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23.1 American Foreign Policy During the 1920s

Warren I. Cohen

Until recently, most historians regarded American foreign policy during the 1920s as an "isolationist" interlude between the internationalism of Woodrow Wilson and of Franklin Roosevelt. The first significant challenge to this view appeared in 1954 with William Appleman Williams's incisive article, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s." Over the last decade or so, a number of historians specializing in American foreign policy have portrayed the 1920s as a dynamic period in which the United States was deeply involved in international matters. In his 1987 book, *Empire Without Tears*, from which this excerpt is taken, historian Warren Cohen argues that the American "empire" was greatly extended during the 1920s and that this expansion required the United States "to be profoundly engaged in international matters."

Consider:

1. *Why Cohen called his book* Empire Without Tears *and what that title implies about American foreign policy during the 1920s;*
2. *Which foreign policy debates and events during the 1920s support Cohen's argument;*
3. *The relation between "collective security" concerns in the 1920s and contemporary debate over American foreign policy.*

Answer

SOURCE: *Warren I. Cohen,* Empire Without Tears: America's Foreign Relations, 1921–1933 *(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), xii, 8–9, 13, 16–17.*

Prior to 1917, . . . few Americans were aware of the impact of the world on their country or their country's role in the world. The world war shattered popular complacency and engaged mass attention. From 1914, certainly from 1917 to 1919, . . . The government of the United States became more deeply occupied with international affairs than likely or even possible in time of peace. The American military establishment grew enormously, and its power was projected overseas. American financial power grew enormously as the United States was transformed from debtor to creditor nation and as the financial center of the world passed from London to New York. . . .

In Washington, the United States Senate failed to muster the two-thirds vote necessary to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and bring the United States into the League—although majority support was available even in the Senate. Rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and lack of membership in the League had little impact, however, on American involvement in world affairs in the decade that followed. In the 1920s the United States was more profoundly engaged in international matters than in any peacetime era in its history. The empire was maintained, with minor modifications in the Caribbean and China. Military power, as is usual in the absence of war or serious threat, declined—but never to prewar levels. Financial power, on the other hand, grew at nearly geometric rates, and the dollar, if not the flag, could be found wherever the sun might shine at any given moment.

. . . In the 1920s, military power was allowed to atrophy. There would be few American boys fighting for the empire: it would be an empire without tears. (I use "empire" throughout to encompass two very different manifestations of American wealth and power. First, I use the term in the traditional sense of territories controlled, directly or indirectly, by the government of the United States . . . Second, I use "empire" in the less than universally accepted sense of "informal empire," to include cases in which the principal instruments for the control of other peoples or their resources are private, generally economic, and profit-motivated, in which the role of the U.S. government is secondary or nonexistent. Those who are its objects rarely distinguish between the exercise of official and private American power.) . . .

. . . The struggle over ratification of the Treaty of Versailles had focused much of the historic tension between executive and legislative branches on foreign policy issues. Participation in the war and in the peacemaking bred a group of experts on world affairs who formed the foreign policy "establishment." Harding's cabinet contained at least two men, Hughes and Hoover, who had spoken for their party on foreign affairs issues in the past and perceived a leadership role for the United States. For all Harding and his constituency's longing to return to "normalcy," there could be no retreat from the rest of the world for the generation of the twenties. The search for order, so pronounced in the Progressive era, had become a search for world order. . . .

In this setting, there emerged what the historian Richard Leopold has called the "interwar compromise." The central question for the 1920s was how to stay out of war, preferably while increasing the benefits Americans enjoyed from expanding involvement in world affairs. A minority, strongly represented by the Council on Foreign Relations and the League of Nations Association, argued that the United States could not avoid being drawn into a second world war. Once such a war started, American participation was inevitable. The only way to keep the United States out of war was to cooperate with other nations for the preservation of peace, most obviously through membership in the League or . . . cooperation with Britain and France.

Most people with views on American foreign policy in the 1920s had a simpler solution: The United States could stay out of future wars as an act of will. It had intervened voluntarily in 1917—next time it would not, even if all of Europe and Asia were at war. [Senator William E.] Borah, representative of much of this thinking, was convinced that the key to peace for America was to avoid obligations or commitments that might lead to war. He and many of those who shared his outlook were unwilling to surrender the overseas interests of the United States, but insisted on looking after those interests independently. They favored a course another historian, Joan Hoff Wilson, has labeled "independent internationalism." When foreign policy was an issue in the 1920s, there were few advocates of an American retreat from world affairs. Rather, the debate was between a minority that advocated collective security and a majority that rejected collective security as the best means to preserve the American empire without war.

In the 1920s the United States attempted to pursue an independent policy, compromising frequently to cooperate with other nations for specific purposes. The policies of the era were epitomized by agreements with other nations on an ad hoc basis, to solve specific problems. Commitments, except to consult, were carefully avoided, as were provisions for enforcement, for sanctions if the agreements were violated. A generation aware of the tendency of post-1945 America toward overcommitment might see the policy of the 1920s as timid, but what is really striking is the increased participation of the United States in major developments around the world, compared with the role the nation played prior to 1917.

