

A Capsule History of American Foreign Policy

American Neutrality and Westward Expansion

In the years after independence, U.S. foreign policy was aimed at territorial expansion. Other foreign policy goals at this time included avoiding conflicts with Europe as well as preventing European powers from re-establishing empires in Latin America.

The Spanish-American War and American Imperialism

Americans entered into a war with Spain for humanitarian and economic reasons. The Spanish-American War of 1898 lasted only a few months. After defeating Spain, Americans established their first overseas colonial empire by seizing Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Congress also voted to annex the Hawaiian Islands, where wealthy American landowners had overthrown the local queen. Cuba became an informal protectorate. Americans obtained the Panama Canal Zone and built the Panama Canal.

World War I

A great war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914. The armies on both sides quickly became tied down in trenches running across France. When Germany announced unrestricted submarine warfare and began sinking American ships, **President Woodrow Wilson** asked Congress for a declaration of war. The United States sent an expeditionary force to France, which helped lead to an Allied victory. Wilson's **Fourteen Points** promised to re-organize Central and Eastern Europe along national lines and to establish a new international peace-keeping organization: the **League of Nations**. Wilson helped negotiate the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, but the U.S. Senate failed to ratify the treaty and the United States never joined the League of Nations.

World War II

In the 1930s, the **Nazi (National Socialist) Party**, led by **Adolf Hitler**, obtained power in Germany. Hitler had plans to conquer all of Europe and exterminate the Jewish people.

Germany attacked Poland in 1939, beginning World War II. Soon German armies had overrun Poland; next they conquered Belgium, Denmark and France. Americans were at first determined to stay out of the war. Congress passed the **Neutrality Acts**, making it difficult to aid foreign countries under attack. In December 1941, Japan attacked the United States at **Pearl Harbor**. Germany and Italy also declared war on the United States. Americans became involved in the most bloody and destructive war in human history. Eventually, the Germans were defeated. Hitler committed suicide in April 1945 and Germany surrendered. In August 1945, Americans dropped **atomic bombs** on two Japanese cities. Japan surrendered, ending World War II. The United States welcomed the creation of the **United Nations**—which replaced the unsuccessful League of Nations.

Outbreak of the Cold War

The Cold War began when the Soviet Union turned Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe into Communist satellites. An “**Iron Curtain**” fell on Eastern Europe, cutting off all contacts between this region and the West. When it seemed that Communism might spread to Greece and Turkey, President Truman offered these countries military and economic aid. In the **Truman Doctrine** (1946), Truman promised to give U.S. support to all free peoples resisting Communism. American foreign policy now aimed at the **containment** of Communism—preventing it from spreading any further.

The Korean War

Truman’s “containment” policy stopped the spread of Communism in Europe, but in 1949, Communists seized power in China. Meanwhile, Korea had been divided into **North** and **South Korea** after World War II. North Korea established a Communist government. In 1950, North Koreans invaded South Korea. President Truman sent U.S. troops to South Korea to resist further Communist expansion. The U.S. army quickly defeated the North Koreans and advanced into North Korea. U.S. troops went so close to the Chinese border that Communist China entered the war. The **Korean War** lasted two more years and ended in an armistice in 1953. Korea remained divided along the same latitude that it had been divided before the war.

Cuba

In 1959, **Fidel Castro** and his force of guerilla fighters overthrew the dictator Batista in Cuba. Once in power, Castro imprisoned opponents and established a Communist dictatorship. When Castro nationalized property belonging to American companies, the United States cut off trade and diplomatic relations. President Eisenhower gave his approval to a secret plan to train Cuban exiles, who planned to invade Cuba and topple Castro. The exiles were armed and given special training by the CIA. Newly elected President **John F. Kennedy** decided to continue with Eisenhower’s plan. In April 1961 Cuban exiles landed at the **Bay of Pigs**. Kennedy refused, however, to give air support on the day of the invasion and the exiles were defeated.

After the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro strengthened his ties with the Communist Soviet Union. In October 1962, American spy planes discovered that Cubans were secretly building bases for Soviet nuclear missiles, only 90 miles from Florida. This discovery triggered the **Cuban Missile Crisis**—the closest the world has come to nuclear war. Kennedy established a naval blockade of Cuba. Then he threatened to invade the island if the missiles were not immediately withdrawn. Soviet leader Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles, and Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba and to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey. The two leaders set up a special “hot line”—a direct telephone connection between their offices.

The War in Vietnam

The Cold War also spread to Southeast Asia. North Vietnam was under the control of a Communist government. South Vietnam came under the control of a dictator. When the South refused to hold elections to reunite the country, South Vietnamese Communists (known as **Viet Cong**) launched a guerilla uprising. American leaders believed in the “**Domino Theory**”—that if Communists took over South Vietnam, the rest of Southeast Asia would fall to Communism like a row of dominoes. In 1964, Congress authorized the President to send ground troops to Vietnam. By 1968, there were half a million American troops there. Over the next eight years, American troops and bombing missions proved unable to win the war despite their technological superiority. The war grew increasingly unpopular in the United States. President Nixon began withdrawing U.S. troops in his policy of “**Vietnamization**,” while secretly negotiating with the North Vietnamese in Paris. In 1973, Nixon concluded the Paris Peace Accords, agreeing to withdraw from Vietnam. Congress passed the **War Powers Act**, which limited the President’s future ability to commit troops overseas without the authorization of Congress. If Congress did not authorize the action in 60 days, the President was required to withdraw the troops.

