Chapter One

THE AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY TRADITION

Lord Bryce, a British statesman who served as Britain's ambassador to the United States from 1907 to 1913, once wrote that the role of foreign policy in American life could be described the way travelers described snakes in Ireland: "There are no snakes in Ireland."

That at the turn of the twentieth century the United States had no foreign policy worth noting was a view that, in retrospect, many Americans would come to share. How such a view arose is somewhat mysterious. Americans of 1900 thought they had an active, indeed a global, foreign policy. The Spanish-American War had only recently ended, and American forces were still in the midst of a bitter war against guerrilla freedom fighters in the Philippines. It was a time, in fact, when many Americans were struck by a sense that the United States was coming of age. "Th' simple home-lovin' maiden that our fathers knew has disappeared," said Mr. Dooley in 1902, "an' in her place we find a Columba, gentlemens, with machute charms, a knowledge iv Euro-peen customs an' not averse to a cigareet."

In 1895 one of America's many successful but largely forgotten secretaries of state, Richard Olney, had forced the British to back down in a boundary dispute between British Guiana (now Guyana) and Venezuela. "Today the United States," stated Olney, "is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its
interposition." Not content with forcing the British to acknowledge their secondary status in the Western Hemisphere, the United States was exerting increasing influence in Asia. It was Secretary of State John Hay who proclaimed the Open Door policy toward China, and, rather surprisingly, the other great powers accepted American opposition to further partition of a weak Chinese empire. Under Lord Bryce's friend Theodore Roosevelt, the United States would humiliate Britain three times in the Western Hemisphere: first, the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1900 saw Britain give up its long-standing insistence on equal rights in any Central American canal. When the Senate rejected this agreement as too generous to Britain, the unhappy Lord Pauncefote, Britain's ambassador to the United States, had to concede even more Isthmian rights and put his name to a second and even more humiliating agreement with Hay. This humiliation came when Britain, increasingly anxious not to offend the United States at a time when tensions were growing with Germany, agreed to settle a boundary dispute between Alaska and Canada on American terms.

The energetic Roosevelt's foreign policy did not stop with these successes. He would send the famous "White Fleet" of the U.S. Navy on a round-the-world tour to demonstrate the nation's new and modern battle fleet, and abrogate the Russo-Japanese War, send delegates to the 1906 Algeciras Conference in Spain, convened to settle differences among the European powers over Morocco; and generally demonstrate a level of diplomatic activity entirely incommensurate with the number of Hibernian snakes.

The closing years of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth saw American politics roiled by a series of foreign policy debates. Should Hawaii, Cuba, the Philippines, or Puerto Rico be annexed, and if so, on what terms? Should the United States continue to participate in its de facto currency union with Britain (the gold standard), or not? How high should tariffs on foreign goods be? Should the United States confine itself to a "revenue tariff" set at levels to support the country's budgetary needs, or should it continue or even increase the practice of protective tariffs?

Lord Bryce knew all this very well, but he had reasons for making the statement he did. Like many British diplomats of his day, he wanted the United States to remain part of the British international system, a world order that was in 1900 almost as elaborate as, and in some respects even more interdependent and integrated than, the American world order that exists today.

There was, he conceded, one diplomatic representative the United States did require, however. The Americans could fire the rest of their ambassadors and not notice any real difference, he said, but the United States did need to keep its ambassador at the Court of St. James.

This change would have been a great deal more beneficial to Great Britain than to the United States, but the good lord had a point. In 1900 Great Britain was at the center of a global empire and financial system, a system that in many respects included the United States. On the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, often considered the high-water mark of British power and prestige, the *New York Times* was moved to acknowledge this fact. "We are part," said the *Times* in words that were no doubt very welcome to Lord Bryce, "and a great part, of the Greater Britain which seems so plainly destined to dominate the planet."

In a certain sense the *Times* was right. One hundred years ago the economic, military, and political destiny of the United States was wrapped up in its relationship with Great Britain. The Pax Britannica shaped the international environment in which the United States operated.

In the last analysis Lord Bryce's comments were less an informed observation about American history and foreign policy than it was a hopeful statement about the durability of the British Empire. It was a prayer, not a fact. Bryce hoped that Britain could continue to manage the European balance of power on its own, with little more than the passive American participation it had enjoyed since the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine. The British statesmen of his day hoped that if they offered the United States a "free hand" in the Western Hemisphere, and supported the Open Door policy in China, the United States would not contest Britain's desire to shape the destinies of the rest of the world.

That Lord Bryce would have discounted and minimized the importance of foreign policy in the United States does not surprise; that so many important American writers and thinkers would join him in a wholesale dismissal of the country's foreign policy traditions is more surprising. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features about American foreign policy today is the ignorance of and contempt for the
national foreign policy tradition on the part of so many thoughtful people here and abroad. Most countries are guided in large part by traditional foreign policies that change only slowly. The British have sought a balance of power in Europe since the sixteenth century and the rise of the Tudors. The French have been concerned with German land power and British or American economic and commercial power for almost as long.

Under both the czars and the commissars, Russia sought to expand to the south and the west. Those concerns still shape the foreign policy of today’s weakened Russia as it struggles to contain control of the Caucasus, project influence into the Balkans, and prevent the absorption of the Baltic states and Ukraine into NATO.

