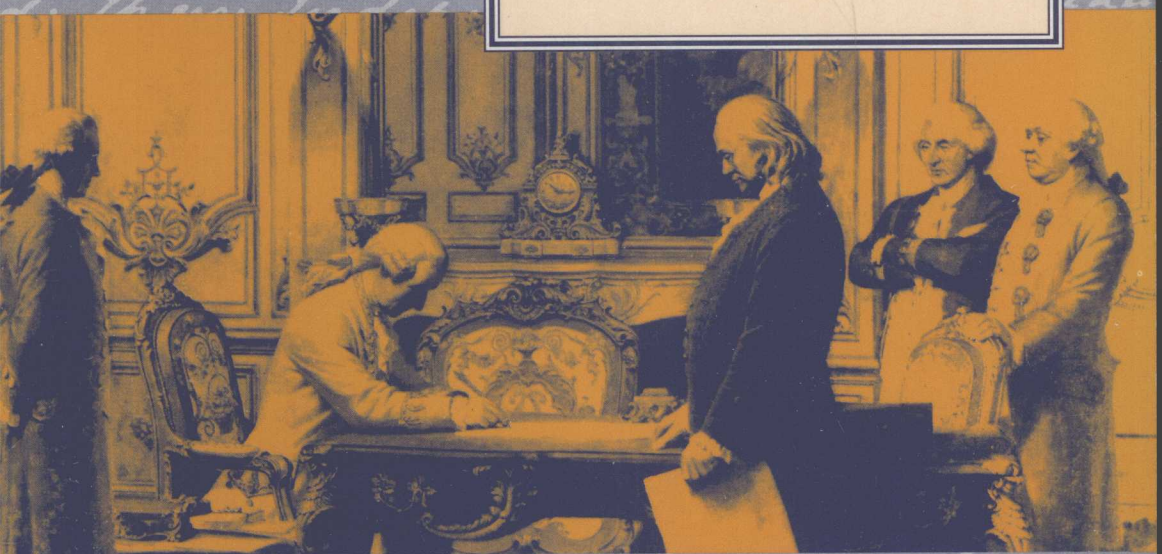
THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

SECOND EDITION

Jerald A. Combs



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SECOND EDITION

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The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

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This book was set in Times Roman by Ruttle, Shaw & Wetherill, Inc.
The editor was Lyn Uhl;
the production supervisor was Paula Keller.
The cover was designed by Joan Greenfield;
the design manager was Joseph A. Piliero.
Project supervision was done by Ruttle, Shaw & Wetherill, Inc.
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company was printer and binder.

Cover photo: Treaty of Amity
and Commerce and of Alliance–
France and the United States, 1778.
Courtesy the Bettmann Archives.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC DOC 9 0 9 8 7 6

ISBN 0-07-553400-2
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Combs, Jerald A.
The history of American foreign policy / Jerald A. Combs with Arthur G. Combs. —2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Contents: v. 1. To 1917 — v. 2. Since 1900.
ISBN 0-07-553400-2. — ISBN 0-07-553401-0 (v. 1).
—ISBN 0-07-553402-9 (v. 2)
1. United States—Foreign relations. I. Combs, Arthur G.
II. Title.
E183.7.C656 1997
327.73—dc20 96-20940

Preface

Anyone who has experienced the bitter debates over U.S. policy toward Iran, El Salvador, or Vietnam understands that American foreign policy inevitably generates controversy. Yet most people expect a history of American foreign policy to be a simple narrative of the "truth" about the past. They seem unaware that events of the distant past created just as much controversy as those of the present day. They also seem to assume that historians will be unaffected by past controversies, let alone by present ones.

Unfortunately, historical study cannnot provide a final truth about the past. Historians can approach the truth by close study of the documents surrounding critical events in America's diplomatic history, but their accounts are still affected by their own experiences, judgments, and predilections. These differences have given rise to several opposing views of the history of American foreign policy.

