

1919 and 1946: The United States at the Crossroads, Twice

Howard Munson
Pacific Union College

Few nations in history ever reach the point of contemplating world leadership. For the United States that unlikely apogee occurred twice. A common moniker for the Twentieth Century is the “American Century.” While this was certainly true by numerous metrics, it can be very misleading about the inevitability of this outcome and obscures much that we can still learn from this period. The focus of this paper is twofold, first to compare and contrast the foreign policy of the United States in 1919 and 1946, and second to do it within a perspective highlighting the enduring role of isolationist thought as a significant limiting factor on U.S. foreign policy. Isolationism was not just a period sandwiched between the world wars, instead, as this essay will highlight, it was a powerful force shaping U.S. foreign policy at both of these pivotal moments and links them together with far more similarities than commonly remembered. This brief examination also helps explain why we should not be surprised in 2019 to still be witnessing the enduring presence of U.S. isolationism in American politics and foreign policy.

A common starting point for U.S. isolationism is George Washington’s farewell address. “The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations,” declared the founding father, “is...to have with them as little *political* connection as possible.” “Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground?” he asked, “tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.”¹ American isolationism never meant complete isolationism. After Washington, the United States would never stop seeking economic and commercial relations with the rest of the world. U.S. isolationism would be political isolationism, of a

¹ George Washington, Farewell Address, 19 September 1796. National Archives, Founders Online, accessed on Feb. 14, 2019. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-00963>. Emphasis added.

hemispheric nature. This policy would hold with minor and brief exceptions until the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the entanglements that ensued in the Caribbean and the Pacific, projected U.S. rule beyond the bounds of the self-declared Monroe Doctrine. Suppressing the Philippine Insurrection and the Moro Rebellion, as well as numerous military interventions in the Caribbean and Central America, quickly forced questions of the role of the United States in the world into mainstream consciousness and started the U.S. debate between isolationists and interventionists that continues until today.

For the first half century, isolationism would hold the most sway. As scholars such as Christopher Nichols have demonstrated, U.S. isolationism was a widely held ideology emanating from a multitude of sources, well before 1914. Outspoken isolationists could be hemispheric expansionists such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, transnational Christian humanists like John Mott, peace activists of the mold of Jane Addams, as well as socialists, pacifists, anti-imperialists of many stripes, and many more. Before the Great War, progressivism, anti-imperialism, and racism, could all work together to motivate isolationist sentiment and political views.²

Regarding the Great War, isolationist ideas are a large part of any explanation for why the United States remained committed to neutrality for the first three years of the conflict. Indeed, it required British control of the information that crossed the trans-Atlantic cables from Europe, the death of hundreds of Americans at sea, U-boat attacks on numerous American-flagged ships, the Zimmerman Telegram, and finally, news of a democratic revolution in Russia, to overcome entrenched President Wilson's and America's isolationism.³ As a result, U.S.

² Christopher McKnight Nichols, *Promise and Peril: America at the Dawn of the Golden Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12-17.

³ Meirion & Susie Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence: America at war 1917-1918* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 34, 70.

intervention in the Great War was an unprecedented break with traditional U.S. foreign policy and created America's first brush with possible world leadership.

The role of isolationism in both 1919 and in 1946 was the same. At both points, isolationism threatened to undermine the postwar agenda of the sitting government. In 1919, Woodrow Wilson was fully in charge of U.S. foreign policy and had clear ideas for what he wanted the postwar world to look like. Wilson's Fourteen Points and his Four Points laid out a vision of the United States as a principal arbiter of the postwar world, complete with a new international collective security organization in charge of policing the globe.⁴ Wilson's ideas were radical, and he believed that he alone understood that this was what the people of the world wanted. As president, Wilson so firmly trusted to his own vision and capabilities that he personally led the U.S. delegation at Versailles, in many ways sidelining his own Secretary of State, Robert Lansing. Wilson performed most of the key negotiating himself, even though it kept him out of the United States for two months initially, and then for a final three month period.⁵ Though the treaty negotiations were a reality check on Wilson's idealism and the final product did not resemble many of his Fourteen Points, he was ultimately much more successful in convincing other world leaders of his ideas than he was in convincing his fellow countrymen.

Despite the fact that the American people initially indicated strong support for the theory of Wilson's League of Nations, the end of war celebrations were hardly over, when the postwar disillusionment began. Even as world leaders met in Paris, in a portent of what League membership might soon require, British, French, Japanese, and American troops were in the midst of military interventions in northwestern Russia and in Siberia, getting sucked into the Russian Civil War. The interventions would last until 1920. There was also fighting across

⁴ Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 45 (1984), 536.

⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *Paris: 1919*, 3, 15, 152.

Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire, as would-be national populations fought each other for space and borders. The War to End all Wars was not living up to its name, despite the mountains of treasure and millions of lives that had gone into it. Adding to a volatile situation, anti-communism spread around the world, unrelated but apace with a devastating influenza pandemic. By late 1919 the postwar world appeared to be just as complicated and fraught with peril as the lead-up to the Great War.

In a devastating blow to the Wilson government's postwar plans on November 19, 1919, Congress rejected the Versailles Treaty and membership in the League of Nations. There are a number of excellent reasons for why Wilson's plan for an interventionist United States ultimately failed in 1919. Being gone for so long, not taking any significant members of the opposition Republican Party with him to Paris, and presenting the treaty and league membership as an all-or-nothing deal, each contributed to Wilson inadvertently ensuring that his postwar plan failed to become a reality, even if as Arthur Link asserts, "No leader in history ever embarked upon a fateful undertaking with higher hopes or nobler ambitions."⁶ These missteps were so insurmountable specifically because isolationism was such an established and pervasive American ideology. It was so easy for Congressional opponents, such as Senator Lodge, to appeal to isolationist arguments, because they were the foreign policy baseline of the United States as a historically hemispheric power and recently as an unpopular imperialist power. Isolationism was a mainstream American ideology and instead of diverting the flow, Wilson's mistakes saw his ideas carried away by the flood of resurgent U.S. isolationism.

Just as 1919 witnessed the popular political upending of an administration's postwar plan, so too 1946 offered a specter of a repeat of exactly the same outcome. At first glance, this argument appears preposterous. The context and aftermath of the Second World War were so

⁶ Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979), 88.

different from the Great War, and after WWII, the United States becomes an interventionist superpower. Yet what about the similarities? Isolationist sentiment kept the United States out of the Second World War for years, just as in the Great War. In fact, anti-immigrant, xenophobia, and America First sentiment were stronger than ever before. The Neutrality Acts of the late 1930s wrote isolationist ideas into laws that put a straightjacket on would-be interventionists in American government. As Lynne Olson argues in *Those Angry Days*, there was a two-year fight in America between isolationists and interventionist over U.S. entry into WWII and the battle was at a standstill as 1941 was coming to a close.⁷ Once again, as before the Great War, it required a long list of grievances against the United States, culminating in the attack on Pearl Harbor to push past entrenched U.S. isolationism. Indeed, it is tempting to imagine that the events of December 7, 1941 altered how Americans thought, in just one day; to think that the realization of being attacked, with no warning, with no obvious provocation, and to lose, simply caused the blinding scales of isolationism to fall from the eyes of the American people. We assume that on that day, and reinforced by each day after, that the American people saw their world and their role in it clearly for the first time.

The political and foreign policy events of 1946, however, beg to disagree. Pearl Harbor only determined U.S. war with Japan, and it took Hitler's declaration of war against America to secure U.S. participation in the European War. Yet neither of these triggers decided U.S. foreign policy after the war was over. In 1946, the situation of 1919 began to play out all over again. Yes, the situation was dramatically different. Harry Truman was president, promising to fulfill the venerable Franklin Delano Roosevelt's postwar agenda. Compared to Wilson, both FDR and Truman were pragmatists, and thus much less likely to allow their own obstinacy or complete

⁷ Lynne Olson, *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh, and America's Fight over World War II, 1939-1941* (New York: Random House, 2014), 431-433.

faith in their own ideas to stand in their own way. Where FDR had been an admirer of Wilsonianism, borrowed many Wilsonian ideas, and, like Wilson, maintained strong oversight of U.S. foreign policy, Truman, as a recent substitute president “who knew nothing about foreign affairs, as he himself acknowledged,” deferred extensively to his foreign affairs and military advisors in the Department of State and the Pentagon.⁸ These advisors, chiefly in State, had spent much of the war years formulating a comprehensive postwar plan for an interventionist United States presiding over a world order, mostly of U.S. design and intended to benefit the United States and the world. The basic elements of this plan rested on the creation of a multilateral world economy (safe and open for U.S. business), protected by a collective security arrangement (the U.N.), backed up by the projection of U.S. military power. It was this plan that promised to prevent a Second Great Depression and avoid a Third World War, which these advisors presented to President Truman and that he wholeheartedly endorsed.⁹ The specifics that made perfect sense to Truman and his government advisors, however, were not necessarily common sense among the general American population.

The first contest between the interventionist aspirations of the Truman administration and the desires of a war-weary populace centered on demobilization of the armed forces and ran from September 1945 to early 1946. The debate in Congress focused specifically on the speed and scale of the drawdown. The most consistent cry from the American people in these months was “bring the boys home.” The deluge of mail regarding the return of service members literally filled the offices of their representatives in Congress.¹⁰ For the Pentagon and the White House,

⁸ Michael Dobbs, *Six Months in 1945: FDR, Stalin, Churchill, and Truman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 161.

