
Warren J. Samuels
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Abstract

The United States, it was once felt, could have a different foreign policy when isolated by two oceans in comparison to the later period when modern technology destroyed its isolation. Foreign policy is thus a function of geography modified by technology. The United States, commencing some time after the first third of the 19th century, had a further choice. It could live up to its self-image as a liberal constitutional democracy and follow a foreign policy of live and let live, in both respects serving as a role model for the rest of the world. Or, like the monarchial dynasties of the past and other regimes of more recent times, it could pursue an aggressive foreign policy in pursuit of what it considered its interests, engendering enmity in various quarters. The United States has done both. In the first category it has preferred isolationism, reluctantly joining the two World Wars in defense of its autonomy. In the second category, it increasingly either engaged in the practices of conventional imperialism, often at the behest of entrepreneurial interests, or flexed and deployed its muscle in pursuit of national interests either on its own initiative or in response to threats from and capabilities of other countries. The former is American exceptionalism; the latter is conventional. Of course, the history is much more complex than the foregoing directly allows. Several other stories or models can be developed (the most recent is Mead, 2001).

Citation


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