Only in the United States can there be found a wholesale and casual dismissal of the continuities that have shaped our foreign policy in the past. “America’s journey through international politics,” wrote Henry Kissinger, “has been a triumph of faith over experience...” Torn between nostalgia for a pristine past and yearning for a perfect future, American thought has oscillated between isolationism and commitment.

At the suggestion of columnist Joseph Alsop, the extremely intelligent George Shultz acquired a collection of books about American diplomacy when he became secretary of state, but nowhere in his 1,138-page record of more than six years’ service does he mention anything he learned from them. The 672 fascinating pages of James A. Baker III’s memoirs of his distinguished service as secretary of state are, with the exception of a passing mention of Theodore Roosevelt’s 1903 intervention in Panama, similarly devoid of references to the activities of American diplomats or statesmen before World War II.

For Richard Nixon, American history seemed to begin and end with the Cold War. American history before 1945 remained a fuzzy blanket to him; even in his final book he could call the United States “the only great power without a history of imperialistic claims on neighboring countries”—a characterization that would surprise such neighboring countries as Mexico, Canada, and Cuba (and such countries as France and Spain that lost significant territories to American ambition) as much as it would surprise such expansionist American presidents as Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, James Knox Polk, James Buchanan, Ulysses Simpson Grant, and Theodore Roosevelt. Other than warning about the dangers of isolationism and offering panegyrics on American virtues, Nixon was largely contemptuous of or silent about the traditional aims, methods, and views of American foreign policy, although he frequently and respectfully referred to the foreign policy traditions of other countries with which he had had to deal.

The tendency to reduce the American foreign policy tradition to a legacy of moralism and isolationism can also be found among the Democratic statement who have attempted to guide American foreign policy in the last twenty years. Some, like Jimmy Carter, have embraced the moralism while rejecting the isolationism; others share the Republican contempt for both. The copious and learned books of Zbigniew Brzezinski show few signs of close familiarity with the history of American foreign policy or with the achievements of his predecessors, much less a sense of the traditional strategies and goals that guided their work. Similarly, the memoirs of former secretary of defense Robert McNamara and former secretary of state Dean Rusk rarely touch on American foreign policy before 1941. When former secretary of state Warren Christopher selected and published the most important speeches of his tenure in office, the collected documents contained only one reference to the diplomatic activity of any American before FDR, and that was to what Christopher sees as the failures of Woodrow Wilson’s efforts vis-à-vis the League of Nations and human rights.

The deep lack of interest in the history of American foreign policy is not confined to high officials. The overwhelming majority of their talented and hardworking colleagues in think tanks, universities, the national media, and government departments that are concerned with developing, carrying out, reporting, and reflecting on the foreign policy of the United States do not know very much about the history of American foreign policy before World War II, do not particularly want to learn more than they already know, and cannot think what practical purpose a deeper knowledge of American foreign policy history might serve.

This lack of knowledge and curiosity about the history of American foreign policy contrasts with what is in general a passion for historical learning among our foreign policy intellectuals. The history of American foreign policy from Pearl Harbor forward is well known and well studied. Lives of such statesmen as Dean Acheson, the Bundy brothers, and Harry Truman—sometimes long and detailed biographies running to several large volumes—find respectable audiences, as do the memoirs of living American statesmen. Foreign policy analysts and journalists are also reasonably well versed in the domestic side of American history and, particularly since the end of the Cold War, the American foreign policy
establishment justly prides itself on its knowledge of the histories and cultures of the many peoples and nations with which American foreign policy has had to deal. It is only the history of our foreign policy before World War II that lies buried in obscurity.

The widespread indifference to and disdain for that history is, at least on the face of things, somewhat surprising. The United States has had a remarkably successful history in international relations. After a rocky start, the young American republic quickly established itself as a force to be reckoned with. The Revolutionaries shrewdly exploited the tensions in European politics to build a coalition against Great Britain. Artful diplomatic pressure and the judicious application of incentives and threats enabled the United States to emerge from the Napoleonic Wars with the richest spoils of any nation—the Louisiana Purchase rote on the reins of Napoleon's hopes for a New World empire. During the subsequent decades, American diplomacy managed to outmaneuver Great Britain and the Continental powers on a number of occasions, annexing Florida, extending its boundary to the Pacific, opening Japan to world commerce, thwarting British efforts to consolidate the independence of Texas, and conquering the Southwest from Mexico despite the reservations of the European powers.

During the Civil War, deft American diplomacy defeated repeated efforts by powerful elements in both France and Britain to intervene on behalf of Confederate independence. The United States demonstrated a sure diplomatic touch during the conflict, prudently giving in over the seizure of Confederate commissioners from a British ship in the Trent affair, but firmly forcing a reluctant Great Britain to observe the principles of neutrality and to pay compensation for their violation in the controversies over Confederate ships built by British firms.

Within a generation after the Civil War, the United States became a recognized world power while establishing an unchallenged hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. As to American intervention in World War I, it was a failure only compared to the lofty goals Wilson set for himself. The United States failed to end war forever and to establish a universal democratic system—challenging goals, to say the least—but otherwise it did very well. With fewer casualties than any other great power, and fewer forces on the ground in Europe, the United States had a disproportionately influential role in shaping the peace. Monarchical government in Europe disappeared as a result of the war. Since 1918 Europe has been a continent of republics, and the great thrones and royal houses that once mocked the United States and its democratic pretensions have vanished from the earth.

