

US foreign relations in the twentieth century: from world power to global hegemony

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All students of American history know that in early 1941 the publisher Henry Robinson Luce wrote an essay for his *Life* magazine entitled 'The American century'.¹ Less well known is the series of essays published 40 years earlier by the British campaigning journalist, William T. Stead, entitled *The Americanisation of the world*.² In a wide-ranging study of the history, politics, foreign relations, commercial practices and culture of the United States, Stead envisaged the new twentieth century as the American century. During the celebrations of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in the mid-1970s, the relatively new but already well-regarded journal *Foreign Policy* published a series of retrospective and prospective articles by leading policy-makers and commentators on the future third American century.³ During the 1990s the theme of the twenty-first century becoming the 'next American century' became a motif both of President George Bush's putative New World Order and of President Bill Clinton's visions of the transition into the third millennium.⁴ In recent years many books and essays have been published under the rubric of the American century, though the portentous title itself gives no clue as to their contents, or the methods and theories of their

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¹ 'The American century', *Life* 10, 17 Feb. 1941, pp. 61–5. Nothing in this edition of *Life* prepares the reader for what was to become a frequently cited—if perhaps seldom read—short essay. See, generally, Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce: a political portrait of the man who created the American century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), esp. ch. 16.

² William Thomas Stead, *The Americanisation of the world, or the trend of the twentieth century* (London: Review of Reviews, 1902). Stead plays a minor part in the recent essay by Geoffrey Best, 'Peace conferences and the century of total war: the 1899 Hague Conference and what came after', *International Affairs* 75: 3, July 1999, pp. 619–34.

³ See the first contribution to this series on 'The third century' by Thomas L. Hughes, 'Liberals, populists, and foreign policy', *Foreign Policy* 20, Fall 1975, pp. 98–137; cf. Felix Gilbert, 'Bicentennial reflections', in William P. Bundy, ed., *Two hundred years of American foreign policy* (New York: New York University Press for the Council of Foreign Relations, 1977), pp. 1–19.

⁴ Stanley R. Sloan, *The US role in a New World Order: prospects for George Bush's global vision*. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1991); 'Clinton proposes new agenda for the 21st century' (22 Oct. 1995), *USIS Official Text*, 24 Oct. 1995.

authors.⁵ As these and numerous other examples show, secular tropes can be easily found in both the public and the unofficial accounts of the United States throughout the present century. Nor, of course, is such rhetoric new: it is simply a more precise, more chronological rendition of the long-established, even pre-Revolutionary faith in the transcendent American mission to the world.⁶ Given these ahistorical, quasi-religious and crusading qualities to the idea of an American century; given also that the notion seeks to shape the American future politically as much as describe the American past historically; can we detect any basic patterns from the closing of the twentieth century which allow us to speculate about the opening of the twenty-first century from an American perspective?

To survey, let alone analyse a century in the international history of one country within the limits of a brief article may appear difficult; to attempt such a project in the case of the most powerful modern state may appear impossible. Yet so sure, so steady has been the growth of American power that the broad patterns emerge with striking clarity. Moreover, each stage in this process has been marked by a contemporaneous debate on the current meaning and future direction of the employment of American power. In this way, the history of American foreign relations in the twentieth century can be seen (as it has been since the Revolution) as a series of Great Debates.⁷ These debates have concerned not just the uses of American power abroad but the implications for such use at home. This qualification is not meant to suggest that the boundaries between foreign and domestic politics are clear and precise; rather, it is to acknowledge the interplay between the two spheres—to borrow a nineteenth-century distinction. Though it is often asserted that ‘politics cease at the water’s edge’, this exhortation should be understood as deprecating partisanship. That

⁵ For a representative sample see Harold Evans, *The American century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; London: Jonathan Cape, 1998); David Slater and Peter J. Taylor, eds, *The American century: consensus and coercion in the projection of American power* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); A. G. A. Valladão, *The twenty-first century will be American* (New York and London: Verso, 1998); Donald W. White, *The American century: the rise and decline of the United States as a world power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996); Olivier Zunz, *Why the American century?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and, better known in foreign policy-making circles than any of the previous authors, George F. Kennan, *At a century’s ending: reflections, 1982–1995* (New York and London: Norton, 1996).

⁶ Loren Baritz, *City on a hill: a history of ideas and myths in America* (New York and London: John Wiley, 1964); Frederick Merk, *Manifest destiny and mission in American history: a reinterpretation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer nation: the idea of America’s millennial role* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1968); Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest destiny: a study of nationalist expansionism in American history* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935; repr. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963).

⁷ I have argued this case in two essays for this journal: see ‘Hemisphere and globe: the terms of American foreign relations’, *International Affairs* 70: 3, October 1994, pp. 701–20; and ‘The history and historiography of American diplomacy: principles, traditions and values’, *International Affairs* 74: 1, January 1998, pp. 165–83. Given the volume of references in those pages, plus the enormity of the material bearing on the present essay, the following pages deliberately avoid the historiographical issues surrounding the debates analysed below. All historiographical work on US foreign relations must begin with Richard D. Burns, ed., *Guide to American foreign relations since 1700* (Santa Barbara, CA and Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 1983), which is being revised and may be updated by the excellent essays which usually accompany the quarterly issues of *Diplomatic History*, the journal of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR), who sponsored the Burns *Guide*. The Spring and Summer 1999 issues of *Diplomatic History* (vol. 23, nos 2 and 3) contained ‘Roundtables’ on ‘The American century’.

events at home and abroad are not mutually influential is a proposition that no politician, particularly the most partisan, could ever sensibly endorse.

