

The making of a superpower, 1890–1919

Key questions

- Why were the 1890s a turning-point in US foreign policy?
- Why did the USA go to war with Spain in 1898?
- How successful was Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy?
- How far had an 'American empire' been created by 1917?
- Why did the USA become involved in the First World War?
- How successful was Wilson's foreign policy 1917–19?

Overview

Up until the 1890s, the United States of America (USA) had largely kept out of the affairs of other countries. Its own inward expansion, followed by the Civil War and

Reconstruction gave the USA little concern for foreign affairs. But this changed towards the end of the century. There was a growing body of opinion that the United States should take a fuller role in world affairs generally, and in those of Latin America in particular. Though there were as many arguments to counter this view, the two decades between 1890 and 1910 saw America take a more prominent role on the world stage, and even saw it acquire colonies of its own in the Caribbean and Pacific.

Over the turn of the century, Presidents Roosevelt and Taft consciously expanded America's role in the world. Theodore Roosevelt believed that the USA had a duty and a right to take a more prominent role in international affairs. Under his administration, the so-called 'Roosevelt Corollary' stated explicitly that the USA had the right to interfere in the affairs of the states of Latin America. Roosevelt also increased American involvement in the Far East — a policy continued by Taft with his encouragement of American financial investment in China.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, many felt it was an argument between the 'old powers' and was of no concern to the United States. However, once it affected American liberties — such as the freedom to travel and to trade — the President, Woodrow Wilson, became more concerned.

German naval attacks eventually forced America into the War, where its role in providing extra equipment and a supply of fresh soldiers was instrumental in the final Allied victory. But the losses of the War and the disappointment of the peace conference made Americans cynical about playing a world role and they retreated into **isolationism**.

Why were the 1890s a turning-point in US foreign policy?

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, when the European powers were extending their empires and embarking on the so-called 'scramble for Africa', the Americans stood above

KEY TERM



Foreign policy A country's foreign policy refers to the actions and strategies chosen by its government to protect the nation's interests and further its goals.



President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–9)

KEY TERM



Isolationism A policy by which the USA detached itself from foreign affairs. A policy of non-involvement and non-intervention in other government's internal affairs and wars.

it all in an attitude of superiority. As a former colony, they condemned the **imperialism** and **colonization** of the Old World. Yet, in the last two decades of the century, America also embarked on colonial expansion in the Pacific and Caribbean, and interfered extensively in the affairs of Latin America.

The growth of imperialism

In the 1880s and 1890s, support for an imperialist foreign policy grew inside the USA for political, economic, social and even religious and racial reasons.

Since the 1840s, Americans had recognized the concept of 'Manifest Destiny', the idea that it was the destiny of the United States to dominate the northern half of the continent of America. This had encouraged the expansion westwards beyond the Mississippi and the Rockies. By the 1890s, the West had been settled and the British had made it clear that they had no intention of giving up Canada. Therefore, some argued that 'Manifest Destiny' could, and should, be extended to Latin America and even beyond. It was the duty of America to spread its civilization. The United States had extended as far as it could across the continent, it was now time to look outwards for expansion.

This argument, unfortunately, had racial overtones. The Social Darwinism that became popular in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century also had supporters in the USA. American democracy and capitalism were dearly superior to the monarchies and the backward economies that existed in many parts of the world, so it was the duty of the USA to extend its power over these areas for their own good. Americans, in effect, were superior to other races and, therefore, were morally obliged to extend their influence in the world. This kind of thinking was famously illustrated by William McKinley when he referred to natives of the Philippines as America's 'little brown brothers' and talked of America's duty to 'uplift, civilize and Christianize' them, ignoring the fact that the vast majority of Filipinos were Roman Catholics. Yet, it must also be said that in extending its 'civilization' the USA did expand education, public health and democracy in many of the places it went to, and that many Christian missionaries acted out of a genuine desire to care for others.

However, there were also more practical political and economic motives for the support of imperialism, which were not much different from the justifications used by the European powers for their empires. America's industrial economy had grown rapidly in the 1870s and 1880s with gross national product (GNP) growing by 4% annually but, by 1893, it was experiencing a downturn that began a four-year depression. There was a fear that the domestic market had been saturated, so overseas outlets had to be acquired. Asia, and China in particular, was seen as a potentially massive market for American goods. Also, overseas

KEY TERMS

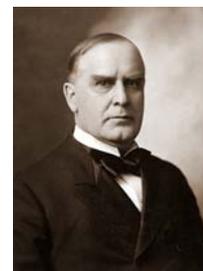


Imperialism The control of one country by another, usually by military and political occupation. It can also be by economic control.

Colonization The forming of a settlement or colony by a group of people who seek to take control of territories or countries. It usually involves large-scale immigration of people to a 'new' location and the expansion of their civilization and culture to this area.