Some historians see American diplomacy as having been a fairly successful blend of democratic idealism and realistic concern for American national interests. They generally assume that American values of liberty, democracy, and free enterprise are worthy goals which, if encouraged throughout the world by American diplomacy, will benefit all the people of the earth as well as the United States. They portray most of America's wars as justified resistance to foreign aggression. For instance, they see the American Revolution and the War of 1812 as necessary battles against British tyranny. They look upon westward expansion as the spread of liberty and civilization over reactionary colonial regimes and tragic but doomed Indians. They emphasize the aggressiveness of the Mexicans leading to the Mexican War and the tyranny of Spain in Cuba and the Philippines prior to the Spanish-American War of 1898. They regard the two world wars as gallant crusades to save Europe from the tyranny of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany and then from Hitler's Nazis. Finally, they tend to see the events of the Cold War, including the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, as part of a noble if occasionally inept resistance to the expansion of Soviet and Communist plans for world domination.

This view, which I call the nationalist interpretation of American foreign policy, represents the outlook of many secondary school texts, politicians, newspapers, and television commentaries. It also continues to have strong support in the

academic world. It can lead to blatant superpatriotic flag waving, as in the speeches of some politicians, but it also can be the sophisticated conviction of scholars who have examined the realistic alternatives available to American statesmen at various times and concluded that in most circumstances America's leaders chose properly.

For the most part, those who hold the nationalist view are politically conservative. Among politicians, Ronald Reagan in his more ideological and less pragmatic moods would be a good example. An extraordinarily informed scholarly account of American foreign policy from this point of view is the classic text, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (4th ed., 1955) by the dean of American diplomatic historians, Samuel Flagg Bemis. Some liberals, however, also hold to the nationalist view. Liberal journalists, for instance, often write exposés of American blundering or cruelty in a particular instance such as the Vietnam war, but contrast that with the rest of America's supposedly decent and successful history. Good examples of such journalistic liberal nationalism are David Halberstam's account of the Vietnam war, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972), and Seymour Hersh's biography of Henry Kissinger, *The Price of Power* (1983).

A second and more critical interpretation of the history of American foreign policy is the so-called realist view. This has probably been the dominant interpretation among diplomatic historians since World War II. Realists insist that American foreign policy generally has been too naive, idealistic, and moralistic. They believe that Americans, regarding their own nation as more peaceful and moral than others because of America's democratic form of government, have oscillated foolishly between a policy of isolation designed to insulate themselves from evil foreigners and their meaningless wars, and a policy of crusading internationalism designed to eliminate foreign evils by making nations over in America's image. For instance, realists argue that America's devotion to total victory over Nazi Germany and unconditional surrender destroyed Central Europe and left a vacuum of power that naturally tempted the Soviets to expand. Instead of meeting that expansion with a realistic negotiating stance, the United States first hoped to deter it by peaceful intentions and goodwill, then overreacted to the failure of this naive approach by embarking on an excessive military buildup and an anti-Communist crusade. Realists believe the United States must follow a steadier policy based on national interests rather than grandiose democratic ideals, and seek peace through a balance of power rather than some utopian vision of a world without conflict.

Although many American diplomatic historians share this realist outlook, they often divide over its application to particular events. Hard realists emphasize the need for the United States to protect its national interests and the world balance of power by dealing with adversaries from a position of unassailable strength. America must be willing to take significant risks, including major military action, to prevent the expansion of its adversaries even in morally ambiguous situations or in areas others might see as unimportant to America's most vital interests. Thus, they favor a very activist American foreign policy. Henry Kissinger is a good example of a contemporary politician and historian who operates from this perspective. For a good history of American foreign policy written from this point of view, see Thomas A. Bailey's popular *A Diplomatic History of the American People,* now in its tenth edition (1980).

There are a number of soft realists, however, who argue that a proper analysis of America's national interest, the balance of power, and the limited ability of military action to accomplish worthwhile policy goals should have led the United States to greater restraint in its relations abroad. Soft or restrained realists generally think that greater patience and more expert diplomacy might have saved the United States from some of its wars and crusades and avoided its present overextension. The most prominent advocates of this view among diplomats and publicists have been George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morgenthau. In general, it is the view to which I subscribe and from which I have written this account.

