

American foreign policy in the 20th century politics essay



".. every nation which desires to maintain its freedom (and), its independence must ultimately realise that the right of such independence cannot be separated from the responsibility of making good use of it."

The 20th century has often been referred to as the American Century.

Throughout the last century, the United States of America (USA or US) has been involved in every significant international political event and incident. Despite war having been brought to its shores only once during the Century, with the bombing of Pearl Harbour during the Second World War, the United States, as it is commonly referred to, has participated in several international wars and regional military conflicts during the 20th century, either directly or indirectly. Today American strength, prestige and influence are so great that Washington is inevitably a factor in every international equation and the global dynamics, whether it is nuclear disarmament, combating terrorism, environmental change or economic slowdown. As the sole superpower in the world today, America's influence in world affairs can simply not be escaped. In achieving such stature, a substantial role has been played by America's Foreign Policy.

Several scholars generally tend to regard the nature of American Foreign Policy to be reactionary. The common refrain that emerges from their studies and analyses is that American Foreign Policy in the 20th century has been primarily a defensive response to the actions of other world powers. They claim that during the initial decades after independence, the United States largely followed a policy of Isolationism and aspired to remain neutral in the international political upheavals of the period. Later, when the United States

commenced proactive participation in international affairs, American Foreign Policy, it is claimed, never harboured hegemonic aspirations.

On the other hand, a large section of the world considers the United States to be essentially an imperious state. The champion of liberal democracy has often been labelled a neo-imperialist country and its Foreign Policy perceived to be predominantly pursuing parochial and self-seeking agenda. It is claimed by this section that, under the garb of altruistic intent, the United States endeavours to spread its hegemony in the world. Over the decades, American Foreign Policy is seen to have acted purely in response to its own appraisal of emerging international situations and incidents. These appraisals have not been based on a collective assessment by the world's leading nations but instead have been overwhelmingly based on American thoughts and habits.

The Foreign Policy of any nation is indeed pursued to promote its interests and to further its objectives in the international arena. Every nation seeks to engage other nations of the world fundamentally to safeguard its own interests and ensure prosperity, whether economic or political, for itself. It is widely accepted that such engagement must occur in a manner that does not transgress the sovereignty of a nation or violate the accepted norms of civilised existence.

American Foreign Policy is commonly perceived to often cast aside these norms and aggressively pursue what is considered by many as a parochial agenda. Even as the sole superpower maintains that its actions are motivated by altruistic intent and benevolence towards the lesser privileged

nations, its influence and stature in international affairs has grown over the years which in turn, has apparently intensified the imperiousness and hegemonic attitude of the United States.

METHODOLOGY

Statement Of The Problem

The aim of this research is to study the Foreign Policy of the United States of America and the appraisals that have influenced such policy actions so as to conclude whether the United States has engaged in an imperious conduct in international affairs and pursued a hegemonic outlook.

Hypothesis

Common beliefs and perceptions predominantly suggest that American Foreign Policy has been a reaction to the developments in the world, implying that the United States had essentially been an ‘innocent victim of circumstances’. Such perceptions emphatically harp upon the Isolationism policy and neutral attitude of American Foreign Policy as proof of America’s altruism. This research holds such inferences to be only partly correct, if not completely incorrect. It is maintained that the United States of America has always pursued a foreign policy purely to further its own interests without regard to international norms and opinion. The country has steadily shaped its foreign policy well in anticipation of developments and in some cases even without reasonable instigation. American Foreign Policy is considered to be parochial and imperious in nature.

Scope Of The Research

The turn of the 19th century was a watershed event in American Foreign Policy. It marked a distinct change from the earlier non-interventionist attitude to an outward looking and global approach. This altered stance has been the essence of the American Foreign Policy ever since.

This research will examine the principal episodes and events relating to American Foreign Policy between the years 1900 to 2000. Foreign Policy is a reflection of a nation's past as much as it is the response to contemporaneous matters. Therefore, to lend perspective as well as a background to the study, this research will briefly dwell upon America's historical foreign relations prior 1900. History and past events can be objectively assessed only if they are examined in a detached manner. Their study must not be influenced by present happenings and current thoughts or perceptions. This research will therefore terminate with the year 2000 because only a decade has elapsed since, which may not be adequate to lend objectivity to the study after that period.

Organisation Of The Research

Foreign Policy of a nation is invariably an evolutionary process. While being a response to current and likely future issues, it relies heavily on past experiences. It either builds upon and consolidates the past successes or learns from its past mistakes and failures. Foreign policy responses to completely new issues tend to derive lessons from past instances of similar nature. This research has, therefore, been undertaken in a chronological order. The study has been chapterised into periods between key

international events that influenced the American Foreign Policy. The study is accordingly divided as follows :-

Chapter I

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Introduction and Methodology.

Chapter II

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Historic Backdrop. (Covers the period from the American Independence to the end of the 19th century.)

Chapter III

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Upto the First World War. (Covers the period from the beginning of the 20th century till the First World War.)

Chapter IV

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Inter War Years. (Covers the period between the two World Wars.)

Chapter V

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Cold War Era. (Covers the period following the Second World War till the fall of Communism in the early 1990s.)

Chapter VI

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Post Cold War. (Covers the last decade of the 20th century.)

Chapter VII

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Conclusion. (Summary and Inferences.)

Method of Data Collection

The data referred to during the course of this research was obtained from published books on the subject. Opinions, analyses and facts were also obtained from various internet resources, journals, periodicals and newspapers of repute. It was endeavoured to consult material from ‘ both sides of the divide’. Works of Western as well as non-Western authors were referred, to lend objectivity to the study. All sources used for this research have been listed in the bibliography at the end of the research. Important citations and references for specific parts of the study have also been mentioned in the main part of the study in the form of end-notes after each chapter.