The history and historiography of American diplomacy: principles, traditions and values

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In the aftermath of the First World War the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) was founded in New York city. Even the leadership of this small, non-partisan, elite body of Americans concerned with foreign relations acknowledged that it was unrepresentative of public opinion at large. Necessarily so; for one of the earliest and specific goals of the Council was to reverse the isolationism which informed the American rejection of membership in the League of Nations in the winter of 1919–20. (I refer to these issues below.) On the broader level the CFR sought to 'improv[e] America's understanding of international affairs in general and of US foreign policy concerns in particular', to quote the words of the current Council President, Leslie Gelb, in the Foreword to the volumes under review. Towards this end the Council began publishing in 1928 an annual Survey of American foreign relations. Initially the SAFR volumes treated issues topically, with synoptic essays (on arbitration, immigration policy, international indebtedness and such like) which often began their coverage before the First World War. With its account of 1931 this series became known as The United States in world affairs (USWA). The later volumes provided rather...
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more factual information, without losing their analytical edge. For some 40 years USWA stood as a record of how informed scholarship could co-exist with argumentative bias while avoiding pro-administration partisanship. If this was the Annual Register of the American foreign policy establishment, it was excellent intellectual value; and USWA remains the best detailed introduction to US foreign relations in the 1930s-1960s.

Undoubtedly better known than USWA is Foreign Affairs. This journal started as a quarterly in 1922 and soon established itself as the leading American periodical devoted to the analysis and shaping of contemporary foreign policy. (The emphasis on the programmatic character of Foreign Affairs is crucial: serials such as the American Journal of International Law, American Political Science Review and Political Science Quarterly, for all their discussion of international relations, were much less policy-oriented and lacked so precise an ideological and sociological identity.) Rivals have come and gone, the most successful being Foreign Policy, first issued in the winter of 1970-71 and published by the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. But Foreign Affairs, now appearing six times annually, though in a format scarcely changed over 75 years, remains the most widely known journal of its kind inside and beyond the United States. Which tyro in university courses on ‘American Diplomatic’ has not read in Foreign Affairs George Kennan’s original anonymous article on the ‘Sources of Soviet conduct’, wherein the Containment Doctrine was outlined? Or, much more recently, which old-hand has not been challenged by Kennan’s reflections on ‘American [Diplomatic] Principles’?

Additionally, the Council on Foreign Relations has published and sponsored numerous individual studies as well as other serials. Among the latter have been the long-running and variously titled Political Handbook of the World annual series, which originated in the late 1920s, and the cumulative volumes in the Foreign Affairs Bibliography; while influential monographs have included works by Stanley Hoffmann and Henry Kissinger, plus the exhaustive and partisan

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2 The United States in world affairs: an account of American foreign relations, 1931 (New York, London: Harper Bros, 1932). The USWA was suspended for the war years when even before Pearl Harbor much of the Council’s energy went into the War and Peace Studies enterprise. See CFR, The war and peace studies of the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1946). A companion annual reference volume, begun in 1939 by the Boston-based and originally pro-League World Peace Foundation, was later published by the CFR entitled, Documents on American foreign relations: From 1947 to 1954, the Brookings Institution in Washington issued Major problems of United States foreign policy, a series of annual analytical surveys, organized topically and regionally, which combined something of both SAFR and USWA, yet were more programmatic.


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classic by Langer and Gleason on American entry into the Second World War: The world crisis and American foreign policy. To this impressive list have been added the four volumes published by Oxford University Press in conjunction with the American Reference Publishing company, edited by Bruce Jentleson and Thomas Paterson, and 'prepared under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations': the Encyclopedia of US foreign relations.

What will the reader find in the voluminous Encyclopedia of US foreign relations (EUSFR)? The objective record is straightforward: some 1,700 pages, containing roughly 1,000 times that number of words, apportioned into 1,000-plus entries, three-quarters of which are quite brief, ranging from a few hundred to one thousand or so words; about one-fifth are longer essays, up to 5,000 words; and one in twenty of the entries has approximately 10,000 words. Topics range alphabetically from the mid-nineteenth-century British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen, to the Zimmermann telegram of 1917. (The so-called ABC countries of Argentina, Brazil and Chile appear under separate headings, as does the XYZ Affair.) As to subject-matter, some likely candidates (lobbying and Political Action Committees (PACs), peacekeeping, the treaty-making power) get no designated entry; economic and strategic issues are generally well handled; while international law and human rights are covered at length in broad and intelligent terms, though the specific entries on international legal institutions are feeble. A chronology, basic statistical materials on individual countries and a classified bibliography form three appendices; and the work ends with an index. Maps of variable quality and utility, mostly borrowed from other sources, are offered throughout the pages; and citations in the 'Further reading' notes are sometimes formally inconsistent. Cross-referencing to related entries is done via a 'See also' paragraph concluding substantive entries: surely a poor substitute for typographical highlighting in the essay itself. (Such a method is employed successfully and unobtrusively elsewhere.)

