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# Remaking the World: Progressivism and American Foreign Policy

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**Abstract**

*Throughout the 20th century, Americans struggled to define the fundamental purpose of U.S. foreign policy: whether America should intervene abroad to promote the welfare of others or to secure the lives and liberty of American citizens. This struggle is one of the most enduring legacies of the Progressive revolution in American politics. Christopher Burkett contrasts the principles of Progressive foreign policy with those of the Founding and looks at three early examples of their application: the Spanish–American War and its aftermath, Theodore Roosevelt's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I in 1917. He shows how the Progressives' idealistic foreign policy marked a profound departure from the Founders' emphasis on prudence in the application of just principles.*

"The world must be made safe for democracy."[1] Thus did President Woodrow Wilson, addressing Congress in 1917, summarize America's high purpose in entering the First World War.

At first glance, Wilson's particular vision of America's role in the world may not sound radically new. Since the Founding, Americans had fondly hoped that the United States, through its foreign policy and the example it set, would foster the spread of freedom and self-government among the peoples of the Earth. This aspiration had always been central to what Americans considered exceptional about their republic.

But Wilson's call to spread democracy was more urgent and pressing, more obligatory. To answer this call, the United States would be obliged to take on a much more active role in making the world into something new, and it would do so through force if necessary. Wilson's foreign policy demanded action for the sake of a principle—the spread of freedom and democracy—that he was unshakably certain was right in and of itself.

Wilson's approach to foreign policy, driven as it was by ideology, also eschewed the Founders' emphasis on the need for prudence in the application of just principles. In the realm of foreign affairs, the Founders believed they should choose the best course in light of particular circumstances. Prudence was also necessary to weigh the possible consequences—long- and short-term, harmful and

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beneficial—of our actions rather than acting impulsively in pursuit of even a just end. Wilson's replacement of prudence with ideology in American foreign policy meant that the tempered pursuit of what is best given the circumstances would give way to the uncompromising pursuit of what is simply right.

Wilson's foreign policy arose from a set of beliefs that were widely shared among Progressives at the time and continue to exert influence on both the Right and Left today. These ideals are fundamentally opposed to the principles of the American Founding. Because they take their bearings from different foundational principles, heirs to the Progressives and the American Founders give very different answers to the questions of why and how we should go about promoting freedom abroad.

Heirs to the Progressives tend to emphasize that the primary, if not exclusive, purpose of the use of force abroad should be to promote the freedom and welfare of other peoples. Heirs to the American Founders, on the other hand, tend to believe that the use of force abroad should be employed first and foremost for the sake of securing the lives and liberty of America's own citizens.

Throughout the 20th century, Americans struggled with the question of which approach should guide American foreign policy. The bitter fruit of that struggle has been division, inconsistency, confusion, and a lack of moral clarity among Americans regarding how and for what ends our foreign policy should be conducted.

The confusion in popular opinion over the ultimate goal of the war in Iraq illustrates this tension well. Did the war aim to eliminate a threat to United States security, or to bring freedom and democracy to the Iraqi people? In this and many other recent examples, we see the lingering influence of Progressivism across the political spectrum in America. To varying degrees, elements of Progressive foreign policy thought have embedded themselves in virtually every approach to foreign policy today, from liberal internationalists to hawkish neo-conservatives.

It is difficult to fault Progressives and their heirs for their intentions, as they share with the American Founders a sincere sympathy with the cause of humanity and freedom abroad. But the dangerous long-term effect of Progressive foreign policy is that over time American leaders and politicians have become hesitant, unwilling, and sometimes even apologetic for doing those things necessary for the defense of our nation and interests. Rather than stand up for our nation when warranted, we seem to be adrift in a cloud of moral uncertainty about what we may, should, or must by right do.

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To regain some clarity regarding the appropriate goals of American foreign policy, we must not only recover the principles of the Founders' foreign policy, but also understand those of the Progressives. This essay will focus on the latter, presenting the origins and substance of Progressive ideology, focusing on how it influenced the theory and practice of foreign policy, and how it led to the rejection of the principles of the American Founding as the guides of American foreign policy. Three examples reveal how Progressive principles were applied in the realm of foreign policy:

- The significance of the Spanish–American War (1898) as the historical moment in which Progressive ideology began to influence foreign policy.
- How and why the United States took on a hegemonic role as protector of the Western Hemisphere during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency (1901–1909), and the consequences of our new role as a the "world's policeman."
- The influence of Woodrow Wilson's ideology on his decision to enter World War I in 1917 and his

1. Woodrow Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress," April 2, 1917, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/woodrow-wilsons-war-message-to-congress.

calls for the use of direct military force and international organizations to make the world safe for democracy.

Analyzing these themes will reveal the degree to which Progressive foreign policy intentionally rejected the principles of the American Founding and the Founders' approach to foreign policy. That rejection has had serious consequences for how we as Americans think about foreign policy today.

## The Progressive "Refounding" of American Foreign Policy

To understand why Progressive foreign policy took the turn that it did, we must first recognize that Progressives generally shared a relatively coherent theory of government and politics.[2] Progressives built this theory upon two central ideas inherited from early 19th century German philosophy: ethical idealism and historical evolution.

The first, ethical idealism, permeated the Progressive sense of morality in political life. According to this idea, any action motivated by a concern for one's own happiness, welfare, or interest is not moral, and accordingly, the only moral action is one undertaken purely to promote the good of others. Progressives interpreted this doctrine to mean that altruistically promoting the welfare of others or of the whole society is good, and egoistically pursuing private self-interest is bad. The proper role of the state is to discourage the individualistic pursuit of private interests, promoting instead cooperative moral actions that contribute to the good of the whole. When the state has fulfilled its duty, the demands of the "ethical ideal" would be satisfied and our society would become truly democratic.

The second tenet of Progressivism, historical evolution, also had a profound bearing on their political theory. Over the course of history, human societies had evolved from rather primitive origins under despotic or monarchical governments. Progressives believed that this was no haphazard historical evolution. Rather, history was a rational process in which societies were moved by events toward an inevitable goal or end state. History was moving societies toward becoming more civilized, more ethical, and more democratic, culminating in the emergence of the state. At this point in its development, a people recognizes its moral duty to promote the welfare of the whole and to subordinate private or individual interests and by so doing becomes not only democratic, but truly free. The final goal of history, therefore, is freedom, which is attainable only when a people become civilized, ethical, and democratic under the tutelage of the state.

These broad tenets of Progressivism were at odds with the political theory of the American Founding, which was grounded in the belief that certain things—for example, the laws of nature, human nature, and natural rights—were not subject to historical evolution.