I

For historians of American foreign relations the twentieth century begins with the Spanish–American War of 1898. Like all wars, the name and the dates are conventional and problematic. (Spanish-speaking scholars, notably Cubans, avoid the term.⁸) But there is little doubt about what main events scholars have in mind when speaking of the war: the renewal of the Cuban struggle for independence from the Spanish crown; the intervention of the United States in the Caribbean; the extension of the US war against Spain to the site and prize of the Philippines; the acquisition of this Pacific archipelago and other Spanish insular possessions (notably Puerto Rico); and the formal independence of Cuba under US suzerainty, a protectorate status exemplified textually in the Platt Amendment and physically and militarily in the occupation of a naval base in Guantánamo Bay. (The US government, of course, continues to maintain this facility in eastern Cuba, though the Platt Amendment, as incorporated into the Cuban constitution, was rescinded in 1934.)

Throughout the twentieth century historians have analysed these events from a number of related perspectives. Did the Spanish–American War, the accompanying acquisition of territory, and the extension of American political and economic power represent an American variant of (European) imperialism? If so, was such imperialism ‘aberrant’ or a logical extension of the trajectory of American land-based nineteenth-century expansion? And, either way, did the moment represent the American ‘emergence’ to world power? To put the answers in a huge nutshell: the war and its aftermath did register an American form of imperialism, for American power (in its broadest sense) was projected abroad and imposed over unwilling subjects; and in taking American power overseas so forcefully and dramatically, the war represented both the *continuity* of American territorial expansion and its *discontinuous* passage into the Caribbean and western Pacific. Whether these events registered the American ‘emergence to world power’ was a question that returned in the mid-twentieth century, when the answer became part of the debate over the Cold War and the origins of collective security.⁹

Contemporaries of the Spanish–American War posed the same question and gave two different answers. One group argued that changing international conditions meant abandoning the traditional policy of hemispheric unilateralism

⁸ Louis A. Pérez, Jr, *The war of 1898: the United States and Cuba in history and historiography* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁹ Thomas A. Bailey resurrected the term, arguing that the USA had been a ‘world power’ since the War for Independence: ‘American emergence as a world power: the myth and the verity’, *Pacific Historical Review* 30: 1, 1961, pp. 1–16. Cf. the excellent contemporaneous survey by Richard W. Leopold, *The growth of American foreign policy: a history* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), esp. ‘Book II: emergence as a world power, 1889–1905’, pp. 103–236.

(usually called, pejoratively, American isolation); the other response was to insist upon the continued value of this policy (summarized in George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796 and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823), while recognizing the expanding political and commercial interests of the United States.¹⁰ Adherents to the former position, in other words, inclined to the view of the war as marking the emergence of the United States to world power; while the second group retorted that the United States had been a world power for over a century.¹¹ The core political issue between the two sides, the choice to which history supposedly gave the answer, was whether circumstances had changed so much that the United States should now join one or more of the major European powers in an alliance system to protect and promote American interests abroad. It was a question that would not be definitively answered until the 1940s.

The Great Debate occasioned by the Spanish–American War had other aspects. The formation of the Anti-Imperialist League was only the most obvious sign of the opposition to a war perceived as imperialistic, especially as the war was fought in the Philippines. Opponents of the war against the Filipino independence movement insisted that freedom could not be maintained at home if it were denied abroad. Racialists in the continental United States opposed the incorporation of non-whites into the American Union. The complex political and constitutional settlement of the war attested to the divisiveness of the issues and the varied geostrategic interests pursued by the US government: formal independence but dependent status for Cuba; the acquisition of the Philippines and Puerto Rico as possessions; the occupation of tiny Guam (some 200 square miles), the largest of the Northern Marianas, as a naval staging-post due east of Manila and almost due south of Tokyo; the contemporaneous annexation by congressional joint resolution of Hawaii (formerly independent and not part of the Spanish empire) with the prospect of eventual statehood. Two things at least were clear. American power had spread overseas; and this process affected domestic politics—just as much as it was itself a function of domestic factors: economic, cultural, political, not to mention commercial and strategic considerations.

The Spanish–American War had a geopolitical duality, a Janus-like quality which seemed to hinge on the continental mass of the western hemisphere, North and South America. President James Monroe, through his eponymous Doctrine, like Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist XI* a generation earlier, had counterposed the Americas to Europe, the New World against the Old World, the latter including Asia. (Hamilton had included Africa along with Europe and Asia as one of the three 'quarters' distinct from the American fourth part.) On one plane Americans pondered the results of the war, particularly in the Pacific,

¹⁰ This debate is treated at length by me in a forthcoming article on 'The political historiography of Washington's valedictory' in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*.