⁹ Patrick J. Hearden, *Architects of Globalism: Building a New World Order during WWII*, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002), 39, 314.

¹⁰ *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 1st session, 91, part 7 (September 1945), 8924). Democratic Representative Andrew Jackson May of Kentucky, a supporter of military demobilization, related receiving 700 letter a day on the topic.

any potential pool of available American military might which the United States government desired to maintain in order to oppose Soviet strength at various points in the world had to first survive the legacy of isolationist thought in America and the popular demands for demobilization. The War Department, in the supreme irony of this event, actually precipitated its own over-demobilization when it belatedly realized by force of public and Congressional pressure that its attempts at artificially maintaining a larger Army, through a fair, but complicated, and therefore slow, points system, had instead created sufficient anti-military sentiment to imperil its future popular support and funding.¹¹

By the start of 1946, as a result of this public and Congressional pressure and the lack of centralized records to forecast such an outcome, the Army had actually already over demobilized by 1.8m personnel. Instead of leveling out in mid-1948 at 2.5 million men as originally planned, by June 1947 the entire U.S. military contained less than 1.6 million personnel.¹² As of mid-1947 this meant that with a total Army strength of 990,000, America possessed only the sixth largest army in the world.¹³ This total had to fulfill the occupation requirements for Germany, Japan, and South Korea, as well as garrison the country's now global network of bases acquired during the war. As a result of demobilization and relentless budget cuts, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Omar Bradley, stated before Congress that with only one "combat ready" division the Army "could not fight its way out of a paper bag."¹⁴ The long-term significance of the popular demand for demobilization was that it placed substantial and lasting bounds upon the international power that America's leaders could wield. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal

¹¹ Howard A. Munson IV, "The Rhetoric and Consequences of the Post-World War II Congressional Debate over Military Demobilization" (TMs, Portland State University, 2006), 93.

¹² Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security 1946-1948* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 81.

¹³ Munson, 94 and Terry H. Anderson, *The United States, Great Britain, and the Cold War 1944-1947* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 152.

¹⁴ Bradley, Omar N. and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: an Autobiography by General of the Army* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 474.

referred to it as “the paralyzing consequences of demobilization.”¹⁵ A *US News and World Report* editorial from March 1946 correctly identified the stakes and direction of this contest when it concluded that “after four years of war the *populace* favored bringing the soldiers home not the building up of strength abroad.”¹⁶ Just as in 1919, the non-interventionist wishes of the American people were steering U.S. military policy back toward being a hemispheric power.

Since money is the foundation for most action, the key test of the internationalism of the Truman administration resulted from a proposed loan to the bankrupt British Empire. For the State Department planners and the Truman administration the British Loan was the necessary first step to unlocking the government’s major postwar goals. Although the loan negotiations with Britain proceeded comparatively smoothly, in January 1946 the executive branch duly submitted its request to Congress, just as the consequences of the recent demobilization debacle were becoming clear. Despite the demobilization setback, Truman and his advisors hoped that the loan would sail quickly through Congress, thus setting a precedent for securing future reconstruction funds, upon which the realization of their multilateral economic goals depended. Instead of quick passage, however, the loan request became a battleground for a six-month Congressional debate that threatened any plans for bolstering Western Europe against Communist pressure, as well as the vision of establishing long-term global economic dominance.

The Republican minority in Congress aggressively attacked the loan with fiscal arguments and rhetoric that was Anglophobic, anti-imperialist, and isolationist. All seemed lost until the last-minute defection of the most internationally interventionist Republicans, led by Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, secured the funds. Even after its passage, the British Loan was a defeat for the administration. It was clear that there was no popular mandate in support of

¹⁵ Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), 107.

¹⁶ *U.S. News and World Report* XX (March 22, 1946), 22 in Munson, 94. Italics added.

the White House's internationalist economic policies. Americans were indeed turning inward after the Second World War, just as they had done in the aftermath of the First. Opinion polls taken between 1945 and 1946 demonstrated that "fewer Americans considered international problems primary than during the late 1930s, when isolationism had been a major constraint upon American diplomacy."¹⁷ Most Americans had high hopes for the United Nations Organization and there was a belief that after the horrors of two world wars, world leaders would settle their issues within the world body, rather than risk another open conflict.

The midterm elections of 1946 confirmed what polls suggested regarding the general public's growing disinterest in international affairs. While there were no doubt a multitude of issues on the minds of voters, the fact that Republicans won decisive control of both the House and the Senate for the first time since 1930 attested to the popular discontent with the Truman administration and its domestic and foreign policies. By November, President Truman's approval ratings had plummeted from their 87% high to a sobering 32% low.¹⁸ For all practical purposes, after the stiff opposition to the British Loan that Republicans had shown as the minority, the Truman administration's interventionist postwar plans appeared doomed with a Congress now dominated by the rival party. Indeed, one of the new majority's first items of business was to propose lowering President Truman's 1947 budget of 37.5 billion dollars by an additional six billion or nearly eighteen percent. Such a move confirmed the administration's fears that without desperate action they would be powerless to continue constructing economic multilateralism or to participate in European reconstruction.¹⁹

¹⁷ Freeland, 65.