These broad tenets of Progressivism were at odds with the political theory of the American Founding, which was grounded in the belief that certain things—for example, the laws of nature, human nature, and natural rights—were not subject to historical evolution. Although optimistic about the ability of human beings to make political progress, the American Founders were tempered by a realistic acknowledgment of the limits inherent in the nature of man and the world, and they therefore rejected any utopian notions of a perfect society of perfect human beings. For the Founders, progress without a prudent regard for what is really possible and necessary could lead to disastrous consequences.[3]

2. Though Progressives frequently disagreed with each other on specific foreign policy actions, their approach was generally guided by a unifying political theory. For a clear presentation of this theory and the basic tenets of Progressivism, see Thomas G. West and William A. Schambra, "The Progressive Movement and the Transformation of American Politics," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Report* No. 12, July 18, 2007, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2007/07/the-progressive-movement-and-the-transformation-of-american-politics.
3. See, for example, the arguments of Alexander Hamilton and James Madison rejecting the "deceitful dream of a golden age" in which human beings would live together in perfect peace and wisdom, even under democratic forms of government, in *The Federalist* Nos. 6 and 41 and Madison's essay "Universal Peace" (*National Gazette*, February 2, 1792), in *The Writings of James Madison*, Vol. 6, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), pp. 88–91.

The Founders also rejected the notion that all self-interested actions were immoral. Accepting human nature for what it is, they believed that the primary purpose of government was to allow individuals to exercise their liberty in pursuit of their own happiness, so long as that pursuit did not infringe on the natural rights of others. The very social compact by which one people sets itself apart from all others and establishes civil government is itself a self-interested act, since its first (though not sole) purpose is to better secure the lives and liberties of that people from the depredations of others.

The Progressive combination of ethical idealism and historical evolution required a drastic departure from the principles and policies of the American Founding. The Founders' theory and practice of foreign policy was derived from and guided by the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.

**Principles of the Founders' Foreign Policy.** In the realm of foreign policy, the Progressive combination of ethical idealism and historical evolution required a drastic departure from the principles and policies of the American Founding. Founding-era statesmen often disagreed over how overarching principles should be applied in particular cases and circumstances, but they were generally unified by a theory that should broadly guide American foreign policy in practice. That theory, like their understanding of domestic politics, was derived from and guided by the principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.[4]

The Declaration proclaims that "governments are instituted among men" to secure their pre-existing natural rights, thereby promoting their "Safety and Happiness." Government fulfills this obligation by two means—by establishing domestic laws that punish and deter violations of rights by fellow citizens, and by promoting national security through foreign policy. When the use of force becomes necessary to secure the rights of our citizens, government has the right and duty to employ it. Prudence dictates when to act with force and when to practice restraint.

In order to ensure this discretion in determining our foreign policy actions, we must also preserve our sovereignty—our national liberty or political independence. The Declaration acknowledges that this is a universal right to which all peoples and nations are entitled. The United States, therefore, has the right to defend its independence, and in turn we have the duty to respect the independence of all other nations. The coupling of right with duty in our foreign policy theory allowed the Founders to confidently assert our just rights as a nation, but it also injected a degree of self-restraint when it came to intervening militarily in the domestic affairs of other nations and peoples.

In light of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Founders' theory of foreign policy was grounded upon these basic ideas:

- A people has the right to assert its political independence. This universal right arises from the principle that peoples should be governed by their own consent. Political independence is essential for a nation, once formed, to freely decide for itself what should or should not be done to promote its own safety and happiness.

- Because of the purpose of the social compact, civil government once established has the right and duty to defend the nation and secure the natural rights of its own citizens.

- While claiming the rights of self-defense and independence for ourselves, the United States has a duty to recognize them in others. This demands a prudential degree of respect for the domestic affairs of other peoples or nations.

These principles do not, however, absolutely prohibit our intervention in the affairs—domestic or

4. For a thorough treatment of the principles of the American Founding and the Founders' approach to foreign policy, see Matthew Spalding, "America's Founders and the Principles of Foreign Policy: Sovereign Independence, National Interests, and the Cause of Liberty in the World," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Report* No. 33, October 15, 2010, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/10/americas-founders-and-the-principles-of-foreign-policy-sovereign-independence.

foreign—of other nations. Our duty to refrain from such actions extends only so far as circumstances and our prudential sense of security will permit, and only applies to those nations that do not threaten our security. As the Declaration of Independence states, we should "hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends." Therefore, we must add the following auxiliary ideas derived from the preceding maxims:

- The right and duty to provide for one's own security trumps the duty to respect the right of other nations to domestic sovereignty and political independence.

- When it becomes necessary, the most justifiable ground for intervening militarily in the affairs of other peoples and nations is prudential consideration of what is necessary for our immediate or long-term security.

The clarity with which the Founders understood these principles enhanced their ability to choose whether to engage in war, to remain at peace, or to employ other means in our foreign policy as dictated by prudence. Because of these principles, their foreign policy was marked by a large degree of self-restraint when it came to military intervention in the affairs of foreign nations.[5]

It is important to note, however, that this did not make the Founders isolationists—in fact, far from it. Though they refrained from unnecessary military interference, they were involved in the domestic affairs of other nations through non-military and diplomatic means and, in some cases, through the actions of private American citizens. Officially, they established economic relations with other nations, made defensive and commercial treaties, and—when necessary—engaged in war. They also intervened in the domestic affairs of other nations when American security interests demanded such action,[6] although they sought to avoid unnecessary military intervention out of respect for the right of other peoples to political independence.

**Principles of the Progressives' Foreign Policy.** The Progressives' reorientation of foreign policy was motivated by the same basic ideas that animated their general political theory. One prominent Progressive intellectual, Charles Merriam, articulated the rationale for replacing the natural rights foundation of American foreign policy with ethical idealism and historical evolution.

Historical evolution, Merriam wrote, reveals that some peoples or societies have evolved at a faster pace, while others are less historically advanced. According to this view, men are not born free and possess no natural right to liberty. Rather, freedom is something to be achieved over the course of history and is attained only after a people has arrived at a certain level of cultural, intellectual, political, and moral development. "Liberty," explains Merriam, "is not a right equally enjoyed by all. It is dependent upon the degree of civilization reached by the given people, and increases as this advances. The idea that liberty is a natural right is abandoned."[7] Therefore, some peoples had earned the right to freedom and self-government, whereas others had not.

Woodrow Wilson agreed with this view: "[L]iberty is the privilege of maturity, of self-control, of self-mastery," he wrote. "[S]ome peoples may have it, therefore, and others may not." For a people to enjoy the right to liberty and independence,

5. This is not to say that before the Progressive era, the United States always acted in accordance with the Founders' foreign policy principles, especially when it came to refraining from intervention in the affairs of foreign nations except in cases of self-defense. The Mexican–American War of 1846–1848, for example, stands out as an anomalous event, especially in light of arguments for intervention by pro-slavery expansionists such as John C. Calhoun.

6. For a further account of the Founders' engagement in world affairs, including why and when the United States engaged in a policy of "regime change," see Marion Smith, "The Myth of Isolationism, Part 1: American Leadership and the Cause of Liberty," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Report* No. 34, December 6, 2010, http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/12/The-Myth-of-Isolationism-Part-1-American-Leadership-and-the-Cause-of-Liberty, and Patrick Garrity, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy? American Foreign Policy, Revolution, and Regime Change, 1776–1900* (Fairfax, Va.: National Institute Press, 2012).

