

Essay on american isolationism

[Politics](#), [International Relations](#)



The nature and characterization of American foreign policy were much discussed in the academic fields. Particular issue which was always actively discussed in the literature is a phenomenon of American isolationism. In this topic, researchers can be divided into three branches. The first ones consider that American isolationism is an undividable feature of American foreign policy. In other words, they suggest that this phenomenon is some kind of national system of values and beliefs. The second type of scholars suggest that not all American foreign policy can be named "isolationist", and that it was so only in the beginning of the country's formation, during the time of the Monroe doctrine and the interwar period. On the other hand, there are also those scholars who argue that American foreign policy had never been isolationist, and that such term is miss-interpreted. They consider that interwar period might seem non-interventional, from European point of view; but, in fact, it was not so. So they are convinced that USA were actively participating in the European affairs. The quote given above corresponds to the first type of scholars, meaning those who condemned USA for isolationism and non-intervention into European affairs unless there was a substantial benefit for the country or common threat was too big. In the present paper, the main points and arguments of this theoretical perspective are described. Their analysis in respect to validity of argumentations concerning motivations of the US foreign policy is made in depth.

Appropriate examples and justifications are also given.

The corner stone of the outlined perspective of American foreign policy is that, through all its history, United States was staying away from European affairs, unless they saw some benefit for themselves. In this sense,

isolationism was seen not as one of the policy directions but rather as policy and rationality of actual actions. In other words, being ignorant to the matters of the outer world was understood as being American in general. The proponents of this idea considered that no altruism or charity in the American foreign policy is possible. In this context, the main points of American foreign policy behavior would include: non-interference into relations between European countries or countries from any other region; ignorance to the consequences of such policy; individualism in behavior and impact on the international relations; confidence in personal correctness; supremacy of national interest above international, common goodness. The described above concept is very radical and is actually based on the condemnation of American policy in general. From the point of theory of international relations, it makes it entirely Machiavellian, meaning “the end justified the means” and that morality and politics are inconsistent (Burchill, Devetak & Donnelly, 2009). In other words, when those scholars studied the topic, they argued that behind each step of American policy there is a hidden motive, entirely selfish and pragmatic. The nature of those motives might be both internal and external. In case of the first one, the main argument is that USA would have never aligned with France during the time of the Second Continental Congress unless it would not contribute to the winning of the Civil War. Another example from the continental period is that American relations with Napoleon Bonaparte were entirely pragmatic. Irrespective of the fact that his activity was illegitimate, conquering and dictatorial, it was favorable for the USA, since they had an opposition to the British Crown and had made a huge land purchase of Louisiana in 1803. Thus, they practically

financed Napoleon/European wars and gained all the possible. Concerning the 20th century, the main examples of isolationism are that USA were reluctant to take part in WWI, they refused to become a member of the League of Nations, and did not participate in the WWII until the Pearl Harbor. The mentioned above argument that in the continental and regional period USA were ignorant to the European affairs is not valid. USA were interested in the European affairs from the perspective of realistic foreign policy interest - desire to survive and gain profit from international trade and political cooperation. Although it may seem that making deals with Napoleon and viewing him as a counterpart to the British Crown is too pragmatic and undemocratic, it should be stated that, under conditions of newly formed state, without even entirely formed common government, after Civil war and in constant struggle for survival, USA were acting quite just and rational. It is not more irrational than British actions of strengthening Germany as a counterpart to France, after WWI. While American actions did not lead to the new war, British policy and desire to gain leadership in Europe led to another war.

American foreign policy cannot even be called non-interventional, since it participated in European affairs, in the interwar period, maybe not the way Europeans wanted it to be, but USA helped financially and in weaponry. This again cannot be seen as non-interference and definitely is not isolationism. The argument, stating that, although the Charter of the League of Nations was based on the "14 principles" of W. Wilson, USA did not become a full member of the organization due to the national isolationist lobby, is quite exaggerated. The main rationale behind American decision not to participate

in the newly created organization was dictated by the postwar situation in the Europe. Inability of the main winning parties to negotiate about repatriations, borders and how treaties with the defeated parties should look like, struggle between UK and France for the supremacy in Europe were suggesting that American active participation in the regional affairs would result in even tougher conflicts and tensions between countries. In other words, immediate after-war altruism had vanished, facing the unresolved problems of the European countries. Of course, the decision to become relatively non-involved was also influenced by the change of the governmental rule inside the country, meaning democratic Wilson was changed by the republican W. G. Harding, who was characterized by conservative views and protectionism. On the other hand, USA did not entirely turn their back from the Europe; instead, they changed the influence from the active political and military participation to the economic one. Overall, the mentioned above discussion can be summarized as follows. The given quote represents a view of the scholars who consider American foreign policy to be isolationist and pragmatic towards European affairs. Although American foreign policy and policy of any country should be pragmatic until a certain extent, it never was isolationist. On each stage of the development, the newly formed country was trying to survive and adjust to the surrounding environment of the international relations. In the times of Napoleon Wars, USA, just as European states, was surviving and gaining profits. With the development of globalization and meaning of the global, common goodness, USA were becoming more active in the world affairs and methodology of its influence had become more diverse.

Reference

Burchill, S., Devetak, R. & Donnelly, J. (2009). Theories of international relations. London,

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