View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons

Naval War College Review

Volume 25
Number 3 *March*

Article 4

1972

U.S. Foreign Policy: A Historical Perspective

Frederick H. Hartmann

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation

Hartmann, Frederick H. (1972) "U.S. Foreign Policy: A Historical Perspective," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol25/iss3/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

The United States, founded and developed in circumstances that are unique in the world, today approaches foreign affairs in the light of these past experiences. By examining her history, the student of American foreign policy can trace patterns of thought and action which even to this day underlie U.S. behavior at home as well as abroad. Such an understanding must of necessity form the basis for any efforts made in the direction of altering America's world role in the 1970's.

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY:

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College

by

Professor Frederick H. Hartmann

Alfred Thayer Mahan Chair of Maritime Strategy

The way we approach foreign policy in the United States is something that is observable by both our friends and foes. We should always bear in mind that we are under very intense scrutiny by adversaries who are seeking to learn our weaknesses. They are looking not so much at what we do well but at what we do poorly. Therefore, as we consider our own approach to international problems, it behooves us to examine not only what we do right, but what we do poorly, and especially what we do that is unusual. When potential adversaries look at us, they are interested in our past conduct because that gives them clues about our behavior as a nation, what we call the historical-psychological-sociological element of national power.

They look at us to see what we have done, noticing what is unusual or odd. By examining our background and behavior, they hope to gain an understanding of our approach to problems in terms of our character and attitude, thereby gaining a predictive clue as to how we are likely to act on the international scene. From examination of past American behavior, I would suggest that there are seven weaknesses or oddities on which an enemy might capitalize.

First, there is the great stress which Americans place on ideology. It is difficult for us to get a perspective on this, but the value we put on ideology is far above the world norm. Most people do not take ideology as seriously as Americans do.

A second characteristic is the American's distaste for a balance of power. A rather odd corollary to the balance of power theory has been fashionable with us however, namely, the domino theory.

Thirdly, there is our tendency for unilateralism in either action or attitude. By this I mean our proclivity to "go it alone" either as a matter of

policy or as a matter of preferment. I would add to this that as a "growing and developing" nation, our attention was largely directed toward domestic issues. Not until recently did we choose to become deeply involved in exterior questions and then in a fashion which is best described as unilateralism. One of the great distinctions I see in our foreign policy when I compare what we have done in Europe to what we have done in Asia is that we are more inclined toward active policy and commitments to Asia. For instance, it is the place where we "prefer" to have most of our wars. It is also the place where we tend to either go it alone or perhaps to deceive ourselves that we are, in effect, going it alone by selecting relatively minor allies. The difference between NATO and SEATO is that NATO is a collection of significant nations and SEATO is not. Another way of saying this is that in Asia, because our allies have generally played the minor role, we have fairly well had our way. I wonder if this is entirely accidental, and that we possibly may have had more of an activist foreign policy in the area than has been called for. If I may direct your attention to Europe again, the thing we did not like about De Gaulle was that he also had ideas about strategy. He was the only one who had the independence to say, "Well, NATO ought to be fashioned in a new and different way."

Fourthly, there is our tendency to approach problems head on. In the past we have followed a strategy of bloc containment, one which essentially lacks subtlety and sophistication. It is a force-direct counterforce approach. When the enemy forms a big bloc, we will amass a big bloc, and then our two big blocs lock horns, Communists versus the free world. Traditionally, we have shown little interest in trying to dismantle an enemy bloc by diplomacy or subterfuge.

My fifth point concerns our preference for what I will call the machine-oriented solution, whether it be precision bombing or precision modeling for computer simmulation. If you understand the American preference for these machine-oriented solutions, you can work on it to our disadvantage. I remember one speaker from the Washington scene who got sick and tired of hearing about "a clean, surgical, precision use of power." It is a favorite Washingtonian phrase. We are easy prey for an idea that is clean and precise. To put it in another way—no offense intended for any part of this audience—if the U.S. Congress ever had to abolish one of the three arms of the service, they would keep the Navy because it is clean; they would keep the Air Force because it is clean; but they would do away with the muddy infantry. Or, if you wish, you may translate that into the Nixon Doctrine.