William McKinley

(1843–1901) 25th President of the United States (1897–1901). McKinley was a lawyer who entered politics as a Republican. He was a member of the House of Representatives from 1877 and Governor of Ohio from 1892. He was elected for two terms, but was shot and killed by an anarchist in 1901. It was under his presidency that the USA fought and won the Spanish-American War.



possessions would provide American manufacturers with access to cheap raw materials. Outward expansion would also relieve the labour tensions and unrest that had grown during the depression.

The USA was also concerned that, as European empires grew and extended further across the world, American power would be diminished. In effect, they were being left behind. Between 1875 and 1914, a quarter of the world was claimed as colonies by various powers: if the USA did not get into the imperial 'club' now it never would and the **balance of power** could shift against it.

KEY TERM



Balance of power The view that the important nations of the world should be roughly equal in terms of power and influence, otherwise there would be instability and war.

An influential book was Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (published in 1890). In it, Mahan argued that the powerful nations of history had always been sea powers. With two coasts, the USA needed to become a major naval power and that required the acquisition of colonies as supply bases around the world. Mahan also argued for a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and emphasized the importance of the Caribbean in protecting that canal. The need for the USA to become a naval power was accepted and acted upon. By 1900, the US navy was the third largest in the world — after Britain and Germany. Clearly, the United States was increasingly seeing itself as a world power.

Arguments against imperialism

Although the voices in support of imperialism were getting louder in the nineteenth century, there was also a vocal and important minority arguing against it. In 1898, this minority formed the Anti-Imperialist League. Among its members were the writer Mark Twain, the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and the lawyer and politician William Jennings Bryan.

As the historian Anders Stephanson points out, in *Manifest Destiny* (1995), the anti-imperialists had a range of arguments to counter the calls for expansion. When others talked of America's mission to civilize alien races, they pointed out that the USA did not have a record of treating its own minorities, such as African and Native Americans, particularly well. They argued that there were no massive new markets in Asia, that expansion would lead to further entanglements, possibly war, and that, unlike Britain, the USA had neither the manpower nor expertise to run an empire. They were, on the whole, correct. From a moral standpoint, the anti-imperialists argued that trying to dress up expansion as some kind of modification of 'Manifest Destiny' was deceitful and that it was nothing more than European-style imperialism. Far from enhancing America's position in the world it could weaken it because by acting like the other Great Powers the USA would lose its unique role as a powerful, democratic nation that respected the freedom of others. Above all, the anti-imperialists condemned those who forgot America's past: how could a colony that had fought a war for its freedom now enslave others?

Although the anti-imperialist movement had powerful friends and many supporters, it was moving against the tide of the era. Ultimately, it failed to prevent successive American administrations from building what was, in effect, an American empire.

The beginnings of expansion

European interference in the American continent had been condemned as far back as 1823 by the **Monroe Doctrine**. This was announced by President James Monroe and John Quincy

Adams, his **Secretary of State**. It established the scope of US interests abroad in the early nineteenth century. The Doctrine stated that:

- US policy was to stay out of European wars unless American interests were involved.
- The 'American continents' were not to be colonized by any European powers.
- Any such attempts at colonization would be regarded as 'unfriendly' acts.

So, when the British government fell into a border dispute with Venezuela over British Guiana in 1895, the Americans stepped in. The Americans urged **arbitration** of the dispute, which was accepted eventually and the matter settled. But Congress had granted President Cleveland the authority to use force if necessary. America had little direct interest in the dispute but it showed a renewed willingness to assert its authority on the continent.

Likewise in the Pacific, the United States found itself taking on a more active role as islands across the Ocean were viewed as vital links in maintaining and developing trade in Asia. For example, in 1889 a **joint protectorate** was established with Britain and Germany over the Samoan Islands.

The Hawaiian Islands had long been a destination for American missionaries and planters, and in 1887 the USA was granted exclusive use of Pearl Harbor. In 1890, the island's right to export duty free sugar into the USA was abolished, leading to a fall in demand and a collapse of prices by 40%. The Hawaiians and the plantation owners worried for their livelihoods and anti-foreign sentiment grew, led by the islands' Queen Liliuokalani. In 1893, American settlers and US marines toppled Queen Liliuokalani and set up a pro-American government, which requested annexation by the USA. President Cleveland was reluctant to do this, but in 1898 McKinley granted the request. This began a process which would culminate in Hawaii being granted full statehood in 1959.

It was clear that, in this decade, American attitudes to empire were changing significantly. The war with Spain was to see the United States taking on colonies in the Philippines and establishing what was, in effect, a colonial relationship with Cuba.

Why did the USA go to war with Spain in 1898?

Since 1492, when Columbus found the New World, large parts of America and the Caribbean had been settled by Spain. Between 1811 and 1830, the majority of Spanish colonies in South America had gained their independence, and the Cubans wanted theirs. Revolts against the Spanish broke out in 1868 and 1879; the third attempt, in 1895, was to be ultimately successful.