While realists have chastised American foreign policy for excessive idealism and moralism, another group of critics known as revisionists argue that American diplomacy instead has been realistic and self-interested to the point of rapaciousness. Revisionists regard the primary theme of American diplomatic history not as an oscillation between isolationism and interventionism, but as continuous aggressive expansion. They see American imperialism beginning with the westward movement, extending through America's attempts to protect its markets and capitalist economy in the first and second world wars, and culminating in recent efforts to preserve American economic interests in Vietnam, the Middle East, and Central America.

The most radical of these revisionists believe that American imperialist foreign policy will not change unless the United States becomes a socialist nation. They agree with Lenin's theory that imperialism is the product of capitalism's intrinsic need to expand its markets and sources of raw materials. Capitalist nations must continually expand their economies by acquiring either formal or informal colonies, because only in this way can the elite who monopolize the internal wealth of the nation find new resources to buy off the masses, whose exclusion from the benefits of their labor would otherwise lead to a revolutionary redistribution of the nation's goods. Radicals believe that this redistribution of goods would enhance the purchasing power of the vast majority of the people, augment economic demand, and thus increase production and jobs. America's prosperity would no longer depend on overseas expansion and aggression, and the major motive behind imperialism and war would be gone. Failing this, the United States and the other capitalist nations would continue to expand, inevitably clash in their competition for markets and resources, and bring war and destruction on the earth. You will not find many American politicians who hold this point of view; they have difficulty being elected in the present American political climate. But you will find a strong statement of this perspective in Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy* (1969), and Sidney Lens, *The Forging of the American Empire* (1971). An excellent scholarly survey written with similar assumptions but with a much more restrained tone is Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick, *Creation of the American Empire* (1976).

Moderate revisionists also criticize America's rapacious expansionism and imperialism, but they tend to stress the economic factor in foreign policy somewhat less than do the radicals. They see American diplomacy as the product of bureaucratic as well as economic elites, of ideological and psychological factors such as racism and fear of communism as well as capitalist expansion, and of well-intentioned error as well as malevolence. They also find some leaders and episodes in

American history with which they sympathize, especially Franklin Roosevelt's attempts to accommodate the Soviet Union during World War II. An excellent survey of American diplomacy from this moderate revisionist point of view is Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, and Kenneth J. Hagan, *American Foreign Policy: A History* (4th ed., 1995).

In the following work, I, like the authors of all the other texts mentioned above, have tried to write a balanced account of the history of American foreign policy. But like them, I cannot help but be affected by my own experiences and point of view. I have tried to compensate for this by ensuring that even when the narrative expresses strong opinions about an episode, it presents other interpretations as well. The reader will also find detailed discussions of conflicting interpretations in the historiographical essays that follow each chapter. These essays trace the development of the major schools of historical thought outlined in this introduction, schools I think affect not only histories of past American diplomacy, but the making of present policy as well.

In the time since the first edition of this book was written, the world has witnessed one of the most significant events in the history of American foreign policy: the end of the Cold War. In some ways, that event has reinforced the differing schools of interpretation on U.S. diplomacy. Each of the schools now points to the end of the Cold War as proof that its interpretation was correct. Ronald Reagan and the nationalists argue that their uncompromising defense of American ideals and interests destroyed the Soviet Union economically and morally, thus bringing the United States victory in the Cold War. Hard realists like Paul Nitze assume that their tough bargaining and the realistic restraints they placed on the crusading idealism of Reagan and his nationalist allies were the keys to defeating the Soviets without triggering a catastrophic Soviet spasm of revenge. Soft realists like George Kennan point to the collapse of the Soviet Union as proof that they were right all along in arguing that the United States overestimated Soviet strength and aggressiveness. Thus, they claim, a restrained policy of containment would have permitted the Soviet Union to decay from within, as Kennan had predicted it would, without the dangers and tragedies brought on by the excessive militance of the nationalists and hard realists. Meanwhile, the revisionists could argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated that the Soviets had never posed a threat to American security in the first place. The real danger to the United States had been the socialist threat to rapacious capitalism and imperialism, and since that threat was independent of the existence of the Soviet Union, the conflict between socialism and imperialism would continue.