Fashionable though it has long been to scorn the Treaty of Versailles, and flawed though that instrument undoubtedly was, one must note that Wilson's principles survived the eclipse of the Versailles system and that they still guide European politics today: self-determination, democratic government, collective security, international law, and a league of nations. Wilson may not have gotten everything he wanted at Versailles, and his treaty was never ratified by the Senate, but his vision and his diplomacy, for better or worse, set the tone for the twentieth century. France, Germany, Italy, and Britain may have sneered at Wilson, but every one of these powers today conducts its European policy along Wilsonian lines. What was once dismissed as visionary is now accepted as fundamental. This was no mean achievement, and no European statesman of the twentieth century has had as lasting, as benign, or as widespread an influence.

Even in the short term, the statesmen who sneered at Wilson did no better than he did. The leaders of France, Britain, and Italy—Georges Clemenceau, David Lloyd George, and Vittorio Orlando—did not do very well at Versailles; none of them gained anything of real or lasting value by the peace. The United States was the only true winner of World War I, as it had been the real winner of the Napoleonic conflicts of the previous century.

World War I made the United States the world's greatest financial power, crushed Germany economically, and left America's most dangerous rival—and reduced both Britain and France to a status where neither country could mount an effective opposition to American designs anywhere in the world. In the aftermath of the war Britain conceded to the United States something it had withheld from all its rivals in two centuries of warfare: Britain accepted the United States as co-monarch of the seas, formally recognizing the right of the United States to maintain a navy equal to its own. Wilson and Warren Harding succeeded where Napoleon and Wilhelm II had failed, and they did it without a war with Great Britain. An American diplomacy that asserted American interests while emphasizing the community of values between the two principal English-speaking nations induced Great Britain to accept peacefully what no previous rival had extracted by force.11

The result of World War II was more of the same. The United States entered the war later than any other great power, lost less blood in the fighting, and realized greater gains from the settlement than any other.
combatant. Churchill defended the British Empire against Hitler and Hirohito, but he was no match for Franklin D. Roosevelt. Stalin gained hegemony over the wasted landscapes of Europe's devastated east, but the United States secured an unchallenged position of leadership in a bloc of countries that included the richest, most dynamic, and most intellectually advanced societies in the world.

Since that time, the United States has made mistakes, but overall its diplomacy has been remarkably successful. The United States not only won the Cold War, it diffused its language, culture, and products worldwide—the American dollar became the international medium of finance; the American language became the lingua franca of world business; American popular culture and American consumer products dominated world media and world markets. The United States is not only the sole global power, its values inform a global consensus, and it dominates to an unprecedented degree the formation of the first truly global civilization our planet has known.

Despite all this, foreign policy commentators and practitioners alike hold that the United States, in order to succeed in foreign policy, must abandon its naive "oscillation between idealism and isolationism" and embrace the mature, sophisticated, worldly approach of European statesmen. They have succeeded at foreign policy, critics say, and we have repeatedly failed.

Nobody, however, seems to ask a basic question: Which European country has had a more "sophisticated" and successful foreign policy than the United States in the twentieth century or, indeed, ever?

Kissinger points to Klemens von Metternich, but the great Austrian prince outrived his own system and saw it collapse in 1848. Great Britain marched into the twentieth century like a lion but limped out like a palsied lamb, retaining only the energy to bleed that the brash and clumsy Americans ought to defer to its superior wisdom, experience, and realism in foreign affairs. As Dean Acheson said once, Britain had lost an empire and had not found a role; far from solving this problem, British statesmen since Harold Macmillan have failed either to establish British leadership within the European Union or to find a great-power role for Britain outside Europe.

France achieved little in the twentieth century, or indeed since the death of Talleyrand, that the United States ought to emulate. Since Napoleon III brought the disaster of the Franco-Prussian War on himself, French foreign policy has known many defeats and pyrrhic victories, but few real successes. In 1918 France recovered Alsace and Lorraine, but only at the cost of a war that bled it white and destroyed forever its standing as a military power of the first rank. France's interwar policy was never coherent or feasible; the Little Entente in east central Europe was a fiasco, and France's collapse in 1940 still casts a shadow over its standing in Europe and the world. Charles de Gaulle, unquestionably the greatest French foreign policy leader of the twentieth century, is chiefly celebrated for his courage in liquidating the disastrous struggle to maintain colonial regime in Algeria. Over the other failures, betrayals, brutalities, injustices, and disasters of French statesmen in Indochina, and in North and West Africa after World War II, let friendship and gratitude for the legacy of Lafayette cast their veil of discretion. France's European policy—under François Mitterrand ended with reluctant acquiescence in German unification and a growing recognition that the century-long effort to defend France's historic position as the leading political power in Europe had failed. This is not a record for American statesmen to emulate.

Farther east, the record is darker. Should the United States imitate the "realism" of the Soviet Union and borrow the policy of the losing power in the Cold War? Or should we look to the policy of the Romanovs, which brought their empire crashing down into chaos and ruin?

