

Power Games

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HIST15 - Final Take-Home Essay

Question #1

(US Foreign Policy based on 1938, 1968 and 1998)

This paper will focus on two interconnected themes regarding US foreign policy. On one hand the influence of public opinion of official policy gradually decreased from the 30's till today. The other tendency I will explore is that the focus and *raison d'être* of an active foreign policy became less and less defined by external factors, such as global events and threats and more and more about what the leaders of the country perceived as important, which may not have been as central to US interests as they would be depicted.

Throughout the 1930s President Roosevelt had to compromise his foreign policy based on what he believed to be in the best interest for the country and the internal forces within the US he had to negotiate with. For example during the 20s he was pro League of Nations, saying the US membership in this international organization was "safe for democracy" in the world. But the isolationist movement—according to whose advocates it is better for the US to keep out of international conflicts--was so strong and because he needed their support in congress after he was elected in 1928 that he agreed their demand and promised that the US will not use its armed forces to solve disputes outside its own borders. This was an example of how a movement had a direct effect on a policy. Another example would be that before granting diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union Roosevelt took a survey of American public opinion.

In his second term he declared the "good neighbor" policy which on one hand offered a helping hand but on the other and promised non-intervention particularly to countries in the Southern Hemisphere. The combined result of this policy and the Reciprocal Trade Agreement of 1934 (which was signed by 22 nations by 1940) was that the protecting US economic interests in Meso and Southern America didn't have to rely on military power.

US foreign policy couldn't ignore the events that were taking shape in Europe during the last part of the 30s and the first half of the 1940s. However the first official reactions were based on the 1933 report of the Nye senatorial committee that believed that those who would like to send US troops to Europe are profiteering companies, "merchants of death". (Later these proved to be fabrications.) The 1935 and 1937 Neutrality Acts were born in the spirit that the US should not get involved, although later allowed limited

economic exchange with warring countries. We can say about this period that World War II set the agenda for US foreign policy, which is in accordance with my second statement. The public was deeply divided about what course if any US should follow about the war. Charles Lindbergh and other isolationist argued even after the onset of the war in 1939 that the US should stay out of this European matter. However after the Pearl Harbor attack (December 7, 1941) the US population united in their desire for revenge and intervention.

By the end of the war US built a working alliance with Great Britain, France and even the with Soviet Union. However the one with this latter turned sour in 1946 and 1947 because the two countries had different interests and intention about the future of Europe. The Soviets wanted Germany to pay for rebuilding their ruined country, keep the German "Vaterland" de-industrialized and have a buffer zone around their own country. At the same time US in order not to return to depression, wanted a healthy world wide economy that provide opportunities for them abroad. This difference and the reactions to it on the two sides was the basis of the conflict that developed into the Cold War. That dictated the foreign policy not just for the US but for a lot of countries around the globe for the next four and a half decade.

We cannot say how real the communist threat was. What we can assert that the US administration successfully convinced the population about it. In particular I would like to emphasize that the work of 3 people (President Truman, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson and career diplomat George F. Kennan, also known as "Mr. X.") planted not just the "containment" idea, but also that foreign policy should be created and executed by "experts" and lay persons should have no voice in decisions. This was a new concept, but its long-lasting effects we feel even today. Experts tell us on TV and other media outlet the details of world politics and we follow and (dis)believe them, but rarely have such an active opinion about it as our grandparents before the 1940s had. This is what I referred to in my opening paragraph as my first theme.

The aforementioned containment concept included the ideas that Soviet Union wants to take over the world, no treaty or negotiation would stop them and force is the only thing that they would understand.

Thus they have to be contained. The Truman doctrine relates to this directly as well: “US must not just resist Soviet military power but must support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” To follow the doctrine and to build an effective National Security State the next few governments developed a model that consisted of 5 parts: the development of atomic weapons (by 1954 the US has hydrogen bomb) , strengthening military power (through the 1947 National Security Act and the creation of the National Security Council), military alliances with other nations (through the forming of North Atlantic Treaty Organization-NATO in 1949), military and financial aid to friendly nations (e.g. Marshall Plan) and espionage.