Individual readers will dispute the relative space given to particular items: Berlin receives 6 pages, Cuba 9 pages, followed by another 9 pages on the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962. Yet since many contributors regard that crisis as the most dangerous incident of the Cold War (14 pages), this allocation is defensible. More important, and regrettable, are the many inaccuracies which disfigure the essays. Obvious typographical and chronological slips abound; inconsistencies are frequent, with three different ways of spelling Hawaii, for example; place names, Arabic transliterations, central European diacritics, Spanish family

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**In the following pages the titles and terms of the EUSFR are used whenever possible; otherwise the relevant location is given by volume (I–IV) and page numbers.
names, Japanese nomenclature, Russian patronymics—these are some of the casualties. Occasionally chunks of text have been misplaced. There are also indisputable factual mistakes and terminological inaccuracies: the Senate, let alone Congress, does not ratify treaties. But perhaps most frustrating are the mispellings of well-known American politicians and public figures who have frequented Capital Hill and Washington at large. With over a score of consulting, associate and assistant editors involved, the result may prove the adage about many cooks. Such are the hazards of multiple authorship!

The publication of this 'comprehensive, multivolume reference work' (to quote Gelb's Foreword again) invites comparison with others. For bibliographical materials, the bulky, annotated volume edited by Richard D. Burns, Guide to American foreign relations since 1790, retains its pre-eminent position. (Though published 15 years ago for the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the Burns Guide can be updated by the excellent historiographical essays which appear in Diplomatic History, the quarterly journal of SHAFR.) Other single dictionary-form sources should still be kept or bought, notably the Flanders collaboration. Those seeking chronologies (and ready to check the entries) will continue to turn to Brune's annotations. Where there seems a real choice between multivolume works (excluding general reference works like the recently completed ten-volume Scribner's Dictionary of American history), readers should note that the passing of 20 years has not dulled the sharpness or lessened the analytical value of dozens of essay-length topical articles in DeConde's compilation, Encyclopedia of American foreign policy.

Over 370 scholars have contributed to the EUSFR, writing on average 3-4 essays each; but this crude figure compresses a single entry (by Judith Ewell on Jeane Kirkpatrick) and multiple contributions (by Stephen Rabe), to cite deliberately two specialists of U.S.-Venezuelan relations. (The Venezuelan boundary dispute of the 1890s is discussed by Justus Doenecke, who shows how to exploit primary texts—a weakness of the EUSFR as a whole. For example, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 is quoted more or less verbatim—but not obviously so.) If a dominant tone can be heard among these hundreds of contributors it is that of the consensus fractured by the Vietnam war. Such a reaction is not surprising; for even the most active proponents of that war have given us more than enough evidence of both their self and public deception—not to mention the

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disingenuousness of the avowed policy-goals. Yet we may recall that Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, wrote, when 'put[ting] Vietnam in context: We...who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values.'

Given that Larry Berman's essay on the Vietnam war is almost as long as those on the First World War and the Second World War; and given also that dozens of other essays are on this scale (from the American Revolution and George Washington via the Supreme Court and the Judiciary to the United Nations), it may be instructive in surveying the EUSFR to consider not individual arguments or particular statements of the historical record but rather how far these hundreds of authors help us to understand (in McNamara's phrasing) the principles, traditions and values which inform American diplomacy.

But before such reflections, two caveats. To mitigate charges of plagiarism against the present writer, it should be emphasized that any merit in the following paragraphs may be attributed readily and unreservedly to the creators of the EUSFR. Conversely, particular criticisms and endorsements of trends in American diplomatic history are not directed only at the huge team which has laboured on the EUSFR. If these disclaimers sound like the proverbial 'weasel-words' despised by Theodore Roosevelt, it may be best to regard the rest of this essay as aiming to offer a general approach to the history of American foreign relations which is prompted by the material under review. By the same token, something of the peculiarities of American diplomatic history and historiography may also be highlighted.