¹¹ Archibald Cary Coolidge, *The United States as a world power* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), esp. pp. 94, 121; John Holladay Latané, *America as a world power, 1897–1907*. The American nation: a history, vol. 25 (New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1907), esp. ch. 15.

for their impact on the traditional policy of abstention from continental Europe. Such a policy had not meant in practice avoidance of extra-European affairs. Throughout the nineteenth century Americans had been involved in European politics, most obviously through the drawing of the continental boundaries of the United States, beginning with the purchase from France of Louisiana in 1803 and ending with the acquisition of Alaska from Russia in 1867, and including en route the settlements with Spain and Great Britain during the 1810s–1840s over Florida and the Gulf littoral to the south-east and the Oregon territory to the north-west. (We should not forget the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848 following the Mexican War, which formalized the loss of half of Mexico's territory.) But this general reluctance to become involved in Europe was matched by a much greater readiness to shape events in Asia. Having taken the lead in opening up first China in the 1840s, then Japan in the 1850s and later Korea in the 1870s to American commerce, the US government was keen to limit Japanese gains at the expense of China following the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–5. Within a year of the formal conclusion of the Spanish–American War by the Treaty of Paris in 1898 (but while the war for Filipino independence raged), Secretary of State John Hay issued the so-called 'Open Door' Notes, which deprecated foreign commercial spheres of interest in China and formally committed the United States to maintaining 'the territorial integrity and political independence' of that vast yet amorphous country. (The precise wording of this formula changed on occasions.) These paper commitments aligned the US and British governments; but they went against German as well as Japanese and Russian interests. Hindsight shows us that, not for the last time, the US government had adopted a policy towards China which set it against two regional powers (Japan and Russia). More to the point, contemporaries appreciated that the American drive for markets, naval bases and coaling stations, and for greater political influence in the Pacific and along the shores of Asia, entailed an examination of traditional policies. As was astutely noted at the time, the very ease of American success obscured the need to reflect on the reasons and conditions for this pre-eminence and encouraged Americans to avoid a re-evaluation of their unilateralist practices.¹²

There was another theme or debate during the first decade of the century: whether the United States should play a part in the maintenance of the European 'balance of power'—indeed, a global balance, to include the rising Japanese and weakening Russian empires in East Asia. Politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt (both during and after his years in the White House) and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge discussed such ideas, along with their mutual friend, the naval historian and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan; while in Europe German officials, military (especially naval) experts, and commentators saw clearly that it was the economic, political and military power of the Wilhelmine

¹² John B. Henderson, Jr, *American diplomatic questions* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1901).

empire which was to be counterbalanced by American might, with France but especially the British empire the great beneficiaries.¹³

The most obvious public display of the inchoate American geopolitics was the US sponsorship of the Portsmouth (New Hampshire) Conference in 1905 concluding the Russo-Japanese War, and the presence of American delegates at the Algeciras conference in 1906 held to resolve peacefully the Franco-German confrontation over Morocco. Nothing showed more clearly the reach and potential of American diplomatic power and its material underpinnings; but equally the two conferences also produced public disavowals from both the Executive and the Congress that such diplomatic intervention was to be interpreted as the abandonment of the fundamental principles of neutrality and unilateralism which had characterized American foreign policy since the earliest years of the Republic. The similar qualifications which had accompanied the publication of the Open Door policy for China and the contemporaneous self-imposed limitations placed upon American participation in the embryonic Hague peace system (1899–1907) were further evidence that the growth of American power and the expansion of the United States territorially into the Caribbean and the Pacific were not only compatible with isolationism (already the shorthand and pejorative term for neutrality and unilateralism) but—in the minds of its proponents—the necessary condition for the American ‘rise to world power’. The isolationists, those who insisted upon maintaining the maximum American independence of action and a free hand to intervene or abstain as the occasion required, denied that this global status was novel: the United States had been a critical factor in world politics since its own emergence as an international agent in the course of its successful struggles against the British in the first and second wars of independence (1776–83 and 1812–14).¹⁴ The key question was whether, in the current and volatile international situation, when conservatives, reformers, liberals, radicals and revolutionaries all foresaw a cataclysmic inter-imperial war, traditional American policies were at least still relevant or at worst suicidal.

II

The outbreak of war in Europe in the summer of 1914 registered the opening of the next Great Debate on American foreign policy. There were essentially three possibilities in the minds of contemporaries, though the second and third

¹³ The classic and exhaustive study is Alfred Vagts, *Deutschland und die vereinigten Staaten in der Weltpolitik*, 2 vols (London: Lovat Dickson and Thompson; New York: Macmillan, 1935), summarized in ‘The United States and the balance of power’, *Journal of Politics* 3 (November 1941), pp. 401–49.