The sixth point is that past American behavior shows an unusual degree of self-confidence. It is really rather unusual for a nation to go out and collect 42 allies, and then to attempt to fashion something as grandiose as what can be labeled globalism. This is really quite an astonishing phenomenon. It is something no one else ever tried. The nearest equivalent to this sort of Pax Americana was the Pax Britannica which was accomplished on a shoestring compared to the U.S. commitment of resources around the world over the last 25 years. Globalism has been very expensive, but it does demonstrate self-confidence.

Seventh and last is a tendency, the great American tendency, to be virtually without any knowledge of past history when confronted by an issue. This is one of our most vulnerable points. Our historical sense is totally different from most of the rest of the world. Let me give you an example.

I was talking with the director of the Bundestag one day, and I said to him, "Your accent is a little peculiar, it is not a Rhineland accent."

He said, "Oh, no."

I said, "You are a refugee."

He said, "Oh yes, refugee family."

I said, "Fled before the Russians."

"Oh no," he said, "before the Swedes in 1618."

It is true. He was a refugee because his family had had to move from East Prussia three hundred and some odd years ago. They still felt like refugees. Can you duplicate that attitude in the United States? We do not look backwards, we look forward, which means we do not know much about what happened before we came along—an area which can be exploited by somebody who is unfriendly.

The points that I have discussed thus far which have characterized the American approach to foreign policy can be regarded as being unusual, perhaps even unique. The question that now needs to be asked is, what is there in the American experience that is responsible for these variations from the more widely accepted norms of international behavior? I believe there are three points which are unique to the American experience and that have given rise to this sort of behavior. First, there is our unique geographical setting as a nation; secondly, there is the time frame in which we achieved nationhood and began developing national experience; and thirdly, there is the kind of social fabric from which this country evolved and developed.

The simple fact that the United States is the sole Great Power in the world without Great Power neighbors nearby has had tremendous consequences. No other major power can make that claim. Now if you do not think that this does not have an important bearing on our attitude, you are wrong. It will shape an attitude. It will create subtle influences on how we analyze problems. Putting it another way, if you replace Canada with the Soviet Union, and then you substitute China for Mexico, what would be the difference? There would be a tremendous difference, and I assure you that the poor muddy infantry would be accepted and gain renewed meaning.

What has this meant historically? Living next to peaceful nations who are not armed to the teeth, has permitted us the luxury of approaching problems leisurely. For example, when did we enter World War I? In the third year. Similarly, in World War II, we did not get involved until December of 41, more than 2 years after hostilities began. We approached the question of our involvement in world war at a rather leisurely pace, and our geographical location allowed us this option. We still have a measure of this option because we do not have China or Russia in our backyard. One can say technological change has altered this situation to a degree, but nonetheless it still is an important factor in our foreign policy considerations.

The second background factor which contributes to our unique outlook on the world concerns our relatively brief history as a nation state. By American standards this town of Newport is comparatively old and is rich in its historical heritage. We see restoration of buildings 200 and 300 years old being carried on and, thinking like an American, believe this to be very old indeed. Actually, our history only goes back a very short way. We do not think like a Roman, a Chinese, a Korean, or a German because our memory as a nation is so short. The United States had practically just come into being by the time the Napoleonic Wars broke out. By this period we had just become independent, were only putting the enterprise together, and were still trying to figure out such questions as whether to call our Chief Executive "His Majesty," "Mr. President," or what. These "teething troubles" were just behind us when the Napoleonic Wars came along. Now, the point I would like to make is that following the Napoleonic Wars there