The revolt against Spanish rule began in 1895. In December, the Spanish dispatched 98,000

KEY TERMS



Monroe Doctrine Statement made by President James Monroe in 1823 that the Continent of America was independent and the European powers could not consider re-colonizing it. An attack on these independent states could be viewed as an attack on the USA.

Secretary of State US official responsible for the administration of foreign policy.

Arbitration The judging of a dispute between nations or states by someone not involved whose decision both sides agree to accept.

Joint protectorate Where stronger nations agree to share the protection of a smaller, less powerful nation. This is usually done to keep out a rival power, rather than benefit the underdeveloped nation being 'looked after'.

troops to crush the rebellion, joining the 63,000 already on the island. Although they were outnumbered, the rebels had many successes with the support of the ordinary people and by 1897 were declaring their independence. Spain had once controlled the greatest empire in the Americas, as far as the Philippines in the Pacific. Now little of it was left. To the Spanish any further losses would weaken its political stability, and it became a matter of honour to defend its possessions. Spain did offer the rebels some concessions, but not enough. Why was America concerned about Cuba? Cuba was on America's doorstep and according to the Monroe Doctrine was in the USA's sphere of interest. The USA was unsure of how to react to either Spain or the rebels until two incidents, and the way they were interpreted, resulted in war against Spain.

- ❶ The Spanish ambassador in Washington wrote a private letter criticizing President McKinley. Its contents were made public, which embarrassed the Spanish government and angered the American public.
- ❷ Whilst on a 'friendly' visit to Havana harbour, the American battleship *Maine* exploded, with the loss of 266 crew. Immediately the American press accused the Spanish of sabotage. A Spanish investigation concluded that the explosion was due to a fault on the ship, whilst a US Naval Court of Inquiry said it was caused by a mine. There was a growing sense that if Spain remained in power in Cuba, they posed a military, and possibly an economic, threat to the USA. The incident ignited war passions and urged on by the press, by Vice-President Roosevelt and by Congress, the President ordered a blockade of Cuba. War was declared on 25 April 1898. Subsequent and less biased investigations concluded the *Maine* exploded because of a coal bunker fire close to where shells were stored; a known design problem on this type of ship.

Defeating Spain

In April 1898, US forces launched a double attack on Spanish territories. The navy attacked Spain in the Philippines and defeated its fleet outside Manila. In Cuba, American troops landed near Santiago and Spanish troops were blockaded in Havana. After seventeen days of fighting the Spanish forces surrendered. Neither side fought particularly well. Spanish commanders were fearful of defeat, knowing its wider impact on Spanish imperial power, yet they used weak military and naval strategies. The American navy were impressive, but the army commanders had never organized such a war. There were shortages of weapons and transport, a lack of basic training for hastily enlisted volunteers, and ill-prepared supply lines and medical care.

As was to happen in the First World War, the contribution of black troops was largely ignored in stories of the Spanish-American War. This was a time when assumptions about the superiority of the white race over other 'inferior' or non-white races was increasing.

Did America benefit from the Spanish-American War?

The terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1898 clearly showed the USA as the victors. It stated that:

- ❶ Cuban independence was recognized, but the USA influenced its constitution and was allowed possession of Guantanamo Bay.
- ❷ Spain lost the last pieces of her American empire by ceding Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and the Pacific island of Guam (part of the Mariana group) to the USA.
- ❸ The USA was able to purchase the Philippine Islands for \$20 million.

The USA had demonstrated its areas of interests, as set out in the Monroe Doctrine, and also had the Pacific bases so much desired by Mahan. However, views on the war differed.

According to John Hay, Secretary of State, it had been 'a splendid little war', whereas the author Sherwood Anderson said it had been 'like robbing an old Gypsy woman in a vacant lot at night after a fair'.

Controlling the Philippines

The defeat of the Spanish in the Philippines in 1898 had been made possible by the assistance of the Filipino independence leader, Emilio Aguinaldo. However, when the USA refused independence to the islands, a vicious three-year war began with Aguinaldo leading guerrilla opposition to the American army. A 1902 US Senate Committee exposed the brutality of both sides, with an estimated 4,300 Americans killed and 50,000–200,000 Filipino deaths. In 1901, Aguinaldo was captured and a civil government, under William Taft, was established. The islands were promised independence, but did not achieve it until July 1946. The treatment of the Filipinos by American soldiers led to a reaction against imperialism within the USA.