Periodization, political structures, official pronouncements and popular ideologies: the pre-First World War legacies

Jentleson and Paterson open the EUSFR with one of the most challenging essays: their own statement of the 'Key questions' to raise in studying American foreign relations. Without sharing the editors' particular formulations, fellow students would surely agree that certain issues must be addressed in any attempt to provide a comprehensive introduction to the 'record of American diplomacy'. Simply put, these questions are: what have Americans done to others? How and when did they so act? What were their goals and what was their success? Implicit in many of the contributions to EUSFR is the question: who acted? In other words, how representative was official policy of popular or sectional interests and opinion? More technically, then, the questions concern the empirical record of events, the material and ideological forces at work, and the formal structures and effective sociology of policy-making. This brief list of topics may not satisfy the international relations specialist in defining that subject's general field of enquiry; but it may fairly stand as a preliminary check-list to mark off the distinguishing characteristics of American diplomacy.

The distinctive features of US foreign relations are a function of more general American history.** Undoubtedly, the most striking aspects of that larger history are the territorial expansion of the United States, its demographic and economic growth, and the increasing political, military and cultural influence of it on the rest of the world. Expansion lay at the heart of the American War of Independence and the Revolution; and enlarging the national boundaries through a strong central government while preserving republican institutions were interrelated goals in drafting the Federal Constitution of 1787. The history of the new Republic until the Civil War broke out in 1861 may be seen as a conflict between the free and slave states projected outwards into territories ruled or claimed by the British, the French, the Spanish, the latters' Mexican successors, and the Russians. (The latter thus played their early part in prompting the anti-British slogan of the Expansionists in the 1840s: 'Fifty-Four Forty

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**Portuguese and Spanish-speaking Latin Americans, of course, can use a handy adjectival form for the United States, estadunidense/estadounidense and they are correspondingly aware of the verbal elision of the United States of America with the whole of the Americas—a political identification familiar to historians and frequently practised by those whom South Americans invariably call North Americans.
or Fight'). After the Civil War the traditional process of consolidating land-based expansion at the cost of the Amerindians continued, while further territory (Alaska) was added and Caribbean islands (notably Hispaniola) coveted. Cuba, 'the pearl of the Antilles', always had pride of place as a possible insular possession; but when the opportunity came in the Spanish-American War of 1898, anti-imperialists, military strategists and racialists compromised on a solution in the Teller and Platt Amendments of 1898 and 1901 which left Cuba formally independent but in fact an American protectorate. (The compromises over neighbouring Puerto Rico remained constitutionally and politically far more complex even to today.) Meanwhile, thousands of miles across the Pacific, the imperial logic of a century culminated in the American annexation of Hawaii and the acquisition of the Philippines for the 'new American empire'.

The Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino war (in the EUSFR term) marked one of the many 'great debates' in American foreign relations. Contemporaries posed four connected questions: (a) what was the relationship of the earlier, essentially land-based territorial expansion of the Republic to the quest for major overseas possessions? (b) did the extension of maritime and commercial power entail colonial control of foreign peoples? (c) what domestic constitutional and social changes might imperialism bring? and (d) what were the implications for American foreign policy in general? The last question was already being posed in language that would dog and confuse the analysis of US foreign relations throughout the twentieth century: the language of isolation. But before terminology is examined, we need (like the Great Debaters) to return to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The expansion of the United States in North America after the War of Independence and the march to the banks of the Mississippi (1783) was subsequently marked in somewhat imprecise, but usually huge stages: the Louisiana Purchase (1803); the acquisition of east and west Florida in the next decade; Texas and its claims, most of the extensive Oregon territory, present-day California and the rest of the Mexican Cession—all gained in the course of the 1840s and mainly thanks to the Mexican war (1846–8); with the Gadsden Purchase (1853) in the south-west and the decades-long drawing of the American–Canadian border to the north completing the process (EUSFR, I, pp. 349–62). The drive for continental union in North America was