¹⁴ Though writing of the novel features for a largely non-American readership, John Bassett Moore invariably argued for the eighteenth-century basis of American world power: see Moore, ‘The United States as a world-power (1885–1902)’, in A. W. Ward et al., eds, *The Cambridge modern history*, vol. 7: *The United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), pp. 655–88; cf. idem, *American diplomacy: its spirit and achievements* (New York and London: Harper & Bros., 1905). Moore’s *bête noire*, Woodrow Wilson, was another contributor to this volume of the *CMH*, writing the chapter on ‘State rights’ (pp. 405–42).

tended to blur into one another: neutrality towards the belligerents, irrespective of the merits of their particular cases and declared war-aims; intervention on one side or the other, the general supposition (then and later) being that this would be alignment with the major Allied Powers of Britain, France and Russia against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman empire (not forgetting Bulgaria); or military abstention from the conflict, strengthening American armed (especially naval) forces, while from such a disinterested position advancing the cause of negotiation to end the conflict, with international sanctions (through various leagues to enforce peace) as the ultimate method for compliance.

These formulas, however plausible in the abstract, were not worked out in practice. To contemporary critics and successive generations of revisionist historians, President Woodrow Wilson preached neutrality while conniving at British infringements of American maritime rights, the result of intellectual and moral bias towards the English-speaking people and their political and social traditions. (A sub-group of this larger historiographical school identified the American economic stake in the Allied Powers' victory as underlying the more general sentimental attachment.) Some later commentators have conceded the *de facto* Anglo-American alignment from 1914 until the formal declaration of war in April 1917 but justified the convergence (and Wilson's actions) as both the unconscious, even inevitable American pursuit of a (global) balance of power and the realization of a new international order transcending just such traditional power politics. What is not contentious, whatever one's analysis of the more or less conscious workings of Wilson's mind, is that almost three years of an American diplomatic rhetoric of neutral rights were replaced, on entry into the Great War, by a Manichaean vision of supranational but American-defined morality crusading against Prussian barbarity and militarism.

American abstention from the Great War, and the American involvement in the Great War that followed, were both represented by Wilson as serving the higher cause of humanity. (This identity is what Wilson's major biographer, Arthur Link, had in mind when speaking of Wilson's 'higher realism'.¹⁵) National interests portrayed as international interests are nothing new; but such language tended to muddle the reasons, and even the pretexts for American intervention in 1917. Essentially the question for decision was whether events in Europe, on the Western Front as well as the February Revolution in Russia, and in the Atlantic, not to mention Japanese actions in China or events closer to home concerning Mexico, epitomized in the Zimmermann telegram, so affected American interests that war against the Central Powers was the unavoidable answer. (An American presence at the peacemaking would help to dislodge the Japanese from the dominant position they had assumed in China during the war—a proposition supported by the controversy which 'the Shantung

¹⁵ Arthur S. Link, *The higher realism of Woodrow Wilson and other essays* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), ch. 10.

question' aroused during and after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.) Even critics of Wilson's earlier policies believed the answer was 'yes' to a declaration of war—though they argued that the United States had been driven into this response by a mixture of official ignorance, self-deceit and even duplicity. Again, such recriminations are nothing new when countries go to war and count the costs later; but the bearing on American policy and the next Great Debate was unmistakable. With the Wilson administration concentrating on the moral arguments first against and then for intervention, the discussion over the lessons to be drawn would *appear* to be pitched less in terms of national and more in terms of international interest.

The Spanish–American War and American entry into the First World War framed the first two Great Debates of the twentieth century. The earlier occasion highlighted the relationships both between the means and goals and between the domestic and foreign causes and consequences of territorial expansion, particularly the question of the terms of American participation in the complex Eurasian alliance system. The legacy of that debate appeared after 1914, when the twin issues were whether the United States should or even could stay aloof from the latest European war; and whether or not the United States did intervene, would it seek to preserve an interstate system its detractors called anarchic or aim to create a new international order. The next Great Debate would provide uncertain answers to all of these questions through the controversy over American membership of the League of Nations.

III

The League of Nations, and especially American rejection of membership, dominates the historiography of American foreign relations between the First and Second World Wars. Given this scholarly fact, to offer an uncontentious overview of the essential issues as seen by contemporaries would appear impossible. But certain propositions are unchallengeable. First, the margins of rejection by the Senate were narrow. (The Senate voted on two separate occasions.) Secondly, the defeat was a result of the constitutional requirement that treaties be approved by a two-thirds vote of the Senate—a deliberately high margin designed to register indirectly wide popular support for international undertakings. Thirdly, both the proponents, led by Wilson, and the outright 'irreconcilable' opponents of American membership combined to defeat the compromises offered by way of reservations to secure senatorial approval of the Treaty of Versailles, the first part of which contained the Covenant of the League of Nations. As the British government made clear at the time, American accession to the League was their primary goal; the particular terms, even the privileges sought by the Americans, could be handled—provided the United States was in the League and committed to maintaining the postwar settlement devised at Paris and imposed upon the defeated Central Powers. That the 'bitter-end' opponents of American membership should first support over a

dozen reservations designed to nullify the effects of American membership and then vote down the package of terms altogether was one legislative thing, deplorable but expected: par for the procedural course in the fierce games of domestic and international politics. For the supposed supporters of American membership to follow suit was unimaginable—but it happened.

