

Foreign Policy Actions

Action A: Washington's Farewell Address

In the late 1700s many nations formed their foreign policy in such a way as to maintain a balance of power with other countries. Countries often sought out alliances to ensure that they had enough allies to prevent an attack by an unfriendly nation. But George Washington, the first president of the United States, tried to steer the United States in a different direction. Washington, in his 1796 *Farewell Address* advised, "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations [but] to have with them as little political connection as possible." He argued that trade with other nations would benefit Americans, but that "entangling alliances" would draw the United States into undesirable conflicts. Washington's counsel to avoid military alliances was followed throughout the 1800s and remained a major foreign policy consideration during the twentieth century as well.

Action B: The Monroe Doctrine

In December 1823 U.S. president James Monroe issued his final message to Congress. Concerned about European colonization in Latin America and on the West Coast, Monroe declared, "The American continents...are henceforth not to be considered as subject for future colonization by any European powers." In other words, the United States would not tolerate European interference in the Western Hemisphere. This statement, known as the Monroe Doctrine, has come to be one of the most important foreign policy statements in U.S. history. In the 1820s the United States did not have the military strength to back up Monroe's words. However, in the years since Monroe's speech, the United States has maintained a keen interest in Latin America affairs and has sent troops to that region more often than to any other region in the world.

Action C: The Mexican-American War

In 1846 President James Polk sent U.S. troops into an area of Texas just north of the Rio Grande that was claimed by both United States and Mexico. Polk was intent on achieving "manifest destiny"—the belief that the United States was destined to occupy the territory between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans—by extending U.S. territory across the southwest from Texas to California. When Mexico refused to sell this territory to the United States, tensions between the two countries grew. In early May 1846, Mexican and U.S. troops engaged in a skirmish in the disputed area. President Polk expressed outrage at the loss of "American blood upon American soil," and called for war with Mexico. Congress was divided on the question of war with Mexico. Abraham Lincoln, then a congressman from Illinois, believed that a war with Mexico was nothing more than naked aggression. Nevertheless, the United States went to war, and by 1848 had invaded Mexico and conquered the territory from Texas to the Pacific Ocean, an area now encompassing New Mexico, Arizona, and California.

Action D: U.S. Entry into World War I

In 1914 war broke out in Europe, with Germany and Austria-Hungary battling against France, Great Britain, and Italy. The United States immediately declared neutrality. In spite of a declaration of neutrality, the United States supplied more arms to the British and French than to the Germans in the first few years of the war. Germany retaliated by sinking unarmed U.S. merchant ships and a British passenger liner carrying American citizens, the *Lusitania*. In 1917 Germany attempted to negotiate a treaty with Mexico in which Mexico would attack the United States. In return, Germany would help Mexico regain the lands lost during the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). After two years of official neutrality but unofficial support for Britain and France, the United States declared war on Germany in 1917. President Wilson told Americans they would fight “to make the world safe for democracy.” The arrival in Europe of 2 million U.S. troops helped to turn the tide of the war, resulting in a bitter German defeat in 1918.

Action E: U.S. Entry into World War II

In the 1920s many Americans believed that U.S. involvement in World War I had been a mistake, and that President Wilson’s proposal for a strong international organization—the League of Nations—to prevent future wars was overly idealistic. They believed that the United States should remain self-sufficient and not become entangled in costly foreign commitments. However, during the 1930s a frightening series of events overseas demonstrated that the U.S. victory in World War I had not succeeded in making the world “safe for democracy.” Lingering hatreds from World War I produced a passion for revenge in Germany. Fascist and military regimes in Germany, Italy, and Japan conquered weaker nations in Europe, North Africa, and Asia. The United States struggled to stay out of the fighting while sometimes providing economic and diplomatic support for the victims of aggression. Then, in 1941, with the free world in peril, a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor forced the reluctant country into World War II.

Action F: The Truman Doctrine

At the end of World War II, the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union turned into a bitter rivalry between the two countries—a rivalry known as the Cold War. The Soviets, led by Josef Stalin, established a ring of Communist states around the Soviet border in Eastern Europe and appeared to be looking for more territory around the globe. In 1947 it appeared that Communist rebels—supported by the Soviets—were poised to take control of Greece and Turkey. The United States responded with a new U.S. foreign policy. President Truman asked Congress for military aid for the governments of both countries. In his request for aid, Truman argued that it was the responsibility of the United States to defend “free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.” Known as the Truman Doctrine, this pronouncement committed the United States to fighting the spread of communism throughout the world.

Action G: The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, the United States' longest foreign war, cost 58,000 American lives and more than \$150 billion. In keeping with the policy of containment—not allowing communism to spread—the U.S. goal in the war was to preserve a separate, independent, noncommunist government in South Vietnam. U.S. leaders believed that if one country became communist, other countries in a region would likely do so as well. For 30 years, under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, the United States provided military and economic support to South Vietnam to help it fight against the North Vietnamese Communists, who were seeking to unite Vietnam. The war dragged on, and support for it eroded as television brought the fighting into American homes, and college students nationwide protested U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. In 1973 the United States and Vietnam signed a peace agreement ending the war. Two years later, the North Vietnamese invaded South Vietnam and reunified the country under a Communist government.

Action H: The Persian Gulf War

In August 1990 the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, ordered an invasion of Kuwait, Iraq's small, oil-rich neighbor. Hussein's forces easily defeated the Kuwaiti army, and a few days later, Saddam announced that Iraq had annexed (extended the Iraqi border to include) Kuwait. U.S. president George Bush, fearing that Hussein's aggression threatened the security of the Middle East and global access to Middle Eastern oil, worked with the United Nations (UN) to put in place an economic boycott of Iraq. The UN also promised to defend Saudi Arabia from attack and to mobilize an alliance of 28 nations to free Kuwait from Iraqi control, through force if necessary. When Hussein refused to withdraw from Kuwait, allied forces struck Iraq in January 1991 in Operation Desert Storm. The operation began with extensive bombing raids on strategic Iraqi targets, after which allied ground forces drove the Iraqis from Kuwait and deep into Iraq. The Persian Gulf War lasted only 42 days, but cost an estimated 200,000 Iraqi lives and 240 lives from the UN allied forces.

Action I: Peacekeeping in Bosnia

In 1989 communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. In Yugoslavia, ethnic and religious groups divided the formerly Communist country into several smaller republics. Serbia, the republic that had dominated Yugoslavia, wanted to preserve a unified country. When two other republics—Slovenia and Croatia—declared their independence in 1991, many Serbs living in those regions feared repression by the new governments. As ethnic tensions continued to rise, fierce fighting broke out among the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in another republic, Bosnia. The United States pushed for an arms embargo (refusal to sell weapons) to Bosnia, which the United Nations passed in 1991. The United Nations also sought to end the conflict by sending peacekeeping troops and humanitarian aid. Still, the fighting continued until mid 1995, when a NATO bombing campaign forced the well-armed Bosnian Serbs into peace talks. Hosted by the United States in Dayton, Ohio, these talks produced a cease-fire agreement and the commitment of foreign peacekeeping troops, including thousands from the United States. In 1998 U.S. troops remained in Bosnia to maintain the peace.