was no general war for a hundred years. By contrast, until 1815 or up to the Napoleonic Wars, there had been continuing and numerous general conflagrations. There had been the Peace of Westphalia to terminate one set. There had been the Peace of Utrecht to terminate another, and then there were the wars of Napoleon. However, after Napoleon was finally defeated there was no general conflict in Europe for 100 years. It was virtually a world without serious war. When one considers this and the U.S. geographical situation, one can gain some appreciation of why the size of the U.S. Regular Army was only 27,172 men as late as 1895. Seventy-six years ago the Regular Army of the United States was one division strong. In fact it had been that size for most of the 19th century. This set of circumstances which prevailed for the first hundred years of our existence left the United States without extensive experience in dealing with external crises. We really did not have to formulate a thoroughgoing or serious attitude toward real life involvement with the outside world. For most of our history we not only picked our wars, but we did not have any Great Power competitors aronnd us that would force us into a war. We had our wars where we wanted them. We picked one with Mexico; we had one with Spain over Cuba, had one over Canada, but we did not have any forced upon us.

The biggest war we ever had in the 19th century was the one we had among ourselves, the American Civil War. And not until almost a hundred years after Waterloo did Europe engulf itself again in general war, and even then we thought over the problem for 3 years before getting involved.

In this hundred years, what kind of armed forces did we have? Our forces were meager indeed, as were the threats from abroad. The Navy was pathetic in size. We simply were not thinking in terms of military power. Our concern was with domestic problems, and that agenda was very, very full. It is hard to recall such a relatively unwarlike image in view of the conflicts that we have experienced since 1917. But the experiences of those early years of our existence made their impression. The history on which we look back sets us apart, for the United States is the sole Great Power in the world whose historical experience was largely gained between 1815 and 1914.

The third aspect of our unusual or unique background stems from the fact that the United States is the sole Great Power the bulk of whose population came from across the sea by immigration and occupied a rich and empty continent. When one considers the diverse backgrounds of the immigrants, one is moved to reflect on how the system ever was made to work. Certainly there were the original 13 colonies from which an English form of government was derived, but the cement that really held it together was opportunity. Opportunity in the form of a vast underpopulated continent whose riches could be tapped by those willing to work them. This enormous rich land awaiting settlement represented not only wealth, but opportunity, and a challenge that was inexhaustible.

In those days one could go out and claim the land that one could walk around in a day. You did not have to pay for it, just walk around it. People were able to achieve wealth in a system that was virtually unregulated. There was no question of the next generation rebelling against their fathers and mothers because they could choose to do virtually anything that entered their heads. There were no tradition-enshrined rules.

At Jamestown, Capt. John Smith confronted a serious problem in that, since "gentlemen" did not work with their hands, there was a shortage of labor to grow food and provide shelter. He established a new rule, a radical

departure from the existing order, when he said, "He who will not work neither shall he eat." This does not shock us! Millionaires' sons sell newspapers; it's a good experience for them. We know that, and every American believes it. John Smith invented it on the spot because he was confronted with an unprecedented situation and there was no rule book upon which he could call.

These three unusual elements in our background experience– where we were located, when we came to exist as a people, and how we were formed—have had enormous and continuing effects. The highly unusual (if not actually unique) historical experience I have summarized accounts directly for what is unusual or distinctive in our national behavior.

In the light of these experiences, our attitude toward the world balance of power in the pre-World War I era becomes a little clearer. We were remote from serious threats; there was not a Great Power around us, and therefore we paid no attention to the world order until it began to disintegrate. Woodrow Wilson did not look at the balance of power until its declining stages when it was not functioning anymore, and, as any American might who really had not studied its whole sequence, viewed it only as adding to world tensions and rigidities. He ignored the decades when the balance of power alliance system worked beautifully, and he did not bother to find out what finally went wrong. He simply did not see it in any deep historical perspective.

These experiences also go far to explain our enormous emphasis on ideology. What is our national motto? *E pluribus unum*—from many, one. That motto is no coincidence as the most significant thing that happened to us was that we became one from many. Now how did we accomplish such a very interesting and complex transformation? It is through our emphasis on ideology. After all, what is ideology?