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accompanied by presumptions towards South America, classically expressed in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, but ideologically prefigured during the Revolution and later given joint executive–congressional support in the No Transfer Resolution of 1811. (In one of his fine essays, Gaddis Smith highlights an important and often neglected event.) Thomas Jefferson saw the Monroe Doctrine as carrying forward the vision of George Washington, famously expressed in the latter's Farewell Address of 1796: the self-denying ordinance against American involvement in Europe was both the quid pro quo for European abstention from Western hemispheric affairs and the prerequisite for expanding the power of the United States. Furthermore, warnings to Europe in the east, protectorates to the south and land-acquisition to the north and west were all promoted on unilateral lines. This was the historical basis of what should have been called the American doctrine of unilateralism. But because the United States was relatively isolated geopolitically; because, in other words, it was difficult for the European powers to attack the United States; and because the Founders had stressed this geographical separation as the material basis for a policy of non-involvement and true balance-of-power politics, the American diplomatic practice of acting unilaterally became known as isolationism. By the end of the nineteenth century, when the issue was whether the United States should expand abroad like the European empires, the term isolation began to acquire pejorative connotations. Isolationism (viz. unilateralism) had worked for the early Republic and in winning land westwards to the Pacific; but isolationism (now coded to mean reluctance to acquire subject peoples overseas) was outdated. So, at least, it was argued by the expansionists, as they tried to dispel 'the Washington legend'.

The confusion caused by the identification of political unilateralism with geographical isolation might have been resolved, as it became clear in the early twentieth century that American military intervention (notably in Central America and the Caribbean) was undertaken independently, that is without 'entangling alliances' with other powers (to echo Jefferson's First Inaugural). Instead, the debates on American entry into the First World War and the League of Nations further confused the issues, setting meanings which have lasted to today. Before we review the tangled history of the interwar period and its relationship to post-Second World War foreign-policy debates, we need to take another look at the nineteenth century; not this time at the territorial and political expansion of the United States but at the partisan, constitutional and ideological aspects of the 'rising American empire'.

Nineteenth-century American expansion, as in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, was driven by different socio-economic groups: hunters, traders,
farmers, manufacturers, sailors, railroad makers; by slave-holders and free-soilers; by southern filibusters and northern annexationists. The first political parties of Federalists and Republican Democrats defined themselves along foreign-policy lines; and the splitting of the Whigs and the formation of the Republican Party in the 1840s and 1850s reflected foreign as much as domestic issues—the blend that a century or more later would be called 'intermestic': the tariff; internal improvements and transportation systems; the acquisition and settlement of territory; immigration policy; overseas trade; and, of course, slavery. When the post-Civil War Republicans and Democrats took their modified political shape, their regional (or 'sectional') identities reflected different material interests as well as ideological values. Which political party (each already a coalition of disparate forces) would the western farmers and free-silver advocates support? From such diverse roots grew the nineteenth-century sociology of foreign policy-making in the United States. While party formation and realignment were the spectacular forms of sociological changes and struggles, the constitutional apportioning of powers between the Executive and the Congress and between the Senate and the House of Representatives also revealed social as well as ideological divisions. Annexation of Texas in 1845 and Hawaii in 1898 by congressional joint resolutions was testimony to the senatorial minorities which could thwart a two-thirds majority for annexation under the treaty-making power but not muster half the votes in both chambers against annexation by a bill. The House might seek a say in the ratification process (as with Jay's Treaty in the 1790s) or to determine the outcome of any future peace treaty (as in the Wilmot Proviso of the 1840s). Congress as a whole, with the power formally to declare war, might be more or less belligerent than the President, with his ability to precipitate war: in 1812 against the British, in 1846 against the Mexicans, in 1898 against the Spanish and in 1917 against the Germans. Thus the American Republic from its very foundation had displayed a foreign policymaking system which was highly complex both sociologically and systemically. Late twentieth-century political scientists would refer to comparable partisan battles and inter-branch struggles as aspects of an institutional crisis; but historians of American foreign relations will be aware of such phenomena from much earlier examples.20

Along with physical expansion went its various belief-systems: the ideological forces which have been variously described as leading, following, certainly

accompanying the growth of the United States. The exact causal relationship is surely the greatest potential debate in the historiography of American foreign relations; for every political event of note has been framed in the discourse which is special to American foreign relations. But this very specialness may be easily entangled in the circularity which often informs the discussion of ‘American exceptionalism’. The term merits quotation marks; for it is the subject of many essays and books, and it is also highly problematical. The phrase does not get a separate entry in EUSFR; nor is it listed in the index; but the editors touch upon its connotations in their introductory comments on ‘Core US goals’.