If I were to summarize the global climate between 1945 and 1991 I would need to call it Cold War: The global antagonism between the Soviet Union and US that was characterized by ideological competition, political tension, rival military alliances and a nuclear arms race. Most of the US population was successfully indoctrinated (sorry if this is too strong of a word, but didn't find a simpler one) and believed that the ‘commies’ are out to get them. They were rather frustrated when the Cold War turning Hot didn't yield tangible results fast in Korea in the first years of the 1950s. The public was frustrated with containment policy that couldn't show a clear-cut victory over the enemy. At this point the pressure they had put on the president to let the people's hero, General MacArthur lead a successful war wasn't sufficient and he got fired. This is another example that the public opinion didn't manage to influence official policy.

President Eisenhower enhanced the foreign policy with a “New Look” that focused on maximum deterrent with a reduced cost. He decreased spending on conventional forces and but increased it on nuclear arms, including arming the military allies. Although he realized that liberating Eastern European countries became impossible but remained committed to contain communism in Asia. He believed that the fall of Vietnam to communism would trigger a "domino effect" in Asia thus he sent weapons and advisers to South Vietnam. This was the main reason of escalation of the Vietnam War. I do not have enough space here to go into the details of Eisenhower's interventions in Latin America and the Middle East, but the essence of these activities were to help US economic interest and oust any government that had the shadow

of being communist, even if that government was elected in a democratic fashion. Meanwhile throughout the 50s and 60s and 70s the nuclear arm race continued. Going back to my second theme, I believe that the bases of the containment policy, interventions throughout the world and the pushing of the nuclear arm race were based on an exaggerated premise. They had more to do with internal state of mind and politics in the US than to real danger out in the world.

John F. Kennedy brought some changes in foreign policy. On one hand he was just as adamant about containing communism as his predecessors as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis proved it. But he also supported third world countries' nationalist movements. He believed that if they could achieve independence and democracy that would be in the US' best interest. He even launched PeaceCorps in 1961 to help the process. (By the mid 1970 more than 60,000 volunteers was involved in it.) Kennedy was an even stronger supporter of bringing up nuclear weapons, than the previous presidents. But after the Cuban missile crisis, that almost ended in a nuclear war he yielded to pressure from scientist and in August 1963 signed a test ban treaty with the Soviet Union and Great Britain, which didn't bring the expected results, because China and France didn't join it. Lyndon B. Johnson followed Kennedy's footsteps and "Americanized" the Vietnam War, committed more and more troops and actions there.

1968 was an important year for two reasons. The January 30 Tet offensive in Vietnam had a major psychological effect that shook the belief for a lot of Americans that the war can be win. Thus gave a good impetus to the growing antiwar movement. By the summer over 200 protests occurred in the country. The violent scenes of the events at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago shown on TV on August 25 brought the war home too. At the election of the same year both candidates wanted to end the war in an "honorable" end.

I will not go into here how foreign policy changed in the 70s and 80s, because I essentially see it as a continuation of the previous two decades with only minor changes in emphasis. In contrast a major change in world dynamics was the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the end of the Soviet Union in 1991. Because there was no longer an explicit and easily recognizable enemy to fight, but the US

still had a very strong military capacity this was utilized in various parts of the world. Including solving conflicts in Panama in 1989, the Persian Gulf in 1991, in Somalia in 1992/3, in Bosnia in 1994/5, in Haiti in 1994 and in Kosovo in 1998/9. These were all unique and different situations. What is common in them the world's strongest (and possibly only remaining) superpower, the US played a supercop role. Intertwined with or without the approval of international organizations such as the UN or NATO with or without allies.

In the first paragraph of this essay I stated that "influence of public opinion of official policy gradually decreased". I admit that I slightly exaggerated because there was some level of fluctuation. However the overall tendency I believe is pointing towards that direction that interest in foreign policy overall declined over the decades and the public largely leaves decisions to experts and politicians. My other claim was that US foreign policy is more and more defined by internal elements. If we look at the time period we can see that World War II was a global event to which the US had to react in some way. The Cold War (and occasionally Hot) years were about the fight against the spread of communism. However it is questionable how much of it was fuelled by threats from the opposite side of the world and how much by rhetoric of various politicians and later interests of the military complex. Finally by the 90s, after the dissolution of communism as a global system all the incidents the US was involved in around were local conflicts. Although the official line for these interventions was often like "humanitarian aid, restoring democracy, stabilizing regions", but I believe behind most of them we could find economic or political interests. Also in the last 20 years each president had a war or two, so I suspect even a certain amount of machismo on their part may play a role in these activities.