The Iran Hostage Crisis

In 1979, popular demonstrations overthrew the **Shah** of Iran. Religious leader **Ayatollah Khomeini** returned to Iran from exile, and Iranians created a new Islamic Fundamentalist state. The Shah first fled to Egypt, and then went to the United States to seek medical attention. The Iranian government responded by allowing an angry mob in their capital city of Tehran to seize the staff of the U.S. Embassy there. For more than a year, U.S. Embassy staff were held as hostages until they were released.

The End of the Cold War

In the 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced more “openness” into Soviet society. His efforts unleashed nationalist feelings in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Rather than use force to put down popular demonstrations, Gorbachev allowed Eastern Europeans to have greater freedom. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall, a hated symbol of the Cold War, came tumbling down. The Soviet Union itself dissolved at the end of 1991, and was replaced by the Commonwealth of Independent States, a loose confederation. The Cold War was finally over.

The First Gulf War (1990)

America was now the world’s only Superpower. When **Saddam Hussein**, a dictator in Iraq, invaded Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush therefore decided to act. He built up a coalition of international forces, which advanced on Kuwait. Iraqi forces were defeated and retreated to Iraq. President George H.W. Bush refused, however, to topple Hussein in Iraq itself.

Attacks of September 11, 2001

On **September 11, 2001**, commercial airplanes flew into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. **Al-Qaeda**, an Islamic Fundamentalist terrorist group, was responsible. Members of al-Qaeda had boarded several planes, taken the passengers aboard as hostages, entered the cockpits, and flown each of the planes into their targets on a suicide mission. President George W. Bush declared a global “**War on Terror**.” When the **Taliban**, the Islamic Fundamentalist government of Afghanistan, refused to turn over **Osama bin Laden**, President Bush sent U.S. forces to Afghanistan, where they overthrew Taliban rule.

The Second Gulf War (2003)

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein remained in power. President George W. Bush feared that Hussein might be hiding biological or chemical “weapons of mass destruction,” which could be turned over to al-Qaeda terrorists. In March 2003, President Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. The Iraqi army was quickly defeated. Hussein fled but was later captured, tried and executed by the new Iraqi government. Although the initial victory was swift, an insurgency led by Hussein’s former supporters and Fundamentalist Muslims broke out against moderate Iraqi leaders and the American occupation. President Barack Obama later withdrew U.S. forces from Iraq. On May 2, 2011, President Obama sent a team of Navy SEALs (*special operations forces*) into Pakistan, where they captured and killed Osama bin Laden, who was hiding there.

U.S. Participation in International Organizations

- ▶ **The United Nations (UN).** According to the **United Nations Charter**, the major aim of this organization is to maintain world peace of the world, while trying to promote friendship and cooperation among nations. All member nations belong to the **U. N. General Assembly**. This organ provides a world forum for the discussion of important affairs. The United States and four other nations serve as permanent members on the **U. N. Security Council**. These permanent members enjoy special powers, including **veto power** over all U.N. peacekeeping operations.
- ▶ **The “World Court” (International Court of Justice).** This is the judicial branch of the United Nations. It meets in The Hague in the Netherlands, where it settles legal disputes between countries.
- ▶ **The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).** NATO was formed in 1949 to defend Western Europe against possible Soviet attack. It reassured Western Europeans that the United States would come to their defense, with nuclear weapons if necessary. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has expanded its functions and membership. Its focus remains on the defense of its member states. NATO sent forces into Bosnia in 1995, and launched air strikes against Serb troops in Kosovo in 1998. In 2001, NATO forces joined the United States in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 attacks.
- ▶ **The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).** NAFTA created a giant trade zone in North America, consisting of the United States, Canada and Mexico. Each country pledged to its lower tariffs on other members’ goods.
- ▶ **The World Trade Organization (WTO).** Members of the WTO have agreed to a set of rules for world trade, including rules for settling disputes. WTO members have further agreed to take steps to reduce tariffs and to eliminate other obstacles to world trade. The WTO now has more than 150 member countries.
- ▶ **The International Red Cross/Red Crescent.** This organization coordinates international relief efforts, monitors the treatment of prisoners of war, cares for wounded on the battlefield, helps locate missing persons, and acts as a link between nations at war. The International Red Cross/Red Crescent is an example of a **non-governmental organization (NGO)**, an organization that is not part of a government.
- ▶ **United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).** UNICEF was originally founded to provide food and healthcare to children in countries that suffered destruction in World War II. In 1953, UNICEF became part of the United Nations. UNICEF receives about two-thirds of its revenues from governments and one-third from private contributors. It distributes vaccines, medicines, nutritional supplies, and educational supplies, and promotes children’s rights

The Active Citizen

Complete the chart below.

How the United States Has Dealt with International Conflicts

Conflict	How/Why the United States Became Involved	Impact of U.S. Involvement
Spanish-American War	_____	_____
	_____	_____
World War I	_____	_____
	_____	_____
World War II	_____	_____
	_____	_____
Korean War	_____	_____
	_____	_____
Bay of Pigs Invasion	_____	_____
	_____	_____
Cuban Missile Crisis	_____	_____
	_____	_____
War in Vietnam	_____	_____
	_____	_____
Iranian Hostage Crisis	_____	_____
	_____	_____
First Gulf War	_____	_____
	_____	_____
Second Gulf War	_____	_____
	_____	_____

- ▶ Select any one of the conflicts on the chart above and write a speech defending American policy. Be sure to mention one or more “tools” of American foreign policy that either were used or that might have been used to resolve the conflict.
- ▶ Make an illustrated timeline showing the history of American foreign policy from 1917 to the present.