Perhaps the Gordian knot of American exceptionalism can be cut by separating form and content. Too often the term is analysed (or deconstructed) by evaluating the contrasts and similarities between the United States and its putative analogues economic statistics here, social indicators there, with the balance-sheets inclining for or against difference, even uniqueness as the mark of the American condition. Instead, we should think of the ways Americans fashion their historical consciousness and, a fortiori, their diplomatic tradition. The distinctive characteristic of the American historical consciousness is its ahistoricity, its lack of the sequential or diachronic sense and the concomitant underplaying of change; whereas synchronic thinking is all-pervasive in American culture. The classic example is the belief in the timeless relevance of the American Revolution in general and the Founders in particular; while in diplomatic terms the doctrinal aspects of foreign policy from Monroe to Clinton express a consensus that the broad policies of successive administrations are manifestations of immanent and permanent American diplomatic interests. Moreover, and obviously so, such doctrines and their derivative corollaries and associated principles are framed as legitimating premises for action. Thus in 1904 the (Theodore) Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine claimed a ‘police-power’ for US intervention in the rest of the hemisphere; while a few

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21 The literature is vast. For an excellent introductory anthology, wider than its title suggests and perceptively annotated by one of the contributors to EUSFR, see Norman A. Graebner, ed., Ideas and diplomacy: readings in the intellectual tradition of American foreign policy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), which can be updated with Michael H. Hunt, Ideology and US foreign policy (New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 1987).


years earlier the Open Door Principle (1899–1900) demanded equal access for the United States along with the existing imperial powers in the commercial exploitation of China.** Such diplomatic presumptions have not been categorically unique to the United States: all imperial powers have made comparable claims and justified them, if need be, by simple Machtpolitik. (Secretary of State Olney's fiat of 1895 directed at the British over Guyana's boundary said it all: EUSFR, IV, pp. 261–3.) What was, and remains, peculiar or exceptional about American diplomatic rhetoric is the persistence of hegemonic national presumptions combined with ahistorical universalism. Woodrow Wilson captured this combination precisely when in his 'Peace without victory' speech of 22 January 1917 he proposed extending the Monroe Doctrine to the world.

Doctrines, corollaries and principles form the core of what may be called the 'canon of American diplomacy'. Beyond this official lexicon lies one idea, one ideology which informed the Revolution, the expansion of the nineteenth century, and Wilson's paradoxical extension of the Monroe Doctrine. Aspects of the same ideology can be detected in early colonial thinking; it was refashioned in George Bush's 'New World Order' rhetoric and has reappeared in Bill Clinton's assertion of American 'indispensability'. In the 1840s this protean, inspirational idea was represented as Manifest Destiny: the providential mission of the Anglo-Saxon Americans to make their political and social system coterminous with North America. Though Canadian confederation in 1867 thwarted that particular goal, the specific language of Manifest Destiny returned at the end of the century to justify sea-borne expansion across the Pacific and even on to the shores of Asia.  

The aim of the preceding paragraphs has been to show how well established were the principles, traditions and values of American diplomacy (in McNamaras's phrasing) before American entry into the First World War and the subsequent debate on membership of the League of Nations. Expansion first on land and then overseas was the essential tradition; the central principles combined continentalism with unilateralism; and the dominant values of racial, political and social superiority were encapsulated in the belief in Manifest Destiny. There were, of course, qualifications. Monrovian continentalism did not, in fact, prevent the acquisition of a Pacific empire or limit the quest for foreign markets and political and economic influence in Asia. Rather the

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** The phrase 'open door' had been used earlier and more generally by President McKinley à propos the peace treaty concluding the Spanish-American War. Secretary of State John Hay did not use the phrase in his so-called Open Door Notes a year or more later—though the term was explicitly mentioned by German and Russian diplomats.
accumulation of material goals was accompanied by the enlargement or aggregation of legitimating principles. We have also seen that traditions encompassed inter-branch struggles and profound social ('domestic') conflicts for political power. The next paragraphs will examine American rejection of the League of Nations and interwar isolationism as stages in the 'shaping of American diplomacy'.

The interwar years: isolationism and its legends

For most historians, with their empirical bent, historiography comes after the narrative account. Practising historians, of course, know that these distinctions are problematical but useful; while post-modern theorists, with perverse superficiality, have belatedly discovered a problem discussed by Herodotus and Thucydides. In the case of American interwar isolationism, however, the normal process is reversed. Everyone seems to know about the literature; but much of this secondary writing is confused argumentatively and adrift empirically. Perhaps more surprisingly, much of this confusion was exemplified and then deepened by a sympathetic attempt to rewrite the study of interwar isolationism.

In the early 1950s, William Appleman Williams published an essay entitled 'The legend of isolationism in the 1920s'. Relatively unknown at the time, Williams was to become one of the twentieth century's most influential American historians. As the most famous member of the 'Wisconsin School of Diplomatic History', Williams's particular contribution to the historiography of isolationism was both general and specific. On the broadest level he argued that expansionism was a key element in US diplomatic history; and, more importantly and startlingly to Williams's contemporaries, this expansionism was driven by agrarian (mainly Midwestern) interests. (If we are not now surprised by these propositions, Williams must take some credit.) More specifically, these sectional interests once condescendingly dismissed as isolationist and inward-looking, were deeply concerned about US relations with the rest of the world, particularly and understandably commercial relations.