The Anti-Imperialist League was formed in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War. The psychologist William James ('God damn the US for its vile conduct in the Philippine Isles') was supported by prominent Americans such as the industrialist Andrew Carnegie, the social activist Jane Addams, the author Mark Twain, the labour leader Samuel Gompers, as well as a wide mix of society businessmen, politicians and intellectuals. They were brought together by their reaction to American behaviour in the Philippines and they claimed that the annexation of the Philippines was against American values and its principles of independence and self-determination. They objected because:

- if tyranny was established abroad then it could become easy to allow tyranny at home
- of the cost of colonies (navy, army, governing, country's debts)
- there was no need to 'own' people in order to trade with them
- cheap labour might be in competition with American industry
- being an imperial power contradicted the American values as expressed in the Declaration of Independence: 'that all men are created equal' and that governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed. Ironically, this was the time of permitted, aggressive racism in the USA.

How successful was Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy?

The Founding Fathers of the USA had not expected the nation to be involved in foreign affairs and made little provision in the Constitution for foreign policy decisions and control, except that the Senate had to review and approve treaties. Presidents and those who influenced them became the major directors of policy. None more so than Theodore Roosevelt, who relished the opportunities for foreign policy control that the 1898 Spanish-American War had given him. He boasted, 'The biggest matters, such as the Portsmouth Peace [ending the Russo-Japanese War of 1905], the acquisition of Panama, and sending the fleet around the world I managed without consultations with anyone; for when a matter is of capital importance, it is well to have it handled by one man only.'

After 1898, the USA maintained its interests in Latin America, ready to intervene in order to maintain regional stability and establish the USA's hegemony (leadership by one state over a number of other states). President Roosevelt outlined this in his annual message to Congress in 1904:

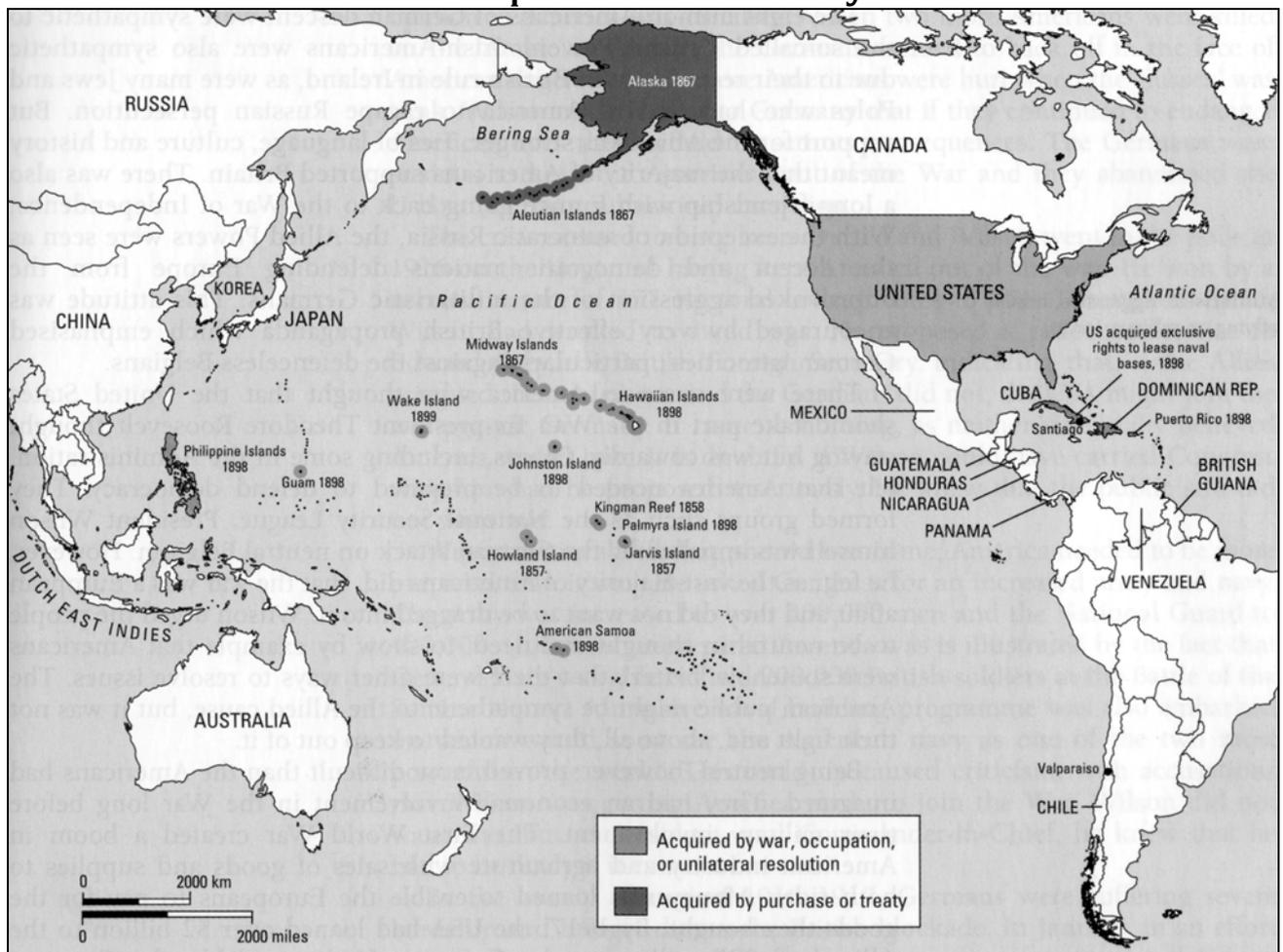
... it is not true that the US feels any land hunger or entertains any project as regards the other nations of the Western Hemisphere save as for their welfare ... [but] the