7. Charles Merriam, *A History of American Political Theories* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), p. 313. Merriam was an influential professor of political science at the University of Chicago from 1900–1940. In these excerpts from *A History of American Political Theories*, Merriam is summarizing with approval the views of John Burgess, professor at Columbia University (1876–1912) and one of the founders of modern political science.

"Discipline must precede it,—if necessary, the discipline of being under masters."[8]

Ethical idealism, as applied to foreign policy, demands that a nation's actions, to be moral, be undertaken more out of a sense of duty to contribute to the cause of human freedom and less because of narrow concerns for its own security, well-being, or happiness. Because certain nations (including the United States) had evolved to a higher stage of civilization, Progressives believed that history had imposed a categorically imperative ethical duty on them to help less civilized peoples "catch up"—politically, intellectually, economically, and culturally—even if it meant dragging them along against their will. According to Merriam, an analysis of history showed that "the Teutonic nations" (that is, Northern European and American peoples, especially those of Anglo–Saxon or Germanic ancestry) "are particularly endowed with political capacity.... Their mission in the world is the political civilization of mankind," and their particular task is to "civilize the politically uncivilized."[9]

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These ideas, Merriam wrote, led Progressives to two further conclusions: Historically advanced societies "must have a colonial policy," and "barbaric races" incapable of political development may be ruled without their consent or, if necessary, "may be swept away." These ideas meant that the older policies of limited intervention in the affairs of other peoples would give way to an American policy of imperialism. The obligation to civilize the uncivilized imposed on the United States the right and duty to intervene in the domestic affairs of foreign peoples. "[S]uch action violates no rights of these populations," Merriam wrote, "in comparison with its transcendent right and duty to establish political and legal order everywhere."[10]

Senator Albert Beveridge agreed wholeheartedly with this view and was one of the most outspoken proponents of an American imperial policy. Dismissing arguments that the principles of the American Founding forbade the non-consensual rule of foreign peoples, Beveridge argued that "the rule of liberty that all just government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, applies only to those who are capable of self-government."[11]

Generally speaking, all Progressives shared historical evolution and ethical idealism as basic tenets of foreign policy, but there was significant disagreement among them over one important question: Should our actions abroad aim primarily at securing our own national interest and secondarily at that of others, or must we instead act selflessly to promote the welfare of others?

There were at least two schools of thought among Progressives on this question. One group, which included William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, mixed considerations of the welfare of others with the priority of defending the United States and its interests. In this sense, they retained certain aspects of Founding foreign policy, especially the need to take necessity into consideration when making principled and prudential foreign policy decisions. The other group, which included Woodrow Wilson, adamantly rejected any moral notions of the direct pursuit of self-interest in foreign policy. Even the direct pursuit of a nation's own safety and happiness was described pejoratively as "separate" and "narrow" by Wilson and other Progressives.

Thus, in general, Progressive foreign policy is marked by a turn toward intervening in the affairs of other nations and peoples on altruistic grounds, including with the use of force, but Progressives such as Woodrow Wilson had the most significant impact in divorcing such interventions—and the use of force altogether—from principled and prudential

8. Woodrow Wilson, "The Ideals of America," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1902, http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/02dec/wilson.htm.
9. Merriam, *A History of American Political Theories*, p. 313.
10. Ibid., p. 314. Here Merriam quotes directly from Burgess's 1890 book *Political Science and Comparative Constitutional Law*.
11. Senator Albert Beveridge, "The March of the Flag," September 16, 1898, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1898beveridge.html.

considerations of self-interest. In this sense, it is Woodrow Wilson's brand of Progressive foreign policy that marks the most extreme break from that of the American Founding.

**Founders vs. Progressives.** Founding-era and pre-Progressive statesmen, as noted, rejected the notion that the pursuit of self-interest was always bad or immoral. This is not to say that the Founders were amoral realists; on the contrary, they rejected the notion that considerations of self-interest justified any and all actions or means. The Founders were more concerned about ensuring, as much as possible, that in pursuing our own interests we would not do so at the expense of or to the harm of others. As George Washington formulated this concern in his Farewell Address, the United States should "choose peace or war, as our interest *guided by our justice* shall counsel."[12]

This combination of "interest" and "justice" led the Founders to believe that the primary goal of American foreign policy should be securing our nation in a way that also reflected our respect for the independence and domestic sovereignty of foreign nations as much as possible.

This combination of "interest" and "justice" led the Founders to believe that the primary goal of American foreign policy should be securing our nation in a way that also reflected our respect for the independence and domestic sovereignty of foreign nations as much as possible. Accordingly, military intervention abroad was limited to those occasions on which America's immediate or future security demanded it and always for the purpose of securing its own citizens from foreign threats.

Founding-era statesmen cautiously refrained from committing the military power of the United States to foreign conflicts waged in the name of liberty, however dear this principle was to the heart of the American republic. Though the Founders publicly supported and in some cases acted to promote the spread of liberty and republican principles, they rejected the notion that the United States has an absolute moral obligation to dedicate its citizens, arms, and resources selflessly to improving the economic, political, and social conditions of foreign nations.

This, however, is precisely what many Progressives, such as John Dewey and Woodrow Wilson, found most objectionable about the Founders' foreign policy. They especially criticized the policy of using force abroad only for the sake of our own national interests, a policy they falsely began to label as "selfish" and "isolationist." Instead, the United States should benefit mankind more directly through its foreign policy. The net effect of these Progressive ideas over time was that the pursuit of self-interest in foreign policy came to be rejected as base and immoral, and selflessness in foreign policy became the ethical and noble principle. Liberating, democratizing, and generally improving the quality of life for foreign peoples, therefore, should be the primary end of foreign policy. Promoting the security of the United States became a secondary goal, to be achieved only indirectly through the process of promoting the good of others or the world as a whole.

This should not be misconstrued as a call from Progressives to unleash unlimited armed intervention on the part of America around the globe. Even a highly evolved society such as the United States lacked the resources to launch an open-ended crusade to liberate or civilize every oppressed or uncivilized people in the world.

What standard did Progressives use to prioritize their interventions abroad? Foreign events, they believed, would provide the United States with particular moments in which it would be imperative for us to act in the name of freedom and democracy abroad. An astute leader would recognize such moments when he saw them. History would provide us with opportunities to intervene abroad with force to liberate societies oppressed under autocratic regimes and to assist with the creation and preservation of democratic institutions for those peoples that were incapable of establishing and maintaining them for themselves.

One of those great historical moments came in 1898 in the form of the Spanish–American War.

12. George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796, Heritage Foundation *Primary Sources*, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address (emphasis added).

## Turning the Tide: The Spanish–American War

The Spanish–American War marked a pivotal moment in the transformation of American foreign policy away from that of the American Founders. The decision to declare war on Spain could have been justified strictly on the Founders' principles, but the actual reasons given at the time—combining both self-interested and altruistic motives—nudged the United States toward a more Progressive foreign policy. Future President Woodrow Wilson recognized the significance of the Spanish–American War, calling it a "turning-point in our life." It was an event as transformative of our foreign policy, he said, as the Civil War had been of our domestic life and institutions.[13]

The Spanish–American War marked a pivotal moment in the transformation of American foreign policy away from that of the American Founders. The reasons given at the time—combining both self-interested and altruistic motives—nudged the United States toward a more Progressive foreign policy.