So far, so good. But the 'Legend' article confused the analysis of isolationism. Animated by social and intellectual hostility to those often dubbed the eastern seaboard internationalists, Williams's article was a sympathetic attempt to rewrite the study of interwar isolationism.

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ist establishment, Williams combined his political criticisms of post-Second World War US foreign policy with a misconception of pre-Second World War isolationism. Tackling these complexities in a review article may be inadvisable; but given that the EUSR does not challenge the dominant historiography of isolationism, an alternative perspective should be given. Moreover, the postwar case against the isolationists, woven into the lessons derived from the prewar years, was a powerful element in the thinking that sustained the American side of the Cold War. (The Soviet contribution to the Cold War is not at issue here; but we may note that the relevant EUSR essays display what may be called a post-revisionist tolerance to the USSR—and to the People’s Republic of China: I, pp. 241–56, 273–88; IV, pp. 36–51).

Accounts of interwar isolationism usually—and correctly—begin with the rejection of American membership of the League of Nations in 1919–20. But this is only half the story, for the rejection of the League was a consequence of the Senate’s failure to agree to the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, part 1 of which was the Covenant (or constitution) of the League. In this rejection the supporters of the League played a crucial role in that many Senators, led by President Wilson, opposed conditional ratification of the Versailles Treaty. So while the outright ‘bitter end irreconcilable’ opponents of American membership in the League willingly voted against the treaty as a whole, unconditional proponents also helped to create the blocking one-third minority to prevent ratification. Thereafter, the catalogue of interwar isolationism is drawn to include such episodes as the Washington Conference on the Limitation of Armaments (1921–2); the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928); the Stimson Non-recognition policy towards the Manchurian Crisis (1931–3); the Senate’s eventual failure to support American membership of the Permanent Court of International Justice (1935); the writing of the Neutrality Acts (1935–9); and, most important, opposition to President Franklin Roosevelt’s foreign policies, particularly from the outbreak of the European phase of the Second World War until Pearl Harbor. (This list uses the designations found in the EUSR.)

Williams attempted to reopen the interwar historiography by insisting that isolationism had not characterized the 1920s—and, inferentially, the 1930s. In this way, the isolationists would be absolved from the terrible charge of bringing on the Second World War. This was important in the 1950s because opposition to contemporary US foreign policy was labelled (neo-) isolationist. Just as isolationism had brought on the Second World War, so a repetition of that


policy would mean losing the global struggle against Sino-Soviet communism. (This syllogism was the essence of the ‘lesson of Munich’ so frequently invoked by Cold Warriors.) In the Williams account, the United States was not isolationist in the interwar years: witness the commercial expansion, the humanitarian concerns, the calls by isolationists like Senator William Borah of Idaho for diplomatic recognition of Soviet Russia.

Williams's argumentative strategy was bold and understandable: deny the prevalence, the existence even of American interwar isolationism. If the United States had not in fact been isolationist, how could American isolationism have contributed to the Second World War? Many decades later it is even clearer that Williams was wrong empirically and argumentatively because the United States was indeed fundamentally isolationist during the interwar years, if isolationism is correctly seen as the avoidance of political and military alliances. Strengthening American economic links with the outside world, promoting humanitarian causes, recognizing revolutionary regimes: no serious isolationist opposed such contacts. What, then, was the relationship of interwar isolationism to the outbreak of the European phase of the Second World War? (The Asia–Pacific aspects do not offer even a prima facie case against the isolationists, as their critics acknowledge by invoking a ‘paradox’ in isolationism.) The answer unwittingly given by the contemporary and retrospective opponents of the isolationists can be inferred: the isolationists were those who opposed policies that have been described as appeasement. For the implication of the indictment drawn against the isolationists is that they should have supported the League and its leading members, notably the British, as they connived at Axis aggression.