adherence of the US to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to exercise as an international police power ... We would interfere with them only in the last resort, and then only if it became evident that their inability or unwillingness to do justice at home and abroad had violated the rights of the US or had invited foreign aggressions to the detriment of the entire body of American nations.

Between 1901 and 1920 the three presidents — Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson pursued similar policies towards American interests in Latin America and the Far East. They rejected making territorial claims on Latin America, but clearly stated that for a combination of reasons — economic, political, paternalistic, élitist and probably racist — there should be stability and order on America's doorstep. So the USA sorted out the debts of the Dominican Republic, took over land in Panama to build the canal link to the Pacific, opposed Mexican revolutionaries and generally tried to support American trade, business and engineering interests, whilst keeping out competing countries, which included Britain and Germany.

The markets of the Far East, especially in China, were tempting and the USA continued to support open-door policies with trading open to all. Taft used 'dollar diplomacy' (private funds used for diplomatic and financial investment in China) to counteract the increasing power of Japan in the region. There were tensions with Japan after the fall of the Manchu dynasty in China in 1911. The USA was anxious to preserve Chinese independence, although not to the extent of military intervention.

How far had an 'American empire' been created by 1917?



Map showing US territorial expansion in the late nineteenth century

Why did the USA become involved in the First World War?

Why was the USA neutral until 1917?

The USA believed the war that broke out in 1914 was a European dispute over the balance of power in that continent. Wilson insisted that the USA was neutral, but he became a central figure in attempts to negotiate a peace.

Wilson's ideals were of democracy, open-door trading and diplomacy. He believed that only the USA, because of its 'exceptionalism' as a free republic, could lead such a world. In

January 1917, Wilson had argued for 'peace without victory'; unrealistic given the nature of the war and the strength of Europe's rivalries over territory and commerce. As one of his advisors had reported after a visit to Europe in 1914, 'The situation is extraordinary. It is jingoism [extreme nationalism] run stark mad ... There is too much hatred, too many jealousies'.

KEY TERM



Exceptionalism The belief that something is exceptional, especially the theory that the peaceful capitalism of the USA constitutes an exception to the general economic laws governing national historical development.

The USA also stayed out of the conflict because of the increase in peace movements within America:

- the Women's Peace Party with Jane Addams, Carrie Chapman Catt and other suffragists
- the American Union Against Militarism set up by Progressive pacifists
- peace initiatives funded by Carnegie and Ford
- the Socialist Party's criticisms, led by Eugene V. Debs
- black Americans who saw it as a white imperialist war.

Their arguments focused on the corruption of war, the loss of young lives, the interruption to domestic reforms and the inadequacy of war as a solution to wrongs. In the 1916 presidential election Wilson used the slogan, 'He kept us out of the war'. However, this meant that he was later criticized for not alerting the American public to the likelihood of war. It was claimed that he failed to prepare the nation militarily, resulting in it taking a year to get troops into France.

Why did the policy of neutrality end?

Wilson failed to realize the practical difficulties of claiming to be a neutral nation. In practice, neutrality was impossible as long as America was still trading with the combatants. Trade with Britain and France rose from \$753 million to \$2.75 billion between 1914 and 1916. Trade with Germany dropped from \$345 million to only \$29 million. American banks provided loans of \$2.3 billion to the Allies, but only \$27 million to Germany. Was this neutral behaviour?

Germany did not think so, although it was the British navy's blockade of German ports that forced most American trade to be with the Allies. The initial German response was for U-boats (submarines) to attack American ships without warning, but this was curtailed after American protests at the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915.

The German suspension of U-boat attacks lasted for the best part of two years. However, the USA declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917. The two main incidents that led to the USA entering the war came as the culmination of a growing sense that German militarism had to be defeated in order to allow the American ideas of a democratic world to be realized.

