

Realism vs. idealism: how american foreign policy has changed since world war ii ...

[History](#)



Realism vs. Idealism: How American Foreign Policy Has Changed Since World War II Throughout the first 125 years of her history, the United States was, for the most part, an isolationist nation. After the onset of two world wars, however, America moved from an isolationist stance to become one of the world's two superpowers. This stance would remain for almost 50 years, until the Soviet Union would come crashing down, leaving America standing as the lone superpower. But how did American foreign policy influence the world over those 50 years?

Why did some Presidents take an idealistic approach to foreign policy, while others looked for more realistic approaches? Since World War II, American foreign policy has taken on a global mission. While the policy has sometimes had an idealistic approach, the realistic approach to foreign policy has benefited America and her allies more. To understand how America reached this position of global influence, one must look back to a time when America was an isolationist nation.

During most of America's history she was an isolationist nation. America seemed content to let the powers in Europe slug it out for global supremacy while she was left to expand her own influence across North America. But all that changed with the onset of World War I. Germany and the axis powers were marching their way across Europe, and although they posed no direct threat to the shores of America, America began to shift from her isolationist stance to provide assistance to Britain and France.

With the revelation of the Zimmerman Telegram, an attempt by Germany to get Mexico to attack the United States and keep her out of Europe, America

moved from isolationism to declare war on Germany and the axis powers. After World War I, however, the United States seemed content to move back to an isolationist position. Although President Woodrow Wilson came up with a grand international group (the League of Nations) as part of his Fourteen Points plan for peace, “ the U. S. Senate failed to pass the Versailles peace treaty by the necessary two-thirds vote. (McCormick 28) This enabled the United States to stay away from the Wilsonian ideas of American involvement in global affairs. A generation later, however, this attitude of isolationism would be tested once again, this time with a much different outcome. During the late 1920s and into the 1930s, Germany once again began to amass a large army and threaten her neighbors. When Germany attacked Poland in 1939, it signaled the beginning of World War II. Once again, the United States appeared to want to stay out of the war, but sent aid to France and Britain anyway.

Aid was also sent to China to help against the imperialist advance of Japan. But American involvement in world affairs was about to begin again. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, leading to President Roosevelt to declare war on Japan. This led to American entry into World War II to combat both the Japanese, and to assist American allies in Europe in defeating Germany. When World War II ended, rather than shrink from the world stage once again, America became a dominating influence to the world.

There were many reasons for this. “ The first important factor that contributed to America’s decision to move away from isolationism was the

political and economic conditions of the international system immediately after World War II. " (37) Europe, having been leveled by warfare, was under great strain from many fronts. Many of the nations of Europe were unable to keep their economies going. Because the land had been decimated by warfare, agricultural yields lagged behind what was needed.

On the other hand, the American economy was running with a full head of steam and so the United States stepped in to rebuild the nations of Western Europe, while the Soviet Union made its push for more power by controlling the nations of Eastern Europe. The result was the Cold War, a showdown between the world's two superpowers. The first president who had to deal with the Cold War was President Truman. Truman took a very realistic approach to the Soviet Union with the issuance of his policy (which came to be known as the Truman Doctrine).

In this policy, Truman lay out his plan for holding back communism. Truman committed the United States to a " global strategy" against communist aggression when he stated, "[The United States] must help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national identity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes. " (46)

President Truman decided to fight soviet aggression by committing the United States to fighting communism and keep it from expanding. The first test of the Truman Doctrine would come with the onset of the Korean War.

The Korean War actually began with the expansion of Soviet power into the Korean Peninsula. The United States, seeking to avoid a war, offered up the plan of splitting the peninsula at the 38th parallel, thus giving the Soviet

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Union influence over the northern half, and the United States influence over the southern half. “ Initially, it was the intention of both sides to establish a stable and unified Korea in order to withdraw their military forces from the area. However, neither the Soviet Union nor the U. S. wanted the peninsula to fall into the other’s hand. ” (Koreanwar. om) Because neither one wanted the other to have sole influence over the peninsula, the stalemate was born. Although both nations would withdraw their occupying forces before the end of the 1940s, the struggle between the two competing regimes would not subside and war would break out. When the South Koreans were attacked by the North, America saw it as an attack that was “ Soviet inspired and Soviet-directed” (McCormick 59) and jumped in to stop the spread of communism. This theme of stopping the spread of communism would pervade American foreign policy through the Vietnam War.

From the end of World War II until the Vietnam War, the dominating approach to American foreign policy was that of a realist approach. Presidents from Truman to Eisenhower, Kennedy to Lyndon Johnson all sought to combat communism directly. This approach was followed by the realism approach of the Nixon administration. The approach by the Nixon administration believed in the balance of power. The main stance of this was the realistic approach that the United States could not be involved in every regional skirmish that flared up.

This more limited role of the United States in regional disputes was announced by President Nixon and signaled a change from previous administrations and their policies toward intervention. The realist approach

by Nixon hinged on the belief that power was to be shared among others in order to preserve world order. (106) Nixon's policy was further advanced by his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger believed in the policy of linkage, by which he meant that all nations must understand that their actions in one area of foreign policy could have an adverse affect on another area.

Nixon and Kissinger also believed domestic issues should not play a role in deciding foreign policy. This policy aspect received criticism because it seemed to many that the president was following a foreign policy course that lacked the same moral content that the country was founded upon. The realistic approach to foreign policy that Nixon relied on did not put these moral issues at the forefront of the decision making process, which would be changed by a later administration. With the election of Jimmy Carter, a shift was made in America foreign policy.

