# America as a World Power

### Imperialism

"Isolationism" had been America's official foreign policy for centuries. At the turn of the century, however, America was enjoying the rush of power it felt when it began dabbling in other countries. Europe had its flags stuck deeply in African and Asia—why couldn't the United States begin doing the same in Latin America? The trend that began with Cuba continued…

Roosevelt proved himself a voracious imperialist. He was especially interested in creating a handy little canal in Central America. At that time, if anyone wanted to sail to California, they had to go all the way down South America, around the tip, and then all the way back up. It was freezing, choppy, stormy, and weekslong.

Problem was, Panama was part of Columbia—which wasn't willing to sign the **Hay-Pauncefote Treaty**allowing Americans to build the canal. "Well," said Roosevelt, "if thatcountry won't help us, we'll just need to create another that will." Americans supported Panamanian rebels in toppling the Columbian government and establishing an independent Panama. Which, of course, was totally cool with the construction of the canal, in thanks for U.S. help.

This kind of bullying—which many called **gunboat diplomacy—**shocked many Americans and frightened many Latin Americans. However, Teddy was adamant: by involving itself in Latin American affairs, America received all sorts of good deals. Plus, he insisted, it was necessary to protect United States borders and interests. Europeans were still running around meddling in various Latin American countries like Columbia and Venezuela. Roosevelt intended to put the punch in the Monroe Doctrine and finally kick them out. His amendment to the doctrine, the**Roosevelt Corollary,**stated that the U.S. would come to the help of any Latin American country that asked for it.Especiallyif the help it wanted spelled: E-u-r-o-p-e-a-n-s-O-u-t-N-o-w.

Other Progressive presidents did the same thing. In fact, Progressivism itself had some strong ideas about imperialism. Sure, it was most important to take care of troubles at home. However, America was still the best country in the whole world, especiallybecause it was proving itself so progressive. It had a "duty" to spread its fantastic policies and ideas to the rest of the world. That way, the rest of the world could be as civilized and as free and as wealthy and as fair and happy and wonderful as the Progressives believed America was becoming.

Taft advocated **Dollar Diplomacy**(convincing Wall Street to finance dabblings in Latin America), and Wilson advocated **Moral Diplomacy**(saying the US had a duty to help topple evil governments in Latin America). Columbia, Panama, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Mexico—the US had troops swarming all around them.

Why is all this important? First, once America began spreading its web to Latin America, it wouldn't retract it easily or quickly. Secondly, because by meddling south of the border, America was showing a thirst for foreign entanglements. George Washington must have rolled over in his grave to see how blatantly America was ignoring his [Farewell Address warning](http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/farewell/). When World War I erupted in Europe, America was poised to jump right in, proving to everyone exactly how global a power it was becoming.

### World War I

Fear not—the AP exam won't ask you about all the details of the war. What you need to know is the general stuff. First, America initially wanted to stay out of the war and only jumped in after it was forced to by German aggression. Secondly, you should know that during the war, government power increased hugely—way more than ever before. Finally, you should know that after the war, American domestic policy was characterized by 1) retreat back to isolationism and 2) rampant xenophobia, otherwise known as "fear of foreigners."

Let's break this down.

When **Archduke Francis Ferdinand**was assassinated and World War I began, Americans were very much against it. It was Europe's problem. Europeans themselves called it a war to "clear the air," which for Americans referred to theirair and theirproblems with competition and aggression. In response, Wilson declared U.S.**neutrality.**

It soon became obvious, however, that total neutrality wasn't possible: that little "war that would be over by Christmas" turned into the bloodiest, most destructive war anyone on the globe had ever seen. Tactics were brutal: Britain imposed a blockade and kept capturing American ships and taking the cargo. Plus, Germany then attempted to blast through blockage by literally blowing it up: sending torpedoes from **U-Boat submarines.**The Germans weren't picky: they attacked ships carrying civilians and Americans, too. In 1915, they detonated a mine under the **Lusitania**and killed some 1200 people. Fact was, the ship was indeed carrying weapons to the British—but America still saw it as an act of aggression against its own people. Americans began murmuring about whether war actually would be a good idea, after all…

Then the Germans put their foot in their mouth. In 1917 their foreign minister sent a telegram to Mexico (the**Zimmerman Telegram)**which the Americans intercepted. They were appalled and enraged to read that it actually told the Mexican government that, if Mexico started a war with the US, Germany would help it. Americans took one look at that and decided that Germany had it in for them, and was trying to take over the world. War was declared a month later.

America entered the war late—it was only in it for a few months, and, compared to European countries, lost few men. However, the war experience still vastly changed soldiers' lives. Many came back shattered, having seen an entire continent blasted to bloody smithereens, looking as [empty and raw as the moon](http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/firstworldwar/ww-moonscape-bailleul.jpg). The experience of the war on the Home Front changed Americans who stayed there, too: many became afraid of their ever-growing government, of their own neighbors, and especially of the masses of immigrants who suddenly seemed more dangerous than ever before.