While commentators then and historians later have correctly seen the self-righteous hand of Wilson orchestrating this result, less attention has been paid to the terms (the reservations) upon which all sides agreed. The more important repeated the substance of earlier American conditions to multilateral treaties, notably those qualifying American support for the international legal system being devised at The Hague (whose third stage was overtaken by the outbreak of war in 1914); while, to look ahead, these same conditions would reappear in later international treaties, whether or not the basic texts were accepted by the US government. Thus the Four, Five and Nine Power treaties which emerged from the Washington Conference of 1921–2 (described by contemporaries as the Pacific–Asian equivalent of the Paris Peace Conference) were all subjected to comparable American qualifications and then approved overwhelmingly by the Senate. So it was with the eponymous Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928, one of the most misunderstood episodes in US foreign relations, when the isolationists quite deliberately finessed a potential multilateral military commitment (implicitly to the League of Nations) growing out of an earlier potential bilateral commitment (to preserve France’s postwar borders) into a simple restatement of unilateralism—though the so-called internationalists continued to hope that the popularly and misleadingly named treaty would be the means to take ‘joint action’ with the British and French governments.¹⁶

Between the Washington Conference and the Kellogg–Briand Pact came the first stage of the campaign for American membership of the Permanent Court of International Justice (the ‘World Court’), set up at The Hague under the auspices of the League and intimately connected to the parent body in Geneva. When the first vote on adherence to the court was taken in 1926, both the Executive and the Senate agreed to repeat the conditions which had reappeared during the League and Washington Conference debates—and which were to be reiterated in the Kellogg–Briand context. Again (in an echo of 1919–20) the League was prepared to accept *almost* all the American demands; but the insurmountable obstacle was an American veto which would cancel out the combined votes of the Permanent Members of the League Council: France, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom. Thus, when the issue returned to Capitol Hill in 1935, the Senate insisted upon terms that would have been rejected by the League—but only as a prelude to defeating the proposal as a whole: another

¹⁶ The Kellogg–Briand Pact was one of the informal terms used to promote Franco–American relations; but a title used by the US government was the ‘Multilateral treaty for the renunciation of war [as an] instrument of ... national policy’. See the commentaries of two pro-Leaguers: David Hunter Miller, *The Peace Pact of Paris: a study of the Briand–Kellogg treaty* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928); James T. Shotwell, *War as an instrument of national policy and its renunciation in the Pact of Paris* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929).

echo of 1919–20. To look even further ahead along the line of this trajectory, when the United States did eventually become a member of the World Court in 1946, the terms matched those rejected during the interwar years, just as the United States sponsored and then joined the United Nations (the court's parent body) on terms which essentially repeated those set for the League of Nations.¹⁷

What we see, therefore, is the continued and eventually successful insistence by the US government, most publicly through the actions of the Senate but essentially agreed if not actively promoted by the Executive, upon conditional acceptance of international engagements. Invariably these conditions (or privileges) include preservation of the Monroe Doctrine, ultimate determination of all issues concerning immigration, commercial agreements, self-determination of the fulfilment of obligations and the right to rescind a treaty, and at the most general level if never directly called such, the veto power over any combination of co-signatories. (The pattern has been repeated in recent discussion of the establishment of a Permanent International Criminal Court.) Thus the passage from rejection of the League of Nations to membership of the United Nations represented a peculiarly American journey: not so much from isolationism to internationalism, but rather the adoption of multilateral means and the retention of the unilateral option to promote American interests in a world where, at the end of the Second World War, American economic power was unsurpassed and its naval and aerial strength overwhelming. The indisputably strongest power materially had acquired the formal political power—if not the military power, for all its monopoly on the atomic bomb—to project its system even further into the world.

IV

Participants in the Great Debates of the twentieth century have looked backwards and forwards. Thus, both in the drafting of the UN Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice (the new 'World Court') and during the senatorial proceedings it was made clear that the anxieties of the interwar years would be met: there would be no foreign infringements of American rights, traditionally understood. Yet the assertion of these national privileges was accompanied, paradoxically, by a rhetoric of reducing congressional, especially senatorial, prerogatives. After all, it was the Senate, particularly that 'little group of wilful men' (in Woodrow Wilson's eve-of-war charge), whose self-conceit and moral blindness had first destroyed the League and then (much more so than the House of Representatives) shackled President Franklin Roosevelt with 'neutrality' laws designed to keep the United States safe from any European war—and, in so doing, objectively encouraged the forces of

¹⁷ The point can be seen in the classic account by Ruth B. Russell and Jeanette E. Muther, *A history of the United Nations Charter: the role of the United States, 1940–1945* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1958). The links between the episodes described in this section are elaborated in Michael Dunne, *The United States and the World Court, 1920–1935* (New York: St Martin's; London: Pinter, 1988), esp. chs 6–7, 9.

aggression.¹⁸ This reading of the past may be called the ‘Munich syndrome’, a compressed metaphor to equate senatorial isolationism with British appeasement, the combined result of which was to bring on the Second World War. In what soon became known as the Cold War, the Munich syndrome then acted as a double argument to maintain the wartime bias of power in favour of the Executive while engaging the Soviet Union ‘on every front’—the classic case being the combination of rhetorical globalism and regional containment expressed in Truman’s eponymous doctrine of March 1947.¹⁹ As Truman himself noted in his *Memoirs*, his task was to refashion what may be called the canon of American diplomacy to move the American people and Congress away from the territorial restrictions of the ‘patron saints’ of the isolationists (Washington and Monroe particularly) and adopt worldwide multilateralism in the pursuit of American national interests. What Truman failed to add, like the majority of commentators then and later, was that the unilateralism so treasured by the isolationists was not going to be abandoned (as his own Doctrine proved) but rather would be re-enforced by postwar multilateralism, so long desired by the internationalists.