If we return to Germany, we see that the delicate structures of Bismarck collapsed, that the aggressiveness of Kaiser Wilhelm II led to disaster, and that Hitler's drive for domination culminated in national catastrophe. Japan's efforts to model its foreign policy after those of European states produced a similar debacle in Asia. It was only when Germany and Japan began to take lessons from the recklessly idealistic United States—an emphasis on commerce rather than militarism, a disinclination to spend unnecessary money on their armed forces, a dedication to the construction of international systems of security and law—that these two countries began to succeed. Similarly, the greatest success story in modern Europe, the development of the EU, originated in economic cooperation demanded by the United States in return for Marshall Plan aid, and Jean Monnet, the architect of the union, found his inspiration and guidance on the western side of the Atlantic.

Compared, in sum, with the dismal record of the other great powers, American foreign policy—with a handful of exceptions, most notably Vietnam—looks reasonably good. Cast morality aside for the moment. From a purely practical standpoint, no European power, with the possi-
bilities: Switzerland, Sweden, and Vatican City, has done better than the United States in the twentieth century; most have done much, much worse. It may be that we have lessons to learn; what is not so certain is that Europe is the place we must look for our teachers.

Not only has American foreign policy been more successful than the conventional wisdom acknowledges, it has played a much more central role throughout American history than many Americans believe. The leading statesmen of the United States often devoted more of their attention to foreign policy questions before and during the Civil War than they did during the twentieth-century Cold War. Indeed, of the first nine presidents of the United States, six had previously served as secretary of state, and seven as ministers abroad. Four of the first twelve—Washington, Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and Zachary Taylor—won fame for commanding American troops in the field, fame that was in each case the most important single factor in their gaining the presidency. Six of the fifteen American presidents who served before Lincoln had been both secretary of state and minister to Great Britain; a seventh, Jefferson, had been secretary of state and minister to France; and an eighth, John Adams, had been minister to both Britain and France.

The greatest minds and the most powerful politicians in the United States were eager to serve as secretary of state in the nineteenth century. Only the presidency itself stood higher in precedence, in power, and in political visibility. Success in foreign policy was considered one of the strongest possible qualifications for a presidential candidate, and such great leaders as Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and Daniel Webster distinguished themselves in this office. Throughout the nineteenth century the American diplomatic and consular service included some of the greatest names in politics and letters. Writers like Washington Irving, George Bancroft, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Lothrop Motley, and George Washington Williams represented their country abroad; in 1902 the political cartoonist Thomas Nast served as a United States consul in Ecuador. Formidable political figures, including William Seward, Charles Francis Adams, James G. Blaine, and John Hay, regarded their diplomatic service as the peak of their careers.

It was no accident that so many American political leaders devoted so much attention to foreign policy in the so-called isolationist period. The prosperity and happiness of the average American family were visibly

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*U.S. minister to Colombia (under Stalin Bolivar's presidency)
†Ambassador of war relief to Europe, secretary of commerce
‡Assistant secretary of the navy
tied to international affairs, and the connection was lost neither on the voters nor on those who hoped to win their support for office.

Statistics for the period are inexact, but the evidence suggests that the U.S. economy was at least as dependent on foreign trade in 1790 as it was two hundred years later. Economically the United States was more dependent on the rest of the world in the nineteenth century than it was during much of the Cold War. From 1948 to 1957, foreign trade accounted, on average, for 7.5 percent of the GNP; from 1869 to 1893, for 13.4 percent.

This trade was not simply a concern of seaboard towns: Agricultural exports streamed from American farmers to European markets. Between 1802 and 1860 cotton exports rose from a value of $5 million a year to $192 million a year; between 1866 and 1900 those same cotton exports had an average annual value of $213 million. The proportion of the vital cotton crop exported to British manufacturers rose as high as 64 percent. Wheat exports, which were negligible before the Civil War, had jumped to a century-high value of $191 million by 1880, and averaged $88 million per year between then and the end of the century. Between 1850 and 1900 agricultural products made up between 73 and 85 percent of all exports from the United States at a time when up to half of the American population worked in farming.

Access to foreign markets was a requirement for American farmers in remote settlements. So much so that most prominent American political leaders believed that control of New Orleans and its port was essential, not merely to national happiness, but to unity. While Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone roamed the Appalachian wilds, informed opinion in the United States and abroad held that the Middle West would not remain in a federal union that could not provide its inhabitants with safe access to international markets. The volunteer backwoodsmen who followed Andrew Jackson to New Orleans knew why that city was fundamentally important to American prosperity and union, and they grasped the importance of the battle they fought there.

Their children and grandchildren never forgot their dependence on foreign customers and on the means of transporting their produce to market. American farmers were utterly dependent on export markets for their wheat, corn, tobacco, and cotton. The cash income of a family on the Illinois plains depended on the conditions of the European wheat market. As Rep. Sidney Breese remarked on the floor of Congress in 1846, "Illinois wants a market for her agricultural productions. She wants the market of the world. Ten counties of that State could supply all the home market." As the bestselling pamphleteer William H. "Coin" Harvey pointed out, the interest rates farmers paid on their loans, and the freight rates they paid the railroads that carried their produce, were also determined to a large extent by conditions in London. Once a farming community had passed the initial pioneering stage of subsistence agriculture and began to sell its surplus product, it entered the world market. And once that community developed banks and sought to borrow money for public or private improvements, it encountered an international system of credit and trade that in some ways was more closely integrated in the nineteenth century than it is today.