Ideology is a set of ideas, a statement of an approach to problems. The Communists are noted for their commitment to an ideology, but we have ideology too. If anything, we probably take ideology more seriously. We even assume that ideology overcomes nationalistic differences!

Our ideology is in the Constitution of the United States; it is in the Declaration of Independence; and, most important, it is in the Bill of Rights which was tacked on to the Constitution before people would accept it.

What does the Bill of Rights say? It says, "There shall be freedom of the press." It does not say "Except in certain circumstances." If the Pentagon Papers case teaches anything, it teaches that. The Bill of Rights says there shall be freedom of assembly, et cetera. In terms of ideology, what we are really trying to say is that we believe it is better to assemble people in freedom and let them settle issues in a free and open atmosphere. We believe in these things because we have, as a Nation, prospered through their use.

How could you have taken a culturally diverse people, blended them together without any rule book, and made the whole thing work effectively unless you allowed town meetings to exist and had freedom of the press—let them argue it out; let the best man win; let there be a free election; let them contest. After all, issues in this new land had no traditional and culturally ordained solutions. As a new country we had no tradition. As a blend of many cultures, no one culture had uniformly acceptable solutions to all problems. Our love of moral abstractions is very intimately related to what I have just said. If I want to talk about "the American way of life," I must begin by talking in abstractions. I have got to talk freedom. I cannot appeal to national customs (for they are at odds) or the place of origin (for they have been left behind). I cannot talk of the way we

have done things for 3,000 years, because we have not. So I have to talk in terms of what we hold in common, in terms of moral abstractions such as freedom, justice, et cetera.

When this habit shows up in our foreign policy, we break out into a rash of doctrines: the Monroe Doctrine, the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Truman Doctrine, and the Nixon Doctrine. No other country ever had a host of doctrines such as we. What this amounts to is the opportunity to state abstractly the essence of a foreign policy. This is a feature that grows right out of our experience. It is a clear indicator of the way we tend to think and is certainly typified in our approach to Vietnam.

How do we justify our action in Southeast Asia? We try to justify it in terms of its relation to communism or its relationship to the need to oppose aggression or to the need to undergird the freedom of a free people. These are all abstractions, all expressed as a set of doctrines. Foreign policy debates in the United States are a process of dealing with one moral abstraction after another. For example, a politician will say, "I do not like war; war is unjust." The opposition answers, "War is unjust, but aggression is a greater evil." It is a debate set in terms of moral abstractions.

Out of these habitual methods of expression arises a curious blend of idealism and realism, which is eminently attractive to an American. In terms of the press, it has some very serious implications. If you feel strongly enough about "press irresponsibility" to argue for some kind of control, I tell you that if you succeeded you really would bring the American experiment to a close. Why? Because our strength is that anybody can stand up and say, "I don't agree with that." Our strength rests in the fact that all kinds of opinions in many forms can emerge, and they can contest. Is that idealism? If I say, "I want to defend the freedom of the press, don't control these people," one may say, "Your're an idealist. Look at the harm they are doing." I say, "No, I'm a practical man." I say, "Look how crucial these freedoms have been in allowing our institutions to survive." It makes no difference which label you pin on me because there is a happy marriage of both realism and idealism in our actions. It has been a happy marriage in the sense that a free press describable in rather idealistic terms is also a practical and cohesive force in our society, bringing the many conflicting views into confrontation and eventual amalgamation.

The whole history of the U.S. approach to domestic issues has been a convincing demonstration that what was idealistic was also eminently practical. We learned that being idealistic and being realistic went hand-in-hand. The conviction of this reality was to have important effects on our approach to foreign policy and our involvement in foreign affairs.

The influence of this kind of approach had differing effects at different times, but in our early years it was beyond argument that if we were to remain a free people (idealism) the strategic problem confronting our Founding Fathers had to be quite seriously altered (realism). Initially the United States was surrounded by potential threats to its existence: the English in Canada, the Spanish in Mexico and Florida. The French also had their ambitions in Louisiana and in the Caribbean. The United States actually started out in the first decades surrounded by Great Powers who, if they so wished, could have eliminated the 13 colonies. How could this newly formed weak state best deal with this problem in strategic terms? The best solution, weak as we were, was somehow to induce them to go home, setting one against the other, but getting them out.