23.2 Roosevelt and the Aftermath of the Quarantine Speech

John McV. Haight, Jr.

On October 5, 1937, in Chicago, Illinois, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a major foreign-policy address designed to counteract a growing

25–3 Korematsu v. United States, 1944

Shortly after Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt bowed to pressure from military leaders and West Coast residents by authorizing the removal and internment of Japanese Americans as a national defense measure. The move was defended on the grounds that the Japanese were "an enemy race." About 100,000 Japanese Americans, including 70,000 native-born American citizens, were sent to "relocation centers" in the interior of the country. In this 1944 case brought by civil libertarians, the Supreme Court upheld the order, with Justice Murphy dissenting. SOURCE: 323 U.S. 214 (1944).

JUSTICE BLACK DELIVERED THE OPINION OF THE COURT

It should be noted, to begin with, that all legal restrictions which curtail the civil rights of a single racial group are immediately suspect. That is not to say that all such restrictions are unconstitutional. It is to say that courts must subject them to the most rigid scrutiny. Pressing public necessity may sometimes justify the existence of such restrictions; racial antagonism never can....

Exclusion of those of Japanese origin was deemed necessary because of the presence of an unascertained number of disloyal members of the group, most of whom we have no doubt were loyal to this country. It was because we could not reject the finding of the military authorities that it was impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal from the loyal that we sustained the validity of the curfew order as applying to the whole group. In the instant case, temporary exclusion of the entire group was rested by the military on the same ground. The judgment that exclusion of the whole group was for the same reason a military imperative answers the contention that the exclusion was in the nature of group punishment based on antagonism to those of Japanese origin. That there were members of the group who retained loyalties in Japan has been confirmed by investigations made subsequent to the exclusion. Approximately five thousand American citizens of Japanese ancestry refused to swear unqualified allegiance to the United States and to renounce allegiance to the Japanese Emperor, and several thousand evacuees requested repatriation to Japan.

We uphold the exclusion order as of the time it was made and when the petitioner violated it.... In doing so, we are not unmindful of the hardships imposed by it upon a large group of American citizens.... But hardships are part of war, and war is an aggregation of hardships. All citizens alike, both in and out of uniform, feel the impact of war in greater or lesser measure. Citizenship has its responsibilities as well as its privileges, and in time of war the burden is always heavier. Compulsory exclusion of large groups of citizens from their homes, except under circumstances of direct emergency and peril, is inconsistent with our basic governmental institutions. But when under conditions of modern warfare our shores are threatened by hostile forces, the power to protect must be commensurate with the threatened danger....

It is said that we are dealing here with the case of imprisonment of a citizen in a concentration camp solely because of his ancestry, without evidence or inquiry concerning his loyalty and good disposition towards the United States. Our task would be simple, our duty clear, were this a case involving the imprisonment of a loyal citizen in a concentration camp because of racial prejudice. Regardless of the true nature of the assembly and relocation centers—and we deem it unjustifiable to call them concentration camps with all the ugly connotations that term implies—we are dealing specifically with nothing but an exclusion order. To cast this case into outlines of racial prejudice, without reference to the real military dangers which were presented, merely confuses the issue. Korematsu was not excluded from the Military Area because of

hostility to him or his race. He *was* excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire, because the properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast and felt constrained to take proper security measures, because they decided that the military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily, and finally, because Congress, reposing its confidence in this time of war in our military leaders—as inevitably it must—determined that they should have the power to do just this. There was evidence of disloyalty on the part of some, the military authorities considered that the need for action was great, and time was short. We cannot—by availing ourselves of the calm perspective of hindsight—now say that at that time these actions were unjustified.

JUSTICE MURPHY, DISSENTING

This exclusion of "all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien," from the Pacific Coast area on a plea of military necessity in the absence of martial law ought not to be approved. Such exclusion goes over "the very brink of constitutional power" and falls into the ugly abyss of racism.

In dealing with matters relating to the prosecution and progress of a war, we must accord great respect and consideration to the judgments of the military authorities who are on the scene and who have full knowledge of the military facts. The scope of their discretion must, as a matter of necessity and common sense, be wide. And their judgments ought not to be overruled lightly by those whose training and duties ill-equip them to deal intelligently with matters so vital to the physical security of the nation.

At the same time, however, it is essential that there be definite limits to military discretion, especially where martial law has not been declared. Individuals must not be left impoverished of their constitutional rights on a plea of military necessity that has neither substance nor support....

That this forced exclusion was the result in good measure of this erroneous assumption of racial guilt rather than bona fide military necessity is evidenced by the Commanding General's Final Report on the evacuation from the Pacific Coast area. In it he refers to all individuals of Japanese descent as "subversive," as belonging to "an enemy race" whose "racial strains are undiluted," and as constituting "over 112,000 potential enemies...at large today" along the Pacific Coast. In support of this blanket condemnation of all persons of Japanese descent, however, no reliable evidence is cited to show that such individuals were generally disloyal, or had generally so conducted themselves in this area as to constitute a special menace to defense installations or war industries, or had otherwise by their behavior furnished reasonable ground for their exclusion as a group.