The nineteenth century was no time of Arcadian isolation from the rigors of the world market. Time after time, American domestic prosperity was threatened or ruined by financial storms that originated overseas. Ron Chernow reports in his book The House of Morgan that a member of Congress groused in 1833 that "the barometer of the American stock market hangs up at the stock exchange in London." He was not wrong. The European depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars spread to the United States. The panic of 1837 had its origins in London. The panic of 1857 began after the Crimean War when troubles in France spread to London money markets, and from there to New York. After the successful permanent laying of the transatlantic cable in 1866, information from London financial markets traveled to Wall Street and the rest of the country at telegraph speed. For the rest of the century the American economy remained vulnerable to shocks caused by collapses and crashes on international financial markets. The panic of 1893, for example, was caused by the collapse of the Argentine loan market and its effects on British banks.

Foreign investment played a greater role in American prosperity during the nineteenth century than it does now. The United States had to borrow the money for the Louisiana Purchase from the Dutch, and during Jefferson's presidency foreigners are believed to have held more than half the national debt. "No man," said Sen. John Taylor of South Carolina during an 1811 debate over bank policy, "who has attentively considered the rise, progress, and growth of these States, from their first colonization to the present period, can deny that foreign capital, ay, British capital, has been the sap on which we first fed; the strong aliment which supported and stimulated our exertions and industry, even to the present day."

Foreign money dug the canals, built the railroads, and settled much
of the West. One-third of the investment for the great American canals came from overseas; foreigners poured between $2.5 billion and $3 billion into American railroads, and by the early 1880s foreign cattle barons owned more than twenty million acres of the American West. The largest shareholder when the New York Central Railroad was formed in 1853 was Benjamin Ingham, a British-born investor who held dual citizenship in the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Other pre–Civil War British investors in American railroads included William Makepeace Thackeray, Josiah Wedgwood, and Manchester School thinker and politician Richard Cobden. Like many Englishmen, the distinguished essayist and clergyman Sydney Smith had an unhappy experience with his American investments. After a number of American states, including Pennsylvania, defaulted on their bonds following the panic of 1837, he wrote: “I never meet a Pennsylvanian at a London dinner without feeling a disposition to seize and divide him; to allot his beaver to one sufferer and his coat to another; and to appropriate his pocket-handkerchief to the orphan, and to comfort the widow with his silver watch, Broadway rings, and the London Guide, which he always carries in his pockets . . . he has no more right to eat with honest people than a leper has to sit with clean men.”

Those foreign investors had political power in the United States, and Americans resented it but could do little about it. Not that they didn’t try. Jackson’s message announcing his veto of the renewal of the charter for the Bank of the United States cited as a prime reason for his opposition the windfall profits to the non-American investors who controlled so much of the bank’s stock. Sixty years later the Populist Party platform called for the expropriation of farmlands owned by aliens. Discriminatory legislation against foreigners proliferated in the late nineteenth century, with twelve states passing laws restricting foreign ownership of land.

Anger against British control was not restricted to the populist West. In 1883 the New York–based Banker’s Magazine looked forward to the happy day “when not a single good American security is owned abroad and when the United States shall cease to be an exploiting ground for European bankers and money lenders. The tribute paid to foreigners is . . . odious.” Charles Francis Adams, son of the Charles Francis Adams who represented the United States in Britain during the Civil War, and brother of Henry, compared British investment in the United States with the rapacious tactics and devastating consequences of the British investment in India. In 1885 the New York Times called for congressional action: “We believe that the building up of great estates by Englishmen should be prevented.”

The great banks of the Anglo-American establishment like the House of Morgan controlled the nation’s money supply and had the power of life and death over most businesses. Populist agitators lambasted the “Money Trust”; the noted author, lecturer, and political crusader Mary Lease attacked the pro–gold standard president Grover Cleveland as an agent of “Jewish bankers and British gold.” Like third-world politicians who complain today about the International Monetary Fund (IMF), American politicians could make little headway against the entrenched power of foreign investors in the American economy. As many populists suspected, some of this was due to bribes paid to American politicians by representatives of British interests. Daniel Webster, for example, accepted a payment of nine hundred pounds from the British banking firm Baring, to help push Maryland to resume payments to British creditors.

Like it or not, the United States was inextricably bound up in the British economic system. And, though the absence of historical poll data makes the statement impossible to prove, the average American in 1845 or 1865 appears to have been at least as aware of the links between domestic prosperity and the international economy as his or her counterpart is today, and perhaps more so.

Politically the first 140 years or so of American independence were not a quiet time in American foreign relations. Virtually every presidential administration from Washington’s to Wilson’s sent American forces abroad or faced one or more war crises with a great European power. During the Napoleonic Wars, of course, the United States fought an undeclared naval war with France and both declared and undeclared wars with Great Britain. These wars and their consequences—including Jefferson’s embargo, which banned all trade between the United States and Europe—had immense repercussions on domestic society. The embargo was perhaps the most painful economic shock the United States ever experienced.

The federal union almost broke up over the War of 1812, and then British troops sacked Washington and attacked Baltimore and New Orleans. The consequences were not limited to the battlefield; American foreign trade fell by 90 percent between 1807 and 1814 as the British navy blockaded the coast of the United States. The resulting collapse in
end of the War of 1812 to the Venezuela boundary crisis of 1895, there was scarcely an administration or a decade in which the United States and Great Britain did not face a crisis or war scare in their tense and turbulent relations.39

While the conventional wisdom of the Cold War era holds that the American people had little to fear from warfare during the nineteenth century, that is not the way Americans thought at the time. During the Revolution, British troops occupied every major city in the colonies, and did not abandon New York until well after the defeat at Yorktown. Throughout the nineteenth century, both military planners and public opinion wrestled with the possibility of foreign invasion, and especially attacks on American cities.