Incident one: Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare

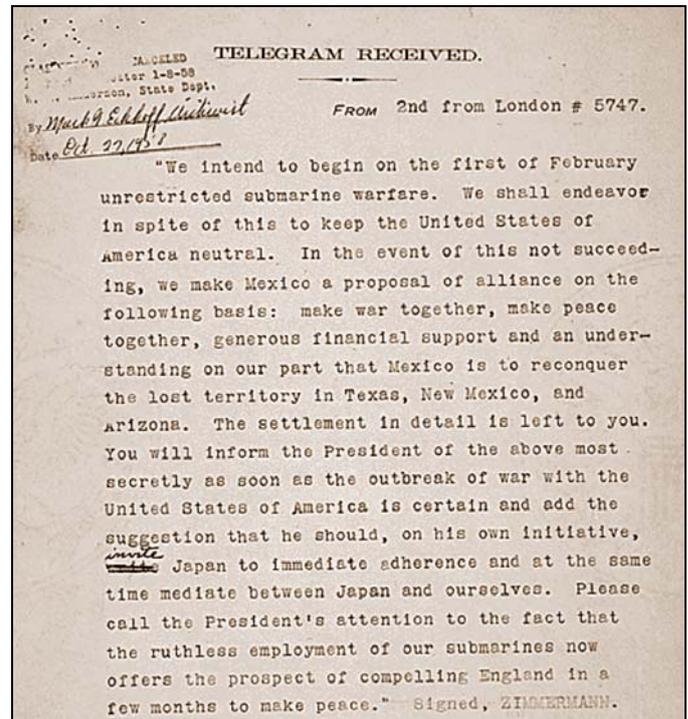
By January 1917, the Russian army was showing weaknesses and the Allied troops were flagging. Despite the risk of America entering the conflict, the Germans decided to seize their

chance of victory. They restarted unrestricted submarine warfare in the hope that this would reduce Allied resources and lead to a rapid German victory. From 1 February all shipping around Britain and France would be attacked on sight.

Incident two: the Zimmermann Telegram

This was a secret diplomatic communication issued from the German Foreign Office in January 1917 that proposed a military alliance between Germany, Mexico and Japan in the event of the USA entering the war against Germany. Mexico would be given Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. The proposal was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence. Revelation of the contents enraged American public opinion, especially after the German Foreign Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, publicly admitted the telegram was genuine on 3 March.

A photocopy of the original decoded Zimmermann Telegram, 25 February 1917, sent by the German Foreign Secretary, Zimmermann, to the German minister in Mexico (the 'President' is the President of Mexico).



The declaration of war

In early March, President Wilson, on his own authority, ordered that all merchant ships should be armed, and that the navy should fire on U-boats. Germany responded by sinking five American ships in one week. There was no alternative but for the president to ask Congress for a declaration of war on Germany.

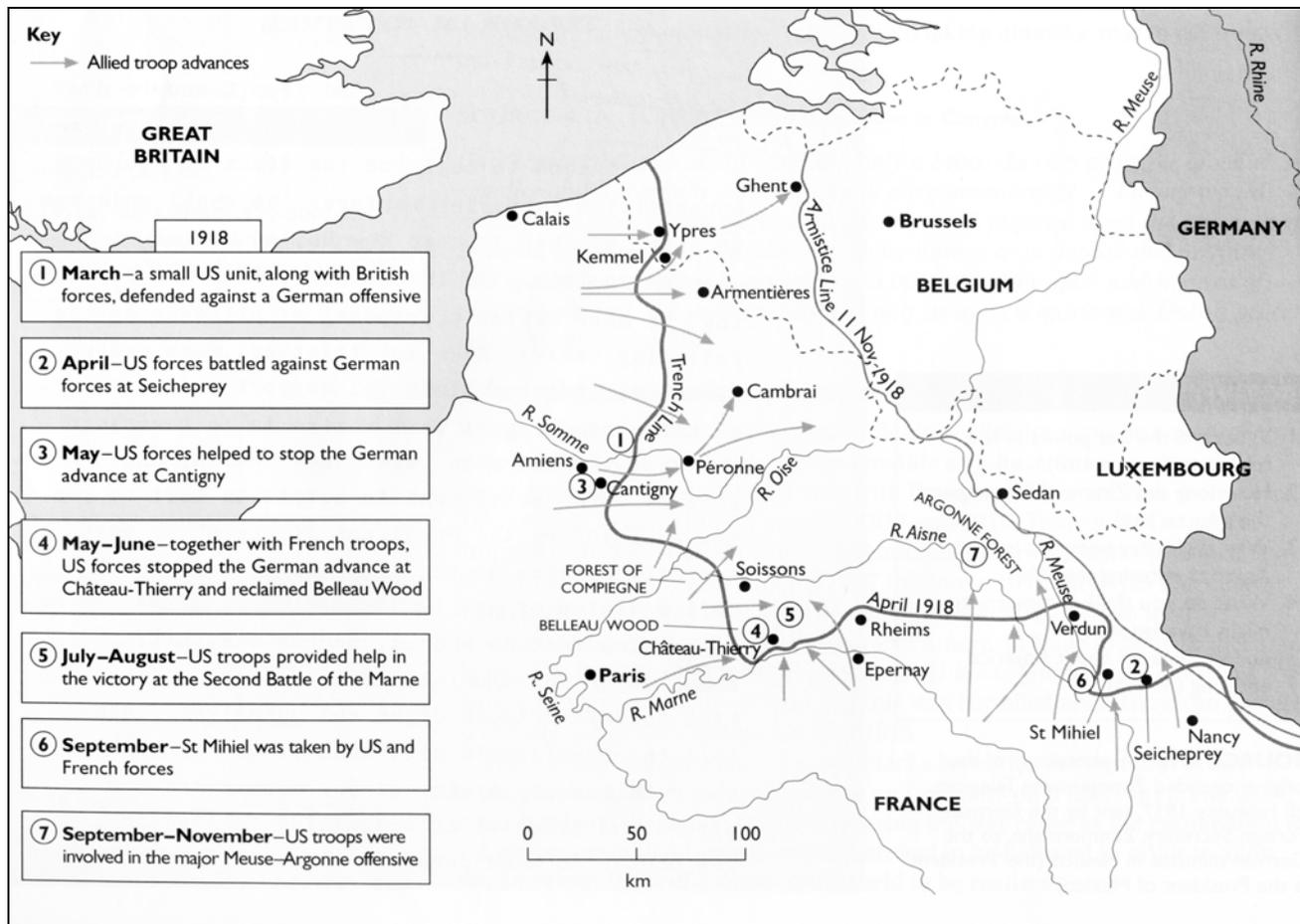
When he was applauded by Congress he commented, 'My message today was a message of death for our young men. How strange it seems to applaud it.' And he was right. By the end of the war in November 1918 there had been 48,909 American deaths in battle, as many again from disease, and 230,000 wounded.