There are three related reasons why interwar isolationism remains a bogey. One is somewhat ironic: even the defenders of the isolationists pay little attention to interwar European politics, particularly of the League, which would show how problematical American support of the League and its leading members would have been. Likewise, the indictment of political isolationism remains unchallenged, with continuing misconceptions about the detail and implications of the evidence. Thus the Kellogg-Briand Pact is still regarded as sentimental and futile, whereas it was partly promoted and then interpreted as a means to align the United States with the League. Finally, the implicit alternative to isolationism is rarely examined from a prewar and postwar per-

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Eventually, one antonym became generally used in political discourse and historical accounts: internationalism. The disasters of the interwar period had buried American isolationism and given birth to American internationalism. Perhaps it took brave hearts to challenge such humanistic language, such a noble ideal?

The postwar years and the Cold War: the legend of internationalism

The years up to the First World War had shown that American diplomacy (a diplomacy of expansion) had been conducted on fundamentally unilateralist lines, though the great debate at the turn of the century had confused such unilateralism with the geopolitical isolation which had been its material premise. The subsequent great debate during the interwar years was whether unilateralism (now pejoratively called isolationism) was both possible and practical. Pearl Harbor seemed to offer incontrovertible proof that isolationism was both impossible and suicidally impractical: such was the lesson drawn by Senator Arthur Vandenberg. With Vandenberg himself deeply involved in the creation of the United Nations, both at San Francisco and in the Senate, the transition from the isolationism which had defeated the League of Nations to the internationalism embodied in the successor organization was dramatically personified. But what was this new internationalism? And how complete was Vandenberg's conversion? Robert Messer's perceptive essay (EUSFR, IV, pp. 258–9) raises this second question and thereby draws the reader's attention to the first conundrum.

Internationalism is not accorded a separate essay in EUSFR; but many pages mention international organizations and movements which overtly or inferentially promote this amorphous cause. (The index cross-references 'Internationalism' mainly to twentieth-century individual Americans.) The historiography of internationalism far outweighs that of isolationism, of course; for the former should have a global resonance, while the latter is presumed to be

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36 Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr. and Joe Alex Morris, eds, The private papers of Senator Vandenberg (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), esp. ch. 1. Vandenberg entered the Senate in 1928, and he was often apart from unambiguous isolationists such as Senators Borah, Hiram Johnson and Henrik Shipstead. Two different studies are Justus D. Doenecke, Not to the swift: the old isolationists in the Cold War era (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1979) and Thomas N. Guinsburg, The pursuit of isolationism in the United States Senate from Versailles to Pearl Harbor (New York, London: Garland Publishing, 1982).
particularly appropriate to the United States.\textsuperscript{37} The EUSFR sketches an uncertain path from the writings of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the League of Nations and United Nations in the struggle between the principles of state sovereignty and trans/ suprastate values and interests. But even more evidence lies on the pages of the EUSFR that the diplomatic tradition of the United States has been highly resistant to the erosion of American sovereignty. This is very much the theme of Louis Henkin's brief essay on international law; and it emerges as a sub-theme in his lengthier analysis of the Supreme Court and the Constitution.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, the skimpy treatment given by the EUSFR to American practice within and even outside international organizations disguises the strength and persistence of the American commitment to state sovereignty— for the United States. In a far shorter, though more definite line than that from Grotius, American presidents and their congressional allies (initially the Senate but increasingly the House) have agreed on limiting the competence of international organizations to which the United States belongs or considers joining.** From the peace conferences at The Hague (1899 and 1907), the drafting and rejection of the League Covenant (1919–20), the failure to join the Permanent Court of International Justice matched by entry into the International Labour Organization (1919), the drafting and approval of the Charter of the United Nations and the Statute of the International Court of Justice (1945–6)— White House and Capitol Hill had invariably agreed on curtailing the reach of international bodies inside the United States or over American interests. The exceptions to this general rule have concerned essentially inter-branch struggles: whether the executive might initiate intergovernmental action; whether the erosion of congressional powers over trade and the tariff could be reversed. But these battles inside Washington were usually pitched in terms of whether Congress or the President better represented different American interests to the outside world.\textsuperscript{39}

The Cold War was not far advanced before both the executive and Congress began selectively using the UN. (Indeed, the early controversy inside the UN in 1946 over atomic-energy control can be interpreted as initiating the Cold War.) Thus, unilateral American action in Greece and Turkey in 1947, heralded by the Truman Doctrine, was defended as promoting UN principles while bypassing its procedures. As the relevant volumes of USWA for 1945–50 show, long before


**Competence is a more general term, of continental provenance; whereas (Anglo- ) American legal discourse uses 'jurisdiction'.