¹⁸ Freeland, 77-78.

¹⁹ Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

Despite the changes in U.S. domestic politics, the trajectory of international events was toward a series of crisis. The Western Allies and the Soviet Union were falling out over the future of Germany and Eastern Europe, while along its southern periphery the Soviet Union was exerting visible pressure on its neighbors. In Greece there was a full-blown civil war, with communist forces threatening to topple the British-backed government. In next-door Turkey there were Soviet territorial and basing demands, threatening to turn Anatolia and its control of Black Sea Straits into another Soviet satellite state. Finally, in northern Iran, Soviet troops had remained after the agreed upon date of withdrawal, even while British and American troops had dutifully left. Top U.S. planners were aware of U.S. contingency war plans from 1946 that forecast the rapid loss of the entire Middle East region, if there was a concerted Soviet attack, even while recognizing that air bases in the region would be essential for any long-term victory over the Soviet Union.²⁰

At this juncture it is important to once again note that the dramatic uptick in hostility between the Soviet Union and the Anglo-American governments had not as yet exerted a significant pull upon the attention of the American people. What many historians refer to as the “1946 War Scare” regarding Iran and Turkey was something most Americans in 1946 were simply not aware of. The Truman administration, the State Department, and the Pentagon, by contrast, were falling into line along two important points of view. The first was the traditional British perspective that feared Russian imperialism and particularly feared its spread into the Middle East. The second was the view, best articulated by George Kennan, which saw radical communist ideology as the motivation behind Soviet actions and expansionism. In the same way that the demobilization and British Loan debates had demonstrated just months prior, the gap

²⁰ Michael J. Cohen, *Fighting World War Three from the Middle East: Allied Contingency Plans, 1945-1954* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 18, 20, and 54.

between the issues dominating the minds of those in government and those of the governed remained quite wide.

In immediate aftermath of the tumultuous events of 1946, Joseph Jones of the State Department lamented, “We thus face a situation similar to that prevailing prior to Pearl Harbor: a powerlessness on the part of the government to act because of Congressional or public unawareness of the danger or cost of inaction.”²¹ At a March 7 cabinet meeting President Truman agreed that he would attempt to steer the ship of Congressional and public opinion. “The decision is,” declared Truman, “to ask Congress for 250 million [dollars for Greece] and to say this is only the beginning. It means [the] U.S. going into European politics. It means the greatest selling job ever.”²² For strategic, military, humanitarian, and predominantly economic motivations, the United States was about to expand from being a traditionally hemispheric power to becoming an interventionist world power.

At noon on March 12, 1947, President Truman addressed an emergency joint-session of Congress for the purpose of overcoming entrenched American isolationism. Following the advice of Arthur Vandenberg, the leader of the Republicans who defected to the president’s foreign policy vision, Truman proceeded to “scare the hell” out of Congress and the American people.²³ Henceforth, the U.S. would throw off its isolationist mantle and “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”²⁴ There was no stipulation about the Western Hemisphere or about wartime versus peacetime. Due to the success of the Truman Doctrine speech and the

²¹ Freeland, 81.

²² Anderson, 169.

²³ Justus D. Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists In the Cold War Era* (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), 741.

²⁴ Truman Doctrine Speech, U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record* 80th Cong., 1st sess., doc. 171, pt. 2 (12 March 1947): 1980.

ensuing policy milestones it set up - U.S. support for Greece and Turkey, Marshall Plan funding for European reconstruction, U.S.-led European integration, and the formation of NATO - the United States became a committed interventionist world power, fully entangled. Though this was essentially the same crossroad that the United States faced after the Great War, and up to this point it appeared that familiar patterns were repeating themselves, this time the president ultimately succeeded in leading the country down a different path.

As a final note, it is worth recognizing that it took the trauma of a second global conflict, the possibility of a third against an opposing power such as the Soviet Union, with a political and economic ideology that were antithetical to those of the U.S., two years of internal political debates, and the real possibility of the Truman administration failing to achieve its chief economic and strategic postwar goals, to cumulatively overcome isolationism as the traditional foreign policy of the United States. Despite all that has happened since 1947, with more than a half-century defined by U.S. interventionism, isolationist sentiment and rhetoric still make appearances on America's political landscape, possibly waiting for the day when a majority of the population will be led back to the familiar and comfortable contours of an all-American tradition.