DISCUSS

Do you think that the USA entering the First World War in 1917 was a bigger turning-point in American foreign policy than the Spanish-American War of 1898?

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was put under the control of General Pershing. He had been concerned that the lack of military preparation before 1917 had prolonged the war into 1918. Even after American soldiers landed in France they relied on British and French weapons (though made in America) and had their own weapons only in time to fire a salute at the armistice celebrations. However, the navy provided vital destroyer-ship escort across the Atlantic for food and industrial goods. Although relatively untrained, the American soldiers brought a much needed infusion of energy and morale into the Allied campaign. They halted the German advance on Paris in July 1918 and played a decisive role in eastern France in September. Germany realized that it would not be able to counter the reality of American

intervention and called for an armistice. It was signed at 11.00 a.m. on 11 November 1918 — the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. At home, the government had mobilized the population to produce weapons, ammunition and uniforms. Food conservation was introduced with propaganda slogans like ‘If U fast U beat U boats — if U feast U boats beat U’. The contribution made by women was given recognition in the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, giving federal voting rights to all women. Government powers increased with controls on unions, arms production, housing and fuel, all designed to support the war effort.



Map showing the American contribution to the fighting in World War One.

Why did the USA not sign the Treaty of Versailles?

President Wilson spent the first half of 1919 in Versailles, France, negotiating at the peace conference. He had already called for a ‘peace without victory’ and had set out his **Fourteen Points** as a basis for a treaty. The key point was to create a league of nations as the basis for a new international, moral order and to prevent future wars. Such a league would encourage the American values of democracy and free trade, would curb **unilateralism**, i.e. make states consult about foreign affairs, and be able to mediate in disputes. It would make the First World War the ‘war to end all wars’. The Treaty of Versailles did create the League of Nations, but Wilson did not achieve ‘peace without victory’ as many of the key

KEY TERMS



Fourteen Points President Wilson’s plan for the peace settlement at the end of the First World War.

Unilateralism A foreign policy which seeks to avoid international alliances and permanent commitments, in favour of independence and freedom of action.

terms punished Germany by, for example, imposing huge reparations and depriving Germany of its colonies.

Once the negotiations were over, Wilson faced another argument as there was considerable opposition in Congress to ratifying and signing the Treaty. Congressman Victor Berger wrote the following to his local paper in 1919:

This was the worst imperialistic war ever known in the history of the world ... As for America in particular — what have we gained in this war and by this war? What has America gained except billions of debts and a hundred thousand of cripples? And we have lost most of our political democracy. Can anyone think of a single thing, worthwhile, that we have gained through this war?

Wilson toured America to rally popular support. The extract below is from a speech Wilson made in St Louis, Missouri, in September 1919. It is typical of the speeches he made at the time:

This nation went into this war to see it through to the end, and the end has not come yet. This is the beginning, not of the war, but of the processes which are going to render a war like this impossible. It is a great treaty, it is a treaty of justice, of rigorous and severe justice, but do not forget that there are many other parties to this treaty than Germany and her opponents ... America is made up of the peoples of the world. All the best bloods flow in her veins, all the old affections, all the old and sacred traditions of peoples of every sort throughout the world circulate in her veins, and she has said to mankind at her birth: 'We have come to redeem the world by giving it liberty and justice.' Now we are called upon before the tribunal of mankind to redeem that immortal pledge.