During World War I, the government took on immense wartime powers: it took over telephone, railroad, and telegraph industries, and created a **War Industry Board**to control all industrial and agricultural production. It was kind of badly organized and slow, but it was important as the government's first attempt to harness the country's energies into a war effort. That would come in handy when the next World War rolled around.

While government was busy extending tentacles into the American economy, it also started to cast a long shadow over American society, as well. It passed the **Espionage and Sedition Acts,**making it illegal to interfere with the war effort or even to bad-talk the America government or military. It was a major crack-down on the First Amendment, but, argued the government, it was necessary in a country wracked by so many different peoples and factions.

Because the reality was that Americans had begun to be frightened and suspicious of their own neighbors. After all, this was a nation full of immigrants—and many of them had come over from the very countries America was fighting—and still had family there. It became ever more important to evidence **100% Americanism,**and to be adamantly patriotic. The **CPI (Committee on Public Information)**was formed to sharpen American patriotism by spreading propaganda. To make matter worse, the **Russian Revolution**had exploded in 1917. Suddenly, Americans saw communists everywhere. It didn't help that America's labor unions had become increasingly visible, and the labor movement gradually became labeled “communist.”

The government was seriously worried about communists pouring out of the woodworks and staging a radical revolution. After all, some socialists were fairly powerful, like **Eugene V. Debs,**who had actually run for president. To police the movements of so-called "radicals," it created the **FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation )**under **J. Edgar Hoover.**Agents collected fat files on suspicious individuals, and even after the war kept close eyes on certain, suspicious people. During the **Red Scare**that followed the war, all sorts of liberal organizations came under fire, as people began calling "commie" on anyone who evidenced any kind of radical idea. In 1920s, government agents in the **Palmer Raids**ran into union halls and social clubs and actually arrested some 4,000 people.

Fortunately, the atmosphere cooled a little—and the government began to retreat out of everyone's private corners—after the war. The American entrance helped the Allies win the war, and Wilson went to the **Treaty of Versailles**conference with a plan he was immensely proud of: the **Fourteen Points.**He felt that it was America's duty, as a kind of foreign observer of Europe's Big Messes, to help Europe rebuild itself and prevent future wars. However, the Points were way too soft for too many Europeans. Its call for leniency to Germany, for free trade, for arms reductions, and for an end to imperialism didn't sound anything nearwhat they had fought the war to win. European nations wanted revenge...specifically on Germany.

The treaty was actually so massively humiliating for Germany, and so totally failed to fix the kinds of problems that had started the war in the first place, that it sowed the seeds for the next world war. Wilson could see this, so he wanted to push for the passage of the favorite idea of his Points: the **League of Nations**.

The League would work a lot like today's United Nations, enabling international cooperation and a kind of policing of world peace. Problem was, when Wilson brought the idea home, too many people in Congress didn't like it. They especially didn't like that it seemed to embroil America in "entangling alliances." After the war, many Americans wanted to distance themselves from Europe as much as possible, and cut away all the ropes that had ensnared them to the continent. Congress rejected the League, and Wilson died of a stroke that historians think may have been brought on by the stress of the whole situation.

With the last, powerful champion for America's global position in his grave, the American leadership steered the nation on a different course: a **"return to normalcy"**and a retreat to **isolationism.**With Europe in shreds, the American economy suddenly had massive space in which to grow. Many Americans wanted to focus on cars, consumer products, and new technology, forgetting about the rest of the world's problems.

As Europe began to collect its shattered pieces, America steamed right along into an era of unprecedented wealth, spending, optimism, and social change: the **Roaring 20s.**

## Sample Questions

1. The primary purpose of the "muckrakers" was to

A) crusade for social reform by organizing movements to counter the abuses of industrialization  
B) challenge the stagnant American government to enact reform and regulation  
C) gain support for Progressive measures by exposing corruption in industry and society  
D) call for an end to industrialization and urbanization by exposing its negative effects  
E) expose social inequality and the divide between rich and poor

The correct answer is (B).

The muckrakers were just that: "rakers" of the "muck" covering industry and society. They wanted to expose all sorts of abuses (not just social) to make people awareof the bad things industrialization and urbanization caused. They didn't want to endthem (because the economy would spin down the toilet) but they wanted to challenge politicians who had only been sitting there watching the abuses to finally put a halt to them. They didn't startthe movements—they catalyzed othersto do so, and the Progressives proved the handiest.

2. J. Edgar Hoover was put in charge of the FBI in order to

A) find foreign spies during the war  
B) find and arrest suspected communists after the Russian Revolution  
C) crack down on organized crime in America during the Prohibition Era  
D) identify radicals and anarchists after the war  
E) root out opposition to the war in American society

The correct answer is (D).

After the war, Americans started to see radicals everywhere. Socialists next door. Communists in the garden. Anarchists behind the curtain. It was legit: radical leftist ideologies were spreading like wildfire through war-torn Europe, and Russia had already fallen. The FBI investigated and rooted out suspected radicals. If you're thinking "hey. I chose (B) and that's totally right." We need to inform you that this is true, but (D) is a better answer because it wasn't justcommunists. As for going after gangsters, this would be an FBI specialty in the '20s.