From 1816 through the end of the century, boards of engineers and naval authorities would develop plans for coastal fortifications, but faced widespread skepticism that fortifications of any type could prevent modern navies from taking and burning American cities. A million men "armed with a profusion of every appliance of a modern first-class army and intrenched (sic) about New York City could not protect it from capture and destruction or contribution by even a second-rate European naval power," wrote Henry P. Wells in an 1886 article in Harper's magazine.40 A substantial portion of American defense spending went for coastal fortification during the century, with physical results that can still be seen in the impressive forts found along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of the United States, but the great forts were unable to prevent broad apprehension about the consequences of war. Confidence in the system further declined after the Civil War experience, where forts like Moultrie, Sumter, and Fisher fell to northern attack.

The following generation drew the appropriate conclusions. The United States was, wrote U. S. Grant in 1885, "without the power to resist an invasion by the fleets of fourth-rate European powers. . . . We should have a good navy, and our sea-coast defences should be put in the finest possible condition."41 "Our wealthy seacoast cities lie at the mercy of any hostile fleet," said naval engineer officer Eugene Griffin in an 1888 article in the influential North American Review.42 During the Spanish-American War, a great panic swept the American East as rumors spread that the Spanish fleet was steaming north to wreak havoc on the defenseless metropolitan areas of the coast.

In important respects the nineteenth-century debate over coastal
defenses paralleled the twentieth-century debates over missile defense. In both cases proponents argued that saving even one of the nation's cities from otherwise certain destruction in war would justify the cost of any defense system; opponents of both National Missile Defense (NMD) and coastal defense argued not that the threat was illusory—it was blatant and gross—but that the strategic defense concept was fundamentally flawed, and that the available technology was insufficient to provide the desired results.

The economic consequences of a war with Great Britain were also clearly visible to every banker, farmer, trader, and consumer of industrial goods. New England's opposition to the War of 1812 grew out of this awareness. As the crisis-ridden nineteenth century continued, an understanding of the consequences of war penetrated into the consciousness of editorial boards and politicians. War with Great Britain would have meant the instant disruption of every branch of American business. The stock markets would have crashed. Most banks would have failed instantly. Crop prices would have dropped precipitously. All trade with the rest of the world would have been interrupted by a British blockade. The prospect of invasion either from the coast or Canada would have cast a dark shadow over every business and home in the country; few American households would have escaped the consequences of war before a single shot was fired, a single city burned to the ground.

Given that background, one should not underestimate the importance of the stormy state of Anglo-American relations during the era. A whole series of questions agitated the relations between the two Atlantic powers, keeping them continually at or near the boiling point. Under President Martin Van Buren, American support of Irish and Canadian rebels against British rule in Canada brought the two countries within a hairbreadth of war.

The boundary between the United States and what became Canada was another fertile source of quarrels. A dispute over the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick was a major issue in the presidential election of 1840 and led to the "Aroostock War," in which both the United States and Britain rushed troops to the remote area under dispute.

At the same time the British government was actively intriguing to bring the newly independent Republic of Texas within its sphere of influence. American fears of British designs played a large part in the American decision to annex the Lone Star Republic and helped launch the Mexican War.\(^{43}\)

**Ultimatum on the Oregon Question**

Far from being isolated and ignorant about the wider world, nineteenth-century Americans often followed foreign affairs with close attention. This 1846 cartoon presents an argument that Britain's domestic problems were so dire that the United States could afford to ignore British threats and press for more territory in Oregon. As Queen Victoria warns the Americans to "Beware how you rouse the British Lion!," her threat is undercut by the evident reluctance of the lion to stir unless the government agrees to "Unloose my chains and fill my belly!"—that is, to agree to radicals' demands for domestic political reforms and better economic conditions. The cartoonist portrays Russia and France (represented respectively by their then-rulers, Czar Nicholas I and King Louis-Philippe) as wishing either to stay neutral or to support the United States in any clash over Oregon. The Irish leader Daniel O'Connell tells Victoria that without political concessions to Irish demands there will be no Irish soldiers for her army. Edward Williams Clay, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-7722

Besides Texas the major issue in the election of 1844 was the Oregon boundary issue, with "Fifty-four Forty or Fight!" the slogan of those who wished to fight a war with Great Britain over conflicting claims to what is now British Columbia.
THE PENDING CONFLICT

While most Americans today think of the Civil War as largely a domestic contest in which foreign countries and foreign policy were irrelevant, the attitude of foreign countries toward the Confederacy was one of the crucial questions of the war. In this 1863 American cartoon, Britain and France—both of which came close to recognizing the Confederacy and to demanding that the Union accept their intervention to negotiate a settlement to the war—are seen as supporting Jefferson Davis, who is trampling on the American flag and wielding a club labeled “Private Alabama” (a reference to the Confederate warship Alabama, built in neutral French ports, which attacked Union shipping until it was destroyed by the U.S.S. Kearsarge off the coast of France in June 1864).