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The 1940s closed there were loud American calls for reform of the UN to weaken Soviet power symbolized in its Security Council veto. The Korean war, technically a UN operation, was accorded this status only because of the temporary absence of the USSR from the Security Council, itself a protest at the seating of the US-allied Chinese Guomindang authorities. The basic story continued in the complex Bricker Amendment campaign of the early 1950s. Here the essential debate was which branch was better able to fight the Cold War at home as well as abroad. The Senate (speaking for Congress) sought a decisive say in preventing human rights intrusions from the United Nations, while the Eisenhower administration wanted to minimize the role of Congress (essentially the Senate) in the framing of international agreements. So just as the interwar battles over the League and the World Court showed a continuing American resistance to outside bodies infringing American sovereignty (in the terms of the time), so the first decade of the postwar Cold War era prolonged this attitude—an attitude shared by both presidents and members of Congress. Forty years have not reversed this diplomatic tradition, though the inter-branch struggle has seen the different antagonists swap places. These are the common themes behind the history of Washington's approach to human rights conventions, the codification of the Law of the Sea, the jurisdiction of the International Court, the remit of the World Trade Organization, intergovernmental regulation of the environment: the language of internationalism will be used; the tradition of unilateralism will persist. In these respects, the Cold War offered the United States a new geopolitical framework to practise a mixture of old-fashioned isolationism (hereinafter called unilateralism) and newly adopted multilateralism (hereinafter called internationalism). As the end of the Cold War has demonstrated, both diplomatic methods will be continued. George Bush said exactly this when announcing his New World Order to the United Nations in 1990. More recently, Bill Clinton's rhetoric of American 'indispensability' brilliantly captures both the popular

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ideology which inspired the language of Manifest Destiny and the humdrum.

diplomatic need for flexibility, for officials to be able to select different methods to pursue American goals.42

The Vietnam war is the striking omission in the foregoing list. Ideologically and institutionally, the war represented the temporary breakdown of the particular consensus which had sustained the Cold War in the United States. The differing efforts of Presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush and now Clinton have been alike in trying to rebuild the self-belief of the American people in the superiority of their own social and political system. Likewise, these five presidents have challenged, more or less directly, the congressional surge that culminated in the War Powers Act of 1973. (Various authors of the EUSFR invariably if implicitly side with the executive by referring to PL 93-148 as the War Powers Resolution.) Yet whatever the human, economic and material costs of the war to the American people (let alone the peoples of former Indo-China), Vietnam did not change the basic patterns sketched out above. On the contrary, both proponents of the war and their domestic critics drew on their conflicting interpretations of the meaning of the American past. As in the 1840s and the 1890s, at the time of the debates over the League and American entry into the Second World War, the protagonists invoked their ideal images of the American mission, their views on the proper role of Congress and the presidency.43 What was distinctive about the debate was its self-referentiality, with each side so obviously calling the American past to support present policy and future goals. A decade or so later, as the ‘Vietnam syndrome’ (EUSFR, II, p. 14) seemed to take hold, the Reagan administration, its supporters and critics, once more called explicitly for guidance from...
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the distant past as they battled over the legitimacy and applicability of the Reagan Doctrine and the proper direction of American foreign policy.44

Conclusion

It used to be a joke levelled against historians of the United States that theirs was a small academic compass. The editors and publishers of the Encyclopedia of United States foreign relations are to be congratulated for showing that the compass of American diplomatic history embraces the 'great globe itself', to echo the borrowed words of a one-time US ambassador to Moscow and Paris, William Bullitt.45 While this essay has sometimes diverged from the particular paths drawn by the contributors and questioned their individual perspectives upon events, the message to be found in the preceding paragraphs is that the EUSFR provides the best way currently available for exploring the paradox which informs American foreign relations—that a country whose political leaders and ordinary citizens pride themselves upon their modernity should repeat such familiar institutional struggles and practice a diplomacy whose methods, values and principles are so traditional.


45 William C. Bullitt, The great globe itself: a prelude to world affairs (New York: Charles Scribner, 1946), p. v. Bullitt was an early public critic of the Yalta agreements (February 1945) for endangering the 'Atlantic doctrine', ibid., ch. 11; Bullitt's analysis of the onset of the Cold War can be compared to James Burnham, The struggle for the world (New York: John Day Company, 1947), in showing how the Containment Doctrine was the concave or defensive side to the convex or dynamic geopolitics of American expansion into Eurasia. Cf. idem, Containment or liberation? An inquiry into the aims of United States foreign policy (New York: John Day Company, 1953). Geopolitics is not discussed in EUSFR. A relevant anthology is Hans W. Weigert and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, eds, Compass of the world: a symposium on political geography (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1944).