

TRACING

THEMES

America in World Affairs

The United States has not always been as involved in world affairs as it is today. Throughout its history, the nation's foreign policy has swung back and forth between a commitment to involvement with the world and the desire for isolation. "Steer clear of permanent alliances," George Washington cautioned Americans in his Farewell Address of 1796. Washington's warning to the young nation became a theme of government policy for the next hundred years, as domestic issues dominated Americans' attention.

In the late 1800s, however, Americans began to look outward to the larger world. The country had reached the limits of its continental expansion and stretched from ocean to ocean. As its economic power grew stronger, the United States became more involved in the affairs of its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere.

1823–1898

THE UNITED STATES AND LATIN AMERICA ►

Throughout the 19th century, the United States expanded its influence in the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine was intended to diminish European interference. After the Civil War, American trade with Latin America, including the Spanish colony of Cuba, grew. In fact, the United States traded more heavily with Cuba than Spain did.

When the Cubans rebelled against Spain, Americans sympathized with the rebels. After the battleship U.S.S. *Maine* sank in the Cuban harbor of Havana, Americans blamed the Spanish, and Congress declared war. After defeating the Spanish, the United States extended its influence in territories such as Puerto Rico, Panama, and Mexico. A new expansionist era had begun.



1917–1939

◄ INVOLVEMENT AND ISOLATIONISM

Before World War I, the United States had generally limited its military involvement to the Western Hemisphere. As the war in Europe progressed, this position became impossible to maintain, as German U-boats increasingly threatened American lives. In spite of fierce opposition from isolationists, the United States joined World War I in 1917. U.S. involvement in the conflict greatly strengthened its armed forces and revealed the nation's military potential.

After the war, the United States returned to a policy of isolationism. A decade later, as European dictators began menacing other European countries, American public opinion was sharply divided. Many argued that the best way to preserve American democracy was to stay out of war in Europe. It took Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1941 to force the United States into World War II.



This statue of Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, was toppled by Latvian citizens in 1991.



U.S. forces in Vietnam in 1968

1945–1991

▲ THE COLD WAR

After World War II, tensions between the United States and Communist countries like the Soviet Union and China developed into a nonmilitary conflict known as the Cold War. During the Cold War, which lasted for nearly 50 years, the United States and the Soviet Union competed to extend their political and economic influence. In some parts of the world, such as Korea and Vietnam, the Cold War led to prolonged military warfare.

The great costs of these conflicts—both in money and in lives—led to renewed calls for isolationism. Nevertheless, the U.S. remained actively involved in the Cold War throughout the 1980s.

1939–1945

INVOLVEMENT IN EUROPE ▼

When the fascist threat to democracy became too great to ignore, the United States joined the Allies in fighting the Axis Powers during World War II. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the war as the two strongest military powers in the world. It was now impossible for the nation to return to isolationism. The United States took an active role in

rebuilding Europe through programs like the Marshall Plan and was instrumental in establishing the United Nations. The United States also stayed involved with Europe militarily during the Cold War as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).



THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO TODAY

- 1. Analyzing Motives** What were America's motives for getting involved in each of the wars described on these two pages? Do you think these motives would be valid today?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R6.

CONNECT TO HISTORY

- 2. Writing About Wartime Experience** Imagine that you are a reporter writing at the time about one of the wars in the 20th century. Interview someone you know—or look for information in the library or on the Internet—to find out how a soldier, nurse, cook, sailor, or pilot spent each day as part of the war effort. Write a feature article for a local newspaper, quoting that person.



RESEARCH LINKS

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