War with Spain came after a long political debate about how to handle ongoing political unrest in Cuba. In the last decades of the 19th century, Spain attempted to tighten its grip on its Western colonies, and this set off a series of revolts in Cuba against colonial rule. The proximity of Cuba, on America's doorstep, and its importance as a gateway to U.S. trade in Latin America made the Cuban–Spanish conflict an issue that struck close to home for many Americans. News of atrocities committed by the Spanish military against Cuban civilians, including the use of concentration camps, outraged many Americans.

As conditions in Cuba became even more unstable, the United States faced the choice of remaining neutral or intervening in the Cuban revolution, and throughout the late 1890s, opinion in Congress moved steadily toward the latter option. The sinking of the battleship USS *Maine* in 1898 in Havana Harbor and an intercepted letter from the Spanish minister in Washington calling President McKinley "weak" moved public opinion even further toward military action. Persistent harm to American property in Cuba, disruption of U.S. trade in the region, the escalating humanitarian crisis, and failed diplomatic negotiations with Spain eventually convinced many Americans that intervention in Cuba was no longer avoidable.[14]

Though President McKinley clearly recognized vital strategic and security issues that required U.S. intervention in Cuba, there was some question as to whether this action should be justified officially and publicly as being taken to secure Cuban independence or to protect the interests and security of the United States. When President McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war, he recommended both reasons, thus combining altruistic and self-interested ends. In addition to securing our peace, our citizens, and our commercial interests in Cuba, McKinley recommended intervention "[i]n the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible miseries now existing there and which the parties to the conflict are either unable or unwilling to stop or mitigate."[15]

Another remarkable aspect of McKinley's War Message to Congress was his admission that intervention to support Cuban independence seemed at odds with the foreign policy of the Founders. McKinley incorrectly labeled the long-standing policy of not using force to liberate foreign peoples as "strict neutrality."

McKinley was actually referring to the Founding-era policy of limited intervention in the domestic affairs of other nations. This policy was best summarized in an 1821 address by John Quincy Adams, then Secretary of State.

13. Wilson, "The Ideals of America."

14. For an excellent explanation of the role the humanitarian crisis played in public opinion regarding the war, as well as the diplomatic and political steps taken by McKinley before requesting a formal declaration of war from Congress, see Garrity, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy? American Foreign Policy, Revolution, and Regime Change, 1776–1900*, chapter 5, esp. pp. 342–370.

15. William McKinley, War Message to Congress, April 11, 1898, in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 1789–1897, Vol. X, ed. James D. Richardson, pp. 139–150.

Adams affirmed that the United States had not only "abstained from interference in the concerns of others," but had done so "even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart." The United States, he said, should offer moral support wherever "the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled," but "she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy." The best policy for the United States, Adams concluded, was to be "the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all," but to remain "the champion and vindicator only of her own."[16] In his defense of this policy, Adams revealed how American statesmen had hitherto chosen their actions toward other nations by combining prudential considerations of possible consequences—long- and short-term, good and bad—with the principled pursuit of just ends.

McKinley, by mischaracterizing this aspect of Founding foreign policy as "strictly neutral," also played up the misconception that the Founders were rigidly inward-looking isolationists who ignored the affairs of other people altogether. To the Founders, "neutrality" simply indicated a nation's policy choice to maintain non-belligerent status: In other words, remaining neutral meant not choosing sides in a conflict and thereby staying out of the fight altogether.[17]

McKinley had a purpose in redefining the meaning of neutrality, for it would allow him to choose between two kinds of neutrality. The first was the older, supposedly "isolationist" neutrality of the Founders; the second was the newer, more Progressive understanding, according to which "neutrality" meant that a nation could enter a conflict (and even choose sides) so long as it fought for an altruistic or unselfish purpose. This distinction would allow McKinley to have his cake and eat it, too: He could now justifiably intervene in the Spanish–Cuban crisis and still seem faithful to the deeply embedded tradition of neutrality, and because the United States would claim to fight for the welfare of the Cuban people and not for any permanent acquisition of territory or other selfish ends, the action would be "neutral intervention." "The forcible intervention of the United States *as a neutral* to stop the war, according to the large dictates of humanity," McKinley argued, "is justifiable on rational grounds."[18]

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To describe the United States as "neutral" in its intervention did not mean that we favored neither side in the contest. In fact, Congress issued a formal declaration of war and authorized President McKinley to use the military "for the recognition of the independence of the people of Cuba."[19] But to underscore that we were intervening as a "neutral" in the conflict, Congress added the Teller Amendment to the declaration, which disavowed any intent by the United States to claim Cuba permanently as territory of the United States.

The introduction of McKinley's "neutral intervention" and Congress's willingness to declare war for the independence of another people were in one sense rhetorical measures intended to establish broad support for the war among the American people, given the inclinations and sentiments of the public at the time. But these acts also marked significant steps toward building the idea that the use of force abroad was most justifiable when we had a neutral—that is, unselfish or disinterested—motive. In the aftermath of the Spanish–American War, other Progressives would explicitly denounce the direct

16. John Quincy Adams, Fourth of July Oration, 1821, in *Library of the World's Best Literature: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Charles Dudley Warner et al. (R.S. Peale, 1896).
17. The use of the term "strict" would have been superfluous to the Founders because to them the very idea of neutrality implied strictness: In other words, one was either neutral toward belligerent nations or not.
18. McKinley, "War Message," April 11, 1898 (emphasis added).
19. Joint Resolution of Congress, April 20, 1898, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), p. 763.

pursuit of American interests as selfish and elevate the selfless fulfillment of our duties toward others as the highest moral end of foreign policy. This new hierarchy of foreign policy ends came to the fore especially in the Senate debates over what to do with the former Spanish territories that had been liberated as a consequence of the war.

**What to Do with the Philippines?** Spain was no match for the United States in the war that lasted only four months. A summer ground campaign by the U.S. Army in Cuba and the destruction of Spanish fleets by the U.S. Navy in Santiago Harbor (Cuba) and Manila Bay (Philippines) led Spain to offer terms of peace by August of 1898. Spain was so thoroughly defeated that it ceded nearly all of its colonial possessions to the United States, including territories in both the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. The United States granted conditional independence to Cuba, and Puerto Rico and Guam were permanently annexed as American territories.

The question of what to do with the Philippines—a vast archipelago with several million inhabitants—proved to be the most contentious issue to arise from the consequences of the Spanish–American War. The 1900–1901 Senate debates on this issue revealed for the first time just how divided Americans had become between the Progressive and Founding approaches to foreign policy.