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-42025

The 1850s saw another rash of crises between the two countries. Southerners hoped to establish new slave states in Cuba and Nicaragua. The British were extending their control along the coasts of Central America in the hopes of controlling communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific. British efforts to search ships under the American flag in the effort to suppress the Atlantic slave trade also caused crises; closer to home, so did the British refusal to return slaves on American ships driven into British-controlled harbors.

The Civil War, of course, saw the United States and Britain approach the brink of war. Only narrowly was war averted when the British negligently allowed Confederate commerce raiders to fit out in British ports. For years after the war, American and British diplomats would rattle their sabers in negotiations over compensation for damages inflicted by Confederate ships like the Alabama.

Relations between the United States and Great Britain did not decisively improve until the final decade of the nineteenth century, when Britain’s fears of such rising European powers as Russia and Germany led it to adopt a more conciliatory, even cringing, tone in its dealings with the United States.

The United States also had a troubled relationship with Spain. A long and hotly contested diplomatic campaign of threats, baseless claims, bribery, and intimidation resulted in the Spanish cession of Florida to the United States by 1819. The United States made known its hostility to any attempt by Spain to reestablish its rule over its lost South American colonies, and inability in Cuba brought the United States and Spain to sword’s points several times before it finally erupted in the Spanish-American War. Between freelance attacks by private American citizens known as filibusters, violation of American neutrality laws in support of Cuban rebels, and diplomatic maneuvers like the Ostend Manifesto, American policy toward Spain was marked by aggressive designs and disregard for international law, until William McKinley put a final end to four centuries of Spanish power in the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific.

Although France and the United States had fewer points of contact after Napoleon gave up his dreams of North American empire and sold Louisiana to Jefferson, the relations between Paris and Washington were also rocky at times in the nineteenth century. The United States and France skirted armed conflict during Jackson’s administration when he sent a naval expedition to back up his threats after France failed to honor agreements relating to compensation for American shipping losses during the Napoleonic Wars. Both during and after the Civil War, the United States and France were regularly engaged in harassing and threatening each other. Napoleon III openly sought the breakup of the United States and the independence of the South; his attempt to establish a puppet emperor in Mexico while the United States was distracted by the Civil War was the grossest and most dangerous challenge the Monroe Doctrine ever faced. French troops were not withdrawn from Mexico until Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, almost immediately after Appomattox...
The American Foreign Policy Tradition

ing the Civil War and to make the case for a permanent, natural alliance between the two English-speaking powers.

In addition to these diplomatic and military contretemps with great European powers and its hemispheric neighbors, the American government in the nineteenth century took an active role in opening up Asia and Africa to trade. As American whalers and merchants spread out across the world in search of profits and whale oil, diplomats and naval forces followed. Sometimes these visits were peaceful. By the time of the Civil War, the United States government had sent official missions to Vietnam, Thailand, the Ottoman Empire, China, Sumatra, Burma, and Japan.

Sometimes American presidents dispatched more than diplomats. The U.S. Marines had already ventured "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" by the Civil War. The marine hymn could in fact have said more; by 1860 the marines had already been far to the west and south of Mexico as well as to the east and north of Libya. Jefferson's dispatch to Tripoli and Algiers of a punitive mission against the Barbary pirates was the first but by no means the last such expedition sent out by American presidents. The village of Qualitai Battoo on the coast of Sumatra was shelled and burned by an American force sent by Jackson; the visit was repeated when the inhabitants continued to be disrespectful to the flag. In 1843 American marines fought with villagers in coastal Palau after Com. Matthew Perry was attacked; the marines returned to Iberia in 1860 to protect American lives and property.

In 1843 American marines landed in Guangzhou (Canton) to protect Americans from Chinese mobs. They returned thirteen years later and defeated five thousand Chinese troops in a pitched battle. A permanent marine presence would guard American traders and diplomats in China and participate—under foreign commanders—with European forces in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

China and Sumatra were not the only places in Asia in which American forces were engaged in conflict during the "virgin isolation" of the nineteenth century. In 1871 marines retaliated for a Korean attack on an American ship and a diplomat by seizing two forts in a punitive expedition. Commodore Perry's orders directed him to shell Japan if the mikado refused his request for trade and diplomatic relations. In 1883, at the height of the Civil War, American forces landed in Japan and what is now Panama. By 1890 American forces were established throughout the South Pacific, and the United States had weathered a serious international crisis with Germany over the control of Samoa.

Statesmen did what they could to dampen the popular fervor. The dying General Grant added a concluding section to his Memoirs that consisted largely of recommendations for American defense and foreign policy in the years to come. Much of the conclusion was devoted to an attempt to soften popular resentment against Britain for its conduct during the Civil War and to make the case for a permanent, natural alliance between the two English-speaking powers.
The U.S. Navy has maintained a global presence much longer than most Americans realize. The permanent Mediterranean squadron was established in 1815 to keep the Barbary pirates in check. In 1820, the United States established its West Indian and Pacific squadrons, the latter charged with protecting American whalers and commercial interests in South America and the South Sea islands. In 1826 this was followed by a Brazil or South Atlantic squadron, with the East India squadron following in 1835 and the African squadron established off the west coast of Africa in 1843. In other words, during the period of American innocence and isolation, the United States had forces stationed on or near every major continent in the world; its navy was active in virtually every ocean, its troops saw combat on virtually every continent, and its foreign relations were in a perpetual state of crisis and turmoil.