Another example of these two-way links between past and future may be seen in the evolution of the Monroe Doctrine—an implicit if unlikely target of Truman’s strictures. The abrogation of the Platt Amendment (mentioned in section I above) was an early sign of FDR’s implementing his ‘Good Neighbor’ policy; and from a later perspective erasing this article of US suzerainty over Cuba was a specific and highly symbolic stage in the steady relaxation of US pretensions towards Latin America as a whole, exemplified at the most general level in the results of successive Inter-American conferences at Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Lima, Panamá and Havana (1933–40). During and after the time of official US belligerency in the Second World War, that is after Pearl Harbor, the United States pushed the process forward at Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro again, and Bogotá (1942–8), the core issue being the willingness of Washington to renounce a right to intervene coupled with the formal collectivizing of this practical possibility. The result was a classic case of the diplomatic principle known as *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. Scholars may debate the origins of the Good Neighbor policy under Herbert Hoover and even Warren Harding; but for all the so-called multilateralizing of the Monroe Doctrine under Roosevelt and Truman, it remained in its essential form in US membership of the UN and the ICJ; and as events in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panamá and Haiti showed successively and most publicly from 1954 to 1994, administrations from Eisenhower to Clinton, with effective support from and even prompting by Congress, have certainly not abandoned the early twentieth-century practice of

¹⁸ The standard but contentious account is the decades-old study by Robert A. Divine, *The illusion of neutrality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

¹⁹ Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr and Joe Alex Morris, eds, *The private papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 374; cf. Thomas G. Paterson, *On every front: the making and unmaking of the Cold War*, rev. edn (New York and London: Norton, 1992).

military intervention in the area peopled by those President James Monroe called his 'Southern brethren'.

Before we leave these segments in the much wider debate on the passage from prewar to postwar American foreign policy, we may note the convergence of the new Truman and venerable Monroe Doctrines to confirm spatially the comparable melding of the ideologies of unilateralism and multilateralism. The Monroe Doctrine was premised on the physical or geographical separation of the globe, which had its political counterpart in the ideological differences between the latter-day *ancien régime* of the Holy Alliance and the republican American Union. (In the 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville readily contrasted the democratic United States with autocratic tsarist Russia.) The geopolitical premise of the Truman Doctrine was the *indivisibility* of the world. But Americans did not formally substitute the latter political principle for the former: the new doctrine was added to the existing canon. In this way the key question left unresolved during the Great Debate over American entry into the First World War and membership of the League of Nations was answered. The United States was indeed affected by events beyond the hemisphere; but, rather than 'extend' the Monroe Doctrine to the world (in Woodrow Wilson's paradoxical formula), it would extend the logic of the Doctrine to define American 'peace and happiness' (in Monroe's simple formula) as dependent upon favourable conditions throughout the *whole* world. Of course, in practice, even an interventionist United States has not so totalized its foreign policy as to seek to operationalize intervention everywhere at all times. But there surely can be no doubt that such globalism has been precisely the ideological underpinning of American foreign policy since the outbreak of the Cold War.

V

If the debate on the League of Nations dominated the politics, and thus the historiography, of the interwar years, what can be said of the Cold War, which lasted twice as long and affected much more of the world? Though this is not a historiographical essay, something must be said about this voluminous literature; but since this is also a broad yet brief survey, it may be sufficient to state one crucial set of factors.²⁰ Even critics of American foreign policy overplay the impact of policies they retrospectively deplore. Here the best-known example would be so-called 'atomic diplomacy'. Whatever the mix of goals which the Truman administration sought in 1945, it still remains at best an open question whether Soviet actions were significantly conditioned by the threat of nuclear bombardment. Yet even this qualification is subordinate to a larger question: what was the general picture, the *Weltanschauung* that American policy-makers brought from their thinking on American history as prologue to the future? We

²⁰ On the limitations of critics of American scholarly nationalism, see 'Isolationism of a kind: two generations of World Court historiography in the United States', *Journal of American Studies* 21, December 1987, pp. 327–51.

may recall Luce's theme of the future 'American Century'. Luce was an individual, though very influential; his was a vision, not a an official blueprint. But the 1941 *Life* essay represented a way of thinking which saw the whole world lying before the United States, ready to accept the 'American system'—the suggestive phrase popularized by Henry Clay more than a century earlier. If we can return to this way of thinking, we can see the Cold War as that stage in American history when its self-imposed mission, namely the projection of its social and economic system as far and as widely as possible, was blocked by rivals, primarily and initially the Soviet Union, but also the latter's allies and dependants in the Soviet bloc, in the People's Republic of China, and throughout what became known as the Third World and the non-aligned or neutral states. These are general terms: the details were often murky; the lines were never drawn with absolute clarity; there were opponents of American policy within the allied countries and supporters within the opposing side. But the Cold War becomes much more comprehensible if the normal way of viewing events, that is, the image of an embattled, defensive United States threatened by encroaching material and ideological forces, is inverted and we see the decades-long American policy of 'containment' as the concave or defensive aspect of the convex or dynamic strategy of global expansion.²¹