The first question in the debates was whether to annex the Philippines permanently as a U.S. territory, which was strongly opposed by a large number of Senators. This option, they argued, should be reserved for territories that would eventually become full states in the Union, and few, if any, Senators entertained the slightest idea of incorporating Filipinos as American citizens. At the same time, however, many Senators also recognized the economic and strategic importance of retaining U.S. control of Manila Bay and the island of Luzon, both to protect U.S. trade interests in Southeast Asia and to prevent other colonial powers (especially Germany) from possessing the Philippines. It seemed that we could neither keep the Philippines nor let them go.

As they struggled to find the solution, many Senators came to favor temporarily governing the Philippines under military occupation without their consent. Some thought this necessary to protect the interests of the United States, while others believed we should do so for the Filipinos' own good, even against their wishes, as part of our moral obligation to civilize less historically advanced peoples.

Of those Senators who opposed ruling the Filipinos without their consent, many based their arguments on the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the language of the Constitution's Preamble.

As the debates continued, the central question became whether the United States could justly rule foreign peoples without their consent. Of those Senators who opposed ruling the Filipinos without their consent, many based their arguments on the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the language of the Constitution's Preamble.

Senator George Hoar of Massachusetts, a Civil War Republican, vehemently objected to governing the Philippines for pristinely altruistic reasons. "Now, I claim that under the Declaration of Independence you cannot govern a foreign territory, a foreign people, another people than your own," Hoar argued, "that you cannot subjugate them and govern them against their will, *because you think it is for their good, when they do not*, because you think you are going to give them the blessings of liberty." He also rejected the idea "that we may do such things not for the perfect union, the common defense, the general welfare of the people of the United States, or the securing of liberty to ourselves and our children, but for any fancied or real obligation to take care of distant peoples beyond our boundaries, not people of the United States."[20]

Other Senators, such as Albert Beveridge of Indiana, preferred governing the Philippines without their consent for their own good. He criticized those who used the principles of the American Founding to stand in the way of progress and our duty to civilize foreign peoples. "The Declaration

20. Senator George Hoar, "The Lust for Empire," in Senate Debates on Governing the Philippines, *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 3rd Sess., January 9, 1899, pp. 493–503, http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/ghoar.htm (emphasis added).

of Independence does not forbid us to do our part in the regeneration of the world," Beveridge proclaimed. "If it did, the Declaration would be wrong." Beveridge backed off from explicitly rejecting the Declaration of Independence, arguing instead that "The Declaration has no application to the present situation.... The Declaration applies only to people capable of self-government."

This argument reflected the basic Progressive idea that the Americans, who hailed from "Teutonic" ancestry, had evolved historically much more than the Filipinos. "[W]e must never forget," Beveridge said, "that in dealing with the Filipinos we deal with children" (his term for "historically young" or less civilized peoples):

> They are not capable of self-government. How could they be? They are not of a self-governing race. They are Orientals, Malays, instructed by Spaniards in the latter's worst estate.... What alchemy will change the Oriental quality of their blood and set the self-governing currents of the American pouring through their Malay veins? How shall they, in the twinkling of an eye, be exalted to the heights of self-governing peoples which required a thousand years for us to reach, Anglo–Saxon though we are?

The best way to help them catch up historically would be to rule them, thereby exposing them to the ways of a civilized people who had acquired liberty after centuries of practice in self-government. In a final rhetorical flourish, Beveridge added, "We are trustees of the world's progress," combining the language of historical evolution and ethical idealism to urge American rule in the Philippines.[21]

The Senate ultimately decided to govern the Philippines without their consent. In fact, the United States rejected the Filipinos' 1898 declaration of independence and waged a three-year war against them in the name of civilization and preparation for self-government. This "benevolent" war, though quite bloody and often involving atrocities on both sides—including the use of concentration camps by U.S. military commanders—was strongly supported by President Theodore Roosevelt. "[W]e are constantly giving to the people of the Philippines an increasing share in, an increasing opportunity to learn by practice, the difficult art of self-government," Roosevelt said. "We are leading them forward steadily in the right direction."[22]

But even as the United States embarked on new paths in the East, the unsettled political landscape in the Western Hemisphere forced the United States to reflect on its foreign policy toward nations much closer to home.

**The Lingering Cuban Problem.** The collapse of the Spanish empire unsettled the balance of international power in the Western Hemisphere. Many Americans feared that other European colonial powers were all too eager to take advantage of the situation and increase their influence in the region. To avoid this and to uphold the integrity of the Monroe Doctrine, some Americans, such as Theodore Roosevelt, called for the United States to take on a more vigorous role in maintaining political and economic stability in many Latin American states.

The new circumstances in the Western Hemisphere, however, raised serious questions about whether our older foreign policy traditions were adequate to meet new challenges to American security.

- Could the United States promote stability in the region while also respecting independence and self-government for the peoples of newly liberated Latin American states?

- Should our efforts to protect and promote the welfare of Latin American peoples be done out of concern for our own security and interests or purely out of concern for their welfare—or perhaps a combination of the two?

These questions were hotly debated in the face of the problems that arose from Cuba's inaugural attempt at self-government.

21. Senator Albert Beveridge, "In Support of an American Empire," in Senate Debates on Governing the Philippines, *Congressional Record*, 56th Cong., 1st Sess., January 9, 1900, pp. 704–712, http://www.answers.com/topic/albert-j-beveridge.

22. Theodore Roosevelt, "Expansion of the White Races," Address at the Celebration of the African Diamond Jubilee of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington, D.C., January 18, 1909, in *Presidential Addresses and State Papers of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 8 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1905; Kraus Reprint Co., 1970), pp. 2071–2089.

When Congress declared war for the sake of Cuban independence from Spain, the Teller Amendment to that declaration was intended to guarantee that Cuba would eventually assume self-government and enjoy domestic sovereignty, but the declaration of war did not stipulate immediate self-government by the Cuban people. Although Cuban independence from Spain had been achieved and recognized by the United States, upon liberation, the island nation came immediately under U.S. military occupation and administration. The steps to eventual self-government first required popular elections for a Cuban legislative assembly, which took place in 1900, and then ratification of a constitution, which was drafted and approved by the Cuban legislature early in 1901.

U.S. oversight of another country's transition to self-government was itself a novel event in American foreign policy. The Senate took another unprecedented step by reserving to itself the final decision on the Cuban constitution. Eventually the Senate did ratify it, but it also added several stipulations in what is known as the Platt Amendment. This amendment prohibited Cuba from making treaties "which will impair or tend to impair [their] independence" and from contracting any foreign debt beyond what could be paid by "the ordinary revenues of the island." Cuba could not allow any foreign power to inhabit any portion of the island for military or naval purposes but was required to sell or lease to the United States land for naval bases to "enable the United States to maintain the independence of Cuba, and to protect the people thereof, as well as for its own defense." Finally, the United States reserved "the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence [and] the maintenance of a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty."[23]

The Senate insisted that these stipulations be integrated into the Cuban constitution and approved by the Cuban legislative assembly. Faced with two options—accept the amendment wholesale or reject it and remain under U.S. military control—the Cuban legislative assembly approved it, despite considerable opposition, and their constitution, with the Platt Amendment stipulations, went into effect in 1901.