The importance of foreign policy in American politics was even greater than this list would indicate. Foreign policy and domestic politics were inextricably mixed throughout American history. The question of American independence was, of course, an issue of foreign relations, and the formation of the French alliance was the key to the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War. It is no exaggeration to say that we owe the Constitution to the requirements of foreign affairs. After the Revolution, the inability of the Continental Congress to manage foreign relations under the Articles of Confederation was the first and foremost reason put forward by the supporters of the new Constitution in the great national debate over ratification. The balance of power between federal and state authorities in the new Constitution was determined in large part by the need for a national government strong enough to conduct an effective foreign policy. My idea is that we should be made one nation in every case concerning foreign affairs, and separate ones in what is merely domestic,” wrote Jefferson in 1787. The jealous friends of states’ rights concluded that it was better to establish a strong central government among the ex-colonies than to face the wiles and pressures of European empires as a feeble and divided confederation.

This proved to be wise. Foreign policy questions dominated the administrations of Washington and Adams: The Jay Treaty; the XYZ Affair, involving scandalous revelations about French attempts to extract bribes from American diplomats; the continued British presence in the Old Northwest; the undeclared war with France; the Genet Affair, the question of whether the United States should “tilt” toward Britain, France, or neither—these were the great issues of late-eighteenth-century American politics.

The nineteenth century saw more of the same. Even after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, when international relations in general assumed a less dramatic cast, foreign policy questions remained at the heart of American politics. There were four great issues in nineteenth-century American politics: slavery, westward expansion, the tariff, and monetary policy. Of these only slavery was a purely domestic issue, but it should be noted that foreign policy issues were absolutely critical to the course of the Civil War in which the slavery controversy climaxed. Secretary of State William Seward planned for a time to cut short the Civil War by provoking a war with the European powers that would rally the North and South to a joint effort. European intervention was the strategic goal of the Confederacy throughout, and the battle for foreign public opinion was for a reluctant Lincoln a decisive consideration in favor of his issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. “To proclaim emancipation would secure the sympathy of Europe and the whole civilized world…. No other step would be so potent to prevent foreign intervention,” wrote Lincoln in 1862.35

Of the remaining great issues, westward expansion was obviously a foreign policy issue; the tariff question then as now had both domestic and foreign policy implications, and the debate over whether to keep the gold standard or to permit the free coinage of silver was fundamentally a question about the relation of the American economy to the British-dominated international system. As William Jennings Bryan said in the concluding peroration of his “Cross of Gold” speech, “Is it the issue of 1776 over again…. instead of having a gold standard because England has, we will restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States has it.”34

Despite the long record of vigorous U.S. activity and intense interest in the world beyond its shores, despite the enormous impact foreign policy has had on domestic politics throughout U.S. history, and despite its unparalleled record of success in international affairs, the United States continues to enjoy both at home and abroad a kind of hayseed image when it comes to foreign policy, that of an innocent barefoot boy unaccustomed to the wiles and ways of the sharp international operators. Yet time after time it has been this innocent who has taken the pot—perhaps after spreading his cards on the table, scratching under his overalls, and naively inquiring if his full house beats the other fellow’s two pairs.

The more I study the history of American foreign policy, the more deeply convinced I become that our national foreign policy tradition has
much to teach us. We don't just draw lucky cards; we also play the game well. Over two hundred years we have developed our own unique style, which suits us. Certainly it has enabled us to become the richest and most powerful nation in the history of the world.

Given that the world is becoming a more interdependent place, and given that both the dangers and the opportunities of international engagement are rapidly rising, it seems reasonable to suppose that the skillful conduct of foreign policy will be at least as important to the happiness and security of the American people in the future as it has been so far.

It is not only the American people whose happiness and security will be greatly affected by the quality of American foreign policy in coming years. The United States has become the central power in a worldwide system of finance, communications, and trade. Any disruption of that system will unleash enormous economic distress around the world. And despite the many imperfections and injustices that exist in the present international system, poor people in developing countries will be likely to suffer worst from any major disruptions.

Managing both the political and the economic dimensions of this global system—while never forgetting the importance of the American and allied military power that stands as the ultimate safeguard of the towering edifice of global society—is an enormous and demanding task that only becomes more challenging as the global system continues to develop and grow. American leaders will have to work cooperatively with allied and associated countries around the world while preserving the foundations of American power. They must deter other countries from challenging the basic institutions and features of the global system and, if new challengers like the Soviet Union should rise up, be ready to defeat them. At the same time they must see that the world system works for other countries as well as for the United States; for the United States to be prosperous and secure they must ensure that developed and developing countries alike find it easier to reach their national goals by working within the global system than by trying to tear it down.

My reading in the history of American foreign policy tells me that there are real reasons to hope that Americans will rise to the dizzying and daunting challenges of the twenty-first century. But I have also become aware of the degree to which our national ignorance of our own past successes impoverishes our foreign policy process today. Our elites and our policy-makers would benefit from a richer, deeper understanding of the principles and goals of their predecessors. More important, a stronger, surer grasp of the important principles of the history of American foreign policy will enable the American public better to evaluate and compare the proposals and policies of contending candidates and political parties. The end result will be greater public support for better policies. It is the hope of that outcome that led me to write this book.