Yet, even as the end of the Cold War reinforced the differences between the schools of thought about America's past foreign policy, it also eliminated the primary issue around which the schools had built their interpretations. As new issues replaced those of the Cold War, they posed novel uncertainties and fresh challenges to existing American diplomacy. Inevitably, these new issues would lead scholars to ask different questions about past as well as present U.S. policies and to formulate innovative historical interpretations of them. Any future editions of this book will no doubt face a substantial rearrangement of the schools of thought about the history of American foreign policy.

Acknowledgments

I have incurred many debts in writing this book. I had a chance to compose several of the Cold War chapters in a National Endowment of the Humanities Seminar with Robert A. Divine at the University of Texas in the summer of 1982. Professor Divine and the members of the seminar have been extremely helpful. One member, Professor Wayne Knight of C. Sergeant Reynolds College, read the entire manuscript and made many useful suggestions. He also did much of the work researching and obtaining the illustrations. Professor Richard H. Immerman of the University of Hawaii gave an excellent critique of the chapters on later American diplomacy. Others who generously donated their time and knowledge to the project include Professors John Tricamo of San Francisco State University, Herbert Margulies of the University of Hawaii, Lou Gomolak of the University of Texas, and Kathy Scott of the Iowa State Historical Society. Readers for the press at various stages of the manuscript included Professors Walter LaFeber, Kinley J. Brauer, Mark Lytle, Robert C. Hildebrand, and Franklin W. Abbot. My wife, Sara P. Combs, helped edit the manuscript and locate the maps. With all the help I have received, any errors of fact or interpretation that remain are my own fault.

All Chinese names are romanized according to the more familiar Wade-Giles system because this was the system in use for most of the period covered in this book and the system used in all the reference materials.

Acknowledgments to the Second Edition

Arthur G. Combs, a doctoral candidate in international and economic history at the London School of Economics, helped with the revisions of this second edition. He took particular responsibility for the new material on Asia in World War II and on recent events in Asia and the Middle East.

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Maps

CHAPTER 1

The American Revolution and the Origins of American Diplomacy

EARLY AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: NEUTRALITY AND EXPANSION

One of America's leading diplomatic historians, Ernest May, has characterized early American foreign policy as "pacifist and isolationist." There is much truth in this label. Americans did try to avoid entanglement in the wars and alliances of the great powers of Europe, just as George Washington had advised them to do in his famous Farewell Address. President Martin Van Buren said in the 1840s that Americans still regarded nonintervention and neutrality "with a degree of reverence and submission but little, if anything, short of that entertained for the Constitution itself." With its neutralist stance and its tiny Army and Navy, the United States seemed a peaceful haven to many Europeans who immigrated to escape the continuous wars and burdensome military obligations of their homelands.

Yet the image of early America as "pacifist and isolationist" is misleading. Americans did not want total isolation from Europe: They avoided political entanglements as best they could, and some even sought cultural isolation to prevent contamination by Europe's supposedly corrupt anti-Republican society. But Americans did not want commercial isolation. Trade with Europe was vital to the American economy, and if Americans designed their neutrality to avoid entanglements in Europe's wars, they also designed it to increase their foreign trade. Under international law, neutral nations could trade unmolested with nations at war, and the United States intended to benefit from this protection. Americans also hoped to reinforce the protection of international law by making their trade so valuable that no nation would risk interfering with it. So, early American policy toward Europe is far better characterized as neutralist than isolationist.

Nor was early American diplomacy truly pacifist. Even though Americans wanted neutrality to keep them out of European wars, they were ready to fight for their neutral rights, as they proved in 1812. In addition, despite the reverence Martin Van Buren insisted Americans held for nonintervention, the United States joined the major powers of Europe in claiming and exercising the right to intervene in other nations to protect the lives and property of its citizens abroad. The United