**Though not wholly animated by Progressive ideals, the Platt Amendment marked another step away from the Founders' foreign policy by further blurring whether self-interested or altruistic ends ought to animate our foreign policy.**

One significant aspect of the Platt Amendment was that it combined altruistic ends—securing the rights, independence, and government of the Cuban people—with the goal of promoting and protecting the security and interests of the United States. Though not wholly animated by Progressive ideals, the Platt Amendment marked another step away from the Founders' foreign policy by further blurring whether self-interested or altruistic ends ought to animate our foreign policy.

The first Cuban government, under President Tomas Estrada Palma, seemed fairly stable until Palma attempted to postpone elections in 1905, which caused the outbreak of popular unrest on the island. President Roosevelt invoked the Platt Amendment to order a military intervention and prevent the revolt from escalating into full-blown civil war. Roosevelt justified the intervention on the legal ground of the Platt Amendment but also emphasized the unselfish nature of his decision to intervene. "The United States wishes nothing of Cuba," Roosevelt said, "except that it shall prosper morally and materially, and wishes nothing of the Cubans save that they shall be able to preserve order among themselves and therefore to preserve their independence."[24]

Roosevelt proclaimed a provisional government until elections could be held and the Cuban people had once again proven their capacity for stable

23. United States Senate, Platt Amendment to the Cuban Constitution, 1901, in *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776–1949*, Vol. 8, ed. C.I. Bevans (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 197 1), pp. 1116–1117, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1901platt.asp. The Platt Amendment was tacked onto the Army Appropriations Act to fund the American military occupational force in Cuba.

24. Theodore Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1906, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.

self-government. The need to reimpose American rule on the Cubans may seem harsh, but according to the basic ideas of Progressive foreign policy, uncivilized nations must struggle through history to become civilized, and civilized nations are obliged to help them along toward this goal. Roosevelt combined these ideas when he remarked in his 1906 Annual Message to Congress, "The path to be trodden by those who exercise self-government is always hard."[25]

## Theodore Roosevelt's Modernization of the Monroe Doctrine

Roosevelt's decision to intervene in Cuba was legally authorized by the Platt Amendment, but he also believed that this and his other foreign policy actions in the Western Hemisphere were justified by his understanding of the Monroe Doctrine.

What has come to be known as the "Monroe Doctrine" was actually a policy statement delivered by President James Monroe in his 1823 Annual Message to Congress. Monroe declared that the United States would consider any attempt by European powers "to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety." He did not insist that European powers give up their colonies and withdraw all influence from the Western Hemisphere, but attempts to reclaim colonies that had already declared and won their independence would be viewed "as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States."

Monroe did not, however, call for the immediate liberation of all peoples under colonial rule. Should the United States be required to take action against a European power in the Western Hemisphere, it would do so as dictated by prudence, but it would not use force purely for the sake of assisting Latin American peoples in their revolutionary efforts.[26] Monroe's original policy, therefore, was quite assertive but was also marked by a considerable degree of self-restraint on the part of the United States when it came to intervening in the domestic affairs of other nations.

Theodore Roosevelt redefined and reapplied the Monroe Doctrine to justify a more positive interventionist role for the United States in Cuba and other Latin American states.

Some Americans questioned whether Roosevelt's interventions were really compatible with the Monroe Doctrine.[27] Roosevelt's answer was that the Monroe Doctrine, though still applicable, had to be reinterpreted and updated in the wake of the Spanish–American War to meet the demands of a new political landscape and a new historical era. Roosevelt therefore redefined and reapplied the Monroe Doctrine to justify a more positive interventionist role for the United States in Cuba and other Latin American states.[28]

In what has come to be known as his Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, Roosevelt announced that our pledge to uphold and enforce that doctrine "may force the United States, however reluctantly...to the exercise of an international police power." In other words, the United States must take the lead in "policing" the affairs—both foreign and domestic—of Latin American nations and intervene when necessary to prevent circumstances that might invite European action in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt explained his Corollary in his 1904 Annual Message to Congress:

> All that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous....

25. Ibid. The military occupation of Cuba continued until 1909.
26. James Monroe, Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1823, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/monroe.asp.
27. The Monroe Doctrine had been relegated to a relatively minor role in shaping American foreign policy since the 1830s. Its importance, however, was revived by President Grover Cleveland in the 1890s to justify his Administration's opposition to European nations acting as intermediaries in a border dispute between Venezuela and Colombia. See Robert L. Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New, 1865–1900* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1975).
28. Roosevelt defended his modification of the Monroe Doctrine in his 1905 Annual Message to Congress: "If we had refused to apply the [Monroe] doctrine to changing conditions it would now be completely outworn," he said. "[It] would not meet any of the needs of the present day.... [W]e have adapted our application of it to meet the growing and changing needs of the hemisphere."

> If a nation shows that it knows how to act with reasonable efficiency and decency in social and political matters, if it keeps order and pays its obligations, it need fear no interference from the United States.... 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 United States or had invited foreign aggression to the detriment of the entire body of American nations.... [E]very nation, whether in America or anywhere else, which desires to maintain its freedom, its independence, must ultimately realize that the right of such independence cannot be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it.[29]

According to Roosevelt's Corollary, Latin American nations have the right to independence so long as their actions do not provoke or invite intervention in the Western Hemisphere by European nations. Roosevelt was especially concerned that Latin American states unable to manage their economic affairs would default on their loans, thereby giving European creditor nations the right to collect what was owed to them, possibly through the use of naval or military force. Similarly, political instability, revolts, and frequent regime changes might place foreign citizens and property in jeopardy, giving European powers the right to step in for their protection. The United States therefore must be vigilant and intervene in the affairs of Latin American states before such circumstances arose, thereby preventing in advance any just cause for European intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Along with military and naval "police actions" in Venezuela (1902), Colombia/Panama (1902–1903), and Honduras (1903 and 1907), Roosevelt deployed American administrators to manage the economic activities of Santo Domingo in 1904–1905.

As noted, Progressives were divided on the question of whether force should be used abroad only for altruistic purposes. Roosevelt consistently maintained that the use of force to promote the security and interests of the United States was not in itself immoral, and he was more than willing to use force to satisfy those ends on several occasions. In this, Roosevelt set himself apart from many other Progressives at the time.[30] He also, however, usually supplemented his justifications of his policies by emphasizing the United States' moral obligation to civilize those Latin American peoples that were incapable of enjoying their independence responsibly.

**Roosevelt combined Founding and Progressive ends in his foreign policy, thereby expanding the circumstances in which the United States could and should intervene abroad militarily.**

Roosevelt rarely justified his actions on either wholly self-interested or wholly altruistic grounds. Rather, he generally combined these ends as the rationale for military intervention in Latin American states. "In asserting the Monroe Doctrine, in taking such steps as we have taken in regard to Cuba, Venezuela, and Panama," Roosevelt wrote in his 1904 Annual Message to Congress, "we have acted in our own interest as well as in the interest of humanity at large."[31]

In this sense, Roosevelt combined Founding and Progressive ends in his foreign policy, thereby expanding the circumstances in which the United States could and should intervene abroad militarily. Roosevelt, to be sure, suffered from no lack of moral clarity in his own mind about what he thought was best when it came to foreign policy, but his addition of altruistic ends to bolster the justifiable use of force abroad marked a further step toward the view that the only justifiable action in foreign policy is one that is undertaken for the welfare of other peoples or nations.