Justification for the exclusion is sought, instead, mainly upon questionable racial and sociological grounds not ordinarily within the realm of expert military judgment, supplemented by certain semi-military conclusions drawn from an unwarranted use of circumstantial evidence....

No one denies, of course, that there were some disloyal persons of Japanese descent on the Pacific Coast who did all in their power to aid their ancestral land. Similar disloyal activities have been engaged in by many persons of German, Italian and even more pioneer stock in our country. But to infer that examples of individual disloyalty prove group disloyalty and justify discriminatory action against the entire group is to deny that under our system of law individual guilt is the sole basis for deprivation of rights.... To give constitutional sanction to that inference in this case, however well-intentioned may have been the military command on the Pacific Coast, is to adopt one of the cruelest of the rationales used by our enemies to destroy the dignity of the

individual and to encourage and open the door to discriminatory actions against other minority groups in the passions of tomorrow....

I dissent, therefore, from this legalization of racism. Racial discrimination in any form and in any degree has no justifiable part whatever in our democratic way of life. It is unattractive in any setting but it is utterly revolting among a free people who have embraced the principles set forth in the Constitution of the United States. All residents of this nation are kin in some way by blood or culture to a foreign land. Yet they are primarily and necessarily a part of the new and distinct civilization of the United States. They must accordingly be treated at all times as the heirs of the American experiment and as entitled to all the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

1. How does the Court avoid the racial aspects of the case? How does it deal with the issue of the violation of citizenship rights?

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2. How does Murphy invoke the racial issue in his dissent?

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25–4 Harry S. Truman, Statement on the Atomic Bomb, 1945

The death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April, 1945 thrust the little known Vice-President Harry S. Truman into the presidency. Events forced him to make a number of momentous decisions fairly quickly, including the decision on the use of the most devastating weapon ever created, the atomic bomb. Roosevelt had kept Truman completely in the dark about the bomb's development. For Truman, dropping the bomb on Japan promised a quicker end to the war and a valuable new diplomatic tool for shaping the postwar world. SOURCE: Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, Vol. I (1945).

SIXTEEN HOURS ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British "Grand Slam" which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

Before 1939, it was the accepted belief of scientists that it was theoretically possible to release atomic energy. But no one knew any practical method of doing it. By 1942, however, we knew that the Germans were working feverishly to find a way to add atomic energy to the other engines of war with which they hoped to enslave the world. But they failed. We may be grateful to Providence that the Germans got the V-1's and the V-2's late and in limited quantities and even more grateful that they did not get the atomic bomb at all.

The battle of the laboratories held fateful risks for us as well as the battles of the air, land and sea, and we have now won the battle of the laboratories as we have won the other battles.

Beginning in 1940, before Pearl Harbor, scientific knowledge useful in war was pooled between the United States and Great Britain, and many priceless helps to our victories have come from that arrangement. Under that general policy the research on the atomic bomb was begun. With American and British scientists working together we entered the race of discovery against the Germans.

The United States had available the large number of scientists of distinction in the many needed areas of knowledge. It had the tremendous industrial and financial resources necessary for the project and they could be devoted to it without undue impairment of other vital war work. In the United States the laboratory work and the production plants, on which a substantial start had already been made, would be out of reach of enemy bombing, while at that time Britain was exposed to constant air attack and was still threatened with the possibility of invasion. For these reasons Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt agreed that it was wise to carry on the project here. We now have two great plants and many lesser works devoted to the production of atomic power. Employment during peak construction numbered 125,000 and over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material going in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical size of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history—and won.

But the greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy, nor its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in putting together infinitely complex pieces of knowledge held by many men in different fields of science into a workable plan. And hardly less marvelous has been the capacity of industry to design, and of labor to operate, the machines and methods to do things never done before so that the brain child of many minds came forth in physical shape and performed as it was supposed to do. Both science and industry worked under the direction of the United States Army, which achieved a unique success in managing so diverse a problem in the advancement of knowledge if such another combination could be got together in the world. What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history. It was done under high pressure and without failure.

We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war.

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.

The Secretary of War, who has kept in personal touch with all phases of the project, will immediately make public a statement giving further details.

His statement will give facts concerning the sites at Oak Ridge near Knoxville, Tennessee, and at Richland near Pasco, Washington, and an installation near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although the workers at the sites have been making materials to be used in producing the greatest destructive force in history they have not themselves been in danger beyond that of many other occupations, for the utmost care has been taken of their safety.

The fact that we can release atomic energy ushers in a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces. Atomic energy may in the future supplement the power that now comes from coal, oil, and falling water, but at present it cannot be produced on a basis to compete with them commercially. Before that comes there must be a long period of intensive research.

It has never been the habit of the scientists of this country or the policy of this Government to withhold from the world scientific knowledge. Normally, therefore, everything about the work with atomic energy would be made public.

But under present circumstances it is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications, pending further examination of possible methods of protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction.

I shall recommend that the Congress of the United States consider promptly the establishment of an appropriate commission to control the production and use of atomic power within the United States. I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace.

1. What are the military arguments used by Truman to justify the decision?

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2. In what sense does he celebrate its success? What postwar uses for atomic energy does he stress?

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