There was no problem of idealism and realism conflicting. After a few

decades of luck, contrivance, and maneuver, we enjoyed some measure of success. We were able to look out on a much less threatening world with a great deal of satisfaction. With the Great Powers no longer encircling us, we concentrated mostly on settling the frontier and developing a continent. While we did not really understand Bismarck's contribution to our security through his manipulation of the balance of power, we did comprehend that the British were controlling the seas and seeing that all went well with us by denying Europe's powers access to New World adventures. In this period we had few problems in trying to make idealism and realism match in foreign affairs. In fact we divorced them completely.

We wept for the poor Poles who were being slaughtered by the Russians, and we collected money for them. When the Irish had their troubles, we collected money for them; and when these poor refugees came over and confirmed the troubles that existed overseas, we collected money for them also. But we did not intervene with troops or even really consider it. The foreign policy was very clear—leave them alone. Our sympathies, our tears, were copious for the poor Poles, the poor Irish, or whoever was in trouble. We sent them money, but we would not send them our policy commitments. We were idealist in outlook and very realist in policy. However, by the 20th century our problems became more complicated, and new answers were sought.

As agendas changed we were now thrust into a world war and then into a second war, without initially resolving the degree of involvement required. We fluctuated between "Don't call us, we'll call you" (1919-1939), and "Count on us!" (1945-1970), that is between isolationism and globalism. Suddenly, however, as an offshoot of the Vietnam war, we have rediscovered an old and simple truth—no state has all the power, all the blood, and all the treasure that is needed to do all the things it might like to do. Therefore, priorities have to be set or else one can expect a great deal of trouble.

Why was this understanding so slow in coming? Because, after World War II—aware of our great power and convinced that we had helped cause that war through our isolationist attitude in the 1930's—we believed that it was our moral duty to play a responsible role in world affairs, particularly by opposing aggression. The Communists were seen as a threat to the freedom of all peoples, and we set ourselves to oppose them and contain them. While this policy, when applied to the Soviet Union, was obviously realistic, the ultimate lengths to which we pursued our anti-Communist crusade, were essentially idealistic.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Professor Frederick H. Hartmann holds an A.B. from the University of California and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University. He also studied at the Graduate Institute of International Affairs in Geneva, Switzerland, was a Fulbright Research Professor at Bonn, Germany, in 1953-54, and did additional research in Germany in 1959 under a Rockefeller Grant.

After instructing at Princeton, he joined the Political Science Department of the University of Florida where he was subsequently promoted to full professor and the Director of the Institute of International Relations. He has lectured at numerous military and civilian colleges and universities and has traveled widely in Europe and Asia. His publications include: *Basic Documents in International Relations; The Relations of Nations; The Swiss Press and Foreign Affairs in World War II; World in Crisis; Germany Between East and West* as well as numerous articles for professional journals.

Professor Hartmann holds the Mahan Chair of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College, is the Special Adviser to President, Naval War College, and is a captain in the U.S. Naval Reserve.

Nobody ever, in the history of the world, has fought a more idealistic war than the United States fought in Vietnam. There was literally almost no other reason for that war. There could hardly have been a selfish reason for it. It was done in the name of idealism and moral abstractions, for better or for worse. The difficulty it reveals is that the rational link between idealistic motives and realistic goals is not automatic in foreign policy. How great is the price tag? How much blood and how much treasure will a commitment take? These are of necessity highly practical questions since there is a limit to material resources, but no limit to where idealism can lead us. Thus, the crux of the U.S. foreign policy problem lies in the unusually high value we attach to ideological questions combined with the habit of assuming that idealism is always practicable. It is this philosophy or approach that has led the United States into unwise and open-ended commitments. A more moderate approach and a more conservative use of U.S. assets are required.

History, by apprising [men] of the past, will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations.

Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, 1782