Woodrow Wilson suffered a massive stroke in October 1919. For the next six months he never met his Cabinet and all communication with him was through his wife and doctor. However, through them he continued to insist that Democrats must not compromise about the terms of the ratification. After two attempts at ratification in November 1919 and March 1920, both of which failed because of Republican opposition and the Democrat's failure to compromise, it was accepted that no further attempt was viable. Instead, Congress passed a resolution in July 1921 formally ending the war, but without signing any peace treaty. Wilson's attempt to match American values and 'exceptionalism' to the complex realities of the post-war world had failed. The USA never signed the Treaty of Versailles nor joined the League of Nations. The Democrats refused to select Wilson as their presidential candidate in 1920 and the Republican Warren Harding won a landslide victory on a platform of a return to 'normalcy'.

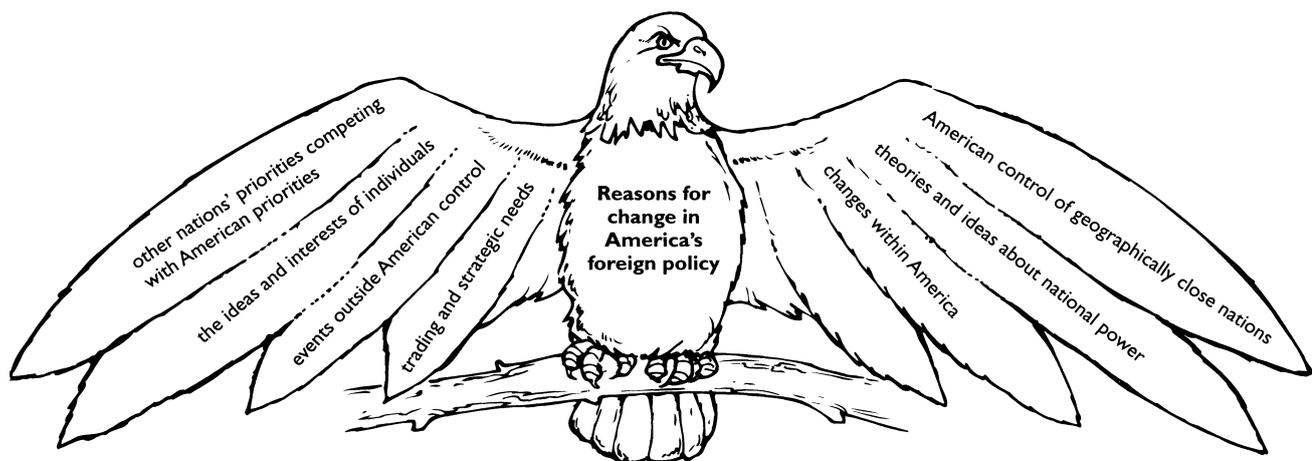


A detail from the Orpen's painting, *The Signing of the Peace in the Hall of Mirrors*

Review: From jellyfish to eagle?

Why did the USA change its foreign policy 1890–1919?

America's involvement in the world had expanded enormously between 1890 and 1919. At the end of the nineteenth century the USA was concerned about its own domestic 'manifest destiny'. As the West was settled it was inevitable that adventurers and traders would look beyond the nation's geographical boundaries. Such expansion needed direction from government to be successful. What could not be anticipated was the way in which foreign policy changes for the benefit of American trade and security would entangle the USA in situations beyond its control. The dilemma for policy makers, after the flurry of military and naval success in 1898 in Cuba, was how this success could, and should, be used. The stark choice of isolationism or entanglement, as outlined by the republic's early statesmen, had become much more complicated by 1919.



Key Points

- 1 The settlement of the West encouraged America to look beyond its immediate borders for markets and settlements.
- 2 The search and need for new markets meant greater involvement with the rest of the world. New policies required military and naval support.
- 3 US policies were influenced by ideas of Social Darwinism and racial superiority.
- 4 It became possible for determined presidents like Roosevelt and Wilson to initiate changes in foreign policy.
- 5 America's attitude to imperialism was much debated during the 1890s and 1900s. America rejected establishing territorial control, but did impose its political and military will in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Philippines.
- 6 The Spanish-American War of 1898 and fighting in the First World War were turning-points in American foreign policy as both entangled the USA further into international politics.
- 7 The First World War exposed the problems of neutrality for a globally active industrial nation.
- 8 The First World War demonstrated the immense possibilities of American industrial production, commitment and the potential power of the state.
- 9 Congress' rejection of the Treaty of Versailles led to the isolationist policies of the 1920s and 1930s and had long-term significance for world peace.
- 10 By 1920, the USA had built up its navy and army, although this made it a threat to other nations.