President Carter took an idealistic approach to foreign policy, unlike the realist approach of previous administrations. One of the major differences was the reliance on moral principle. America's domestic values " were to be preeminent in the shaping of America's foreign policy. " (115) President Carter believed America should be at the forefront in promoting our way of life and our morals to the world at large. In his eyes, his presidency would usher in an era of global cooperation, where the United States would join with other nations from around the world to assist less fortunate nations in joining the world organization.

This move also shifted the way the president thought about American-Soviet relations. No longer would the United States have a bi-lateral approach toward the Soviets, but instead would work with many nations to form a broad coalition. Although President Carter sought a more global reach with his foreign policy, many areas in the world gave his policy trouble. In the Middle East, peace was something many thought may never come. The Arabs and Jews were constantly fighting one another and neither one seemed to have an answer for peace. The initial strategy of the Carter administration was to seek a comprehensive settlement through a Geneva conference, cosponsored with the Soviet Union. " (123) This initial plan was thwarted by the Israelis, who believed they would be outnumbered by both the Arab nations, and the Soviets, who they felt would side with the Arab nations. Although President Carter did see some progress for peace with the signings of the Camp David Peace Accords in 1978, ultimately this proved to be a disaster as only one Arab nation (Egypt) accepted the framework of the accords. Even more telling of the failure of the idealistic approach of Carter was his handling of the Iranian hostage crisis. By this time, President Carter had begun to move away from an idealistic approach, but he still relied on the domestic ideals of the United States to guide him in his policy decisions. Because of this, he allowed the overthrow of the pro-American Shah without any assistance by the United States because President Carter believed the Shah to be ruthless to his detractors in Iran.

The result was the storming of the U. S. embassy by students and taking of hostages. These hostages would be held for over 400 days while President Carter repeatedly failed with a variety of measures to get the hostages back.

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The election of another realist, President Ronald Reagan, would change the direction of America once again. On the day President Reagan was elected, the hostages were freed by Iran. This marked the first major victory for Reagan's foreign policy, which would be one with a realistic approach to policy implementation.

In many instances in his presidency, Reagan took the realist approach of meeting the Soviets head on instead of building vast coalitions. Reagan also believed that the Cold War was not an unending war, nor did he believe that America (and the West) were to have an equal stance in the eyes of the world with the Soviet Union. " In 1981 he told an audience at the University of Notre Dame, " The West won't contain Communism. It will transcend Communism. It will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written. The next year, speaking to the British Parliament, Reagan predicted that if the Western alliance remained strong it would produce a " march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ashheap of history. " (D'Souza) President Reagan believed America should lead by example, and that example would be freedom and democracy. He believed America was a shining city on the hill, and that the world was looking to her to end the Cold War, and also to emulate her successes.

His realist approach to the Cold War led to the president believing the Cold War could be won, not just managed. To combat Soviet aggression, Reagan built up the American military and strengthened ties with allies such as those in NATO. This had an adverse affect on the Soviet Union. " The Russians

watched the budget for the U. S. military increase, culminating in Reagan's grand promise to create the Strategic Defense Initiative — better known as Star Wars... But Reagan repeatedly upped the ante — and the Soviets realized that the costs of matching him militarily were beyond their means. (Barnathan) With the Soviet economy slipping away, and a new reformist leader in Mikail Gorbachev ready to change the course of the Soviet Union, President Reagan's realist approach was able to win the Cold War. This approach has also helped later presidents in their decisions. President George W. Bush has taken a largely realist approach to combating terrorism. Since the events of September 11, Bush has made it abundantly clear to the world that the United States will spare no expense to shoulder the burden to eradicate the world of the terrorists.

President Bush's understanding of how to fight this war was based in his linkage to President Reagan's approach during the Cold war when he stated, " While there are important distinctions, today's war on terror is like the Cold War. It is an ideological struggle with an enemy that despises freedom and pursues totalitarian aims. Like the Cold War, our adversary is dismissive of free peoples, claiming that men and women who live in liberty are weak and decadent — and they lack the resolve to defend our way of life.

Like the Cold War, America is once again answering history's call with confidence — and like the Cold War, freedom will prevail. " By pointing out the stark difference between the terrorists and Americans (and other free people of the world), President Bush staked his claim to a realist approach that would see actions, not just words, to combat terrorism. President Bush's

realistic approach to the war on terror has led to regime change in Afghanistan as well as Iraq.

While there are critics of both wars, the President has pointed out, using a mixture of realism and idealism, the peoples of these nations are now free from the oppression they once lived under. Much in the same way America's leaders used a realistic foreign policy approach to move away from isolationism in World War II, or from the idealism of detente to the realism of Reagan's approach to end the Cold War, President Bush's use of a realistic approach in the war on terror has achieved astounding changes in the world. But the challenge is there for America to stick with this realist approach and not fall back to an idealist mindset.

America must understand that " the war on terror is not a matter of law enforcement...It is a war that we fight against a totalitarian ideology, like Communism, that wants to destroy Western civilization. " (McInerney 166)
The Realism approach to foreign policy has been effective at dealing with an adversary who only understands violence, who does not seek to change to our way of thinking. This new adversary in the war on terror cannot be dealt with by idealism; only a realist approach will secure America's future.

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