29. Theodore Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1904, in *Presidential Addresses and State Papers of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 3, pp. 176–177.

30. For example, in his 1904 Annual Message to Congress, Roosevelt wrote: "It is our duty to remember that a nation has no more right to do injustice to another nation, strong or weak, than an individual has to do injustice to another individual.... But we must also remember that it is as much the duty of the Nation to guard its own rights and its own interests as it is the duty of the individual so to do."

31. Roosevelt, Annual Message to Congress, December 6, 1904.

Woodrow Wilson would move the United States toward this moral view more than any other President before him.

## Woodrow Wilson's Moral Theory of American Foreign Policy

Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy thought was deeply influenced by both of the fundamental tenets of Progressivism: ethical idealism and historical evolution. He was inflexible in his conviction that the only moral foreign policy action is one that is selfless rather than selfish and that the United States had an absolute moral obligation to spread freedom across the world by civilizing uncivilized peoples. Wilson believed that America had reached a new stage in its historical development and that our foreign policy would have to be adjusted to meet our new moral obligations to the rest of the world. America, he thought, had been providentially prepared by history to dedicate its might and resources to the good of others.

These Progressive ideals would play a decisive role in shaping not only Wilson's foreign policy thought, but also his justification for America's entry into World War I. As Wilson wrote just after the United States entered the war:

> [W]e are saying to all mankind, "We did not set this Government up in order that we might have a selfish and separate liberty, for we are now ready to come to your assistance and fight out upon the field of the world the cause of human liberty."... Such a time has come and in the providence of God America will once more have an opportunity to show to the world that she was born to serve mankind.[32]

**World War I: Why We Fought (According to Wilson).** From the beginning of hostilities in 1914 between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria–Hungary, and Italy) and the Allies (Great Britain, France, and Russia), Wilson pledged to do his best to keep the United States out of the conflict by insisting upon America's neutrality. Foreign affairs in the Western Hemisphere, as well as efforts to affect Progressive domestic reforms, more than occupied the energies of President Wilson and his Administration. Even public outrage over the 128 American lives lost on the British liner *Lusitania*, sunk by a German U-boat in 1915, did little to move Wilson toward entering the fray.

When he finally called for intervention in 1917 on the side of the Allies, Wilson was careful to avoid any hint of self-interest or desire for revenge on the part of the United States. Instead, he justified American entry into the war by claiming that the progress of the world demanded it. History had provided a pivotal historical moment: the opportunity for the United States to act for a cause greater than its own separate prosperity and security. That cause was the very fruition of the world historical struggle toward freedom and democracy.

Woodrow Wilson's hard-nosed idealism was grounded on the basic tenets of Progressivism.

The need to help history to its ultimate end was a central theme of Wilson's 1917 War Message to Congress and the driving idea behind his rationale for declaring war. The United States should enter the war, Wilson argued to Congress, not for selfish American interests, but to combat a new and more abstract enemy: "autocracy," the enemy of freedom and obstacle to the world's progress toward democracy. "While we do these things, these deeply momentous things," Wilson said, "let us be very clear, and make very clear to all the world what our motives and our objects are...to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power."

From his high historical vantage point, Wilson could see clearly that autocracy was the last great obstacle to spreading and sustaining democracy in the world and that it was now incumbent upon the United States to play its part in this great struggle of history. "We are glad," Wilson continued, "to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples."

Wilson's hard-nosed idealism was grounded on the basic tenets of Progressivism. Like Theodore

32. Woodrow Wilson, Memorial Day Address, May 30, 1917, in *Selected Literary and Political Papers and Addresses of Woodrow Wilson,* Vol. II (New York: Grosset & Dunlap Publishers, 1926), pp. 248–250.

Roosevelt, Wilson was not afraid to use force abroad, especially if it would move history forward toward a more civilized world. Unlike Roosevelt, however, Wilson believed that such actions must be as free from the taint of self-interest as possible. He repeatedly emphasized that the United States would not fight for any selfish purpose whatsoever in World War I:

> We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make.... [W]e shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.[33]

Wilson consistently elevated the altruistic or selfless purposes of the United States in many other speeches throughout the war. In his 1917 State of the Union Address, he stressed that America should press forward to victory confident in its high, noble and unselfish motives. "Our present and immediate task is to win the war and nothing shall turn us aside from it until it is accomplished," Wilson said. "We can do this with all the greater zeal and enthusiasm because we know that for us this is a war of high principle, debased by no selfish ambition of conquest or spoliation.... [I]t is for us a war of high, disinterested purpose." Wilson combined the twin pillars of Progressive ideology when he concluded, "A supreme moment of history has come. The eyes of the people have been opened and they see. The hand of God is laid upon the nations."[34]

Wilson's altruistic rationale for joining the war marked a significant reorientation of foreign policy ends. Fulfilling the duty to help others not only supplanted considerations of self-interest as the chief aim of American foreign policy, but actually demanded action even at times when our interests were not at stake.[35] Wilson's moral theory of foreign policy, therefore, was a significant departure from the earlier traditions of foreign policy. In fact, Wilson explicitly rejected the Founders' approach to foreign policy when he declared that the old policy of "neutrality" would henceforth have to be replaced by a policy of altruistic interventionism:

> Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances.[36]

Wilson's condemnation of "neutrality" wrongly implied that the Founders' foreign policy amounted to selfish isolationism and always proscribed involvement in the affairs of the world and other nations. In reality, the Founders saw neutrality as one of many policies at the country's disposal, to be used or not used according to circumstances. In his Farewell Address, George Washington had stressed that America ought to have the liberty to choose or reject neutrality in order for it to retain "command of its own fortunes." Neutrality did not absolutely prohibit American involvement in the affairs of other nations and certainly did not mean that the United States must isolate itself from the rest of the world.

Unlike President McKinley's attempt to square "neutral intervention" in Cuba with the older tradition of limited intervention, Wilson paid no lip service to the Founders' advice to prefer neutrality when possible as dictated by prudence. By declaring an end to the Founders' foreign policy principles, Wilson seriously limited the exercise of prudential discretion, all for the sake of satisfying absolute moral imperatives in foreign policy.

A consequence of Wilson's injection of moral absolutism into foreign policy was that "historically

33. Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress," April 2, 1917.
34. Woodrow Wilson, State of the Union Address, December 4, 1917, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.
35. Whether security considerations actually justified American entry into the war is a separate and debatable question. Wilson, however, consistently downplayed the importance of such concerns, insisting instead that the United States was simply fighting for *what was right*.
36. Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress," April 2, 1917.

advanced" nations like the United States would have to relinquish some of that discretion. History would dictate to American statesmen when to act abroad by presenting circumstances and events that compelled them to fulfill new moral duties. This idealistic insistence on selflessness and self-sacrifice in American foreign policy would become the cornerstone of Wilson's vision of the League of Nations and also a chief cause of its rejection by the U.S. Senate.

