the prospects of another global conflagration. Though the creation of the United Nations would fall to his successor, the organization's original makeup greatly reflected FDR's vision. Accordingly, during the Second World War, the United States demonstrated tactical expediency in allying with a repressive dictatorship, while maintaining a broader, strategic commitment to the advance of American values.

In the immediate wake of Harry Truman's unlikely ascent to the presidency upon FDR's death in 1945, the former haberdasher was forced to grapple with enormous challenges. At first brush, Truman shared few similarities with his suave, patrician predecessor. The product of rough and tumble machine-politics and an autodidact, Truman did, like Roosevelt before him, craft a policy informed by an amalgam of American interests and ideals. In the same year that Truman visited unprecedented destruction on the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he also exalted the drafting of the United Nations Charter as "a profound cause of thanksgiving to Almighty God." The president's heartfelt endorsement of an organization "determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" set against the backdrop of America's "war without mercy" against Japan exemplifies the distinctive conjunction of soaring idealism coupled with pitiless realism that marked American foreign policy over the 20th century.

Truman, perhaps more than any other president during the American century, was able to marry American interests and ideals. The Marshall Plan, a massive program of relief for beleaguered post-war Europe, bolstered the continent's collapsing economies while staving off communist advances. The program's emphasis on free enterprise broke down economic barriers in Europe, triggering a rapid recovery and helped lay the foundation for European integration. Celebrated by Winston Churchill as "the most unselfish act in the whole of recorded history," the Marshall Plan providentially, if only temporarily, reconciled the tension between America's strategic constraints and deeply rooted values. During the ensuing four decades that spanned the Cold War, American policymakers rarely experienced such success in squaring principles and practicality, and more often than not, hardheaded realism carried the day.



Former Presidents George H.W. Bush (left) and Bill Clinton at the White House in 2005.

The demise of the Soviet Union and apparent triumph of liberal democracy did not augur an end to the conflict between American interests and ideals. The United States' relationship with China during the 1990s proved that this ineluctable tension remained. President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) entered office at a low-ebb in Sino-American relations following the first [George H.W.] Bush administration's 1992 sale of F-16 strike fighters to Taiwan. Sanctions from the Tiananmen Square massacre and calls from members of his own party to take a stiffer line against China's continuing human rights abuses further exacerbated the relationship, and impelled the president to sign a 1993 executive order linking human rights conditions to the renewal of China's most-favored-nation status. With the Dalai Lama and Chai Ling, a leader of the Tiananmen uprising, in attendance at the signing ceremony, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell triumphantly proclaimed, "For the first time since the events of Tiananmen Square, nearly four years ago, we have a president who is willing to act in order to bring about positive change."

This high-minded idealism quickly fell victim to a confluence of factors—American business interests in China, pressures from the Pentagon in light of a looming crisis with North Korea's nuclear weapons testing and a series of acrimonious public confrontations with Beijing—leading Clinton to reverse his trade policy toward China. Arguing that American ideals could be best advanced by integrating China into the global economy; the president adopted a policy of engagement and in May 1994 delinked China's trade status from its human rights

record. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin justified this about face explaining that it was in America's interest "to help speed the integration of the Chinese economy into the world economy... Make no mistake: we have serious disagreements with China on human rights, religious freedom, security issues, as well as economic issues... The question is what is the best way to advance our interests and beliefs. We believe that the process of engagement is the most likely means to make progress on all of the issues we have with China." In the fall of 1996, President Clinton commenced a three-year campaign to secure

China's entry into the World Trade Organization. China's eventual entry into the global economy—widely considered Clinton's greatest foreign policy achievement—was not without difficulty and signified another instance of American ideals and interests at loggerheads.

President George W. Bush's second inaugural speech demonstrated the degree to which the longstanding tension between American ideals and interests has defined U.S. foreign policy. Proclaiming "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one," the president's vision aims to effectively harmonize competing forces. But the conflict between American values and strategic imperatives is not always so readily resolved; the president's rhetoric notwithstanding, key American allies such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia often rule in a manner counter to the American ethos. Just as in the past, balancing vital interests and fidelity to American ideals will remain the central challenge for American leaders through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ■

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