

Modern America

The United States today is different from the way it was during its early history in countless ways. In particular, the pace of technological progress has quickened, resulting in amazing industrial advances that make our lives easier and longer. Globalization has also increased. We are now completely accustomed to buying things “Made in China,” traveling to other countries, and communicating regularly with people anywhere in the world. For America in particular the past hundred years have also resulted in a crucial shift in the country’s relationship to the world. Early America was focussed on independence, and remained apart from the wars of others. Today’s America is an “international police power” fighting a continual global “war on terror.” In this last segment of the course, we will look at how the world became “America-centric” and how the United States became entangled in a web of global conflicts.

I. From the Monroe Doctrine to WWI

A. Eighty Years of the Monroe Doctrine

1. From 1823 to 1903, Americans adhered to the Monroe Doctrine in their relationships with other countries.
2. The driving premise behind this policy was a desire to secure American independence and thus to create the most optimal conditions to protect individual rights.
3. The adherence to the Monroe Doctrine was especially crucial in helping the United States sort out the problem of slavery internally during the period of Growth and Decline and during the Civil War without major interference from Europe.

B. The Spanish American War (1898)

1. In 1895, Cuba rebelled against Spain, which had ruled over the island ever since the time of Columbus.
2. Some Americans believed that the United States should help Cuba become independent, because the Monroe Doctrine said that Europe and the Americas should stay separate, and, given its proximity to the United States, it was desirable to expel the monarchical power of Spain, as a matter of national security.
3. Others were upset with how brutally the Spanish were treating the Cuban rebels. The Spanish General Weyler was notorious for forcing 400,000 Cubans into concentration camps on suspicion of rebellion. The fate of these “reconcentrados” appealed to Americans' sense of righteousness.
4. In 1898, the United States sent a battleship called the USS Maine to protect Americans in Cuba, and it was apparently destroyed by Spain.
5. America then declared war on Spain.
6. The American military was able to easily defeat Spain, which surprised many people in the world. Nobody realized that the United States had become such a powerful country that it could defeat a major European power.
7. As a result of the war Cuba did become independent.
8. An unexpected result of the war was that the United States expelled Spain from the Philippines (Spanish colonial islands in Asia).
9. Since the Philipinos were not ready to form their own government, the United States decided to help them become independent as well, which would require a large-scale long-term military effort to protect and stabilize the country.

C. The Panama Canal

1. Now that America was propping up two former Spanish colonies – one in the Caribbean and one in Asia – it was considered desirable to be able to move the American navy from the Atlantic to the Pacific without having to circumnavigate South America.
2. President Theodore Roosevelt hoped to be able to build a canal across the isthmus of Panama, but it was part of Colombia, and the Colombian government refused to come to terms with the United States concerning the possible construction of such a canal.
3. In 1903, the province of Panama rebelled against Colombia, and President Roosevelt decided to help it become independent.
4. The United States signed the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty of 1903 with the newly independent country of Panama to create a canal.
5. President Roosevelt justified this meddling in Cuban affairs by saying that “chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in America, as elsewhere, ultimately require intervention...by the United States.” The United States was now going to be an “*international police power*.”
6. President Roosevelt claimed that this new policy was compatible with the Monroe Doctrine, so he called it the “Roosevelt Corollary” (1904). (A “corollary” is an idea that logically follows from holding another idea. By calling his policy the “Roosevelt Corollary,” Roosevelt was claiming that anyone who accepted the Monroe Doctrine would necessarily have to agree with his new idea as well.)

II. Woodrow Wilson and America's Entry Into WWI

A. American Neutrality in a European War (1914-1917)

1. There were now two competing ideas for how America should act in the world: the Monroe Doctrine and the “international police power” concept put forward by Theodore Roosevelt.
2. In 1914, when Europe fell into its most terrible war yet, Americans were at first relieved not to be involved. President Woodrow Wilson explained that this latest war was one “with which we have nothing to do, whose causes cannot touch us.” It seemed that America would stay neutral.
3. In this war, however, the two countries with whom America had the strongest ties (Britain and France) were on the same side, and Americans naturally hoped that this side would win.
4. Americans increased their trade with their friends and reduced trade with the enemies of those friends (Germany and Austria).
5. Although it was not direct military aid, this type of support was understandably viewed as detrimental to the German war effort by Germany.
6. Staying neutral became difficult when German submarines then started attacking ships sailing around Britain, and 128 Americans were killed when a British ship called the Lusitania was destroyed.

B. America Enters WWI

1. Germany was worried that the United States would eventually enter the war, so it attempted to make an alliance with Mexico, promising to help Mexico reconquer territory it had lost to America in previous wars.

2. This promise was delivered in a secret telegram, but the telegram was discovered by the British and passed on to the United States. When Americans learned of it, more of them felt like joining in the war against Germany.
3. President Woodrow Wilson apparently also changed his mind at this point. He explained why America would act as an international police power in the following terms in a speech of 1918 called the "*Fourteen Points*":

“American ships have been sunk, American lives taken...but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk...The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it...Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion...

...We are glad...to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included...*The world must be made safe for democracy!*”