**Wilson's Idealism and the League of Nations.** Even before President Wilson asked Congress for a formal declaration of war, he had consistently argued that the most effective way to advance the cause of freedom in the world was through the multilateral use of force under the direction of an international association of democratic nations. With America's entry into the war, Wilson believed the moment was ripe to push for the creation of such an organization.

The defeat of Germany and the Central Powers, while important, was not in itself enough to guarantee peace and justice in the future; only the cooperative efforts of nations legally bound and dedicated to a common cause could make the entire world safe for democracy. "Only when the great nations of the world have reached some sort of agreement as to what they hold to be fundamental to their common interest," Wilson said in 1916, "can we feel that civilization is at last in a way of justifying its existence and claiming to be finally established."[37]

Joining together in a collective democratic league would also compel member nations to set aside the pursuit of their own separate interests and reorient their foreign policies toward less narrowly selfish ends. "A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations," Wilson said in 1917. "It must be a league of honor, a partnership of opinion.... Only free peoples can hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests of mankind to any narrow interest of their own."[38]

Such were the principles that would animate a proposed League of Nations.

The League was central to Wilson's vision of the post-war world as revealed in his "Fourteen Points Speech" before a joint session of Congress in 1918. In this speech, Wilson listed his recommendations for how to achieve a lasting peace at the end of hostilities, emphasizing the need for diplomatic reforms, arms reductions, and the fair settlement of territorial disputes and colonial claims on the part of the victorious allies. The 14th and most important of Wilson's points was his call for a "general association of nations," which would have oversight in fulfilling his first 13 points and responsibility for coordinating and carrying out all measures necessary to guarantee peace and justice in the world. Wilson envisioned the League of Nations as nothing less than the capstone to the long historical struggle toward universal peace and freedom: the "moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty."[39]

Wilson envisioned the League of Nations as nothing less than the capstone to the long historical struggle toward universal peace and freedom: the "moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty."

Wilson was confident that the American people strongly supported his plan for the United States to join the League of Nations, but he faced strong opposition in the Senate. Many Senators had reservations about the degree to which the United States would have to relinquish control of its foreign policy decisions and subordinate its own discretion to the determinations of the League. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge was especially outspoken in his critique of the proposed League of Nations.

The United States, Lodge argued, would in essence be ratifying a permanently binding and indissoluble treaty. Furthermore, member nations in the League would be assigned "mandates," taking responsibility for the security and general welfare of non-member societies or peoples (in other words,

37. Woodrow Wilson, "American Principles," May 27, 1916, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.
38. Wilson, "Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress," April 2, 1917.
39. Woodrow Wilson, "Fourteen Points Speech," January 8, 1918, in *Woodrow Wilson: The Essential Political Writings*, ed. Ronald J. Pestritto (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2005), pp. 261 and 263–264.

peoples that were less politically developed than member democratic states). Joining the League of Nations, Lodge believed, would entangle the United States in unending intervention abroad because it virtually "pledges us to guarantee the political independence and the territorial integrity against external aggression of...every nation of the earth."[40]

In short, Lodge believed that joining the League would require the United States to give up command of its own fortunes, and his reservations, along with those of several other Republican Senators, carried the argument in the end. Wilson's efforts to get the United States into the League of Nations failed, but his general approach to foreign policy took root and profoundly influenced how Americans thought about foreign policy throughout the 20th century.

## The Legacy of Progressivism in Contemporary American Foreign Policy

Today, many aspects of Progressive ideology have disappeared from American foreign policy thought, especially the belief that historical evolution justifies racist imperialism. Yet the lasting effects of Progressive foreign policy are still felt. Americans remain unsure whether promoting our own security and interests for their own sake is morally acceptable or somehow shameful. Nearly every President since Wilson, regardless of political party, has felt compelled to justify American action abroad, both to our own citizens and to the rest of the world, with assurances that we are acting not just out of concern for our interests, but for the welfare of other peoples and the global community as a whole.

In nearly every recent example of major military intervention abroad—George H.W. Bush's interventions in Kuwait (1991) and Somalia (1992); Bill Clinton's interventions in Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999); and George W. Bush's actions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2004)—Presidents have attempted to blend the two rationales. Because of the political rhetoric used to justify each of these actions, Americans often found themselves asking whether they were undertaken to deal with threats to U.S. security, for humanitarian purposes, or to bring freedom and democracy to oppressed peoples.

A return to the Founders' clarity of purpose in foreign policy is the corrective to this Progressive legacy. The Founders' emphasis on prudence in foreign policy is especially important, since prudence is the political art of achieving what is best within the limits of what is possible in human affairs. Prudence is the antidote to Progressive idealism, which shuns the natural limits to what is possible and aims uncompromisingly at what is simply and abstractly right—or, as Woodrow Wilson once famously said, "As always, the *right* will prove to be the *expedient*."[41]

The net effect of a renewed application of Founding principles would be a foreign policy that better promotes our good, the good of other nations and peoples, and the good of the world as a whole.

The prudential foreign policy of the Founders was informed and guided by the principles of the American Founding. A renewed understanding of these principles will allow us to justify actions abroad that promote our security and interests but also temper that pursuit with an awareness of our moral obligations to other nations. A foreign policy grounded in principles and prudence would allow us, as Washington said in his Farewell Address, to "choose peace or war, as our interest guided by our justice shall counsel." The net effect of a renewed application of Founding principles would be a foreign policy that better promotes our good, the good of other nations and peoples, and the good of the world as a whole.

Understanding the dangerous shortcomings of Progressive foreign policy, coupled with a proper knowledge of Founding foreign policy, will also allow us to avoid the pitfalls of two extremes in contemporary foreign policy: on the one extreme, a purely disinterested and idealistic foreign policy by which we endlessly dedicate our military and other resources to the liberation and welfare of others

40. Henry Cabot Lodge, "Joint Debate on the Covenant of Paris," March 19, 1919, in *A League of Nations*, Vol. 2 (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1919), pp. 49–63.

41. Wilson, State of the Union Address, December 4, 1917 (emphasis added).

and, on the other, a policy of isolationism or narrow-minded self-interest by which we both neglect forward-thinking actions necessary for our immediate and future security and miss real opportunities to help others by prudentially advancing the universal principles to which we as a country are dedicated.

This critique of Progressive foreign policy is not meant to suggest that the United States should never act to help others or that we should only pursue our own interests without limit or concern for others. The American Founders would have rejected these views as well, but they also understood that there is a prudent and just way to fulfill our moral duties to ourselves, to other peoples, and to the world as a whole.

Helping others must be done in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons—and never at the expense of our conviction that the security of our own safety and happiness is a moral duty as well. The loss of this conviction was the high cost of the Progressives' refounding of American foreign policy. A renewed understanding of the Founders' foreign policy is the key to restoring it.

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