

II. America Transformed

A. The First Small Step: The Spanish-American War of 1898

1. In order to understand how America abandoned its policy of political separation to become the world police power, we need to refer to a sequence of three events that brought about the change, starting with a seemingly minor war, and then two obviously huge conflicts that changed the world.
2. The seemingly minor conflict that launched America on its career of policing began as a war of independence for the people of Cuba against their Spanish rulers.
3. Unlike the rest of the Iberosphere, Cuba had not become independent prior to the Monroe Doctrine. Nor since, despite trying a number of times as the Cuban national identity began to form through the nineteenth century as a distinct culture that wanted to break away from Spain.
4. Americans watched as the Spanish Empire brutally suppressed the independence movement in the war. Spain became the first modern country to make use of concentration camps, where citizens were taken and forced to live in essentially prison-like conditions, simply to prevent them from helping the rebels.
5. Americans were deeply disturbed by what they learned of the war, but as it progressed, they continued to hold true to the Monroe Doctrine. President William McKinley announced that *“not a single American citizen is now in arrest or confinement in Cuba of whom this government has any knowledge.”* Clearly then, if the policy of America was to solely protect the rights of its citizens, then this was not a war it should enter.
6. Strangely and controversially, an American battleship, the *USS Maine*, was sent to Havana (the capital of Cuba) to protect American “interests,” and then was destroyed by a powerful explosion, which was blamed on Spain.
7. This seemed to provide a pretext for intervention that had not existed before. *“Remember the Maine! And don’t forget the starving Cubans!”* was a new rallying cry heard around America.
8. Once America committed to war, it was an easy victory. Spain had been struggling to put down the rebellion, and America’s power was easy to deploy in neighboring Cuba, whereas the Spanish had to fight across the Atlantic.
9. Through the **Spanish-American War of 1898** Americans got their first “taste” of policing the world. They were proud of themselves for helping Cuba. They were proud of their military for performing so well. They started to think of themselves as a “great” power (unfortunately, in the same sense as Europeans defined themselves as “great”).
10. In addition to helping Cuba to become independent, American forces also defeated the Spanish at Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and the island of Guam—the latter two being in Asia. This caused an unexpected entanglement. America found itself in possession of overseas territory with a large non-American population. How to solve the problem of managing the Philippines, in particular, was a long challenge that was only really solved by the Japanese takeover of the Philippines in World War II.

B. The First Great Leap: World War I (1914-19)

1. In 1914, yet another great European war began. (Those who know their European history—as the Founding Fathers knew it—know that it was just the latest episode in a long history filled with wars.)
2. Reflecting the long tradition of political separation, American president Woodrow Wilson assessed the war as being one “*with which we have nothing to do, whose causes cannot touch us.*”
3. Thus, in keeping with the Monroe Doctrine, the United States stayed neutral and apart from 1914 to 1917.
4. President Wilson was celebrated for doing so. He won re-election as president in 1916 running on the slogan, “*He has kept us out of war.*”
5. And yet America entered World War I in 1917.
6. Many explanations have been offered for this dramatic reversal, but these are typically focussed exclusively on the past. What really matters is how America’s entry into the war set the stage for a complete transformation of America’s relationship to the world, which results in the reality we now find ourselves in.
7. In that regard, only one thing matters. President Wilson articulated the reason for a profound shift in American’s relationship to the world. The United States must, he explained, use its growing power as a modern nation and embark on a new mission: “*The world must be made safe for democracy.*” The United States is the country that it is today, because it first accepted this responsibility in World War I, and has essentially accepted this responsibility as normal today.

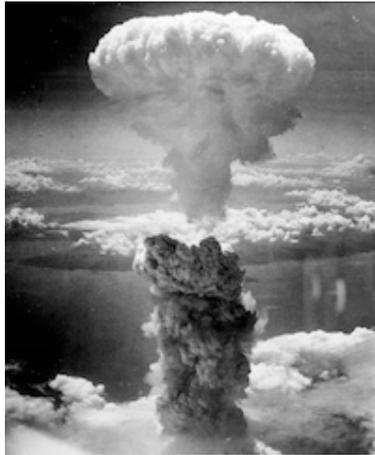


President Woodrow Wilson articulated a new basis for America’s relationship to the world: the mission of making the world “safe for democracy.”

C. Saving The World A Second Time: World War II (1939-45)

1. 117,000 Americans died in World War I. It was profound shock, and Americans recoiled from the role that had been thrust upon them.
2. In the 1920 presidential election, Americans repudiated Wilson’s concept of giving up their lives to a global cause. They opted instead to elect Warring Harding, who offered them a “return to normalcy”—which, at that time, meant a return to the “normal” policy of political separation.
3. Thus as the world descended into its second horrible war of the twentieth century, the United States remained apart. It did not join World War II from 1939 to 1941.
4. Then entry into the war was forced upon it. The military commanders of the empire of Japan anticipated America’s eventual involvement and decided upon a sneak attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, with the goal of crippling America’s navy and preventing it from interfering with Japan’s imperial ambitions in Asia.

5. The attack failed to achieve the desired outcome. United States entered the war and played the decisive role in this new and larger conflict just as it had in the previous war. Notoriously, the war ended in 1945 when the United States used the newly developed “atomic bomb” twice on Japan, destroying the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and forcing the empire’s unconditional surrender.



The explosion that destroyed Nagasaki is captured in this photograph. Atomic bombs are so powerful that a single bomb can destroy an entire city. The explosion produces a huge, characteristic “mushroom cloud” that extends far up into the atmosphere.