Though such expansive thinking permeates many classic official documents of the early Cold War (the Clark Clifford memorandum of autumn 1946; the famous NSC-68 argument of spring 1950 that huge increases in the military budget would be economically functional), the contemporary record is remembered for reactive and defensive metaphors: George Kennan's 1946-7 picture of the *almost* irresistible force of Russian history in tandem with Bolshevik ideology in the more dangerous political and military shape of the Soviet Union; Dean Acheson's 'rotten apples in the barrel' that were the Greece and Turkey of the Truman Doctrine and that would soon spread their corruption to the whole of the Middle East and on to Africa; Eisenhower's image in spring 1954 of the 'falling dominoes' of Indo-China collapsing throughout the land mass of South-East Asia and the great archipelagos of the western Pacific—a sequence which under Lyndon Johnson became the rhetorical nightmare of Americans fighting communism on the beaches and streets of the Pacific slope.

The Great Debate over the accuracy of this geopolitical construction is usually dated to the so-called Vietnam War, whose beginning is conventionally dated to the early 1960s.²² But over a decade previously another Great Debate

²¹ William C. Bullitt, *The great globe itself: a preface to world affairs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946); James Burnham, *The struggle for the world* (New York: John Day, 1947).

²² Robert L. Beisner, '1898 and 1968: the anti-imperialists and the doves', *Political Science Quarterly* 85, June 1970, pp. 187-216, analyses the later Great Debate, while he and others do so less explicitly elsewhere: see idem, *Twelve against empire: the anti-imperialists, 1898-1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968; re-issued with a new preface, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1985); E. Berkeley Tompkins, *Anti-imperialism in the United States: the Great Debate, 1898-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970); Richard E. Welch, Jr, *Imperialists vs. anti-imperialists: the debate over expansion in the 1890s* (Itasca, IL: Peacock, 1972); idem, *Response to imperialism: the United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

had broken out over the biggest ‘domino’ ever to fall: China.²³ Had too much attention been paid to the (ungrateful) Europeans, while the real friends of the United States in Asia in general, and the Guomindang Chinese particularly, were being betrayed? This was very much Luceite thinking; and it found its kindred spirits not just among the ‘China lobby’ but among those who argued that if (western) Europe were important enough to have brought about the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift and NATO, then surely it was right for the United States to go on the offensive and ‘roll back’ communism not just to the borders of the USSR but even beyond, and thus bring ‘liberation’ to such regions as the Baltic SSRs.²⁴ It was perhaps forgotten in these recriminations that the Americans had supported the French in the first decade of the Indo-China war partly to maintain French commitment to a pro-West German European defence and security programme—though all the time (as the record shows) Washington rather wanted the French out of this particular war, so that it could be waged more successfully. The Geneva Conference of 1954 gave the Americans just this opportunity—shortly after Eisenhower had coined his ‘domino’ theory.

Until the increasing costs and palpable failure of the Vietnam War brought Congress, and especially the Senate, back more obviously into foreign policy-making, its members and the Executive had basically agreed upon one lesson from the interwar years and the onset of the Cold War: the President needed the maximum flexibility in the conduct, perhaps even the framing, of foreign policy. The controversy over the Bricker Amendment in the early 1950s epitomized this particular issue, though the episode is often misunderstood. The failure of the proposed constitutional amendment by the slimmest of margins in the Senate disguised the overwhelming belief that the Executive should indeed have the freest hand for waging the Cold War. Where senators wanted to put the curbs was on the intrusion of multilateral bodies into domestic, especially civil rights, matters. (The United Nations was the greatest bogey.) That the chief supporters of Senator Bricker’s domestic concerns came from the supposedly ‘internationalist’ South was further confirmation that this terminology was analytically shallow—though the pejorative force of ‘isolationism’ was levelled at critics right through and beyond the Vietnam War.²⁵ Even today it remains perhaps the worst term of abuse in the rhetorical armoury of successive administrations when foreign policy is debated. (The reproach is not, of course, levelled only by and against Americans.)²⁶

²³ Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘Another “Great Debate”: the national interest of the United States’, *American Political Science Review* 46, Dec. 1952, pp. 961–88; and, more generally, idem, *In defense of the national interest: a critical examination of American foreign policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

²⁴ John Foster Dulles, *War or peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1953); James Burnham, *Containment or liberation? An inquiry into the aims of United States foreign policy* (New York: John Day, 1953).

²⁵ Michael Roskin, ‘What “new isolationism”?’’, *Foreign Policy* 6, Spring 1972, pp. 118–27.

²⁶ For recent examples from the British press, see the reports of President Clinton’s 28th veto (on reductions for foreign aid): *Guardian* (London), 19 Oct. 1999, p. 4; and, on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, Will Hutton, ‘Will it take this to bring America to its senses?’, *Observer* (London), 17 Oct. 1999, p. 29.

The American failure in Vietnam led many to question the ideology of cultural superiority, which in this case had been blended with a crusading tradition: the Asian Cold War version of mid-nineteenth-century 'manifest destiny'. Thus was fashioned the notion that 'American exceptionalism' had come to an end.²⁷ It was a temporary hiatus: a moment of crisis which was striking for its brevity. In characteristic style, commentators worked alongside politicians in emphasizing the basic consensus of American beliefs (invariably expounded in the pronouncements of the leaders of the Revolution and Early Republic), within whose argumentative framework the fierce battles of American politics are fought. Thus throughout the 1980s, after the politically shaky presidencies of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan's rhetoric stressed the verbal components of consensus. Indeed, so successful were Reagan and his speech-writers that he could invoke Franklin Roosevelt as he set about deliberately dismantling the social programmes begun during the New Deal.²⁸

VI

The Reagan presidency will be remembered not for this particular oratorical trick but for beginning the (final) endgame of the Cold War. While scholars of Soviet-American relations continue to search for the immediate reasons for this sea-change (itself the happy culmination of precedents in each decade back to President Eisenhower), the 1980s confirmed the general thesis of this article that successive Great Debates have reflected earlier controversies and foreshadowed later priorities. Thus the Reagan administration made its contribution to the growing canon of American diplomatic principles with its own eponymous doctrine. Applied to Nicaragua and El Salvador in particular but global in scope, the Reagan Doctrine was defended as a restatement of a tradition going back even to the Founding Fathers.²⁹ This argument was challenged, of course; but the very rebuttal further emphasized the self-reflexivity of American political discourse.³⁰ Likewise, the old binaries of the early Cold War—internationalism vs isolationism, realism vs idealism—were rehearsed, the common element

²⁷ The impact of Vietnam was one of the themes which led Daniel Bell to write his important essay on 'The end of American exceptionalism', *Public Interest* 41, Fall 1975, pp. 193–224, esp. p. 204.

²⁸ William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the shadow of FDR: from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton*, 2nd rev. edn, updated (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), ch. 7.

²⁹ Robert F. Turner, 'International law, the Reagan Doctrine, and world peace: going back to the future', *Washington Quarterly* 11, Autumn 1988, pp. 119–36. See, more generally, Christopher C. DeMuth et al., *The Reagan Doctrine and beyond* (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1987); Mark P. Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: sources of American conduct in the Cold War's last chapter* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1994); James M. Scott, *Deciding to intervene: the Reagan Doctrine and American foreign policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and, from inside the Reagan administration, Robert Kagan, *A twilight struggle: American power and Nicaragua, 1977–1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996). For the Revolutionary era and George Washington, especially in this context, see Joshua Muravchik, *Exporting democracy: fulfilling America's destiny* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1991).

³⁰ Norman A. Graebner, 'An American tradition in foreign affairs', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 65, Aug. 1989, pp. 600–18, itself a version of an earlier argument by Frank Tannenbaum, 'The American tradition in foreign relations', *Foreign Affairs* 30, Oct. 1951, pp. 31–50.

being the unwitting confession that policies promoted to direct American foreign policy were alike in their essential nationalism.³¹

As one Great Debate finished, another began: that on the entwined themes of the end of the Cold War and the advent of a post-Cold War world, particularly the putative New World Order. Already the literature on these topics is large; and some of it has been discussed in these pages.³² Perhaps the key analytical question is how far the traditional frames of reference will survive in what is argued to be an unprecedented political situation.³³ For this historian the answer seems a racing certainty, as the Clinton rhetoric of the 'indispensable nation' suggests. Whether the forms of legitimation for American action in the world appear to change their names by a kind of political and cultural deed poll, their basic identity will continue. Thus 'humanitarian intervention' and 'democracy promotion', the fashionable language of the mid-1990s, like 'free markets' and 'globalization' in the early 1990s, will be terms coined in the ideological, which means historical, character of this century's most powerful state, the United States of America; and despite the universalist pretensions of this country, those guides to action will reflect above all the peculiar and paradoxical American cultural legacy from at least the days of the Revolution and Independence: its self-image as an exceptional society whose very uniqueness should be extended to the world. This particular American Dream will only be likely to fade over many decades when a rival world power comes to challenge the third millennium's first hegemon.

³¹ Nathan Tarcov, 'Principle and prudence in foreign policy: the founders' perspective' *Public Interest* 76, Summer 1984, pp. 45–60; Thomas H. Hughes, 'The twilight of internationalism', *Foreign Policy* 61, Winter 1985–6, pp. 25–48; Robert W. Tucker, 'Exemplar or crusader? Reflections on America's role', *National Interest* 5, Fall 1986, pp. 64–75; Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "'Citty upon a Hill'", *Foreign Policy* 66, Spring 1987, pp. 20–38.

³² See the references at note 7 above.

³³ John C. Hulsman, *A paradigm for the New World Order: a schools-of-thought analysis of American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era* (London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's, 1997).